CO-LEARNING IN YOUTH-ADULT EMANCIPATORY PARTNERSHIPS: THE WAY FORWARD?

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Abstract: Youth engagement continues to be a priority issues for Canadian governments and policy-makers. The focus on young people often negates the critical role that adults play in the process and implementation of youth engagement activities. The following article examines the evolution of youth engagement in Canada, and identifies the key theories and ways of thinking about involving youth that currently guide the field. The article attempts to examine how well-meaning adults concerned with genuine youth engagement re-imagine the possibilities of youth-adult engagement by exploring the ideas of adults and youth sharing civic learning outcomes, emancipatory goals, and iterative forms of reciprocal co-learning.

Keywords: youth engagement, co-learning, youth-adult partnerships, transformational learning theory (TLT)

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Many scholars have argued that youth are disempowered from genuine participation in contemporary society (Camino, 2005; Cook, Mack, & Blanchet-Cohen, 2010; Golombek, 2006; Youniss et al., 2003). As a result, much literature in the field has explored how this imbalance might be addressed and mitigated. For example, the fields of positive youth development (Hart, 1994, 2008; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Lerner, 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003) and community youth development (Hughes & Curnan, 2000; Perkins, Borden, & Villarruel, 2001) offer important advice to practitioners on how to effectively build programs or construct approaches that more actively and authentically involve youth in engagement activities by moving from deficit-based models to more positive, developmentally focused approaches.

A related strand of research focuses on civil society and how the principles of youth engagement and inclusivity should reflect youths' rights to participate as citizens (Biesta, Lawry, & Kelly, 2009; Balsano, 2005; Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Lansdown, 2001; Youniss et al., 2003). Certainly our own previous work in youth-adult university research partnerships (McGregor, 2010) has been built around a similar desire to achieve authenticity, participation, and civic engagement – making a place and space for youth voices in more typically adult-focused civic community issues. But the question remains: Can well-meaning adults concerned with genuine youth engagement erase the naturalized boundaries – often unacknowledged – between youth and adult created and maintained in our cultures, institutions, and discourses? In particular, can we shift from conceptions that naturalize youth as "deficient" in some way? Can we move away from dominant conceptions of what it means to be civically engaged, a model that requires youth to fit within contemporary socio-political landscapes and systems of governance that privilege particular conceptions of civic-mindedness?

In this article, we re-imagine the possibilities of youth-adult engagement by exploring the ideas of adults and youth sharing civic learning outcomes, emancipatory goals, and iterative forms of reciprocal co-learning. This work arises from a recently completed study in which Shaw (2012) surveyed contemporary literature and then spoke with practitioners and funders involved in youth engagement in Canada about their experiences. In this article we begin by surveying the historical and contemporary theories of youth engagement, and then describe how research participants both legitimize and sometimes contest these approaches. We then consider the potential for enhancing the legitimate engagement of youth through the lens of transformational learning theory and, in particular, describe the ways in which co-learning – with youth and adults as intergenerational collaborators engaged in a relationship developed through enacting common goals – might offer an enhanced means through which to realize the call for authentic engagement and emancipatory outcomes.

Understanding the Landscape: Influencing Foundations of Youth Engagement Theory and Practice in the Canadian Context

Contemporary thoughts on youth engagement have changed from deficit-based models of the past towards more youth-centred approaches (Pittman, 2000), clearly a positive move. Yet while this shift in the philosophical underpinning of youth engagement is significant, approaches to youth engagement remain centred around assisting youth rather than around the relationships that are necessary for creating successful engagement processes. In what follows we summarize how this shift in thinking has emerged; in particular, we highlight the significance of the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child or UNCRC (United Nations, 1989), acknowledged as a critical historical juncture in youth engagement theory and practice. Subsequent developments within the field are also detailed providing an important historical and contextual perspective that informs current practices among youth engagement practitioners in Canada. It is critical to understand how the current context of youth engagement is shaping the space for youth-adult learning relationships in Canada.

