

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

'Dear colleagues, I ask you to act like adults' : minority youth and their political participation

Suni, Anna

2021-12-01

Suni , A & Mietola , R 2021 , ' 'Dear colleagues, I ask you to act like adults' : minority youth and their political participation ' , Journal of youth studies , vol. 26 , no. 2 , pp. 213-228 . <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.2009784>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/354896>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.2009784>

cc_by_nc_nd

publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.



'Dear colleagues, I ask you to act like adults': minority youth and their political participation

Anna Suni & Reetta Mietola

To cite this article: Anna Suni & Reetta Mietola (2023) 'Dear colleagues, I ask you to act like adults': minority youth and their political participation, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 26:2, 213-228, DOI: [10.1080/13676261.2021.2009784](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.2009784)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.2009784>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 30 Nov 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 744



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

‘Dear colleagues, I ask you to act like adults’: minority youth and their political participation

Anna Suni  and Reetta Mietola 

Department of Cultures, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on conceptions and representations of political participation. It is based on ethnographic research of a civics course that a multicultural NGO designed for young people from different racialized and ethnic minorities in Finland. We ask how political participation is conceptualized in such efforts to ‘engage’ or ‘empower’ ‘marginalized’ young people, what opportunities for political participation these practices present and how young people make use of them. We draw on new citizenship theory, which focuses on lived and acted citizenships and practices of mundane political agency. Our analytical focus is on performative acts and processes, and how these may transform conventions. Thus, we examine the political inherent in young people’s actions and tackle the difficulty in recognizing young people’s political activeness and agency. The young people on the civics course actively took the space provided for them and performed political participation. Adults often failed to recognize this, leading us to question what, in the adults’ eyes, counts as acts and sites of political participation. We conclude that recognizing young people as political agents not only requires access and resources, but also negotiation of what is seen as political participation and what it can entail.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 1 December 2020
Accepted 18 November 2021

KEYWORDS

Agency; citizenship;
minorities; political
participation; young people

Introduction

The past decade has witnessed growing concern about young people’s political participation. This has prompted various societies and actors to develop a number of measures to support and enhance youth participation and to ‘empower’ young people (Bastedo 2015; Rytioja and Kallio 2018; Eliasoph 2011; Boldt 2021). This is connected to a bigger ‘participatory turn’ (Meriluoto, Litmanen, and Bäcklund 2019; Polletta, 2016) in democracy, where people are encouraged to participate, to serve their communities and to become useful and empowered citizens. A growing number of researchers are providing critical observations concerning these participatory practices that challenge the worry discourse concerning ‘(politically) passive youth’ (Kallio 2019; Häkli and Kallio 2018; Farthing 2010; Bessant 2004; Lepola and Kokko 2015; Krivonos 2016; Coe et al. 2016).

CONTACT Anna Suni  anna.suni@helsinki.fi  Department of Cultures, University of Helsinki, PL 4 (Yliopistonkatu 3), Helsinki 00014, Finland

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Certainly, some of the interest in enhancing youth participation is due to the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 (Rytioja and Kallio 2018; Boldt 2021). Nonetheless, much of this discussion stems from the concern over the 'crisis of Democracy' (Farthing 2010; Bessant 2004) and the declining interest towards traditional forms of democratic participation among the youth. This phenomenon applies more or less to all western liberal democracies, also Finland, the context of our study. For example, in the 2017 municipality election in Finland, only 33% of 20-year-olds voted (OSF 2017). However, in the 2018 Finnish Youth Barometer, 61% of the respondents said they were interested in politics and the Finnish youth's trust towards politicians and political institutions is high (Pekkarinen and Myllyniemi 2019, 19). Nevertheless, young people often find Finnish politics and its language alienating and not easily accessible, and feel that politics and politicians were not interested on them (Lepola and Kokko 2015, 4).

Similarly, previous international research highlights how young people struggle to become recognized as serious political actors (Farthing 2010; Bastedo 2015). This gap between young people and recognized political participation is particularly wide for racialized and ethnic minority youth (Mikola and Mansouri 2015; Ribeiro et al. 2014). According to the 2018 Youth Barometer, young people with an immigrant background were less interested in politics than Finnish youth on average. Yet interestingly respondents, who had experienced discrimination, were more interested in politics than the average (Pekkarinen and Myllyniemi 2019, 19, 23).

One key criticism of the measures for supporting youth participation is that they are mostly individualized and focused on changing the young people rather than challenging the elite field of politics and its exclusionary practices. Often when political participation is discussed, especially related to young people, the focus is on normative and institutional ways of participating, such as voting, which fails to cover all forms of youth participation (Rytioja and Kallio 2018, 3). What people see as political, how they define participation and what becomes politicized in their action, is much more complex than this. Thus, many recent studies stress the need to avoid predefined 'adult' notions of politics and focus on what young people see and construct as political (Coe et al. 2016; Rytioja and Kallio 2018; Eliasoph 2011).

This article is based on ethnographic study on a civics course designed for 16–25-year-olds coming from different racialized and ethnic minorities. We began by observing the practices used to enhance participation, in order to identify the opportunities and challenges involved in these types of practices. Our fieldwork prompted us to turn our analytic gaze towards contradictions present in these practices aimed to 'engage' or 'empower' 'marginalized' youth. We ask what conceptions of political participation these are based on, how this positions young people in general, and racialized and ethnic minority youth in particular. Additionally, we ask what opportunities for political participation these young people have and how do they make use of these.

