

# Student activism: Learning through doing



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# Introduction

Activism has an important role in shaping the future of society. Activism enables everyday citizens, including young people, to share their views and influence public issues. Youth attendance at the 2019–20 School Strikes for Climate marches, and other recent protest events for Ihumātao and Black Lives Matter, suggests that youth view activism as having individual and collective benefit.

Young people who feel their voice is valued more regularly engage in their education and positively contribute to society (Harré, 2007; Hathcock & Dickerson, 2015; Hodson, 2014; Rosas, 2010). However, little is known about student activism in Aotearoa New Zealand. We need a clearer picture of student activism in this country so that teachers can better provide equitable and authentic learning experiences that maximise student agency and contribution. This work is relevant to school leaders and teachers thinking about ways of fostering student activism and agency, and to educationalists considering how activism education can provide a critical context for student learning and development.<sup>1</sup>

## Scope and focus

This paper explores what youth activism looks like in Aotearoa New Zealand. For pragmatic reasons this paper focuses on young people between the ages of 12 and 18 years old—most young people who attend high school in Aotearoa New Zealand are within this age range. Teenagers tend to have more autonomy compared with children. Teenagers also tend to be more regularly exposed to learning opportunities that may develop their awareness of, and competence in, activism participation.<sup>2</sup>

To begin, this paper defines key terms and considers some of the problematic aspects of these definitions. This is followed by an examination of the relationship between activism and formal education, including the benefits and challenges associated with in-school activism. Media reports are then used to analyse out-of-school youth activism participation and expression in Aotearoa New Zealand.

This paper ends with a discussion that considers the ways that adults respond to youth activism, and the role of the education system in preparing and supporting young people in their engagement. It considers the framing of youth activism and the agency afforded to young people by adults, and ideas about the educational potential of student activism. Finally, possible next steps are identified.

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1 This paper is part of NZCER's Te Pae Tawhiti Government Grant programme of research, funded through the Ministry of Education.

2 Some researchers and primary school educators debate this claim (Dias & Callahan, 2015).

## Defining youth and student activism

In this paper the terms “students” and “student activism” refer to young people who attend or participate in school-based activist events. The terms “youth” and “youth activism” are used to encompass a broader category of young people who participate in out-of-school activism and who may or may not attend formal schooling.<sup>3</sup>

Activism as defined in this paper is borrowed from the work of Martin et al. (2007), who note that activism occurs when a:

person or group recognizes a problem and takes some action(s) to address it in order to create change.  
(p. 78)

This definition acknowledges that *action* is a critical element of activism. While activism requires an individual response, which can occur in isolation, it is the collective response that makes activism effective (Hathcock & Dickerson, 2015). Consequently, social relationships, networks, and knowledge are essential elements of activism (Hall, 2019; Martin et al., 2007).

The intricacies of activism can make it difficult to determine whether a person is considered an activist. In addition, not everyone is willing to identify as an activist, even if their activities are considered by many to align with activist intentions or outcomes (Fisher, 2016). Some young people distance themselves from the term “activist” due to the often-negative responses their activism receives from adults (Beals & Wood, 2012).

## Gaps and silences in the research literature

Notably absent from the research literature are the voices and experiences of youth. Few studies of youth activism ask young people to describe their perceptions and experiences of activism. Addressing this gap in the research might help us to understand why youth activism, or even civic engagement in many places around the world, is lower than what the rest of the population view as ideal.

Indigenous experiences of activism are also less visible in the research literature. While similarities exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists and the causes they fight for, there are some marked and important differences. As several authors have noted, Indigenous activism is an area of research that needs and deserves considerable investigation (Norman, 2017; Ritchie, 2021; Wood, 2013). There is, therefore, a clear need for further research into the experiences and views of Indigenous youth activists.

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<sup>3</sup> There is no clear consensus on the age range used to define youth in the literature reviewed for this paper. Several studies consider youth as being between 18 and 24 years old, while teenagers aged 15 to 19 are used in other research. The terms “young people” and “youth” are used interchangeably in most of the literature to describe participants who are considered to be in their teenage and young adulthood years (Dodson & Papoutsaki, 2016).



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# Student activism in formal education

Student activism and formal education have a complex relationship. Research about youth activism is often prefaced by public concerns of declining youth civic engagement and voter turnout (Beals & Wood, 2012; Thornton, 2016; Wood, 2010). This social backdrop had led many researchers to focus their work on school-based citizenship education.