The First Phase in Youth Development Theory: Deficit-Based Approaches

Deficit-based approaches to youth engagement emerged in the 1960s. The mass media in particular characterized teens as *uncivil*, highlighting issues such as teen pregnancy, high school dropout rates, and youth delinquency. Pittman (2000) documented that it was towards the end of this decade that the "indirect cost associated with the loss of skilled human capital was emerging" (p. 19) and, in turn, public funding began to focus on interventions dealing with youth "deficit" or "delinquent" behaviours. Pittman's (2000) research also documented how these "programs built on, rather than squelched, young people's sense that they could make a difference… [and he called] for programs that addressed young people's needs before they ran away, dropped out, or become pregnant began to grow" (p. 19).

Pittman's (2000) call was a significant departure from the approach used during the 1960s. He argued that work with youth needed to emphasize development, support, and nurturing practices. Lerner et al. (2003) concur; they suggested such approaches were a significant deviation from the acceptable norms of the time. This initial shift in thinking, however, created openings in the policy, research, and programming agendas within communities interested in moving to an asset-based approach. As Block (2008) noted: "[it is] hard to argue against the next generation. An alternative future opens when we shift our view of youth (say 14 to 24 years) from problem to *possibility* [emphasis added], from deficiency to *gift* [emphasis added]" (p. 165).

The Second Phase of Youth Engagement Literature: The UNCRC as a Catalyst

While a shift was clearly emerging, change in theory and practice required a new anchor: Pittman (2000) argued that this emerged as a result of the adoption of the

UNCRC in 1989. Central to the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) was its role as a binding legal document describing the universal rights of the child, both in the developed and developing world. It became a catalyst for action for governments and nations, particularly in the Western world.

The UNCRC is understood by many in the youth engagement field as the catalyst that finally propelled deficit-based programming into an asset-based or strength-based praxis capturing a fundamental shift in understanding the role of young people in society. In Canada, the UNCRC represents the only ratified, legally binding commitment that explicitly states that children – those under the age of 18 – have the right to participate, the right to be heard legitimately, and the right to be part of the very decisions that affect their day-to-day lives.

The UNCRC uses legal language and therefore has presented some challenges to the concrete achievement of its intentions, as the next section will show. But the explicit articulation of young people as capable decision-makers in an adult dominated context within Western society proved to be a message of great weight. Article 12 created significant new opportunities for practitioners, funders, and researchers across countries who ratified the declaration to re-examine the roles and responsibilities associated with young people under the age of 18 (Lansdown, 2001).

Golombek (2006) has further highlighted how this emerging understanding of youth as capable decision-makers enabled a focus beyond conventional measures of citizenship (i.e., voting or running for office activities reserved for adults), to the inclusion of such activities as public debate, letter writing and lobbying, or participation in community groups, as "individuals engage[ed] in activities that connect them to larger issues to sustain and strengthen their community – the traits of 'good citizens'" (p. 13). Essentially then, the UNCRC was the first document in Canada to create this opportunity for broadening our expressions of citizenship to include youth as participating members within society, who possess *civic capacity*.

The Third Phase of Youth Engagement Literature: The Asset-Based Approach

The implications for post-UNCRC youth engagement scholars was profound as it signalled a critical shift in thinking about how exactly a young person's civic capacity could or should be both honoured and nurtured, implying the move to an asset-based approach. It also signalled important changes in the field of youth development, which we outline next.

Hart's Ladder of Participation. One of the seminal frameworks that emerged from the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) was Hart's (1994) research *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship.* This publication represented one of the first, if not the landmark typology for linking youth participation with the concept of children's rights. Presented using a ladder as a metaphor, Hart's (1994) work focused on identifying ways in which young people's engagement could be hierarchically organized while reflecting principles for inclusion and participation. The simplicity of the model is

important as it provided a means by which practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers could identify their current youth engagement practices and compare them to participatory "ideals".

