'The ability to change stuff up': volunteering as a young person within established organisations

Sally Carlton, Sylvia Nissen, Jaclyn Phillott, Anna Sapsford & Lloyd Carpenter

Published online: 04 Feb 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 69

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

'The ability to change stuff up': volunteering as a young person within established organisations

Sally Carlton, Sylvia Nissen ⬤, Jaclyn Phillott, Anna Sapsford and Lloyd Carpenter

Faculty of Environment, Society and Design, Lincoln University, Lincoln, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

There has been growing acknowledgement of the significant contribution that young people can make to established 'adult' organisations and institutions, alongside efforts to encourage their participation in these spaces. In this context, there is a need to examine how young people experience participation as volunteers within established organisations. Drawing on 25 in-depth interviews with young volunteers in the Canterbury region of Aotearoa New Zealand, our findings demonstrate that volunteering in established organisations can be a conflicted participatory space for young people. We identify three aspects young people negotiate in their participation: 'what they seek' through their engagement, particularly empowerment by way of social connection and political voice; 'what they give' to established organisations, especially time, energy and financial resource, with risks of burnout; and 'what they fight' within organisations, including discrimination, marginalisation and tokenism. Our analysis suggests established organisations should be responsive to the aspirations young people strive to enact through their participation.

1. Introduction

The past three decades have seen growing efforts to encourage young people's participation as volunteers in youth-led groups but also in established 'adult' institutions and organisational spaces (Elliott and Earl 2018; Matthews and Limb 2003). Multiple, often overlapping, arguments are made in support of this civic engagement. In the context of youth transitions, volunteering is said to bring a number of social development benefits for young people, including cultivation of personal skills and achievement, enhancement of employability, and the construction of social capital and connections (Davies 2019; Kay and Bradbury 2009). Against concerns of young people's perceived political 'disengagement', volunteering has been considered an avenue through which to establish participatory habits and foster civic engagement among young people (Hustinx et al. 2012). Participation by young people has also been positioned as a means to address a perceived lack of inclusiveness and diversity in decision-making arenas and within some sectors and organisations, with young people's access and

CONTACT Sylvia Nissen ✉ sylvia.nissen@lincoln.ac.nz 🖃 Department of Environmental Management, Lincoln University, PO Box 85084, Lincoln 7647, Canterbury, New Zealand

engagement in these spaces providing sites for political voice and empowered membership in political communities (Kallio and Häkli 2013; Kassman and Vamstad 2019).

In this context, there are important questions to ask about 'the lived dimension' of young people's participation as volunteers within established organisations (Kallio, Häkli, and Bäcklund 2015; Kallio, Wood, and Häkli 2020; Lister 2007). For the purposes of this study, established organisations are defined as those that have existing agendas, practices and processes which have not been developed by young people for young people, and within which young people are a minority. We consider volunteering as 'unpaid work' for an established organisation, while recognising volunteering is a social construct that engages multiple theoretical understandings and involves diverse expressions (Hustinx, Cnaan, and Handy 2010). The focus of research and practice has often been on encouraging young people to volunteer, including within established organisations, with less attention given to their experiences within these organisations as active participants in their communities and societies (Kallio and Häkli 2013; Vromen and Collin 2010). Moreover, while volunteerism is often positioned as 'good' for young people and society, participating in established organisations can be an ambiguous experience for young people, providing distinctive opportunities for engagement, while also reflecting and potentially reinforcing societal power relations and inequalities (Dean 2016; Matthews and Limb 2003). In examining how young people negotiate these spaces, we build on and extend literature that has explored the tensions within volunteerism (Eliasoph 2013; Holdsworth and Quinn 2012) and other institutionally-driven participatory processes, such as youth parliaments and councils (Augsberger et al. 2018; Kallio and Häkli 2011; Matthews and Limb 2003).