This section identifies some related approaches to activism education and provides two examples that illustrate the different ways that schools engage in activism and citizenship education. The benefits and challenges of activism education in formal education are also discussed.

## Citizenship and civics education

Citizenship and civics education play a key role in preparing students for their roles and responsibilities in society, and effective educational interventions can improve youth civic engagement. Learning about citizenship and civics at school provides a gateway for many young people in their activism.

However, the place of citizenship and civics education and activism in schools is debated. This debate is underpinned by conflicting views of the purpose of education, as viewed by the public, whānau, students, educationalist, practitioners, and policy makers. As Desjardins et al., (2015) suggest:

activism and education ... are a controversial pairing. For many, education is seen as impartial and should focus solely on preparing children or young adults with the skills to participate positively in society. (p. 350)

Regardless of how education is positioned, a consideration of the roles and rights of young people is frequently missing from debates about student activism and activism education in schooling.

Dias and Callahan (2015) note that the rise of industrialisation shifted the primary goal of education “from civic responsibility to economic utility” (p. 314). Despite this, education:

at the root ... is what societies provide for their young people to help them get ready to make the most of the world they are going to find themselves in. (Claxton, 2002, p. 46)

## Action competence

Alongside citizenship and civics education, other educational approaches are discussed in student activism research, such as action competence. Action competence approaches have the same intent as citizenship and civics education—raising awareness of societal ideals and structures, while equipping young people with skills that enable them to be active members of society. For example, in her study of young human rights activist in Australia, Hall (2019) uses the theory of action competence as a framework to illustrate the diverse ways youth conceptualise and take action on issues that are relevant and meaningful to them.

Similarly, Desjardins et al. (2015) draw links between action competence and activism in their study of university students enrolled in a social change programme. They note that action competence is:

seen by some as a crucial outcome in education, since it brings together processes and practices with an urgent need to develop democratic citizenship skills (and values) in students, [and that it is] an essential component supporting the development of activism in students. (p. 351)

Action competence theory, as described in the studies above, draws parallels with the holistic and applied approach of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) (NZC) and *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 2017).

## Student agency

Activism can also provide an important and tangible platform for youth agency by giving power to young people's desire and quest for autonomy and influence. In some of the literature, student and youth agency is identified as a related sociological and educational concept. Here, the similarities between activism, action competence, and agency are brought into focus. Agency, as described by Beals and Wood (2012), requires "doing". The authors consider effective agency to involve three dimensions: personal, collective, and transformative, with the latter focusing on "collective projects to bring about fundamental change" (p. 194). Beals and Wood (2012) also refer to the concept of *tino rangatiratanga* (self-determination) to describe the complexity and challenges associated with youth agency. For some young people acts of resistance may be the only form of agency they have access to.

## Activism education and *The New Zealand Curriculum*

The words "activism" and "activism education" do not feature in NZC. However, citizenship education is a key focus of the curriculum, specifically within the social sciences. The vision of NZC states a desire for young people in Aotearoa New Zealand to be "actively involved" in society, and contribute "to the well-being of New Zealand [in] social, cultural, economic, and environmental [ways]" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 8). NZC outlines dispositions that support lifelong learning. These are identified in the curriculum as "values" and "key competencies". NZC also outlines specific skills and learning area knowledge that young people should develop during their time at school. Activism offers an authentic and interdisciplinary context for students to develop these dispositions, knowledge, and skills.

## Activism education in schools

Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand approach activism education in a variety of ways. Some schools use Ministry of Education resources to develop students' citizenship capability; for example, by delivering a unit of learning about systems of power and voting. Other schools encourage students to engage in activities that challenge societal assumptions and norms.

### The plastic bag ban

Many teachers use current events and issues to develop students' civic understanding and capability. For example, in 2017, students from four primary and secondary schools made separate but coordinated efforts to encourage Parliament to ban single-use plastic bags.<sup>4</sup> Students learned about Parliament and law making and how to conduct research, communicate an argument, write a petition,

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<sup>4</sup> An article about this petition was published by the New Zealand Parliament: *Plastic Fantastic—Petitions Capture the Public Mood* (2018).

and collect signatures. Some students were supported by their teacher to write to their local Member of Parliament about the impact of plastic pollution on their community. Their action included the presentation of a petition with almost 18,000 signatures. Selected students were invited to speak to the Environment Committee at Parliament. In August 2018, the Government announced that Aotearoa New Zealand would phase out the use of single-use plastic bags by 2019. This outcome sent a powerful message to the student activists: “your views and actions matter, and you can influence change”.