Hart's typology highlighted two dichotomies: non-participation and participation. A total of eight rungs were identified on the ladder. The lower three represented non-participation and the upper five represented increasing degrees of participation: assigned and informed; consulted and informed; adult-initiated; shared decisions with children; and children lead and initiate action; (Hart, 1994, pp. 11–14). While the typology is hierarchical, Hart (1994) viewed participation as a continuum, arguing:

> [I]t is not necessary that children always operate on the highest possible rungs of the ladder…. The important principle again is one of choice: programmes should be designed which maximize the opportunity for any child to choose to participate at the highest level of his [*sic*] ability. (p. 11)

Positive Youth Development. Between 2000 and 2003, the term *Positive Youth Development* was coined by Lerner (2005) who examined youth engagement through a psychological lens. Building on the asset-based work of other scholars, Positive Youth Development (PYD) reconceptualized youth engagement by shifting from the binary of "good" and "bad" youth to one that argued for a developmental approach. PYD is based on the premise that young people will thrive and meet their fullest potential when spaces and opportunities are provided which support, nurture, and empower their natural gifts and abilities in ways that benefit the larger community (Lerner, 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

PYD's approach promoted a potential-oriented model for youth engagement – and the concept of *plasticity* as an approach that shifted from an emphasis on negative youth behaviours to a focus on preventing undesirable behaviour by promoting desired outcomes (Lerner, 2005) while considering "youth… as resources to be developed" (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003, as cited in Lerner, 2005, p. 11). Central to PYD is the concept of relationships: "if young people have *mutually beneficial relationships* [emphasis added] with the people and institutions in their social world, they will be on the way to a hopeful future marked by positive contributions to self, family, community, and civic society. Young people will thrive" (Lerner, 2005, p. 12).

Community Youth Development. The culminating effect of Hart's Ladder of Participation (1994) and the PYD movement was to initiate a push for more formal acknowledgement of young people in decision-making processes. Community Youth Development (CYD) emerged within the community development sector, which sought to formally engage youth in decision-making processes and practices associated with community development. Originally developed by the National Network for Youth and composed of a consortium of youth engagement practitioners and policy writers in the United States, CYD is described as a blueprint which supports a "partnership for action" between youth and systems within society (Perkins et al., 2001).

Two core beliefs were building blocks for the CYD framework: First was a belief in building and promoting healthy communities that included youth (we will return to this theme shortly); the second concerned the concept of *protective factors* which, while still emphasizing youth risk-taking, focused more substantially on how *resiliency* as a youth behaviour or response to risk might operate.

Risk wasn't a new discourse around youth practitioners (smoking, vandalism, and unprotected sex are three well-documented examples), but the idea of resiliency was a departure from the more typical CYD and sought to enhance the "ability of [young] individuals to withstand the stressors of life and the challenges to their healthy development" (Perkins et al., 2001, p. 44). Resiliency is linked, in turn, to the amount of protective factors in one's life that increases resilience to known and unknown risk factors. Protective factors, they argued, emerge from key relationships within a young person's life; in the case of CYD the relationship is connected institutionally. Practitioners and scholars using this lens explored how having adults and young people working together increased protective factors.

Pathways to civic engagement. In considering asset-based approaches to youth engagement, it is particularly important to consider the work of Camino and Zeldin (2002). They describe the meaningful participation of young people as the "primary component of civic society" (p. 213) and frame youth engagement as the opportunity for young people to learn, create, demonstrate, and actualize their civic responsibilities. Their work identified five specific pathways that, they assert, formulate critical entry points for young people's meaningful involvement; these pathways "concurrently promote positive youth development and community change" (p. 215). They also identify specific characteristics necessary within each of the pathways to meet the criteria for meaningful civic youth engagement including ownership, youth-adult partnerships, and facilitative strategies and structures (pp. 218-219). For the purposes of this article, we focus specifically on the latter two.

Youth-adult partnerships are identified as critical catalysts supporting the goals of meaningful youth engagement. Aspects of youth-adult partnerships identified include "coaching, dialoguing, [and] connections to institutional resources and community leaders" (p. 218). Further, Camino and Zeldin (2002) linked the role of youth-adult partnerships to building the capacity of young people as leaders both now and in the future. They also argued that "youth-adult partnerships are critical to the efficacy of the pathways because they have the potential to engage a full range of human capital" (p. 218). The development of human capital is enhanced through the interplay of youth's leadership qualities and exchanges with adults in youth-adult partnerships. They go on to opine that "leadership is not a skill per se. It is rather a complex set of skills, behaviours, actions, and attitudes best developed through apprenticeship and experiential-type learning processes, which necessitate close partnership between novices and older hands" (p. 218).

