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Young people "learning to become" active citizens: informal learning and youth social action in the Philippines

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Abstract

Purpose – Citizenship education tends to focus on formal provisions – such as integrating citizenship education into curriculums – eclipsing the important contributions of informal learning to youth citizenship development. This paper explores the informal learning processes in how young people "learn to become" active citizens through activism and volunteering. It investigates how informal learning facilitates critical citizenship and shape more "hopeful" visions for social change despite intersecting crises young people face.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper draws on multiple-case study analysis of two ethnographic and participatory research that I conducted with a youth-led organisations central Philippines from 2017 to 2023, where I observed, documented and discussed (through semi-structured interviews) their everyday activism.

Findings – This paper found that youth activists and volunteers engaged in informal learning, fostering political literacy through peer-to-peer and intergenerational interactions, task-oriented learning and observation. This learning helped young people to critically assess power structures, such as local politics, while also expanding their repertoires of activism and strengthening their contributions to youth movement building. Additionally, informal learning through participation broadened young people's identities, repositioning their roles to become active local actors. This shift allowed them to promote their own vision of development and citizenship, a vision framed by solidarity and hope.

Originality/value – Youth citizenship learning is conceptualised as a situated and relational process. Using informal learning as a lens, this paper argues that citizenship education must be understood in the context of wider social issues, promoting critical literacy so young people identify power inequalities and devise methods for addressing them.

Keywords Informal learning, Citizenship education, Youth activism, Social movements

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction: active youth citizenship, education and (informal) learning

Active youth citizenship has long been recognised as a contributor to local and global development. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet described young people as having "tremendous potential" to contribute to post-COVID-19 recovery, citing as evidence their innovative and timely responses to the difficulties faced during the pandemic (UN, n.d.). In the Philippines, the 1987 Constitution emphasises the importance of youth in nation-building, mandating that the government must encourage their "involvement in public and civic affairs" (Philippine Const. art. 2 §13). However, what this participation looks like in practice remains uncertain and a critical research concern. Elsewhere, I have discussed how young people and students are demanding more *meaningful* engagement. They oppose tokenistic participation in education policymaking and demand to be included in shaping national policies on education recovery and the global education agenda (Millora, 2022).

Despite optimistic statements about young people's role in development, there remains a persistence of a "deficit" perspective in framing young people's roles in societies (Earl, Maher, & Elliott, 2017). Young people appear to be caught within a paradoxical discourse (Millora, 2022). On the one hand, they are considered apathetic, a perception at least partly due to declining voter turnout among younger cohorts (c.f. O'Toole, 2016). O'Toole (2016) refers to

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this perspective as the "crisis narrative" within the wider discourse on youth participation. On the other hand, when young people do organise and protest, they are stigmatised as "dangerous subjects" (Power, 2012). This rationalises the need to control, surveil and police young people (Millora & Karunungan, 2024) to "prevent" them from "straying" from the path towards responsible adulthood (Earl *et al.*, 2017).

Citizenship education has been framed as both an important antidote to youth apathy and a tool to ensure that young people are "on track" to become active and responsible citizens (Biesta, Lawy, & Kelly, 2009). Some approaches to citizenship education programmes are based on the assumption that young people are "not-yet citizens", implying that they must be educated and trained through citizenship education to become productive members of society (Biesta *et al.*, 2009; Robinson-Pant, 2023).

This view of citizenship as a learning outcome is a problematic framework "because it is fabricated on the assumption that citizenship is a status that is only achieved after one has successfully traversed a specified trajectory" (Biesta *et al.*, 2009, p. 7). This framing is also employed by educational approaches to active citizenship that predominantly focus on formal provisions, such as integrating global citizenship education into curriculums for K–12 education and universities (Le Bourdon, 2020).

However, focusing on the "formal" can eclipse the important contribution to informal youth citizenship learning that occurs outside formal institutions. In this paper, I ask the following research questions: What are the informal learning processes involved when young people "learn to become" active global citizens through activism and volunteering? With a focus on the "processes" rather than the "outcomes" of learning, in what ways does informal learning facilitate young people's critical citizenship and visions of social change? My conceptual starting point recognises young people's social activism as an opportunity to learn citizenship. I intentionally avoid a framing that constructs citizenship as an autonomous, external skill or value that must be inculcated through formal citizenship education programmes. For this purpose, I draw from the long-term ethnographic and participatory research with youth volunteers and activists that I have been conducting in central Philippines since 2017. I also build on previous studies that have clarified how young people develop their citizenship through their everyday lives and by participating in diverse forms of social activism (Biesta *et al.*, 2009; Baillie Smith, & Laurie, 2011; Le Bourdon, 2020; Schugurensky, 2021; Allaste, Beilmann, & Pirk, 2022).