### **The Polynesian Panthers movement**

Some schools have adopted more “radical” approaches to activism education. In these schools, we see teachers supporting students to engage in and take action on personally challenging and relevant topics. For example, as part of their history curriculum, a secondary school in South Auckland<sup>5</sup> teaches their students about the Polynesian Panthers activist movement. Through these opportunities, students learn how to exercise their civil rights and have activists speak with them about their activism experience. The school’s staff believe their students have the right to understand the history of systemic racism and discrimination experienced by their community, as well as learn how to respond by taking positive and wellbeing-enhancing action.

### **What are the benefits of activism in formal education?**

The benefits of school-based citizenship, civic, and activism education are significant. Young people who are supported to develop their citizenship competency, and have the opportunity to take action on important issues that are relevant to them, are more likely to continue their participation in civic life post-school (Hodson, 2014). Further, youth who feel empowered, and are connected to and valued by their communities, tend to have more positive wellbeing outcomes. Hathcock and Dickerson (2015) believe that activism supports these outcomes, reporting that youth who engage in activism are less likely to use drugs or alcohol, or to engage in criminal activity; are more likely stay in school and obtain better results; and are more active in community life.

As Hathcock and Dickerson (2015) and Kirshner (2007) discuss, the social and emotional learning associated with activism can also be considerable. The collective nature of activism requires people to work closely with one another. Activism can also help to shift young people’s perspective from the individual to the group (Thomas et al., 2019). Being connected to the community is an important determining factor of youth civic engagement (Desjardins et al., 2015). Schools that prioritise the development of school–community relationships are better placed to support students’ social wellbeing and provide experiences that are more likely to empower students to engage in actions that benefit their community.

Activism supports localised and real-world learning experiences. As Akoorie (2021) suggests, students who have the opportunity to apply their learning in “real world” contexts and situations are better able access the full benefits of their education:

Longitudinal research showed the only type of [citizenship] education that had a long-term impact was when students gained active experience in working on issues—and particularly on issues that mattered to them such as climate strike action. (n.p)

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5 The school’s approach was reported in Re, “How the Polynesian Panthers’ Legacy Is Alive Today” (Costello, 2020).

The cross-disciplinary knowledge and holistic skillset used in activism provides an ideal context to unpack and apply learning. As Kirshner (2007) argues, this is one of the strengths of using activism in the classroom. Greater use of activism and activism education in Aotearoa New Zealand schools would help to meet the vision and key competencies outlined in the curriculum.

## What are the challenges of activism in formal education?

Schools can offer knowledge, skills, and guidance to student activists. However, education systems and teacher preferences can alter the way young people make sense of their own experiences of the world. There are also some teachers and school leaders who view youth activism with scepticism, particularly when students engage in activism that “disrupts” school activities (Desjardins et al., 2015). For example, one school principal was reported in the media as calling the School Strike for Climate protests “a waste of time”, because the “students’ impact on climate change would probably be zero” (MacManus, 2021). This deficit positioning of young people, particularly by adults working in schools, raises questions about the messages that some schools give about student agency and empowerment.

The positioning of teachers as “the people with knowledge and power” (and of youth as needing to be “filled up” with knowledge), can limit what and how young people learn about and engage in activism (Taines, 2014). As Beals and Wood (2012) note, gatekeeping by teachers is a common challenge students face in their activism. These authors, and Wood (2010), also discuss the “double sword” that students frequently experience in their activism participation; receiving complaints from adults about their “poor” interest and engagement in civic life, and then are criticised and ridiculed for the social and political actions they do choose to make. The contradictory and confusing messages that schools (and the wider public) send to student activists does little to secure the vision of youth who are “confident, connected, and actively involved” in society.

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# Out-of-school youth activism in Aotearoa New Zealand

The School Strikes for Climate (SS4C) movement has piqued the interest of many social and educational researchers. Prior to the SS4C movement, few studies considered youth activism outside of formal educational settings. While the number of research studies about student activism in formal education continue to exceed those in out-of-school settings, you only need to turn to online and mainstream media to see how prevalent youth activism is outside of formal education.

Over the past few years, young people have been active in seeking change in environmental (School Strikes for Climate), social (rape culture; Black Lives Matter), and political (Ihumātao) issues. This section begins by offering a brief overview of each of these events, followed by a discussion of some of the common elements shared by these examples, such as the tools and methods used by youth activists, and the ways adults responded.