Camino and Zeldin (2002) also posited that without the *facilitative policies and structures* that require larger institutions and established processes (such as government decision-making and budgeting) to genuinely engage young people in processes, practices, and outcomes, youth engagement is merely an afterthought. "Accordingly, the need to enact policies and build structures to support youth engagement becomes salient. Policies and practices provide the scaffolding that articulate the vision, expectations and support for the pathways" (p. 219).

The Historical Footprint

In summary, we have documented the history of youth engagement theories to illustrate how some events and scholarly fields served as catalysts for changing approaches to youth engagement practices. While we are aware of researchers who continue to develop these approaches to youth engagement, in this article we propose a new direction that we believe could reconceptualize the field. This is necessary for several reasons. In particular, we draw attention to how the frameworks described here offer a Western-centric focus, particularly with the majority of youth engagement research coming out of the United States.

This dominance means that youth engagement approaches in the global south and in regions outside of the USA are frequently obfuscated, even if these approaches might meaningfully contribute to our collective knowledge of how to work with youth. In addition, the frameworks or approaches discussed here fail to provide the necessary space for addressing the complexity of the very relationships and social, cultural, and political contexts that are shaping youth and their participation in contemporary society. In what follows we hope to engage in an exploration of how we might close these gaps by drawing upon the insights of Canadian youth engagement practitioners, and suggest how the application of transformational learning theory to youth engagement might offer another important shift in the youth engagement landscape.

Shifting the Landscape: Reframing the Youth Engagement Conversation

Our work as educators has led us to explore the ways in which meaningful learning processes are necessary to effecting change in youth engagement. In particular, we draw from our work in the field of adult education as we believe it offers the opportunity to engage in a richer, more nuanced conversation about the differences between development (the dominant discourse of youth engagement theory) and shared spaces of learning. We elaborate on our reasons in what follows.

Transformational Learning Theory: A New Approach to Youth Engagement?

Transformational learning theory (TLT) has emerged from adult education scholarship, and allows the creation of spaces for growth, as well as new interpretations and ways of knowing around any subject matter, experience, or phenomenon (Morrell &

O'Connor, 2002). TLT embodies a holistic foundation in attempting to understand, grow, and nurture any issue, subject, experience, or individual personal context.

As the previous review of the scholarship has made clear, youth engagement practitioners are similarly concerned with change. Yet TLT provides a way of shifting from changing youth through adult-guided intervention to understanding how young people are able to activate their citizenship, their agency, themselves in their worlds, and the worlds around them. TLT, we argue, provides a vehicle through which this can be realized as a function of learning. TLT also emphasizes the need for experiential learning as a critical component for transformational personal and social change. In other words, change is understood to mean not only a change in the behaviours or policies that we as citizens can see, but also a change in the habits – as well as psychological, cultural, and even spiritual conceptions – of individuals and their relationships to larger contexts: from family, to peer group, to community, and beyond. In doing so, TLT actively positions the role of learning at the centre of community change – and not just learning for one sector of a group over another, but rather a shared space developed mutually through action.

We believe the tenets of TLT offer a space through which to move from emphasis on individual development (the psychological foundation described in earlier sections of this article) to situated social action learning; in other words, moving from the individual to the collective. TLT aspires to create a collective learning environment that enlightens and empowers through active engagement or experiential learning (Dirkx, 1998; Morrell & O'Connor, 2002).

Our work has led us to examine youth engagement through TLT as not only a tool but also a process in which a collaborative learning space becomes possible. Because TLT allows space for responding to emergent or situated contexts and addresses local complexity, the traditional barriers between youth and adults as well as between youth and institutions can legitimately become opportunities for collaborative and reciprocal learning processes. Repositioning youth engagement as a shared learning experience opens greater potential for meaningful impact, for both youth and the organizations of the social and cultural communities in which they live. We sought to demonstrate this potential in a recently completed research study (Shaw, 2012).