We use terms racialized minority and ethnic minority youth to refer to the group of young people who participated in the studied activities. By racialized minority, we refer to people who are visible minority (see, for example, Andersson 2003; Rastas 2019), particularly because of their skin colour. By ethnic minority, we refer to people who represent cultural or linguistic minority in Finland. We also sometimes use the term 'multicultural' since this term was frequently used during our fieldwork. However, we acknowledge

the problematic, and possibly racializing or marginalizing nature of these kinds of terms. For example, the term 'multicultural' has been criticized for not addressing or acknowledging racism as a structural problem but rather constructing it as personal and individual occurrence (Lentin and Titley 2012).

Materials and methods

Our ethnographic fieldwork focused on activities organized by a Helsinki-based NGO. The observed activities were designed to enhance young people's understanding of policy processes and Finnish society, and thus to support their political participation. The activities we observed took place in spring and summer 2019 as part of a civics course organized for 'multicultural' young people (aged 16–25). The fieldwork covered 20 meetings (2–6 h each) in the capital city area and three days outside Helsinki. Altogether 41 young people took part in the activities, with 31 actively participating. Our data consist mainly of fieldnotes written during the fieldwork (by both authors) and interviews done with six young people (by Suni).

Our methodology and fieldwork are shaped by our interest in meanings, positions and (possibilities for) action that are formed in practices that aim to empower and engage individuals and groups. According to Luhtakallio and Eliasoph (2014), ethnography is useful for studying political communication and behaviour as it unfolds in political participation and action, even those people do not necessarily see as political. This resonates with our interest in the nuances, tensions and (unintended) possibilities that emerge in the observed processes.

Since our research focused on observing a one-off NGO course, our research field formed at the beginning of the course and dissolved at the end of it. This meant that we entered this field simultaneously with our research participants, and were able to observe social practices and relations as they emerged. We introduced ourselves, our research interest and ethical principles of the research endeavour to the group during the first meeting of the course. The participants were informed about consent, both verbally and with a written information sheet about their right to refuse to participate by informing us or the course leaders. None of the young people refused. At the final stages of the course, we asked participants to be interviewed, stressing that this was voluntary. Additionally, we approached consent from a processual view, paying constant attention to any signs that the participants were expressing discomfort (see Renold et al. 2008). The names used in this article are pseudonyms, and some details concerning our participants and contexts have been changed or removed to protect their privacy.

The researchers were observers with limited participation: we mostly did not take part in the activities but observed them from the back of the room, writing fieldnotes on our laptops and notebooks. This positioning was deliberate: while we were keen to get to know the young people and talk with them, we left it up to them to approach us. Some of the young people actively made contact with us; others kept their distance. Sometimes the young people or the course leaders involved us in discussions by asking our opinion of the course topic. During visits (e.g. to parliament, the ministry of justice), we travelled with the group, enabling us to have informal chats with the young people and get to know each other. Most of the young people we interviewed had had closer contact with us during the course. The interviews were ethnographic

interviews. In them, we were able to ask, clarify and deepen our understanding about the course and the young people's experiences.

During the fieldwork, we learnt where most of the young people or their families originated from and how they identified themselves, but we never explicitly asked these things as this was not the focus of our study. This does not mean that their background does not matter. The young people addressed various ways how they had experienced racism or discrimination. In addition, some of the young people who were born in Finland were not citizens due to the inheritance principle (where children get the citizenship of their parents, not their birth countries), and thus cannot vote. On the other hand, many of the young people studied in top upper secondary schools and lived in good, even upper middle-class neighbourhoods of the Helsinki metropolitan area, making the group very diverse and not that easy to categorize. Nevertheless, typically for ethnography, our focus was on the observed practices and how different social positionings and categorizations, differences as well as similarities were raised in these and what kinds of meanings were given to these rather than approaching the observed practices and interactions through background information on individual participants.

Our ethnographic analysis included multiple phases. Typically for ethnography, we began to analyse our data during the fieldwork. At this point, our analysis was done through discussion: doing fieldwork together, we could discuss our very preliminary observations and interpretations and focus our ongoing observation on aspects that we both found intriguing (see Gordon et al. 2006). The second phase consisted of the collaborative reading of our fieldnotes to identify key themes and tensions. This positioned the relationship between the NGO's activities and the young people's agency at the centre of our analysis. In preparing the interview guide, we wanted to elaborate some themes we had observed and hear how the participants viewed and experienced these, including their encounters with different adult agents (MPs, editors etc.) during the course. In the final phase, we read the data with the previously identified themes in mind, focusing on how the young people were positioned in different contexts and situations, recognition and unrecognition of their political agency in these moments, and how the activities provided the young people with opportunities for political agency.

Performative citizenship and young people's political agency

We draw on new citizenship theory, which focuses on lived and acted citizenships and practices of mundane political agency. It expands the conventional view of citizenship as a legal institution by focusing on its performative aspects – on 'how people creatively perform citizenship' (Isin 2017, 501). It sees citizenship as contested, constantly negotiated and changing subject position (Hildebrandt et al. 2019). Thus, the analytical focus is on performative processes and acts and how these transform conventions (Isin 2017, 507).

Approaching young people's political agency from the perspective of performative citizenship allows us both to acknowledge contextual boundaries and norms framing and forming political action, and still focus on young people's agency and subjectivities as these emerge in action (see Coffey and Faruggia 2014). Thus, rather than seeing agency and structure in opposition, a performative take on citizenship approaches

agency as formed within and in relation to material and symbolic conditions. While our primary focus is on the young people's agency – what they do – we approach their acts and accounts as forming a dialogue with the dominant discourses and practices concerning young people's political participation.