Next, this paper maps the shifting understandings of youth citizenship, particularly in terms of how the constellations of social activism and citizenship that young people participate in have changed over time. I then explore the concept of informal learning to understand the diverse ways that young people influence and enact social change. By employing informal learning as an interpretive framework, this paper emphasises citizenship as a process of being rather than a set of measurable outcomes. The next section explains my methodology before introducing the three key themes from the findings. I conclude the paper by reflecting on how a focus on the "informal learning" contributes to research and practice surrounding youth engagement.

2. Broadening conceptualisations of youth citizenship

Ako ay Pilipino	I am a Filipino;
Buong katapatang nanunumpa	I pledge allegiance
Sa watawat ng Pilipinas	To the flag of the Philippines
At sa bansang kanyang sinasagisag	And the country it represents.
Na may dangal, katarungan at Kalayaan	With honour, justice and freedom
Na pinakikilos ng sambayanang	That is put in motion by a nation that is
Maka-Diyos,	God-fearing,
Maka-tao,	Humane,
Makakalikasan,	at Pro-nature and
Makabansa.	Patriotic

Most Filipinos who have attended formal education in the Philippines can likely recite the *Panunumpa sa Watawat* (Pledge of Allegiance to the Philippine Flag) word for word. The pledge is written in Tagalog, the national language of the country. Every Monday morning, schools across the country hold a flag-raising ceremony attended by the entire school community, including students, teachers and staff. Attendees recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the Philippine Flag ("and the country it represents") with their left palm over the right side of their chest. These words project an image of an ideal Filipino citizen: someone who is *maka-Diyos* (God-fearing), *makatao* (humane), *makakalikasan* (pro-nature) and *makabayan* (patriotic). This practice is a useful starting point for understanding how educational spaces and their accompanying practices are pathways that "mould" young people are to align with the image of the ideal citizen.

The image of the ideal Filipino citizen has also been popularised as a function of education policies, including school curriculums (Mendoza & Nakayama, 2003). In 2013, the Philippine government implemented a revised K–12 curriculum that added an additional two years of compulsory education to the existing ten-year requirement. This significant change not only "mark[ed] a policy and structural change but also a discursive shift in so far as the imagination of the Filipino's place within the nation and the world [we] re concerned" (De Los Reyes, 2013, p. 549). For De Los Reyes (2013), the new curriculum strongly emphasises the acquisition of so-called "21st-century skills", including a more "global" perspective that recognises international issues and challenges and respect for other cultures. Now, for a young person to become an upstanding Filipino citizen, they must not only become *maka-Diyos* (God-fearing), *makatao* (humane), *makakalikasan* (pro-nature) and *makabayan* (patriotic) but also work both for "the good of one's own country. . . [and] for global ends" (De Los Reyes, 2013, p. 557). This shift in government policy reflects wider discourses that stress the "global" nature of citizenship (cf. Johnson & Morris, 2010), such as global citizenship education (Myers, 2016).

More broadly, citizenship education programmes also demand that citizens think "critically". According to Adarlo (2016), partly due to its complex colonial history and subjugation to dictatorial regimes, the Philippine society continues to be marked by stark power inequalities characterised by domination and oppression. This highlights the need for an education system that can "provide sites to examine and interrupt the historical and structural roots of power and privilege" (Adarlo, 2016, p. 266). Indeed, the educational imperative of critical citizenship has been observed in several national education programs (cf. Johnson & Morris, 2010), as well as within global citizenship discourses (cf. Andreotti, 2014). I will now turn to a more detailed discussion on what "critical citizenship" means and how young people's changing repertoires and aims of social action could offer new ways of understanding active citizenship.

2.1 Critical citizenship education and dissent

Critical citizenship involves understanding the unequal power relationships that shape systems of education and acting to address these problematic relationships. In some ways, critical citizenship proposes a new framework of the (critical) citizen as someone who challenges, rather than simply abides by, the visions of citizenship developed by others. Freire (1970/2000, p. 85) offers a useful lens for framing education (and learning in general) as an important pathway to conscientisation, referring to "a deepened consciousness" of one's situation that "leads people to apprehend that situation as [a] historical reality susceptible of transformation". Drawing on Freire's work, Bartlett and Schugurensky (2021) suggest the need for an ecosystem of citizenship education (e.g. knowledge building through curriculums), civic engagement (e.g. volunteering at and through schools) and school democracy (e.g. youth participation in school governance). Thinking of these three pathways as interrelated rather than mutually exclusive enables a recognition of student agency and the diversity of social activism.