Examining the Current Canadian Landscape: Research Snapshot

Building on the theoretical framework of TLT, we sought to examine the current youth engagement landscape in Canada so as to explore the personal perspectives and

understanding of youth engagement practitioners, researchers, and funders[1] within the Canadian context. Using snowball sampling techniques, 20 participants from across Canada were initially identified, with 18 agreeing to participate. Using interviews and focus groups, and informed by our analysis of youth engagement and transformational learning theory (TLT), we documented the perspectives, beliefs, and experiences of the participating practitioners, researchers, and funders in Canada. An initial conversation sought to map out participants' understandings of meaningful youth engagement, as discussed in the literature. To facilitate this, participants were asked to respond to the following definition:

> Meaningful youth engagement is the intentional establishment and support for the genuine involvement of young people in the design, creation, coordination, implementation, and evaluation of the processes, practices, and decisions that shape civic life. (Shaw, 2012, p. 16)

While the study supported the assertion that youth engagement was a term in common usage, what became increasingly clear was the range of different perspectives and beliefs central to working with youth in ways that facilitated meaningful engagement. We explore in greater detail the findings of the study in the sections that follow.

Key Findings: Meaningful Engagement, Youth Centred and Youth Citizens

A detailed analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts resulted in the identification of six key themes, described here as *meaning clusters*. The use of the term meaning cluster attempts to reflect the scope and complexity of voices and experiences of the researchers, practitioners, and funders involved in youth engagement in Canada, while also emphasizing connections where evident. Three meaning clusters that emerged pertinent to this article were: the key characteristics of meaningful youth engagement, putting youth at the centre of our practice, and valuing youth as citizens now. The following provides a brief summary of each.

What is meaningful youth engagement? The data gathered from participants included a listing of the attributes, descriptions, and characteristics of what they believed amounted to effective and meaningful youth engagement. In particular, specific participants identified the following elements: (a) the need for positive processes and experiences for youth and adults involved; (b) that outcomes for youth participants need to result in tangible change; (c) engagement needs to be action-oriented; (d) the importance of including youth from diverse and inclusive communities; (e) the need to

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[1] For the purposes of this research, Shaw (2012) identified a practitioner as any adult working front line with young people or in coordination of youth programs, while a researcher was any adult undertaking research associated with youth engagement or youth involved within their communities; funders were any adults paid within funding mechanisms, both non-profits and foundations, who directly funded youth engagement or youth civic involvement projects.

provide young people opportunities to connect outside of their traditional kin group such as peers and immediate family; (f) the need to include youth at decision-making tables; and (g) the need to establish supportive resources including money and human resources and expertise. However, by far the most critical characteristic described by the participants was the role of adults as essential allies, supports, and resources for meaningful youth engagement.

Putting youth at the centre. While the list of key elements could be applied to many different approaches and frameworks for establishing a definition of meaningful youth engagement, it was the belief, value, and practice of putting youth at the centre that was most often reiterated by participants. For example, one participant who was a practitioner expressed that meaningful youth engagement, "meets youth where they are at, celebrates their abilities, nurtures their potential, appreciates their contributions, and invites both participation and ownership". Another participant provided the following insight: "Youth engagement is the development of positive relationships between young people and their community through formal and informal programs that are structured to benefit both the youth and the host organization or institution". Clearly these practitioners were centrally focused on relationships and authenticity, both attributes of what the literature argues is necessary for effective approaches.

Yet while the outcomes for youth were placed at the centre by these practitioners, the mutuality of benefits to youth and adults was also identified as key. For example, another participant stated:

> Engaging is looking outwards; you are using that strength and voice to connect with young people and issues bigger than yourself. That is where things like adult-youth partnerships become important. To engage with a system larger than your experience, you need those relationships. Without them, you bump up against systems in unproductive ways; you don't take no for an answer, but you need to know how to talk to change it.

Another stated: "Engaging youth in genuine and productive roles is a strategic and good practice decision". These quotations also make clear how participants understood the mutuality of effective youth participation: both individuals and communities can benefit.