The performative approach to citizenship also challenges the dominant, socialization view of citizenship education (see Biesta 2011) and the relationship between acts and subject(ivity) carried by this view. Rather than approaching political subjects as required for political action to take place, in performative reading, subject(ivity)s are considered as following from these acts (Isin 2019). This turns 'the relationship between political subjectivity and democratic politics on its head' (Biesta 2011, 95).

When racialized and ethnic minority youth attempt to negotiate value and meaning to their political agency, we find this 'turn' particularly important in two ways. Firstly, when seen only as 'multicultural' young people, our research participants are expected to lack skills, resources and interest in political participation. As we show, these expectations are major barriers to recognition of their political agency. Rather than presuming particular identities, a performative approach turns the focus on acts and the subject(ivity)s that emerge in action. This allows us to study the multiplicity of identifications as they are formed in acts, accounts and 'claims' made by our research participants, while doing our best to avoid treating these simply as expressive of their 'identities' as 'multicultural youth' (see Butler 2015).

The performative take on subjectivity does not imply that these subjectivities (or the acts that form these) are unattached to the social categories surrounding our participants, and meanings attached to these categories. Rather, our analysis aims to make visible how the intersecting categories of youth and 'multiculturalism' inform our participants' action and influence their abilities to act and gain recognition for their political action.

Moreover, the performative approach allows us to acknowledge differences in the 'actual condition of citizenship'. As Biesta (2011, 85) notes: 'the processes and practices that make up the everyday lives of children, young people and adults – as they are lived both within and outside of a range of institutions – convey important and often influential 'lessons' in democratic citizenship'. This means that while our research data only provides a glimpse into our participants' lives and experiences of political participation, we acknowledge that they come into these processes with resources, life experiences and understandings of their abilities to influence their lives and society.

Results

Climbing out of the sandpit and into places of political power

In the Finnish language, two terms are often used when participation is discussed. *Osalistuminen* means participation by individuals in general, whether in society or politics. *Osallistaminen*, engaging or including people, is a top-down attempt by societal actors and institutions, such as public administration and NGOs, to educate and turn people into participating citizens (Meriluoto, Litmanen, and Bäcklund 2019, 8).

The contradiction between *osalistuminen* and *osallistaminen* proved a defining factor in the course leaders' work, in particular in terms of the focus of change. At the planning stage, the leaders recognized young people's agency and ability to participate in many

ways. As the course was introduced to researchers and the participating young people, the leaders emphasized the right of young people to participate in societal discussion and decision-making and how this was not currently realized due to problems related to young people's lack of access and power.

The course leader starts introducing the course by explaining the background of the course. 'It all started last year when we had another project for young people similar to this one. It became evident that only very few can actually influence or have the knowledge how to influence and by what means.' The leader continues explaining that usually people only think about voting, and how this way of thinking about political participation often leads to 'outsourcing decision making' in the sense that after voting people do not follow through how the politicians are using their mandate. 'Especially young people are not so courageous to explore how and where to influence. And adults talk about young people, claiming that they are creating opportunities [for young people] to influence [society/politics]. But these do not meet.' But they are now trying to proceed differently, really do this, 'not in a sandpit that adults have created'. (Fieldnotes, February 2019.)

The above extract is from the first session of the course, describing the opening address of one of the course leaders. Whilst they start with a comment concerning their notion concerning young people's lacking understanding about different arenas and forms of participation, the main emphasis in this introduction is on structures and cultures of political participation and in particular recognizing how problematic a traditional, narrow conception of political participation is for young people. If political participation is only about voting, it is out of reach from those young people who are under the age of 18. However, the course leader's comment about outsourcing decision-making can also be interpreted as generally problematizing this voting-centred view as not activating citizens, who leave decision-making to their elected representatives. The aim of the course is described against this background as not only introducing alternative means for participation but also creating real opportunities for young people to participate and breaking the conventional 'sandpit[s] that adults have created'.

By using the metaphor of a 'sandpit', the course leader recognizes that when young people are invited to participate, *osallistetaan*, this is often narrowly framed to topics and contexts that are considered as suitable for them. This distances young people even further from the core of political discussion and decision-making processes. To go beyond this 'sandpit' approach, the course leaders' key strategy was to take young people to places of power that are usually out of their reach, such as the Finnish Parliament. This strategy of physically taking young people to these places of power can be viewed as working in two directions: firstly, educating young people about how politics (policy processes, decision-making, political discussion) works and the means to influence these processes; secondly, to make young people and their views visible in these spaces of power.

The above introduction places a critical focus on structures and cultures of political participation, producing a participatory agenda (*osallistuminen*) focused on analysing and overcoming structural and cultural barriers met by young people as they seek to make themselves heard in the society. Approached this way, the agenda and role of the course and the leaders is to work as allies that support young people in their efforts to form initiatives and making these visible by providing access to relevant arenas and knowledge about different means of participation.

While the course was introduced to the young people by emphasizing this participatory agenda, the course also had an underlying 'hidden agenda'. For researchers, this alternative perspective became visible already in our initial discussions with the NGO and the course leaders as they explained how they had observed a need for these kinds of activities during their first contacts with 'multicultural' young people. The course had initially been designed to address two concerns. Firstly, they wanted to respond to the general lack of political participation among young people. Secondly, they worried that young people 'with multicultural backgrounds' had limited access to knowledge concerning Finnish society and its parliamentary system. The leaders feared that this lack of knowledge would affect these young people's ability to 'take root' in Finnish society.