In this paper, we examine the experiences of young volunteers participating in established organisations in the Canterbury region of Aotearoa New Zealand. Through interviews with 25 young volunteers, we demonstrate that volunteering in established organisations can be a conflicted participatory space for young people. We identify three aspects young people negotiate in their participation. Firstly, as young volunteer interviewees explained, participation in established organisations could provide a source of empowerment through social connection, including across generations, and the possibility of political voice and leverage (what they seek). Yet their volunteer participation also demanded significant commitments, such that the second aspect to young people's volunteer participation is the potential for burnout and other detrimental impacts on their wellbeing (what they give). Thirdly, young volunteers also described discrimination and tokenism within organisations that were amplified across the intersections of age, race, gender and class (what they fight). Our discussion considers the implications for established organisations wanting to engage young people.

2. Young people, participation and volunteerism

There is growing acknowledgement of the distinct and important contribution that young people can make to the decision-making, practices and processes of organisations and institutions (Checkoway and Gutierrez 2006; Hart 1992). Yet at a time where citizen participation has become an established concept within public administration rhetoric, fears have risen of a crisis in young people's civic engagement (Kallio, Häkli, and Bäcklund 2015). Decline in some forms of participation among young people have been portrayed

as a matter of a generational 'deficit', and a signal of a lack of knowledge, disengagement or complacency among young people (for discussion see Bečević and Dahlstedt 2021; Pilkington and Pollock 2015). In other cases, scholars have cautioned that the embedding of neoliberal policies in many societies may be contributing to a cohort that is increasingly opting out of public life or whose actions becoming more individualised and consumer-oriented (see Hayward, 2021; Holdsworth 2017; Kyroglou and Henn 2017). While these portrayals are not uncontested, they have helped spur efforts to encourage and provide opportunities for young people to actively participate as citizens in a range of sectors, organisations and decision-making spaces.

However, there is a long-recognised disconnect between institutional or official framings of participation and young people's lived experiences (Kallio, Häkli, and Bäcklund 2015). Official avenues of participation can often be defined by policies and procedures, and as such are static and exclusionary for many young people, allowing participation only above age-based thresholds, within pre-defined territorial boundaries, and at accepted times and places (Bečević and Dahlstedt 2021; Vromen and Collin 2010). Young people can and do participate within these processes, but their participation is also not defined by or restricted to these practices and spaces. Instead, young people's participation has been argued to be more effectively understood as a plural, multi-layered and dynamic process of lived citizenship (Kallio, Häkli, and Bäcklund 2015; Wood 2012). In this sense, young people are active in negotiating the positions they are offered by their societies and communities, and rehearse different kinds of agency expected of them by these groups but also in relation to their peers. Their participation is context-dependent and relational, with differences in identities and subjectivities shaping how young people define and access participatory spaces (Bečević and Dahlstedt 2021).

Conceptualising young people's participation as 'lived' raises questions of how they experience and traverse various spaces of participation, including within the volunteer sector. Although volunteering practices are distinctive across different societies, volunteering among young people has increasingly been positioned in some contexts as a 'win-win' activity that benefits both young people and the organisations and communities in which they participate (Davies 2019). Yet as scholars like Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) and Eliasoph (2013) suggest, framings of volunteering as a 'good thing' can be unhelpful in flattening the complexity of young people's participation. The relationships between young people and communities, for instance, are not homogenous and distinct, but diverse, unfolding and informed by power relations within and between these groups (Bečević and Dahlstedt 2021; Tupuola 2004). Moreover, it is not automatic that volunteering will empower all those involved. Volunteer participation does not always benefit the communities it seeks to assist and can result in unanticipated 'lessons' for those involved (Eliasoph 2013; Holdsworth and Quinn 2012). Issues of stress and burnout can affect young people as active participants within their communities, especially in neoliberal societies that encourage individualism and self-responsibility (Hayward, 2021; Nairn 2019), and this can be compounded by austerity measures that strain the volunteer sector (Jones 2011).