## Recent examples of youth activism

Black Lives Matter is a global anti-racism and discrimination movement, which began in 2013. The movement is motivated by ongoing incidents of police violence and racially driven attacks against black people. Several youth activism events took place in Aotearoa New Zealand in June 2020 in response to the police murder of George Floyd in the United States.

Two separate in-school events were reported in the media. In both instances, students put posters up around their school grounds in support of the movement. In one school, the students' posters were repeatedly removed by a teacher,<sup>6</sup> and students involved were also allegedly verbally abused by the same teacher. In another school, the school's principal was reported as threatening police action against students who put up the Black Lives Matter posters.<sup>7</sup> The students involved in the action said they had wanted to show their support for challenging systemic racism in Aotearoa New Zealand and globally.

The School Strikes for Climate (SS4C) is an international youth climate action movement. Originally called "Fridays for Future", it began after teenager Greta Thunberg and other students sat outside the Swedish Parliament for 3 weeks in protest of the country's lack of action on the climate crisis. It is estimated 170,000 people participated in the September 2019 Aotearoa New Zealand protests. Youth activists involved in organising the marches ranged from 7 to 18 years old.

Christchurch school student and SS4C organiser Mia Sutherland was appointed as guest editor by major online news platform Stuff during 2019. In one of her articles,<sup>8</sup> Mia discussed why climate change is an important issue for young people. She encouraged readers to participate in the marches, noting that protests are an important and defining aspect of Aotearoa New Zealand culture and identity.

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6 Zaki (2020).

7 Small (2020).

8 Sutherland (2019).

Ihumātao is an area of traditional Māori land in South Auckland, which was confiscated by the New Zealand government in 1863. In 2016, to act against a proposed housing development on the land, Māori formed SOUL (Save Our Unique Landscape). SOUL members began occupying the site, and held regular protests, which culminated in a major occupation and protests in 2019.

Sixteen-year-old Torerenui A Rua Wilson shared her winning Ngā Manu Kōrero Waikato regionals speech in a video on Facebook.<sup>9</sup> In her speech, Wilson addressed the history of Ihumātao, as well as why she is helping to protect it. The video has been shared by the wider Protect Ihumātao campaign across different social media platforms and has been viewed close to 5,000 times.

In 2017, hundreds of students from across the Wellington region attended an anti-rape protest in front of Parliament. The event was organised to show support for the victims of a series of sexual assaults on young women by male Wellington students. The protesters demanded for schools and the Government do more to stop sexual violence and assault.

Four female students, who led the 2017 anti-rape protest in Wellington, were featured in an educational magazine.<sup>10</sup> In their self-authored article, the girls discussed the important role activism plays in engaging communities about important issues, and in bringing about personal and systemic change. The speech<sup>11</sup> given by school student Norma McLean during the anti-rape protest is also featured in the magazine.

## What do these examples tell us about youth activists and activism?

The events above demonstrate that young people are not only socially and politically engaged but can influence decision making. The events also show commonalities in the expressions and methods of youth activism, and in the roles that adults play.

Although we cannot make a judgement on whether these youth identify themselves as activists, it is clear from their engagement that many see the value and importance of their activism. As Norma McLean, a student organiser of the anti-rape protest said,

[I'm] proud that I can be a part of such an important protest and say in front of you all that we are part of a change. (McLean, 2017, p. 7)

Many students also see their activism as an opportunity to address multiple issues:

We want people to see us South Auckland students in a good light. We are future leaders, we are the future generation. (Viane, as cited in Muller, 2020)

Here we see young people not only using their activism to influence change in their communities, but as a platform to correct inaccurate public views of youth activists.

## Social media

Digital and social media are deeply embedded in young people's lives, so it is not surprising to see youth using these tools in their activism. Social media campaigns, video content, online opinion pieces, and digital art were all methods the youth activists employed in the examples above.

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9 *Voices of Ihumātao* (Wilson, 2019).

10 Fiaumu et al. (2017).

11 McLean (2017).

The Black Lives Matter and SS4C youth leaders also used social media to communicate about their protest events. This enabled youth to access and share information quickly and to reduce adult influence and interference. Social media has become an even more important tool for youth activists since the emergence of COVID-19, which has restricted their ability to organise in-person events (Deguara, 2021). Some researchers question the effectiveness and commitment of activists who use online media (Cabrera et al., 2017). However, Piat (2019) argues that considering online activism as “slacktivism” only serves to reinforce adult policing of youth activism.