While participation of young people was a broad theme, the quality of their involvement resonated most throughout the data. The term *quality* in the context of this study was a term selected to highlight how the participants discussed expanding engagement methodologies beyond just having young people involved and instead pushing for a deeper (i.e., more meaningful) engagement agenda. Providing opportunities that expanded young people's capacities both as leaders and civic agents was a key characteristic discussed within this theme of increased quality rather than tokenistic approaches. One participant in the research described it this way:

> Basically, if you just bring people to the table all the time and do the token thing by asking them questions you already know the answers to and questions that you think you should but don't really listen to their feedback, then you won't really have a meaningful experience. It won't mean anything.

Another participant emphasized this same point, while applying what we would call an intergenerational lens: "Community engagement is important and young people should be allowed a number of opportunities to contribute and shape their world as everyone else". Clearly participants in this research connected the increase in quality and opportunity to achieving the goal of genuine community involvement with young people acting as change agents in their own right.

Youth as civic assets "now". We like the words of another participant: "Everyone has something to contribute". In addition to the two meaning clusters discussed above, this statement highlights how participants have developed a strong sense of self through their work with young people not only as participants in community building, but as conveners and holders of spaces where young people can be recognized as community assets and change agents despite their identity category of youth. These clusters from the research are particularly important to the discussion in this article as participants clearly describe the necessity of involving young people as citizens and co-participants. Research participants made this clear. One said: "Youth engagement inherently is of value as it does engage young people in their own development for themselves and how they contribute to their life, their communities and their world". Another added that youth engagement "builds stronger communities. The benefits are so substantial, there are so many ways to do it and that's what's exciting about it". All of these statements and perspectives on youth as agents of change stress their assets as individuals and valuable members of a community.

Reflections on findings. We believe these results offer important insights into how youth practitioners perceive their work as both advisors and learners in the joint endeavour of civic action. We do, however, want to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Shaw's (2012) research was selective and included a small sample – but the words and voices of the practitioners, researchers, and funders within the Canadian landscape are nonetheless important. These voices make evident the experiences that are directly shaping the current realities of youth and the practices of youth engagement, both in the defining characteristics of what youth engagement in Canada looks like, and in the tangible decision-making processes in which youth are participating. The themes from the data highlight the ongoing dependence on previous typologies for building and implementing youth participation opportunities. The ideas are embedded in the foundational words of the UNCRC and still closely linked to the early work of Hart's (1994) Ladder of Participation and even the more recently developed pathways to youth civic engagement described by Camino and Zeldin (2002). In the final sections of this paper we want to build on these insights and consider how transformational learning theory might serve as a catalyst to advance the work being done by current Canadian practitioners.

Thinking Differently, Acting Boldly:
Reconceptualizing Youth Engagement as Adult Education

Earlier in this article we introduced the concept of transformational learning theory (TLT) as a potential anchor to begin understanding and building a new movement in youth engagement. As we have noted, the current literature has some very specialized notions, segregating youth engagement and placing it into the field of youth capacity building and youth learning processes. We have also discussed a recent small research project that examined and brought to the surface the experiences, perspectives, and thoughts on youth engagement of key adult practitioners, researchers, and funders within the Canadian youth engagement landscape. Their views that youth need to be valued as citizens now, that youth engagement is part of an asset-based community development approach, and that meaningful youth engagement is a relationship between adults and youth placing young people at the centre highlighted an ongoing dependence on previous typologies currently underpinning the youth engagement landscape (although some tensions between these conceptions of youth engagement had surfaced in their comments). While encouraged, we nonetheless contemplated this question: What evidence is there that if youth engagement were reconceptualized and articulated as a reciprocal, co-learning process undertaken simultaneously by adults, institutions, and youth, more effective practices of adult-youth partnerships would be enabled?