This perspective relates to several findings from youth engagement research. For example, studies have shown that young people's political participation is more diverse than anticipated and does not always mirror "duty-based" citizenship models (such as the Philippine model introduced earlier) (Dalton, 2008; O'Toole, 2016). As demonstrated by the many youth and student movements that have arisen in response to social inequalities around the world, youth citizenship can also be expressed through dissent (O'Brien, Selboe, & Hayward, 2018; Millora & Karunungan, 2024).

In many cases, "dissenting citizenship" aims more at holding systems and governments accountable and challenging policies rather than at "pledging allegiance" or agreeing with authority (as in the duty-based citizenship model). In their analysis of youth climate activism, O'Brien *et al.* (2018) found that young people's dissent is expressed in different ways, such as by practising "dutiful dissent" within existing structures, attempting to modify systems and practices through "disruptive dissent" and "dangerous dissent" expressed by "threatening" powerful elites and fundamentally transforming the "given world". In research on the Philippines, for instance, a few critical historical analyses have highlighted how citizenship education programmes continue to be inflected by the legacy of Spanish and American colonisation and its citizenship education objective of "training loyal colonial subjects" (Maca & Morris, 2014; cf. Azada-Palacios, 2022). Because the imagery of citizenship is rooted in the history of colonial occupation, citizenship and dissent can be used as tools to challenge these legacies, including received notions of an ideal citizen, calling into question how and why such notions were formulated.

Finally, scholars have also observed that youth citizenship is becoming increasingly individualistic. Dalton (2008) described this as "engaged" citizenship, which sees acts of citizenship – such as adopting veganism, supporting sustainably sourced products or boycotting certain clothing brands – become increasingly embedded in the everyday lives of young people (Earl *et al.*, 2017; O'Toole, 2016).

Youth citizenship becoming at once less structured and more multifaceted, individualised and critical produces questions regarding the flexibility of "formal" conceptions of citizenship (e.g. those promoted in formal schooling) and their ability to capture the fluid ways that young people participate in social activism. More specifically, what are the implications of these questions in terms of scholarly understanding of how young people learn to become active citizens? I now turn to the concept of informal learning to probe this question.

3. Informal learning: some conceptual considerations

My conceptual starting point for this paper is the framing of citizenship education, or, more specifically, pathways to learning to become citizens, as a lifelong learning process (Mayo, 2000; Delanty, 2003; Rogers, 2006). While an exploration of learning outcomes in citizenship education programmes is important, my conceptual framework conceptualises citizenship not as an end product or learning outcome but rather as a process that occurs across an individual's lifespan and in various contexts (e.g. the home, community and school) (Jarvis, 2004; Rogers, 2014). The process of learning to become an active citizen can occur in various informal ways. Informal learning is broadly understood as unstructured and often non-intentional learning with no clear or intended learning outcomes. In this context, learning is a result of "daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification" (UNESCO, 2009).

In his research on informal learning through democratic participation, Schugurensky (2021) quotes a female participant who described participatory budgeting as "our school of citizenship". Those who engage in participatory budgeting learn a diversity of knowledge and skills, enabling them to actively shape local funding strategies. Hence, this participant articulates how learning to become an active citizen occurs not only in formal spaces such as schools and universities but also in informal and everyday spaces (Biesta *et al.*, 2009; Le Bourdon, 2020). In addition to schools, non-governmental organisations and other civil

society groups offer opportunities for citizenship education. Such opportunities can take the form of international volunteering programmes that are open to young people (Baillie Smith, & Laurie, 2011), youth activism development initiatives (Carey, Akiva, Abdellatif, & Daughtry, 2021) and experiential environmental education programmes (Robinson-Pant *et al.*, 2021). Notably, studies have identified youth activism as an effective context for learning collective problem-solving skills (Kirshner, 2007) and developing critical awareness (Carey *et al.*, 2021).

Approaching citizenship education as a process and not only as an outcome also encourages exploration of the "funds of knowledge" (Moll *et al.*, 1992) and "banks of skills" (Rogers, 2014) that young people already possess – rather than the knowledge and skills they need to be taught. My research and personal experiences demonstrate that many young people and students are already at the forefront of several social justice movements (Millora & Karunungan, 2024). By recognising that youth and students are actively participating in society as citizens in diverse constellations, I have been able to reorient my exploration of citizenship education away from teaching and training (the dominant focus within the existing literature; cf. Le Bourdon, 2020) and towards the ways that young people are "learning from active citizenship" (Mayo, 2000, p. 23).