In this sense, volunteering may provide an ambiguous and paradoxical participatory space for young people, and there is a need to empirically explore in different contexts how young people negotiate their engagement in these spaces. Established organisations

are 'adult'-dominated and rely on already-formed processes and practices that can relegate young people to minor positions and be resistant to their concerns and needs (Hadfield-Hill and Christensen 2019; Vromen and Collin 2010). Institutions and organisations may have developed in a historical context of discrimination and maintain those legacies in current practices (Augsberger et al. 2018; Bečević and Dahlstedt 2021; Finlay and Hopkins 2020), or be unresponsive to aspects that inform young people's agency, including their identities, connectivity, mobilities, and economic precarity (Allan 2019; Nissen 2019; Tupuola 2004). As illustrated in the lower rungs of Hart's (1992) adaption of Arnstein's ladder of participation, participatory opportunities can risk providing 'tokenistic' voice but little real power. Yet while these participatory spaces can exclude or marginalise, they can also offer space for young people's agency within established avenues of influence, including the possibility of challenging and transforming these practices (Garcia, Fernández, and Jackson 2020). As Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) suggest, volunteering in this sense can be both reproductive and deconstructive, in holding the potential to reinforce but also resist power structures and inequalities.

3. The study: young volunteers in Canterbury

This study was part of a wider project examining changing patterns and practices of young people's volunteering in the Canterbury region of Te Waipounamu, the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. The region contains the city of Christchurch (population 400,000) and surrounding rural areas. The study was undertaken at a time when young people are often perceived as disengaged; for instance, the 2020 *State of Volunteering New Zealand* report identified that an ageing volunteer workforce is coupled with a perceived lack of engagement from younger volunteers (Go 2020, 10). Yet young people's participation in Aotearoa is recognised as multifaceted and dynamic, reflecting the diverse identities of young people (Carlton 2015; Wood and Homolja 2021) and their interactions with 'adult' society that has been shaped by the complex legacies of colonisation (Kidman et al. 2021) and neoliberal reforms (Hayward, 2021; Nairn, Higgins, and Sligo 2012). A broad understanding of civic engagement is also critical, for instance for indigenous Māori encompassing work related to the management of marae and tribal organisations (Bargh 2013) or the role of sports clubs, music or dance groups, churches, cultural associations and festivals for Pasifika and Asian young people (Lang 2010). In Canterbury, questions of civic engagement have intersected with experiences of successive disasters over the past decade, including earthquakes, flooding, fires, a terrorist attack and a pandemic. The aftermath of these events has seen significant trauma within the region, including for young people, and placed heavy demands on the voluntary sector (Bennett et al. 2014). Young people have at times occupied marginalised positions in the response and recovery, yet these events have also provided openings for distinct expressions of youthful agency (Nissen et al. 2021).

For this study, we conducted 25 in-depth interviews, between November 2020 and January 2021, with young people aged between 18 and 30 who were active as volunteers in Christchurch or its semi-rural fringes. We took a phenomenological approach to the research, in seeking to explore how young people interpret and make sense of their experiences of the lived world. The age range of interviewees meant these young people were already autonomous participants within their communities with access to

the entitlements of adult citizenship, yet also of an age that renders them minors within many spaces. The people we spoke to were intentionally chosen for being active in volunteer organisations; we did not intend to form a representative sample of young people within Canterbury. The initial pool of interviewees was drawn from the research team's contacts and through approaching a range of volunteer organisations operating in the region. Following this initial stage, a snowball sampling approach was used. There was an active attempt by the research team to interview people who identified as different genders, ethnicity and faith to develop a richer perspective of youth volunteering within the region (Table 1), although interviewees predominantly identified as female, reflecting wider trends within the volunteering sector. Participants were contacted through email and phone, with ten possible interviewees declining to participate. All research procedures had human ethics approval (Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee, #2020-47).

Interviews were conducted by two members of the research team, who were of similar ages to the interviewees to enable peer-to-peer conversations. The length of interviews averaged 30–40 minutes, with some lasting up to an hour. Based on the preference of the participant, interviews were conducted face-to-face or over the internet via Zoom. Interviews were semi-structured, with questions broken up into two sections. The first section focused on interviewees' personal involvement with volunteering, while the second section considered their reflections on young people's engagement with volunteering more generally. The questions were developed by all members of the team based on themes raised within the literature and, especially for three members of the research team, including one younger member, practice-based experience. All interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed. Research journals were also kept by members of the research team. Following an initial coding for broad descriptive and analytical insights, two researchers undertook more detailed thematic analysis of patterns of shared understanding of the challenges which the interviewees face in their volunteering, drawing particularly from a reflexive approach (Braun and Clarke 2020). To give space for multiple interpretations, the themes initially generated were revised several times through discussion with other members of the research team, centering our varying

Table 1. Summary of interview respondents.