A first step in thinking through this reconceptualization is identifying within the youth engagement field how frequently young people's experiences or ideas are actually expressed through the roles taken on by adults or so-called experts who are, the majority of the time, acting as institutional agents commissioned by local organizations within a youth engagement context. These include positions such as a youth worker, a community planner, a council member, or a chamber of commerce youth liaison. These adult roles effectively create binaries of difference with youth on the one hand positioned as learner and adult on the other as expert, knowledge holder, or mentor. This binary relationship perpetuates a power dynamic favouring the adult within the current Canadian youth engagement culture, and makes it impossible for young people to actually become change agents because they are always marginalized.

Shaw's (2012) research participants made clear that while the discourse of empowerment of youth and agency is vocalized, practices or institutionalized responses result in maintaining the status quo of dependency. While some participants were clearly bridging between competing conceptions of youth agency and adults as empowering agents, there was no explicit acknowledgement of how youth could or should be considered genuine citizens in their own right within the community context. Dislodging these assumptions, we believe, will be difficult work, largely because the shared discourses within the youth engagement community have become normative based on shared beliefs, values, and expectations that both youth and adults experience through existing youth engagement processes. However, by adopting a new discourse – TLT – practitioners and youth alike could be provided with a vocabulary and philosophical

stance through which these binaries could be re-examined, as well as new spaces through which local complexities could be addressed.

There are some other adult education scholars who have tried to address this gap. For example, Biesta et al. (2009) use the term *citizenship learning* to describe what could be usefully considered meaningful youth engagement. They explain:

> The teaching of citizenship needs to be supplemented with a more thoroughgoing understanding of the ways in which young people actually learn democratic citizenship through participation in the communities and the practices that make up their everyday lives. 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 make clear how these lives are themselves implicated in the wider social, cultural, political and economic order. It is, after all, ultimately this wider context that provides opportunities for young people to *be* democratic citizens and to learn from their actual "condition of citizenship". (p. 8)

Addressing cultural norms that reinforce this binary positioning within youth engagement will require a different type of learning environment for youth; but more than this, it requires adults to operate and think differently. How might this be achieved? The following section discusses specific opportunities that could be considered by youth engagement practitioners as strategies for creating and supporting more complex spaces and approaches to their work with youth and adults alike.

Issue-focused, not Status-, Age- or Identity-focused

How to actually deconstruct the binaries currently embedded within youth engagement is not simple – nor should it be. Every community, person, and experience is unique; creating innovative and expansive spaces for these differing perspectives and ways of knowing to be legitimatized needs to be inclusive and respectful of diversity. Yet there are opportunities where the focus can be easily changed from involving youth to a focus on issues or situations within communities that both young people and adults want to address. Collaboratively naming these and then focusing on the issue versus the involvement of a specific identity group or population provides for collective and intentional community-based work that builds intergenerational networks.

Block (2008) also makes this point when he argues for developing shared networks or social movements:

> Collective change occurs when individuals and small diverse groups engage one another in the presence of many others doing the same. It comes from the knowledge that what is occurring in one space is similarly happening in other spaces, especially ones where I do not know what they are doing. This is the value

of a network, or even a network of networks, which is today's version of a social movement. (p. 75)

While Block (2008) discusses a network approach, the foundations of his ideas are focused on creating platforms that bring young people into action-oriented processes that require them to work alongside adults while addressing specific issues. Creating a space where the term *youth* is actually removed from the engagement process and where it is assumed that young people have a legitimate stake in the issue at hand would create a very different tone for engagement – one that promotes shared adult-youth partnerships and learning.

Pushing this concept further, we suggest that the term *adult-youth partnerships* also tends to re-marginalize young people because it places youth and adults as binaries, while failing to acknowledge learning for the team. If we could change our language to emphasize *inclusive participation* or *learning partnerships* with an emphasis on learning together, it could create the opening necessary for the complexity of youth's experiences and knowledge to become embedded with the experiences, knowledge, and understanding of adults involved in facilitating and supporting youth engagement processes.

Attempting to take an issue-centered approach would potentially enable a revised view of young people as civic agents in their own right and in multiple civic and/or social locations – instead of relying on traditional organizational settings and governance strategies, such as policy decisions, volunteerism, and community-based organization involvement. We agree with Youniss et al. (2003) who assert, "At a minimum, new generations must learn what democratic citizenship entails and figure out how to satisfy their needs within the demands of a capitalist system" (p. 122).