4. Methodology

This paper employed a multiple-case study approach (Stake, 2013) by drawing on the findings of two interrelated research projects I conducted on the learning and literacies dimensions of youth social action. Multiple-case studies allow for an understanding of the "how" and "why" of a phenomenon (Yin, 2003), across various linked locations or contexts (Stake, 2013). Both projects saw me work with youth volunteers and youth activists in Iloilo City, Philippines, where I observed, documented and discussed (through semi-structured interviews) participants' daily HIV/AIDS awareness activism, as well as their participation in local governance. The inspiration for these studies derived from my own experience as a social justice activist in Iloilo City where I grew up and started my professional career. I was a student leader, campus writer and member of various local, youth-led organisations focusing on education and social justice – some of which I have founded myself. After studying and working in Europe since 2013, my occasional trips (both personal and for research purposes) to my city exposed me to changing landscapes of its youth civic space. Therefore, whenever I conduct fieldwork, I see myself both as an insider and outsider in various extents in the contexts where I research.

4.1 Introducing the two case studies

This paper draws from two case studies of youth-led organisations in the Philippines. Each case study is part of a separate research project, led by the author, that explores the learning and literacy dimensions of youth social action in the Philippines. Both studies received ethical approval from Goldsmiths University of London and University of East Anglia research ethics committees prior to commencement. In these studies, I have used a broader age range for "youth" and "young people" which, in several contexts, is state-defined as up to 35 years old (African Union, 2006; ASEAN, 2017). In the Philippines, the legal definition of youth is 15–30 years old (Senate of the Philippines, 1995).

The first case study organisation is Youth4Health [1] – a youth-led local organisation that advocates for HIV/AIDS awareness. I studied the organisation as part of my "Learning and Volunteering" project which was long-term (2017–2022) ethnographic research to explore informal learning through youth volunteering (cf. Tedlock, 2000; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

The second case study organisation is Buligay Youth (*buligay* is a Hiligayanon term that roughly translates to "helping one another"), [2] a youth-led group encouraging their fellow

youth to participate in local governance. My second research project, "Literacies of Dissent", explored how youth activists in the Philippines "learn" by participating in youth and student movements. This project employed a youth-led participatory action research approach (Ozer, 2017), with youth co-researchers playing a key role in determining the research questions, choosing the research methods, collecting data and analysing findings.

My approach for access and recruitment is similar in both case studies. I began by securing institutional approval from the leaders of both organisations. I then attended preliminary volunteer meetings and gatherings to share my research, how I intend to gather data and invite potential participants. Since my interviews were often a follow up from a participatory workshop or a specific observation, I invited participants individually for a discussion if they were willing.

4.2 Data and participants

For Youth4Health, I drew data from semi-structured interviews and participant observation. I observed volunteers' activities, conversations and other tasks while volunteering with the organisation and conducted about 20 semi-structured interviews. The youth volunteers in the organisation range in age from 18 to 27, and their motivations for volunteering are diverse, such as wanting to learn about sexual and reproductive health and wishing to give back to their communities. Some of the participants were themselves youth volunteers living with HIV. Youth volunteers partake in several activities, such as organising public HIV screenings and tests, facilitating care plans for youth and adolescents living with HIV and conducting community health classes and outreach activities.

For Buligay Youth, the main data used in this paper were semi-structured interviews with four youth activists (19–21 years old). They were the original founders of Buligay Youth, and they have been instrumental in training their fellow youth to continue the work of the organisation. At the time of the interview, all but one of them were still in university.

In both research projects, I used a semi-structured approach to interviewing. This method was particularly useful for focusing on specific issues or topics that I had observed through participant observation and other participatory activities. While I had general ideas about the questions to ask and the topics to explore, the semi-structured format allowed participants the freedom to steer the conversation toward areas that were relevant and important to them, while still staying within the broader theme of the research. All interviews were voice-recorded following consent of the participants.

4.3 Data analysis

I used a thematic analysis approach to investigate the data collected during the course of the two projects. This data analysis did not occur at any distinct stage. Instead, I used my data analysis as a "study [of] the emerging data" that fed into the overall direction of the research (e.g. focusing research questions) and data collection methods (e.g. selecting interviewees and focusing observations) (Charmaz, 1996, p. 36; cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Interviews were transcribed and, alongside the field notes, were read and re-read to identify preliminary patterns. Much of the preliminary coding occurred during my fieldworks. I then proceeded with secondary coding, bringing most common codes together and, later, emerging themes following process described in Charmaz (1996).

Each set of data were analysed separately as the "Literacies of Dissent" project started after the "Learning and Volunteering" project was completed. For this paper, I was able to identify similar themes that arose from both of the projects. I found the concepts of informal learning and critical citizenship (reviewed above) as useful lenses for this cross-case analysis. For example, in both case studies, themes emerged around young people engage with the knowledge, skills and activities that relate to movement organising and advocacy. These common themes became the basis of this article and, specifically, constitute the next three sections arising from both projects were linked together to identify the patterns and similarities that constitute the next three sections.