This framing of the activities could be considered as contributing to the problematization of the political participation of young people and to conflict with the participatory agenda highlighting young people's rights and agency. In addition, the expression 'take root' can be interpreted as referring to dominant integration discourses where understanding about migrant communities' relationship to Finnish society – how 'well' these have integrated to Finnish society and culture – is built through notions such as roots. Approached this way, the problem that the course is aimed to address is still located in the young people's relationship to Finnish society. However, unlike in the participatory agenda, the hidden agenda responds to this problem by training the individual young people in order to encourage active citizenship. Ultimately, it is the young people (and the communities that they are interpreted to represent) that need to be changed in the sense suggested by the term *osallistaa*, to enhance democratic participation, not the exclusive structures, practices and understanding of political participation. The framing reproduces the view of these young people as deficient, in need of motivation and activation (see Gunsilius 2019) and the NGO and the course leaders as agents that have the moral obligation to empower underprivileged youth (see Eliasoph 2011).

While the leaders of the course were talking about this alternative approach as a hidden agenda, this did not remain hidden. As the course started and the group met politicians and experts in different locations, we quickly became aware that also they had received a similar 'introduction' to the group: some voiced their amazement at how active and knowledgeable the young people were. We interpreted that this amazement followed from expectations that these adult experts had about 'multicultural youth' as political actors and thus about the group: they had been identified as marginalized and thus a suitable objects of well-meaning measures, rather than active subjects with their own intentions, targets and perspectives. However, as the course continued, the course leaders seemed to find it increasingly difficult to describe the group as underprivileged, non-participating and passive or in the danger of becoming socially excluded. Midway through the course, many times the group was not introduced as needing to be 'saved', but rather as active, interested and capable young people.

Also, many of the young people had become aware of this hidden agenda during the course. This awareness became visible in different situations where the young people were challenging stereotypical notions concerning their capacities and interests, as will be discussed in more detail below. In addition, during the interviews, the interviewees on the one hand explained how they had become aware of the stereotypical expectations concerning their backgrounds, capacities and interests, and on the other resisted the

categorizations at play. As Greta stated in her interview, as a young woman with an immigrant background whose belonging to Finnish society typically was not questioned, she felt uneasy with being ‘talked to like I was an immigrant and not a Finn’. Greta’s account can be read as questioning the starting points of the course by arguing that the multicultural approach that strives to provide resources to disadvantaged collectives rather reproduces difference than helps to include (or integrate) those excluded from the position of Finnishness. In a similar vein, Nora explained that while she felt that the ‘course worked for us’, she still questioned the categorization produced by targeting the course for young people coming from multicultural backgrounds. She thought that if the course was aiming to help people with an immigrant background to understand Finnish society and political system, the course simply ‘would have been too difficult’. In addition, she resisted this categorization by stating that she doesn’t ‘feel like an immigrant’.

‘We are a mini society here’: young people’s experiences of and aspirations for political participation

Both Greta’s and Nora’s accounts above make visible experiences of misrecognition. Not only did the categorizations at use not resonate with the young people’s self-definitions concerning their positioning in/relationship to Finnish society and Finnishness, the young people’s accounts also suggest that these failed to recognise capacities that they had. Additionally, these kinds of categorizations – like ‘multicultural youth’ – that bundle together this heterogeneous group hides the different positionings that the young people take in relation to political participation. As Daniel phrased it:

The thing is, that as this is a societal course and we discuss societal issues, so we too, when we are gathered from different places, so in a way, in my opinion, we are also a mini society here. Some people find talking about some topics intimidating but at the same time others don’t and really want to talk about them a lot. (Interview, Daniel, 2019.)

In the interview, Daniel discussed at length about the heterogeneity of the group. Daniel, like other interviewees, primarily discussed this in relation to the young people’s different backgrounds in taking part in societal discussions and different activities and differing aspirations. In the above extract, he also highlights different positionings that the young people take in the field of politics and in relation to different topics: according to Daniel, immigration was one of the topics that some of the young people were very keen to discuss at the same time as others found it really ‘intimidating’.

At the same time as the participants were forming ‘a mini society’, with differing political stands as well as views and aspirations concerning political participation, many of the young people had a somewhat critical stance on youth participation, with some of the participating young people being even sceptical.

The leaders give us our turn, Reetta starts to introduce our research project. Thomas sits right in front of Reetta, surrounded by others, and quite quickly requests a turn and asks ‘what do you mean by influencing?’ [...] Thomas continues that ‘like here, we are pretending to influence’. Thomas’ face has turned red, it seems that he doesn’t feel comfortable taking up this space, voicing his opinions. Those young participants that had attended the activities last year respond and begin to challenge Thomas’ view, they point out that they ‘got a chance to influence’, ‘we were able to ask’, one adds that they ‘felt’ they were making an impact. Thomas responds to this by asking what did this change, legislation, policy making? One

young woman responds that many of the politicians were saying that young people are the future, and that they really listen when one talks with them. Another continues that since she has two backgrounds [cultures], she was able to tell [the politicians] how this [society] looks like to her. Thomas challenges this, says that demonstrations and strikes, either violence or elections, are the only means to really influence. That he does not think that you can make any sort of difference with this course. If you go and talk to the politicians as a secondary school student, they are simply not interested. 'Politicians are not interested in my or your opinion.' The young woman responds to this by adding that even if she is involved in party politics she really felt that she could make a bigger impact here than there [in the party]. (Fieldnotes, February 2019.)