A focus on intergenerational learning also underpins our call to focus on an issue rather than an identity group. The process of learning how to address and implement intergenerational approaches to issues facing a collective population across generations could provide the very space that both scholars in the field of youth development and the participants in Shaw's (2012) research were seeking. Instead of creating a space where youth are engaged in becoming adult citizens, this inclusive participation design would focus on developing a context where, as Shaw puts it, "young people wanting to participate in something positive, enjoying that process and feeling like they contributed in a meaningful way – they feel like they are giving back and changing the world" (p. 97).

The Challenge Ahead: Implications for Practice

One of the few researchers to consider fully the complexity of the role of adults in the youth engagement field, Camino provides an excellent starting point to begin unpacking the intricacies of creating meaningful youth engagement, necessitating a new conceptualization of the role of adults that fits with our argument for shifting this role

from expert to co-learner. Meaningful youth-adult partnerships, Camino (2000) argues, are:

> [a] multidimensional construct. They contain (a) principles and values, which actors use to orient the relationships and guide behavior; (b) a set of skills and competencies through which the behaviours are focused; (c) a method to implement and achieve collective action. (p. 14)

Camino (2000) also suggested that the gap in thinking about adult learning as a central element to youth engagement is limiting the field's transformational capacity because of how adults conceive of issues of power and empowerment:

> The value orientation (of adults) is clear and positive: to transform asymmetrical relationships between youth and adults into more symmetrical ones that are characterized by an atmosphere of equality. The intention is to assist youth in exercising their full range of agency that they are developmentally capable of, and to assist youth in assuming roles as active decision makers and problem solvers. *The fallacy of this perspective is that it conceives power as a "zero-sum equation." That is, the only way youth can gain power is for adults to give up power* [emphasis added]. (p. 75)

Camino (2005) explains that this assumption pushes adults to close off their ability to collaborate, or, in our conception, to become co-learners, and shifts their focus to the institutional connections of a young person's project or initiative, rather than allowing situated "experience and wisdom" to surface (p. 75).

Concluding Comments

In this article we have attempted to provide a broad review of how particular ways of thinking about youth engagement or empowerment have developed over time. We outlined what we learned during a recently completed research study that illustrated how these discourses continue to shape current youth engagement practices, while noting some of the tensions around issues of agency and empowerment. We concluded our discussion by drawing on the work of Camino (2005) who argues for equality through symmetrically purposed relationships and intergenerational issue identification and action planning; we extend these ideas by considering how transformational learning theory might provide a means to operationalize these goals. We argued that an emphasis on shared, intergenerational learning might provide a practical framework to bring these ideas into the everyday practices of agencies, organizations, and adults and youth working together. We believe this approach is quite feasible; our earlier research work with youth leaders (McGregor, 2010) provided us with evidence of how this model might be successfully implemented.

Yet we also know one of the limitations in taking this approach is time. Youth engagement relationships are often time sensitive and constrained around a specific

project or programmatic deliverables, particularly in the case of organizations devoted to youth engagement. These limitations create silos where cross-generational and personal learning by the youth and adults become stifled. But if adequate time were built into organizations working with youth and transparency of expectations for co-learning made explicit, new opportunities for this kind of shared commitment could emerge. We also think learning-centred approaches could become part of policy documents developed by civic or governmental organizations mandated to work with youth and adults in community settings. Institutionalizing these two suggestions – focusing on an issue and engaging adults and youth in a co-learning experience – will require considerable infrastructure, both in terms of capacity and long-term resources. However, as we have intimated in our discussion, maintaining the status quo discourses and practices of youth to adult empowerment will continue to allow for only a limited form of youth engagement to be realized. Revising the type of youth-adult engagement and the roles of youth and adults in more collaboratively focused efforts with concrete entry points will alter the status quo power dynamics that currently dominate the traditional approaches to and spaces for youth engagement. Such approaches will move us towards the kind of genuine, authentic, intergenerational learning and shared forms of problem solving needed by communities in today's complex world.

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