5. Diverse ways of learning in/through volunteering and activism

The findings from these two studies emphasise how young people learn about social injustice and inequality in the context of unstructured, peer-to-peer and self-directed learning activities. Examples include volunteering with friends in HIV/AIDS community classes, participating in student street protests in support of academic freedom and organising food drives for those affected by COVID-19 lockdowns. Much of this learning happened informally, often with the assistance of more experienced "others" or fellow activists and volunteers who may have lacked experience but were willing to learn things as they went along. Jacob and Greg, both founding youth members of Buligay Youth, described how they developed many skills vital to organising and maintaining campaigns intended to support youth participation in local decision-making processes:

> When I had just started conducting voter education campaigns, I did not know a lot of things [about politics]. Specifically, [there was] legal language that I was not aware of; I would black out. I think it might have started when I was young. People would tell me, "You should not talk to your elders", "You are young, so you should listen", and "You are young, so you should be quiet". When I was doing the house-to-house campaign, I became more vocal and also learned "how to talk" from my peers.
>
> – Interview excerpt, Greg (22 years old), 14 April 2023

> Jacob: Communication skills ? I learned them in school, but the other things that I write [e.g. letters to local officials, campaign materials, statements], I did not learn from school.
> Me: So, where did you learn them? Jacob: I also don't know. . . But perhaps [I learned them] when we had to campaign for land tenure when we were evicted from where we used to live. I am also a writer, and [I was] a campus journalist then, so I was able to apply those skills. But in terms of knowing who to talk to, which government office, "*panilag-nilag ka man*" ["you need to learn by observing with curiosity"]. I listen to how people talk and who they talk to.
>
> – Interview excerpt, Jacob (21 years old), 5 June 2023

Greg's experience demonstrates the challenge many young people face when speaking with adults and even their peers: young people are thought of as inexperienced and should therefore primarily listen rather than speak. Such experiences reveal the limitations of current frameworks for understanding youth participation (cf. Earl *et al.*, 2017) and suggest ways that activist work (such as the voter education campaign Greg describes) can offer a pathway for youth to challenge these problematic identity framings by highlighting their agency when campaigning.

My discussions with Jacob and Greg are representative of the experiences of many of the youth activists and volunteers I interviewed. It also offers rich insights into the diverse informal ways by which they learn. In the excerpt above, Jacob describes how he utilised his previous organising experience (the campaign for land tenure) and his experience as a student journalist. He was able to apply his writing composition skills to the new context of local campaigning. In this social action, Jacob was able to draw from "funds of knowledge" (Moll *et al.*, 1992) and "banks of skills" (Rogers, 2014) that he had established over multiple years, in varying contexts. Notably, these skills and knowledge bases were apparently not readily explicit to Jacob (given his immediate response of "I also don't know"), highlighting the tacit and "invisible" nature of informal learning (Rogers, 2014; Schugurensky, 2021).

Youth4Health had more non-formal learning opportunities, such as training, short courses and orientation sessions that were often designed by "external" partners (e.g. other non-government organisations, funders and government institutions). Differing from informal learning, these non-formal sessions were often designed around predetermined activities and lessons, with clear learning goals. Many such sessions were instrumental or project-based (e.g. how to conduct an HIV test), but some sessions also explored broader themes, such as the role of young people in public health and education access.

Youth4Health youth volunteers also organised community health classes and outreach. They were expected to communicate accurate information during community lectures and

health teaching, including correctly performing medical tasks involved in HIV testing. Based on my observations, an "authority" figure is often needed to validate whether certain tasks have been performed correctly. They also served as arbiters whenever confusion arose, as illustrated by my account of RJ's return to the organisation after attending a three-day workshop where he learned a new community-based HIV testing procedure. RJ is a youth volunteer at Youth4Health. In the past, when volunteers or staff members of Youth4Health attended a major workshop or seminar (such as a seminar on new developments in HIV testing), it was customary for them to share what they learned with the members who were unable to attend. After one such meeting, RJ was asked by Luisa, a senior staff member, to perform the test on Tomas, another senior staff member, while volunteers and other staff members, including nurses and medical technologists. I observed

> RJ disinfected Tomas' finger by wiping it with alcohol using a cotton ball, narrating the steps as he went along. Luisa came closer to get a better look, and someone said, jokingly, "Oh no, Ma'am Luisa is grading you!" RJ laughed, and Luisa clarified, "You need to wipe the finger from the centre outward". RJ appeared a bit tense but said, "Yes ma'am".
>
> RJ proceeded to wipe the finger with dried cotton. Tomas told him, sounding irritated, that there was no need to continue because the finger had been disinfected by the alcohol and had air-dried. If the finger comes in contact with another object [i.e. the dry cotton ball], it might get infected again. RJ disagreed and said that this was how he was taught by the instructor during the training. He continued, stating that because some clients become very sweaty out of fear of needles, you need to wipe away the sweat. Tomas disagreed and said that nobody could begin sweating that fast. Feeling irritated, RJ replied, "So why don't you just do this instead of me?"
>
> – Field notes, 11 September 2017