Respondents		n
Age	18–19 years	2
	20–24 years	14
	25–30 years	9
Gender*	Female	18
	Male	7
Ethnicity*	Pākehā/NZ European	15
	Māori	6
	Pasifika	1
	Asian	5
	Other	3
Religion*	Christian	9
	Muslim	3
	Ringatū/Tikanga Māori	2
	Other	2
	N/A	9

*Self-identified; respondents could identify multiple genders, ethnicities and/or religions.

age, gender, ethnicity and practice-based experience in these conversations. In presenting the data, pseudonyms chosen by interviewees have been assigned to respondents to ensure their anonymity.

We approached young people who were active within established organisations. However, it quickly became apparent that most of the interviewees have engaged with multiple volunteering roles. Between them, the 25 interviewees specified 142 past and present volunteering roles linked to either a particular organisation or a particular project. On average, interviewees identified between five and six roles, with 13 the highest number of mentioned roles, and only two interviewees talking of a single role. In practice, this engagement is likely to be even higher than mentioned in the interviews, with many participants either concluding their list of roles with sentiments such as 'and stuff like that' (10 respondents), or realising partway through their interviewees they had forgotten to mention certain roles at the start (9 respondents). Their involvement spanned many sectors and issues, including community support and service (24 roles mentioned), including within Māori (18) and ethnic communities (4), youth work and support (18), sports groups (8), agriculture (8) and environmental (5) organisations, and cultural activities (5). For example, in addition to her marae and community responsibilities, Kalani's volunteering encompassed participation in a youth advisory group, a church group, a Māori community support organisation, environmental activities and youth mentoring. Within organisations, some participants held formal roles, such as being youth mentors or leaders (13 roles), on youth councils or advisory groups (10) or as board members or trustees (5), alongside participation in day-to-day activities.

4. Participating as young volunteers within established organisations

The young volunteers we interviewed expressed enthusiasm about their volunteering and, for the most part, commitment to the organisations through which they carried out this work. Yet their participation also brought challenges, and interviewees spoke candidly of the often detrimental impacts of their engagement on their lives and their wellbeing. In this section, we explore young volunteers' experiences of participation within established organisations. While recognising the complexities and interconnections within their experiences, we identify three aspects young people negotiated in their participation: 'what they seek' through their volunteer engagements, particularly empowerment; 'what they give' to established organisations, especially time, energy and resource; and 'what they fight' within these organisations, including discrimination and tokenism.

4.1. What they seek

When describing their volunteering, interviewees spoke of their participation in established organisations as a source of possibility and potential power. Central to this discussion was a belief that established organisations could lend young people agency and provide an avenue to further the issues which they were passionate about. 'Passion' was cited by 17 interviewees as a critical motivating factor for people to initially get involved in volunteering; as Michael pointed out, 'if you're not passionate about the issue, then you're not going to volunteer'. In this context, it was believed that young people could wield power 'if they actually take part in the institutions that already

exist' (Lillian). Participating in established organisations, as Elaine described, offered young people 'the ability to change stuff up' – both in terms of furthering the causes they were passionate about as well as instigating change within the organisations themselves. Although the interviewees we spoke to were over 18, two respondents noted that the power that came from young people's participation within established organisations was especially significant given that under 18-year-olds within Aotearoa are marginalised from traditional pathways of influence in not being able to vote.

One source of empowerment described by interviewees related to the possibility for connection and collective solidarity that could come through volunteering in established organisations. The issues that young people were engaging with could be 'pretty heavy [and] lonely' (Amy), and the community and social connections that came with volunteering were considered to help relieve those pressures. So while Muslimah noted volunteering could 'be at the cost of your family time, your personal time', she also emphasised 'I don't take personal time out; my personal time is my community time, because that gives me some kind of motivation'. Lillian similarly stressed that she would rather spend her hours volunteering than 'walking around the shops, or being on my mobile phone or watching Netflix' because 'what I really, really value is just being part of a community'. Connection could also be to place. Referring to his years of volunteer surf lifesaving, James reflected that, 'I don't 'get' people who go out and party every weekend – but then, that's a meaningful connection for them, because that's where they see their friends and get their interactions. Whereas I don't; I get mine at the beach'.