In the above extract from the first session of the course, Thomas raises two concerns with young people's opportunities to participate: firstly, he doubts whether young people can make a difference and whether they are always limited to just imitating ('pretending') political participation; secondly, he doubts whether those in power are interested in young people's views. While in the above extract, some young people quite forcefully challenged Thomas' views, emphasizing positive experiences and opportunities that the NGO's activities had provided for them, elsewhere, the same young people talked about their disappointment with attempts to make themselves heard in other contexts.

Many of the young people had participated in similar activities before, such as youth editorial boards in media houses, and their experiences were very mixed or even negative. Even in these contexts that aimed to 'engage' young people, they experienced being treated as the 'wrong kind of young people' when expressing interest in politics – too clever and too vocal. They were expected to be agentic and participate, but only inside the specific sandpits reserved for them (see also Bastedo 2015; Boldt 2017).

Thus, while being enthusiastic about the topics and methods of the course – opening up opportunities to discuss politics and even challenge those in power – in general the young people seemed to be cautious with their expectations of getting their views heard and making a difference. However, many of the young people were still stating that their reason for participating in the course was to do with their interest in making a difference and having their views heard.

'Are you perhaps interested in politics?': confronting (and parodying) the terms of political participation

Despite the aim of investigating and finding different means of participation, the places of power visited during the course mostly represented institutional politics. This reproduced a very narrow view of politics and political participation. The group visited the visitor's centre of the parliament to meet MPs (who mostly failed to show up), the ministry of justice, city hall, chief editors of two media houses (one large national, one small independent) and finally an elite politics debate forum aimed at middle-aged adults. In these situations, the young people actively and spontaneously discussed politics with the politicians and journalists they met. They were taking the opportunity to 'show that young people are not stupid', as phrased by one of the course leaders.

However, challenging this dominant conception of passive and ignorant youth proved to be a very hard task. Our data show repeated situations where the young people's skilful participation surprises the MPs, civil servants and journalists they engage with during the

course. In our data, the young people's skilful action and particularity of their views many times goes unnoticed as their questions, comments or action is approached as representing 'youthfulness' in general.

In the beginning of the tour at the city hall, the young people had been polite and followed along obediently, until we reached the chambers of the city council. They burst into the room and onto the rostrum, and start to look for the list of the council members and their placing in the chambers. They are very well aware where they are and what they are doing. Some of young people stay on the rostrum and pretend to be members of the council. One of the politically active young women, Nora, takes the list and tries to find a specific seat in the hall. After finding what she is looking for, she sits down and asks me to take a picture on her phone and says that 'one day' this will be her seat.

A lady from the city's communications department, who has acted as our guide on our tour, has followed the young people from afar. In the middle of all this hassle and enthusiasm she asks 'are you perhaps interested in politics?' The young people raise their heads and look at her, smile politely and say 'yes'. Nora shouts 'yes, we are interested' in a loud voice. The young people go on with their pretended council meeting. Nora asks Gabriel at the rostrum whether he is the chairperson of the council. Gabriel takes out the list of council members and says 'Council member? Excuse me?' to which Nora replies 'Mr Chairperson, I ask Daniel to be removed from the council'. Others laugh and someone shouts 'I object'. (Fieldnotes, April 2019.)

This description of how the young people take over the council chambers shows the skilfulness in their performance. We researchers were stunned at how the young people seemed to know exactly how things work in this context. It was not accidental that most of them were keen to find a seat on the rostrum, from where the council meetings are chaired. Many of the young people were looking up specific seats in the hall – typically ones held by powerful political figures. Despite their enthusiasm and knowledgeable performance, the staff member working as our guide asked whether the young people are 'interested in politics'. To us, who were finding it difficult to think any further ways that the young people could have embodied their 'interest', this question made visible how challenging it might be to recognize this in the current context dominated by worried discourse, sometimes even moral panic, concerning the passivity of youth.

These incidents of non-recognition did not go unnoticed by the young people themselves. Sometimes, they opened up space for cheerful carnivalesque behaviour; the young people used these images of 'unruly youngsters' and behaved accordingly (while exchanging knowing looks across the room, as in the moment described above). At other times, discussions with experts, MPs et cetera were followed by irritated talk amongst the young people about how they were not heard, or how their very specific questions were neglected or met by generalized answers. They were very aware of how they became positioned in these encounters: as citizens-in-the-making, subjects to be educated about political participation, not as active participants.

This type of misrecognition occurred again during the tour at the city hall:

After this we continue upstairs to the chambers of the city board, perhaps an even more unobtainable space for anyone. Once again people right away take their place in the oval room and its horseshoe of desks and start to act like the members of the board. The most active ones of the group, including Nora and Daniel, place themselves in the centre of the tables. Each seat has their own microphone, and these are enthusiastically used. Nora says on microphone 'we, the Green Party want ...' and 'dear colleagues'. The rest is swallowed

by the fuss and noise. Daniel says 'I ask you to speak less'. Nora objects and says something about how much Daniel himself has the floor, to which Daniel replies 'well, the difference is I always talk sense'. Two young men on the very far side of the table breathe heavily on the microphones. Daniel and Nora right away start to humorously correct their behaviour and Nora says 'dear colleagues, I ask you to act like adults'. This prompts laughter in the room. The boys continue their heavy breathing. Someone plays music on the microphone from their phone. Nora says 'think if we actually were this cabinet and we behaved like this'. [...] As the deputy mayor arrives, our guide walks up to her and explains that 'we have been playing a meeting here'. (Fieldnotes, April 2019.)