There was palpable tension in their discussion over the exact steps involved in conducting this medical test. The three demonstrators – RJ, Luisa and Tomas – attempted to work together to share this information as accurately as possible with the audience. RJ could be considered *the* expert in this situation because he possessed the most up-to-date knowledge regarding the procedure. However, it can also be inferred from this account that the role of "teacher" shifted at various moments (cf. Rogers, 2014). Luisa stepped in at one point to clarify the method of wiping the client's finger from the centre outward. At the outset, the audience placed Luisa in a position of authority capable of evaluating the accuracy of RJ's actions ("Luisa is grading you!").

The second half of the account captured the clear disagreement between RJ and Tomas. RJ supported his process by referring to the guidance of the trainer who had facilitated the workshop. He argued that this was what he was told to do by someone who was knowledgeable. Tomas, meanwhile, relied on his own understanding of the situation. This disagreement was not resolved. Nonetheless, it is apparent that two-way learning was occurring between RJ, the youth volunteers and the more "experienced" others. This resembles Chisholm's (2013) observation that "the conditions and demands of working life are no longer predicated on the one-way transmission of knowledge and competence between the more experienced and the less experienced". Ultimately, this account highlights both the collaborative and combative nature of "making sense" of and mediating information.

This section has demonstrated how spaces of youth activism are spaces of learning that offer various modalities of interaction (cf. Rogers, 2014). In my two studies, these spaces were significant in shaping young people's understanding and awareness of inequalities and social justice, as well as the potential contributions of collaboration, solidarity and mutual respect to addressing these issues.

6. Critical awareness and action

In both case studies, young people expressed that they developed a more critical understanding of social issues and their role in addressing them as they engage in social activism. These

understandings were developed informally by young people as they organised campaigns, conducted awareness-raising sessions and participated in volunteer activities. For example, members of Buligay Youth learned from the youth dialogues that they helped facilitate within their communities. These dialogues were designed to develop youth-led solutions in partnership with other stakeholders.

One issue they worked on was young people's participation in local governance processes, particularly the creation of state-sanctioned programmes that address the needs of young people (e.g. mental health, well-being and employability). For this purpose, several participants expressed the importance of continually working with government officials despite persistent issues, such as corruption. In the following interview excerpt, Jacob and Kyle explain their beliefs about engaging with local officials as a part of their work:

> Jacob: My philosophy is that the very meaning of community participation is public–private partnerships. It's [about] working with the government, whose primordial aim is to ensure social welfare. They are the ones who have the resources that we need to access [as youth organisers and leaders].
> Me: Well, what about politicians who have a record of being corrupt? Will you work with them?
> Jacob: I think I will work with that person and help them perform their duty. I cannot just critique and critique them. My approach would be that, if they are open, I would engage in dialogue with them, collaborate and see how we can work together so they can perform their duties. But, of course, it's a different story if you are feeding their ego and supporting their corrupt practices.
>
> – Interview excerpt, Jacob (21 years old), 5 June 2023

> There is a saying in our circles that in order to change the system, like the government, you have to be part of it. I believe this, but I think being part of the government is not only about being a politician. There are other ways, such as being part of committees or councils.
>
> – Interview excerpt, Kyle (21 years old), 26 April 2023

According to the interviewees, participating in the organisation allowed them to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the limits and possibilities of working with/within the political system they were trying to engage with. As articulated by Jacob and Kyle, this led to more strategic, practical and impactful work. Allaste *et al.* (2022, p. 21) argue that active citizens possess knowledge not only of "political institutions and how they work" but also of "skills for relating to others in the public domain, and opportunities to display solidarity and interest in solving social problems". Participation in these established cultural and political practices, as well as decision-making, plays an important function in organising. According to O'Brien *et al.* (2018), this allows young people to "engage and interact with technical, managerial, and political elites" – and potentially challenge them. Kyle and Jacob needed to understand politics, the identities of politicians (i.e. "who's who") and the dynamics of political processes in order to access and participate in these decision-making processes.