There are temporal dimensions to how young people described empowerment in established organisations. Interviewees explained that their participation allowed them to gain an in-depth comprehension of an organisation, cause or sector, including through intergenerational transfers of knowledge. For example, Lillian enthused about how much she had learnt from a fellow board member who is still committed to 'provid[ing] input to governance' in his nineties. Likewise, James described his appreciation of being 'constantly surrounded with people who have been in this place for 50, 60, 70 years and they still keep coming back and being involved'. Interviewees also spoke of the empowerment that could come with long-term volunteer commitment. Thus James was committed for the long term because 'it's not something you can just, like, pick up and put down' if you want to have a 'meaningful impact'. Monstera also viewed long-term volunteering and commitment as essential to ensuring volunteering activities are 'meaningful' and 'sustainable', using the analogy of tree planting days – 'Who's going to maintain it? Or who's going to come back in a month's time and do the weeding?' – to emphasise the significance of longevity within volunteer engagements.

Empowerment within established organisations was also considered to come through visibility and voice. Although by no means assured, many interviewees stressed the possibility existed. As Monstera explained, 'I think maybe that's why young people are giving their time in spaces where there are avenues to have their voices heard: because they want to have their voice heard'. Many volunteers, as young people but especially those who identified as Māori, Pasifika or from an other ethnic community, were conscious that simply by being present they were bringing visibility to a demographic which would otherwise be missing from these organisations, with flow-on effects for processes and practices. For example, Aroha explained her ongoing involvement was in a sector

which does not 'have a lot of young voices' and Amy reflected that she participates 'not just as, like, a young person, but a young Māori woman'. The work of young volunteers was therefore considered an important avenue to demonstrate that young people 'are key stakeholders in the future and it's not OK to make decisions without us' (Marie) and that young people 'need to be there, kind of alongside the decision makers' (Michael). Māori interviewees spoke of their hope for greater understanding of and respect for Māori perspectives through inclusion in predominantly Pākehā organisations. For instance, Aroha noted that 'there's some barriers', but emphasised the importance that 'impacts on Māori' were considered and that Māori 'do have something to contribute'. Similarly, Amy explained that her dream is 'to see more Māori people in these decision-making spaces […] to 'brown up' spaces and places'. Increasing the participation of young Māori in organisations is critical, she reflected, 'because we have our own challenges that require our own people to be in these spaces, otherwise we leave others to kind of dictate it for us'.

In some cases, interviewees considered the organisations they had been part of to have been responsive to their perspectives and concerns. Marie, for example, noted she and other volunteers had been regularly granted 'access' to senior members of the organisation 'who actually want to hear our voices', and Amy affirmed that 'there's a lot of people in […] decision-making places that actually really value young people and their voices'. However, the responsibility that came with political voice could also be a source of pressure for young volunteers, discussed especially by Māori interviewees. For example, Sage explained that 'I'm on these committees because this is work that needs doing for my iwi [extended kinship group], for the success of, you know, more than 400 people, um, and, you know, all the people that come after them'. Sage did not feel she could 'give up' volunteering for multiple organisations because 'there are a lot of important conversations that need to be had, that people won't bring up unless [we] do. […] It's critical that somebody's in there in those roles and doing that work'.

4.2. What they give

Volunteering in established organisations had the potential to empower young people, yet it also meant they needed to give substantially. The idea of 'giving' was identified as central to many volunteers' actions. Kalani described volunteering as being a question of 'how much you are willing to give', while Goldie commented 'I have something to give and so I'm going to give it'. Time was given significantly by the young volunteers we spoke to: Aroha and Gavin both associated the word volunteering with 'time-consuming', while Muslimah described days being 'super jammed' as a result of her volunteering. Ten interviewees estimated the time associated with volunteering, with their estimates varying between two and forty hours per week, depending on the ebb and flow of the organisation's activities. Hand-in-hand with time commitment was the 'energy' that often went with it: Emily, for example, described volunteering as 'knowing that you may not get anything in return but you still give that time and energy anyway'.

