Strengthening youth participation in civic engagement: Applying the Convention on the Rights of the Child to social work practice ☆

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A B S T R A C T

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) provides a framework for strengthening youth participation in civic engagement, especially within the field of social work. Through a review of peer-reviewed social work literature over the last decade, this paper explores the central question: How does the CRC shape social work scholarship about youth participation in civic engagement? We find that the CRC is reflected in scholarship' outside of the U.S., while U.S. social work scholarship rarely draws on the CRC and concepts related to child rights. This results in qualitative differences between youth civic engagement scholarship in countries where the CRC has been ratified and scholarship in the U.S., with divergent research and practice models for working with youth. Non-U.S. social work literature offers framing, perspectives, and practice examples that can be of value for positioning youth civic engagement within U.S. social work practice. We discuss the implications of the CRC for youth participation in civic engagement in the U.S. and explore potential future directions for research and practice.

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1. Introduction

Youth civic engagement embraces concepts around youth participation, youth voice, youth empowerment, and youth organizing. As a framework for practice, youth participation in civic engagement involves the process and impact of young people engaging in and impacting the institutions that influence their lives (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2006; McBride, 2008; Pritzker & Metzger, 2011). This perspective assumes youth as strengths, as resources, and as meaningful societal contributors (Checkoway, 1998; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Nicotera, 2008).

While many fields engage in practice with youth, we argue that social work should play a central role in promoting youth participation in civic engagement. The Code of Ethics promoted by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2008) prioritizes the field's engagement in practices that enable people of all ages to "pursue meaningful involvement in decision-making." While there are individual practitioners and faculty who promote youth civic engagement, there have been few organized attempts within the broader field of U.S. social work to extend the profession's ethics and values to include the potential

for youth to actively contribute to and impact the environments in which they live.

To date, the traditional canon of U.S. social work literature has focused on clinical engagement with youth – treatment, prevention, or intervention practices – rather than on a strengths-based, asset-based approach to youth engagement (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2006; Golombek, 2006). However, an increasingly broad conversation about youth participation in civic engagement – that is, engaging young people in organizational, community, and policy decision-making – is taking place within the social work literature. Much of this growing and dynamic literature is global in nature, seemingly driven, at least in part, by the widespread ratification of the United Nations' (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC contains 54 articles clearly outlining and articulating rights specific to youth under 18. While many of these articles have important implications for U.S. social work practice across fields of practice, including in school settings, health care environments, and child welfare systems, we focus specifically on the implications for youth participation. Articles 12–15 outline specific rights for young people to participate and engage in their communities through assembling, asking questions, conducting research, having a voice, being taken seriously, having agency in their ideas, and expressing themselves freely. These "participation clauses" within the CRC set the stage for understanding youth participation as a right and shift the conceptualization of youth from vulnerable members of society to competent contributors and civic agents (Chawla & Driskell, 2006).

Within the U.S., there has been little recognition of the CRC or its potential for youth work. In fact, the U.S. is one of only two U.N.-member

countries worldwide yet to ratify the CRC. Scherrer's (2012) article calling for active integration of the CRC's tenets into social work practice and research, despite non-ratification, is one of a very small number of articles within the U.S. to explore the implications of the CRC for social work practice with youth. Scherrer details each article of the CRC and outlines potential implications for strengthening social work practice with youth. However, he focuses primarily on the range of CRC articles that serve as a guide for protecting children's rights and interests in the area of child welfare. In this publication, he focuses less attention on the articles of participation that showcase potential ways in which the CRC can provide a basis for advancing meaningful youth participation in civic decision-making.

This paper seeks to extend and develop Scherrer's discussion by examining the specific implications of the CRC's participation articles for promoting and supporting youth civic engagement. Through an examination of peer-reviewed social work literature over the last 10 years, this paper explores the central question: How does the CRC, and in particular, articles 12–15, shape social work scholarship about youth participation in civic engagement? In this paper, we explore how the CRC and concepts related to child rights impact research and practice models for working with youth in and outside of the U.S. We examine how social work literature frames, or sets the context for, work in the area of youth civic engagement. We find that youth civic engagement scholarship in countries where the CRC has been ratified is qualitatively different than such scholarship in the U.S. Non-U.S. social work literature offers framing language around the role of young people and their participation in society, perspectives and critical questions around youth participation, and examples from practice that can be of value for positioning youth civic engagement within U.S. social work. We discuss the implications of the CRC for youth participation in civic engagement in the U.S., current limitations, and potential future directions for research and practice.