Jacob's emphasis on attempting to identify common values while also setting boundaries ("It's a different story if you are feeding their ego and supporting their corrupt practices"), as well as Kyle's insight into various ways of participating in governance beyond electoral politics ("being part of committees and councils"), reflect some of the changing ways young people are learning to relate to politics, a phenomenon already documented in the literature (Dalton, 2008; Bang, 2009; O'Toole, 2016). Their ideas also relate to the findings of O'Loughlin and Gillespie (2012, p. 122) that some young Muslims in the United Kingdom chose "to work within [the dominant political and media system or discourse] and attempt to alter the agendas". For Andreotti (2014), critical global citizenship education also involves teaching individuals to "analyse [their] own position/context and participate in changing structures, assumptions, identities, attitudes and power relations in their contexts". In line with this, Kyle and Jacob first aimed to understand the political system and then strategically identifying ways to change practices.

Their organisation was also active in encouraging young people to vote. For example, they held house-to-house voter registration campaigns and provided transportation to registration

sites for young people in rural areas. This improved access to voting for many "marginalised" youths in their community. The youth volunteers described this initiative as a way to help young people's voices be heard, especially given the then-current political climate, an approach they consider a significant pathway to changing political systems and structure.

Another important theme that emerged from the interviews was movement building. In particular, responses from participants highlight how "learning together" as youth activists gave rise to further youth mobilisations and increased participation.

> We saw another group setting up a youth-led organisation. . . doing similar things to us – which is a great thing! Because for me, that's the goal of community development – to organise people and mobilise them. So, that shows you that our campaigns are working because they are replicable. If you are the only organisation that's addressing a problem, the problem cannot be solved. But if you teach your fellow peers and young people about how you solve an issue in a way that is viable in their own contexts, then the action will grow!
>
> – Interview excerpt, Jacob (21 years old), 5 June 2023

Jacob's statement is representative of many interviewees' views regarding the importance of movement building and how it is made possible by raising awareness and building solidarity with other youth groups. Solidarity seemingly drives action. Capturing the spirit of critical citizenship (Andreotti, 2014), the notion that we are all part of the problem and all part of the solution motivates young activists.

This section has demonstrated that learning through activism not only increases awareness but also catalyses further action. Learning in and through social activism goes beyond understanding social inequalities and struggles and becomes an impetus for young people address these problems. The findings highlight how youth activists and volunteers were able to "work around systems" to comply with funder deliverables and meet expectations (in the case of Youth4Health), as well as build relationships with local politicians (in the case of Buligay Youth) – despite being unable to completely change hierarchical relationships. These observations demonstrate the political literacies and awareness of young people and the flexibility and creativity they display when collaborating with key stakeholders.

7. Visions of citizenship

Many young people expressed how these change-oriented learning experiences, in a way, facilitated a more hopeful view of their role in social change. Particularly, it allowed them to (re)position themselves as active contributors to local recovery efforts in education and beyond. By expanding what they think they can do for others, these findings point to the transformative potential of education not only at the social level detailed in the previous sections but also in terms of identity building.

> I used to not know how to write letters, compose a formal email or talk to professionals. I was very intimidated before. . . I have a very soft voice. But now, I can talk to potential sponsors and politicians. I think the most important thing I learned was how to communicate the cause that you are advocating for to people. And [I learned] other things, like campaigning, being able to network – like knowing who's who – [and] public speaking and presentation skills.
>
> – Interview excerpt, Kyle (21 years old), 26 April 2023
>
> The best experience I had was during my first medical mission. . . It was my first time giving out medicine. They [patients] looked as if they didn't have money to buy medicine. . . Because of volunteering here, I can see that I can also help them. . . I can give them medicine. . . It is a small thing, but it is already a significant contribution to them and generally.
>
> – Interview excerpt, Anita (18 years old), 16 December 2018

Despite the five-year documentation interval, these excerpts from interviews with Kyle (Buligay Youth) and Anita (Youth4Health) exemplify the sort of personal transformations that

social activism can help facilitate in young people. Anita, who comes from a low-income household, described learning that she can help others as if it were a "surprise" ("I can see that I can also help them"). Similarly, Kyle describes how learning certain skills while performing his tasks as an activist improved his self-confidence when speaking with people and advocating for certain causes he believes in. This exemplifies the transformative potential of informal learning and learning through social activism (Kirshner, 2007; Rogers, 2014; Schugurensky, 2021). These examples also show how social activism can help young people (re)build their identities as active agents who seek to effect social change.

The Buligay Youth activists often had the opportunity to serve as trainers. They were involved in designing learning sessions for fellow youth activists and volunteers, as well as for young people seeking to run for the local youth council. My observations of these sessions demonstrate how Buligay Youth used learning and dialogue (cf. Freire, 1967/2000) to enhance young people's understanding of citizenship, their roles in wider (and unequal) political and social arenas and the concrete strategies that can be used to be taken seriously as a stakeholder in education (e.g. participating in student councils, building power through organising and writing letters). In other words, these sessions allowed an exploration into how hope-based visions can be turned into more concrete actions. Young people, through learning and literacy practices, can vacillate between their ascribed roles in social spaces (i.e. their "duties" as students and community members) while also challenging and disrupting these roles (i.e. "dissenting" from the acceptance of unequal power hierarchies).