## Adult responses

The complexity of adult–youth activist relationships are illustrated in several of the examples. Adult distancing and the dismissal of youth activism is evident in some examples, and adult support of youth activism is observed in others.

The two Black Lives Matter examples illustrate the negative responses that school staff can have towards youth activism. Other students were reported as being barred by school leaders from participating in the SS4C protests or received a detention for attending against their school’s wishes. There were also examples of more general negative adult responses to youth activism. Several politicians commented on negative adult responses, such as Climate Change Minister James Shaw, who was reported as saying that youth climate activists were:

Feeling a bit of a backlash from the talk radio crowd and the adults who are being a bit defensive about this whole thing and they want to know from us that we’re listening, because the whole point of their strike is that adults have not been listening and governments have not been listening. (Gerritsen, 2019)

Some adults showed their support for youth activism by giving the activists opportunities to share their perspectives with a wider audience. Mia Sutherland’s Stuff articles are some of the few examples of youth-authored SS4C articles published in mainstream media news. Although these public-engagement opportunities are often organised and controlled by adults, they provide an invaluable platform for youth activists to share their perspectives and influence decision making. Ideally, we would see a greater number of news platforms following the lead of two examples above, where young people are able to share their perspectives in their own words, rather than through the lens of adults.

Other adults are also working to shift the ways that society views the social and political power of young people:

This survey should serve as a wake-up call for anyone who doubts whether Pacific communities, particularly our young people are politically engaged. ... As a youthful and rapidly growing population, Pacific young people have incredible power in this election, and political processes in general. Our young people are clearly passionate about improving the country and are ready to take a stand for what they believe in. (Moeono-Kolio & Afaese, 2020, p. 34)

Students spoke about teachers and parents who encouraged their activism and participated in protests alongside them. However, many more young people expressed their frustration at the negative and inaccurate views of, and lack of adult support and action for, youth and student activism.

## Indigenous youth activism

In the events described above, high numbers of Māori, Pacific, and youth of other Indigenous cultures participated in activism for Ihumātao, School Strikes for Climate, and Black Lives Matter. These Indigenous youth activists face additional challenges in their activism participation, compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. For example, the following quote by a youth activist shows the difficulties involved in gaining ally support from other cultural groups:

So, it was like literally, just a whole bunch of brown kids trying to make a difference but there was barely any support from like any other cultures, which was like really shocking for a country and a city who all went to go support Black Lives Matter. I know like so many people went to go support that. But as soon as a bunch of kids literally want to fight for community issues, it's all of a sudden a different matter. (Tonumaivao, cited in Costello, 2020)

The above example played out in July 2020, when approximately 200 South Auckland school students attended a youth-led peace march against inter-school violence. The students said they hoped the march would challenge the deficit and narrow perspectives and reporting of young people from South Auckland.<sup>12</sup>

Colonisation has significant negative and ongoing impacts on the ways Indigenous youth (and adults) express and participate in activism, and the ways in which society responds to their activism (Ritchie, 2021). Indigenous youth are regularly silenced or excluded from opportunities to participate in activism or decision-making. Indeed, few Pacific youth attended the March 2019 SS4C protest. Despite climate change being an important personal issue for many Pacific students, the scheduling of the protest, which coincided with Polyfest (a significant cultural performance event), meant students were forced to choose between the two events. In response to the exclusion of Pacific youth at the SS4C protest, Pacific youth leader Aigagelefilī Fepulea'i Tapua'i formed "4 Tha Kulture" (4TK).<sup>13</sup> 4TK is a Pacific youth organisation that gives voice and visibility to Indigenous and Pacific youth perceptions of climate change. The group organises climate action events that consider and reduce barriers, such as transport and working arrangements, to ensure that Pacific youth can participate.

Acts of resistance and activism are an essential part of Indigenous history and identity. Indigenous activism plays a critical role in the development of Aotearoa New Zealand culture and society. Indigenous youth, like their non-Indigenous peers, continue to exercise their right to express their views and influence public issues and decision making. To better understand the history, expression and nature of youth Indigenous activism, Indigenous-centred research about student and youth activism is needed.

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<sup>12</sup> Muller (2020).

<sup>13</sup> Lee (2019).



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# Discussion

## Youth as legitimate and competent activists

Adult perceptions about the cognitive and decision-making capabilities of young people play a critical role in how youth participate in society, and how their activism is viewed. As Bolstad (2011) discusses, it is common for young people to be invited share their “voice” in decision-making situations. However, the traditional power dynamic underlying adult–youth relationships must be addressed (and balanced) to ensure youth views and experience are fully valued and enacted.