The group was going to meet the deputy mayor at the end of their visit to the city hall. As the young people settled down around the desks, their ongoing discussion revealed how they very well understood the rules of social conduct that adults have created, which is summed up in Nora's plea for her 'colleagues' to act like adults. The group knew how they are expected to behave in order to be taken seriously as political and societal actors and what is seen as immature and ill-behaved. However, the infantilizing comment of our guide totally misses the playful parody that made visible and commented on the impossible terms of young people's political participation: how these contexts require 'adult behaviour' in order to become recognized as a political actor, yet they will inevitably be approached primarily as 'young people' – or even children.

'It is however our future that the parliament decides about': young people performing political participation

During our fieldwork, our attention was drawn to how the young people actively and innovatively used and created space(s) for political participation. Even if they were sometimes voicing their disappointment that yet again they had not been properly heard, this did not seem to defeat them – rather, they looked for new opportunities to voice their views and concerns. For example, as the deputy mayor arrived to the scene described above, the group eagerly used the opportunity to make their views heard. They raised questions concerning employment opportunities for young people, available spaces for self-organized activities, safer spaces for young non-binary people and other minorities, and women-only times in public swimming pools and gyms. Similarly, when visiting the parliament and talking to MPs, the group pointed out concrete situations where young people's views and political initiatives had been dismissed (such as the recent dismissal of a citizens' initiative for free upper secondary school materials) and stressed how the mostly middle-aged parliament was making decisions concerning their futures. As one of the young women exclaimed during her interview:

In the last parliament there was one under 30 and then someone who was 27. (...) Our life situations are so different and the stuff in my life is just not so interesting, because the people there, they are old and they are promoting for things important to them and they get all the votes as it's the middle-aged people who are the active voters. (Interview, Nora, 2019)

In the meetings with decision-makers, the young people often skilfully resisted the overt (political) talk that was addressing them generally and focused on topics that are assumed to interest young people and led the discussion to specific topics that they found relevant. This not only forced their interlocutors to reframe their address, but

also challenged the possibly stereotypical views that they had about 'multicultural' young people's interests. As with the deputy mayor, the young people's questions drew attention to the multiplicity of positionings and interests within their group.

To our understanding, the young people demonstrated discourse virtuosity (Brunila 2009) as they were cleverly adjusting their behaviour to different contexts and interlocutors, while persistently aiming to get their views and concerns heard. This required situational awareness (Koskinen 2020) of both how one should act in these settings in order to be taken seriously and how one can use these situations to introduce new perspectives and thus negotiate the script of the meeting. By using knowledge gained from their former experiences of political participation to adjust their agency in these particular situations, the young people were able to subtly extend the boundaries of the sandpits that generally frame their participation.

While our analysis thus suggests that the young people were actively using these opportunities to create discussion around topics important to them, our overall observation of their agency highlights a rather different aspect. Instead of focusing on resistance, by responding to and challenging dominant, objectifying and marginalizing discourses, the group were investing in doing, being and enjoying.

During the activities organized by the NGO, the group was mostly absorbed in their tasks, whether planning interview questions, making audio and video clips, taking photos and making power-point presentations. They also used the course sessions and excursions to casually discuss with peers their views, thoughts and reactions to topical political issues. The underlying theme that recurred in these discussions was how young people, their views and topics that concern their lives were included in current political and societal debates, who understood young people and who cared about their views.

We find that the way the young people enjoyed this opportunity for engagement and interaction in itself having transformative potential. The young people raised this key aspect of the activities in their feedback after the course and during the interviews; what they had enjoyed the most and found most valuable was the chance to meet new people, peers and to talk with them (see Krivonos 2016; Harris, Wyn, and Younes 2010; Malafaia et al. 2018).

While many of the young people had joined the course due to their interest in influencing public and political discussion, we would argue that this dimension of enjoyment and togetherness, or affective solidarity (Krivonos 2016), is what actually could make a difference. While we find that providing young people with knowledge about and means for participation (the main aim of the NGO) is valuable, these resources might not be used without the affective aspect of comfort and enjoyment. Collaboratively, the group was able to create a space where, firstly, they were considered as having credible political views, and secondly, they felt comfortable participating in political debates.

Discussion

Different actors and practices position and encounter young people as political agents, and these form and/or overcome barriers that frame the political participation of young people. Our argumentation has highlighted the difficulties that both the young people and practices that aim to support their political participation face as they try to

challenge these barriers and stereotypical conceptions of young people's relationship to politics.

Contextual boundaries and norms construct major barriers to recognizing the political nature of young people's agency, and of youth as political subjects. Our analysis implies that this is particularly challenging in the case of racialized and ethnic minority youth. Rather than focusing on structures and practices that hinder political participation, their lack of participation becomes often explained through individualizing perspective focusing on lacking resources or dispositions.

Young people's skill, interest and enthusiasm can easily be overlooked or belittled due to the current policy concern over young people's lack of interest in politics. This adult concern not only contributes directly to excluding young people from the political sphere; adult actors fail to recognize young people's political initiatives and the resources that they already have, individually or collectively. This is one key reason why panic about passive youth can thrive despite young people's persistent efforts to participate.