Finally, everyday acts of volunteering and activism also shape young people's understanding of citizenship, a possibility framed by Kyle using the concept of "hope":

> I am hopeful regarding governance because if there is no hope, then there are really no longer any spaces for us to participate in. And even now, when the space for participation is so narrow, I am still hopeful because there are still some spaces for us [young people] to participate.
>
> – Interview excerpt, Kyle (21 years old), 26 April 2023

For Andreotti (2014, p. 29), the goal of critical global citizenship education is to "empower individuals to reflect critically on the legacies and processes of their cultures, to imagine different futures and to take responsibility for decisions and actions". This section has demonstrated how informal acts of everyday activism and citizenship are political and imbued with power, facilitating the authoring of young people's identities and social roles. Enabled by learning practices such as writing letters, conducting trainings and facilitating peer-to-peer dialogue, these tactics are claims to power that promote individual "visions" of citizenship.

8. Concluding notes: what these findings mean for post-crisis recovery in education

This paper has demonstrated how youth activism and volunteering are important spaces where young people can learn informally about what it means to be an active citizen, how local politics work (and how they can strategically contribute to or shift systems) and how they can (re)shape mainstream perceptions of their demographic: Their activism allowed them to challenge views of young people as passive and, instead, as active citizens who play key roles in social change. Three key findings have emerged from my analysis: (1) Young people engage with informal learning practices (peer-to-peer learning, two-way intergenerational learning, learning as they go along and learning from their previous experiences and other contexts) that enable the development of their political literacy and skills. (2) This mode of learning allows young people to critically assess the broader power relations and structures within which their activism is situated and utilise this critical awareness to drive further action, such as building youth movements. (3) Learning through activism also impacts young people's identities and expands the scope of what they can do and their roles in society. This, in turn, enables them to construct hope-based visions of citizenship that can shape what citizenship can look like.

One policy implication of this paper is that youth activism offers an opportunity to reimagine their role in educational policymaking. Taking cues from the informal learning practices and visions of youth volunteers and activists in the Philippines, I have intentionally avoided a theoretical framing that interprets young people as "citizens-in-the-making" (cf. Biesta *et al.*, 2009). Instead, I have approached them as "already citizens". From this perspective, I have explored the citizenship acts of youth activists and volunteers and examined how they have learned within these contexts. This implores policymakers and education providers to ask themselves how they can recognise and identify these acts of citizenship and build on them when developing education policies. As Biesta *et al.* (2009) explain,

> A focus on young people's citizenship learning in everyday life settings allows for an understanding of the ways in which citizenship learning is situated in the unfolding lives of young people and helps to make clear how these lives are themselves implicated in the wider social, cultural, political and economic order.

This understanding is vital for promoting meaningful youth engagement and ensuring that young people's diverse repertoires of citizenship are considered a resource rather than a barrier. Furthermore, my observations concerning the situatedness of learning citizenship emphasise the ways that informal tacit learning is always "situated in and derives directly from a real-life situation" (Rogers, 2014, p. 29). However, this understanding is not compatible with the perspective that sees citizenship as a learning outcome. If learning is situated, then learning to become a "citizen" is not a static or linear process that leads to a predetermined set of learning outcomes. Instead, the learning process is shaped by broader social issues (community, national and global issues). That is, "learners do not simply occupy an external and separate context where they learn – they are part of the situation where they learn, and their learning is part of the practices of that situation" (Hodkinson *et al.*, 2008, p. 32). This understanding reinforces the effectiveness of more creative, experience-based approaches to citizenship education (cf. Robinson-Pant *et al.*, 2021; Le Bourdon, 2020) and approaches that motivate young people and students to question power structures rather than reproduce them. Perhaps an appropriate starting point involves thinking about how to embed *critical literacy* in the teaching of citizenship – or what Andreotti (2014) describes as the "reading of the word and the world that involves the development of skills, critical engagement and reflexivity".

Finally, the lessons gleaned from young people's visions of citizenship also push to the surface questions about how young people, including students, are involved in key decision-making processes. The so-called "participatory turn" in public governance encourages policymakers and practitioners to meaningfully involve, consult and collaborate with various groups, including youths and students, in shaping national policies and the global education agenda. If post-crisis recovery requires the solidarity of a variety of voices, then the youth demographic must be engaged in meaningful ways, especially given that they are the biggest stakeholders in the sector.

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Notes

1. The name Youth4Health and those of the individuals in it are pseudonyms.
2. Buligay: This is a pseudonym as well as the names of individuals.

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