2. Methods

2.1. Search and screening strategy

To examine the influence of the CRC on youth civic engagement scholarship in social work, we sought to identify social work literature, defined as social work authored or appearing in peer-reviewed social work journals, with a focus on youth civic engagement. We limited our search to articles published over a 10-year period between 2004–2014 with a specific focus on children and youth under 18, and a substantive focus on youth civic engagement. Books and book chapters were excluded.

To identify relevant articles, we utilized a four-stage article search and screening procedure (See Pritzker & Richards-Schuster, under review). We searched a broad array of potential publication outlets, including journals related to social work with topical areas related to youth and/or community (Leung & Cheung, 2014), as well as several additional journals in which the authors had previously identified articles related to youth civic engagement. As we were primarily interested in informing U.S.-based social work practice, we did not specifically search journals published outside of the U.S. The journals were searched using the following search terms: "youth", "civic engagement", "participation", "civic action", "empowerment", "civic engagement", and "development". In order to capture the breadth of social work-specific scholarship, we only retained articles authored by a social worker and/or published in a 'core social work journal' (published or offered as a membership benefit by one of the three leading U.S. social work organizations: NASW, the Council on Social Work Education, or the Society of Social Work and Research) or in an interdisciplinary youth and community journal broadly read and contributed to by social workers (e.g., *Children and Youth Services Review*, *Children & Society*, and *Journal of Community Practice*). Applying these criteria resulted in a final sample of 119 articles.

All 119 articles were entered into a database focused on the following elements: journal of publication, date of publication, social work authorship (yes/no), abstract, type of article, geographic orientation, explicit reference to the CRC or to the rights of children in framing the research (yes/no; themes), the research approach, and the age of youth under study. We provide a more in-depth definition of variables that specifically relate to this paper below. In populating the database, we reviewed the full text of each article. Our analysis uses both descriptive methods and grounded theory methods to identify themes across the sample.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Geographic orientation

To capture the geographic orientation of the scholarship, all articles written primarily by U.S. authors with content focused on a U.S. context were categorized as "U.S.-focused", while all articles written by international authors and/or focused on an international case(s) were identified as "non-U.S.-focused". For all analyses in this paper, the database was split into two groups based on this geographic orientation variable.

2.2.2. Children's rights

We used a dichotomous variable to assess whether the article explicitly referenced the rights of children in framing the research (i.e., in the introduction or literature review) or in the research approach. We also created a dichotomous variable assessing whether each article made explicit reference to the CRC. Each article making explicit reference to the CRC or to children's rights more broadly was evaluated for themes regarding the manner in which the CRC or children's rights were discussed in the article.

2.2.3. Research approach

Research approach was defined in two ways. First, we created a categorical variable to capture each article's research methodology: qualitative examination of youth's experiences, case study, intervention evaluation, conceptual, predictive, as a single component of a larger intervention, or other. Second, we sought to identify the research focus. Initially, we reviewed each article to identify the research question(s) under study. However, we discovered through this process that very few articles included explicit research questions or hypotheses. Thus, the overarching focus of each article was identified. Using thematic analysis techniques, the identified article foci were organized into 16 discrete categories.

2.2.4. Age of youth under study

Each article was reviewed to identify the age range of the youth being studied or discussed. Statements such as "high school students" were linked with common age ranges (e.g., 14–18) where specific ages were not reported. We used descriptive techniques to analyze the age ranges of studied youth.

2.2.5. Terminology

To further explore our findings on the above measures, we explored the language each article used in discussing youth civic engagement using NVivo, a qualitative software analysis tool. We ran queries across all article abstracts using NVivo's exact word setting to look for language patterns. While this setting introduced some limitations, such as separating out different words reflecting a similar concept like 'youth' and 'young people', other settings over-conflated distinct concepts. Thus, we felt that this was the most appropriate way to identify discrete patterns in the authors' choices of terminology. The word clouds for U.S. and non-U.S.-focused abstracts are provided in Figs. 1 and 2. The more frequently used words appear bigger in size than those used less frequently.