Youth and student activists are clear in their desire for support from adults (Coughlan, 2019; Morton, 2019). Similarly, we see young people calling for better access to (high quality) citizenship and activism education (Zaki, 2020). As Claxton (2002) suggests, young people are:

telling us that they are floundering, and that we are not teaching them how to swim ... in the face of these patent cries for help, how are education systems responding? And are these responses hitting the spot? (p. 28)

Education is designed to prepare young people for their lives in a forever changing world. However, aspects of school do not reflect the nature of society very well. Although well meaning, the “protect” and “provide” attitude of schools towards young people can result in the minimising of youth ability and contribution. Compounded by ageist structures and biases present in society, some young people, upon leaving school, may struggle to apply their education or have access to opportunities in ways they imagined or were taught to expect.

The right of children to express and have their opinions heard and considered in decision making is protected under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Many global societies view children as lacking the critical skills and experience needed to fully and effectively contribute to civic matters (Te One et al., 2014). Education systems and schools not only play a critical role in upholding Article 12 but in equipping young people with the skills and dispositions that enable them to be active and confident citizens.

Bencze et al. (2015) describe how the privileging of particular types of knowledge and learning can limit opportunities for student-led activism or action projects in school. Additionally, adult ideas of what constitutes as appropriate and effective activism may alter how and why students engage in activism. For example, Wood (2010) notes that adults often like the idea of including and promoting youth agency, empowerment, and action but are less willing to “hand over” some of their power to afford youth real impact and voice. Similarly, Bencze et al. (2015) found that when adults did hand over some of this power, youth “avoided suggestions made by us ... in favour of topics of their interest” (p. 342). This suggests that when given the freedom, young people may make decisions that deviate from, or reject, those that an adult would have made in the same situation. For some teachers, students’ rejection of the traditional teacher–student power dynamic might be challenging to accept and navigate. Ensuring that teachers have access to adequate professional learning and support will be essential for schools as they support their students in their activism and learning in general.

Te One et al. (2014) argue that educationalists, policy makers, schools, and teachers must engage in a critical dismantling of the ways education positions and involves young people. This dismantling must also be applied to systemic societal perceptions of youth. Education must follow through in its responsibility to empower and create space for youth experience and leadership, so that when young people take their seat at the table, their voices are considered as worthy and important as the adults voices beside them.

## How we research youth and student activism

Studies of young people and youth culture viewed through the eyes of adults, or as performed in largely adult-led institutions, is an issue common across all avenues of child and youth research. This can result in distorted or inaccurate views of youth experience. Therefore, it is imperative that youth experience is at the centre of research about youth and student activism. Ideally, to deconstruct the limited positioning of youth, young people should be involved in research as partners and co-designers.

Contrary to other researchers, Kirshner (2007) believes that studies about youth activism tend to consider the actions and accomplishments of young activists, rather than the interaction between youth activists and key players supporting their efforts. While on one hand this ensures youth experience is at the centre of youth studies, he argues that taking this individualist approach can obscure the critical relationships and dynamics that are at play leading up to, and during, activist events. Indeed, if a goal of “activism education” in schools is to increase the quality of student–community relationships, examining these relationships is a critical element to obtaining a full picture of the nature of youth activism. This approach to student activism research may support school leaders, teachers, and other key players in the education system, to critically examine the ways youth are positioned. It may also help schools to identify ways they can better meet the needs of students in their quest for recognition as independent and competent social and political agents.

## What are the implications for formal education?

Many students value and relish opportunities to engage in and contribute to society. Young people want to learn how they can have meaningful impact on the world around them. Schools and teachers are ideally placed to develop students’ skills and competency to support their activism ambitions. Schools that provide learning experiences, guidance, and opportunities that enable students to practice and apply their citizenship and activism skills will help to bring life to the vision of NZC. Most importantly, it will enhance the potential and mana of young people.

As this paper has illustrated, there is mismatch between the perceptions and the realities of youth and student activism. As discussed, further work is required to better understand youth and student activism and activists, and the educational potential of activism in formal education. Such work will support the dismantling and rewriting of inaccurate and limiting views of youth who engage in activism. Future investigations should bring together youth, school staff, and researchers as partners, giving equal space and authority to their respective expertise, knowledge, and experience. There is also considerable value to be gained from schools taking time to consider the ways they position young people, including how they frame and give power to student agency.

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