Our findings about these challenges concerning recognition support the criticism of individualized participatory measures (Eliasoph 2016, 2011; Meriluoto, Litmanen, and Bäcklund 2019; Ribeiro et al. 2015). Our participants' accounts and our observations indicate that the problem lies with how young people are generally positioned in relation to political participation. As long as 'politics' is limited to predefined, institutional forms of political participation, young people's position will be determined by dominant cultural conceptions concerning capable (adult) political agents in these spheres.

Yet, as young people, they will not be able to measure up to these criteria – not even with training, suitable knowledge and skills. The hypocrisy (Raby 2005) of this framing was also ingeniously captured by Nora's comment, asking her colleagues to 'act like adults'. As different institutions and actors seek to engage young people in politics, are they really ready to include young people's perspectives, interests and ways of doing politics, or are they looking for chronologically 'younger people' with adult forms of behaviour and interests?

While we remain sceptical about the ability of youth engagement measures to challenge and change dominant norms concerning political agency, and thus to enable young people to participate in institutional politics in new ways, we cannot ignore the positive experiences the young people had on the course. For them, the course provided a space to elaborate their political subjectivities by discussing their interests and stances regarding societal questions with their peers and the leaders. For some participants, the course provided exceptional experiences of affective solidarity that encouraged them to share their thoughts, form claims and even take part in collaborative acts/performances (see Kennelly 2009).

Our analysis thus implies the need for a general shift in approaches to young people's political participation. Political agency needs to be reconsidered, both in terms of what is recognized as political (Rytioja and Kallio 2018; Luhtakallio and Eliasoph 2014) and what is recognized as agency (see Coffey and Faruggia 2014). In terms of our study, it would be tempting to consider individual moments of spectacular (e.g. verbally challenging those in power) or subversive (e.g. parodying performances) acts as sole instances where political agency is realized. However, this perspective reproduces a conception of politics that excludes less easily recognizable modes of participation (e.g. peer-to-peer discussions). Additionally, this representation of political agency can end up celebrating the capacities

and enactments of particular individuals. In order to support young people's political participation when they are struggling to have their political agency recognized, we need to ask critical questions about what supports the emergence of political agency (Kennelly 2009). This means focusing not on educating young people with a predefined image of future political agents in mind, but on making spaces of multiple political engagement here and now possible.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Strategic Research Council [Grant number 336584, 336551].

ORCID

Anna Suni  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3151-8358>

Reetta Mietola  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3004-5731>

References

- Andersson, M. 2003. "Immigrant Youth and the Dynamics of Marginalization." *Young* 11 (1): 74–89. doi:10.1177/1103308803011001077.
- Bastedo, H. 2015. "Not 'One of Us': Understanding How Non-engaged Youth Feel About Politics and Political Leadership." *Journal of Youth Studies* 18 (5): 649–665. doi:10.1080/13676261.2014.992309.
- Bessant, J. 2004. "Mixed Messages: Youth Participation and Democratic Practice." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 39 (2): 387–404. doi:10.1080/1036114042000238573.
- Biesta, G. 2011. *Learning Democracy in School and Society: Education, Lifelong Learning, and the Politics of Citizenship*. Rotterdam, Boston: Sense Publishers.
- Boldt, G. 2017. "Condescension or Co-decisions: A Case of Institutional Youth Participation." *Young: The Nordic Journal of Youth Research* 26 (2): 108–125.
- Boldt, G. 2021. *Citizens in Training: How Institutional Youth Participation Produces Bystanders and Active Citizens in Finland*. Tampere University. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-03-1850-5>.
- Brunila, K. 2009. *Parasta ennen: tasa-arvotyön projektitapaistuminen*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki, Department of Education.
- Butler, J. 2015. *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Coe, A., M. Wiklund, M. Uttjek, and L. Nygren. 2016. "Youth Politics as Multiple Processes: How Teenagers Construct Political Action in Sweden." *Journal of Youth Studies* 19 (10): 1321–1337. doi:10.1080/13676261.2016.1166191.
- Coffey, J., and D. Faruggia. 2014. "Unpacking the Black Box: The Problem of Agency in Sociology of Youth." *Journal of Youth Studies* 17 (4): 461–474.
- Eliasoph, N. 2011. *Making Volunteers: Civic Life After Welfare's End*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Eliasoph, N. 2016. "The Mantra of Empowerment Talk: An Essay." *Journal of Civil Society* 12 (3): 247–265.
- Farthing, R. 2010. "The Politics of Youthful Antipolitics: Representing the 'Issue' of Youth Participation in Politics." *Journal of Youth Studies* 13 (2): 181–195. doi:10.1080/13676260903233696.

- Gordon, Tuula, Elina Lahelma, Pirkko Hynninen, Tuija Metso, Tarja Palmu, and Tarja Tolonen. 2006. "Collective Ethnography, Joint Experience and Individual Pathways." *Nordisk Pedagogik* 26 (1): 3–15.
- Gunsilius, M. 2019. "Perform, Citizen! On the Resource of Visibility in Performative Practice Between Invitation and Imperative." In *Performing Citizenship*, edited by P. Hildebrandt, K. Evert, S. Peters, M. Schaub, K. Wildner, and G. Ziemer, 263–278. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Häkli, J., and K. Kallio. 2018. "On Becoming Political: The Political in Subjectivity." *Subjectivity* 11 (1): 57–73. doi:10.1057/s41286-017-0040-z.
- Harris, A., J. Wyn, and S. Younes. 2010. "Beyond Apathetic or Activist Youth. 'Ordinary' Young People and Contemporary Forms of Participation." *Young* 18 (1): 9–32.
- Hildebrandt, P., K. Evert, S. Peters, M. Schaub, K. Wildner, and G. Ziemer. 2019. *Performing Citizenship. Performance Philosophy*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Isin, E. 2017. "Performative Citizenship." In *The Oxford Handbook of Citizenship*, edited by Ayelet Shachar, Rainer Bauböck, Irene Bloemraad, and Maarten Vink, 500–523. Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198805854.013.22.
- Isin, E. 2019. "Doing Rights with Things: The Art of Becoming Citizens." In *Performing Citizenship*, edited by P. Hildebrandt, K. Evert, S. Peters, M. Schaub, K. Wildner, and G. Ziemer, 45–56. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kallio, K. 2019. "Elettyä kansalaisuutta jäljittämässä: Kansalaisuuden ulottuvuudet Nuorisobarometrissä." In *Vaikutusvaltaa Euroopan laidalla*, edited by E. Pekkarinen, and S. Myllyniemi, 167–182. OKM: Helsinki. Nuorisosaian neuvottelukunta & Nuorisotutkimusverkosto/ Nuorisotutkimusseura, julkaisuja 216.
- Kennelly, J. J. 2009. "Youth Cultures, Activism and Agency: Revisiting Feminist Debates." *Gender & Education* 21 (3): 259–272.
- Koskinen, Pekka. 2020. "Mä En Ensin Mieltänyt Itseäni Mitenkään Niinku Aktivistina": Kertomuksia Nuorten Vammaispoliittisesta Aktivismista." Master's thesis. University of Helsinki.
- Krivos, D. 2016. "And After That We All Became Like Brothers: Emotions, Affectivity and Communication in a Pro-Governmental Youth Movement in Russia." *Young* 24 (2): 102–117.
- Lentin, A., and G. Titley. 2012. "The Crisis of 'Multiculturalism' in Europe: Mediated Minarets, Intolerable Subjects." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15 (2): 123–138. doi:10.1177/1367549411432384.
- Lepola, O., and V. Kokko. 2015. *Nuoret poliittisina toimijoina: äänestäminen ei riitä. Näkökulma 5. Nuorisotutkimusverkoston julkaisuja*. Nuorisotutkimusseura.
- Luhtakallio, E., and E. Eliasoph. 2014. "Ethnography of Politics and Political Communication: Studies in Sociology and Political Science." In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, edited by K. Kenski and K. Hall Jamieson, 749–762. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Malafaia, C., E. Luhtakallio, I. Menezes, and T. Neves. 2018. "Being Civic While Disavowing Politics: An Ethnography of a Youth NGO in Portugal." *Current Sociology* 66 (3): 769–787.
- Meriluoto, T., T. Litmanen, and P. Bäcklund. 2019. *Osallistu!: Pelastaako osallistaminen demokratian?* Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Mikola, M., and F. Mansouri. 2015. "Race Lines and Spaces of Political Action among Migrant Youth." *Journal of Youth Studies* 18 (4): 500–514. doi:10.1080/13676261.2014.992313.
- Official Statistics of Finland (OSF). 2017. Municipal Elections [e-publication]. ISSN=2323-1114. Background Analysis of Candidates and Elected Persons 2017, 1. Persons Who Voted in Municipal Elections 2017. Helsinki: Statistics Finland [referred: 24.5.2021]. http://www.stat.fi/til/kvaa/2017/05/kvaa_2017_05_2017-05-05_kat_001_en.html.
- Pekkarinen, E., and S. Myllyniemi. 2019. *Vaikutusvaltaa Euroopan laidalla*. Helsinki: OKM, Nuorisosaian neuvottelukunta & Nuorisotutkimusverkosto/Nuorisotutkimusseura, julkaisuja 216.
- Polletta, F. 2016. "Participatory Enthusiasms: A Recent History of Citizen Engagement Initiatives." *Journal of Civil Society* 12 (3): 231–246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2016.1213505>.
- Raby, R. 2005. "What Is Resistance?" *Journal of Youth Studies* 8 (2): 151–171.
- Rastas, A. 2019. "The Emergence of Race as a Social Category in Northern Europe." In *Relating Worlds of Racism: Dehumanisation, Belonging, and the Normativity of European Whiteness*, edited by P. Essed, K. Farquharson, K. Pillay, and E. Joy White, 357–381. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Renold, Emma, Sally Holland, Nicola J. Ross, and Alexandra Hillman. 2008. "Becoming Participant': Problematizing 'Informed Consent' in Participatory Research with Young People in Care." *Qualitative Social Work* 7 (4): 427–447. doi:[10.1177/1473325008097139](https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325008097139).
- Ribeiro, N., C. Malafaia, T. Neves, P. D. Ferreira, and I. Menezes. 2015. "Constraints and Opportunities for Civic and Political Participation: Perceptions of Young People from Immigrant and Non-immigrant Background in Portugal." *Journal of Youth Studies* 18 (6): 685–705. doi:[10.1080/13676261.2014.992307](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2014.992307).
- Rytioja, A., and K. Kallio. 2018. "Opittua käsitteistöä vai koettua yhteiskunnallisuutta? Pohdintoja nuorten kansalaisuudesta politiikkakyselyjen valossa." *Sociologia* 1: 6–27.