While some organisations had agreements of the number of hours volunteers were 'supposed' to do, interviewees reflected that in practice they often did well beyond that. As Aroha summarised, 'I think sometimes organisations don't understand the time

commitment some people give to them'. For instance, Bella explained that her organisation suggested she gives five hours per week, but in practice this number 'really varies'. Bella did not begrudge these hours, noting that it 'doesn't really matter anyway because you are just here to help out'. Volunteers' time was often further split across numerous organisations in order to support multiple causes. As Amy recognised, becoming involved meant 'you end up getting thrown so many opportunities soon and you just jump ship to everything else', a situation which prompted Tracy, who talked of twelve past and present volunteering roles, to describe herself as a 'serial volunteer'. The needs met by voluntary activities further shaped these commitments. Emily noted she does extra hours 'because I see such a high need, I just do it anyway', while another interviewee situated these demands within the aftermath of the 2010–11 Canterbury earthquakes: 'There's been more and more work that is expected to be done by volunteers and the commitment seems to be a lot higher' (Lillian).

Interviewees spoke frankly of the impact of volunteering commitments on their lives. As noted earlier, this commitment could be a source of empowerment, but interviewees were also clear that volunteering could come at 'a cost' (Muslimah) – sometimes quite literally. Interviewees described giving personal resources to their volunteering endeavours, especially in relation to transport and in some cases accommodation. For instance, Tracy recounted how her organisation started providing fuel vouchers to a volunteer upon realising they had been driving several hundred kilometers multiple times a week to help with an event. Meeting the financial costs associated with volunteering was noted as a potential barrier for young people, given many had limited access to financial resources because of their stage in life. As Monstera explained, if young people are required to travel to volunteer 'and you don't have a way of getting there and if you've got parents who work long hours or may not have the capacity to drive you places, then only a certain group of young people are going to volunteer'. Adding further strain was the fact that donated time was time that could be spent working and earning an income (7 respondents). For instance, Aroha reflected that given the 30–40 hours she volunteers per week 'on top of, like, trying to study and work part time', 'I would be earning a lot if I was actually getting paid for my time'.

Volunteering activities were also situated by interviewees in addition to family, study, work and community commitments. Sage described her relationship with volunteering as 'always in flux', reflecting:

> By the time you get through however many hours of study, however many hours of work, it'd be nice to sleep a normal amount a night. If you want to be a grown up and actually eat decent meals, if you want to try and stay fit and healthy, um, maintain any personal relationships in your life, yeah, like, what time do you have to do for additional things like volunteering?

Volunteering in this sense was not always taken from aspects of life which might be deemed recreational, but rather from the physical needs of eating and sleeping and the social need for relationships. In this context, volunteering was described as 'consuming' (Gavin) and 'a big ask' that 'interrupts your daily life' (Gerry). For Lillian, being able to commit to multiple volunteering roles in addition to holding down a full-time job 'come[s] down to, like, whether or not you've got the energy to do all that'.

Adding to these demands were organisational expectations of what participation entailed. Interviewees spoke of embedded organisational expectations to provide 'return on investment' (3 respondents), explaining for instance that 'at minimum you're committing two years, if not three' (Marie) and that 'anything under that is really a waste of time' (Gerry). These interviewees tended to understand the reasons for this commitment, but also recognised the pressure that came with a 'commitment cycle' of expectation to stay and put training to use to benefit the organisation (2 respondents). Another challenge identified was the energy associated with mundane but time-consuming bureaucratic procedures, for instance pre-volunteering vetting. While comprehending its importance, particularly for volunteers working with children and youth, interviewees lamented the number of times they have done police checks as 'driv[ing] me crazy' (Elaine) and 'probably a bit ridiculous' (Barnabee). Elaine added that 'so much volunteering these days is covering our ass if something goes wrong' and that this focus 'almost, like, taints the experience' of volunteering by removing spontaneity and spirit.

With volunteers 'giving' so much of themselves, the emotional toll of volunteering left some interviewees feeling stressed, burnt out, exhausted and overwhelmed. Interviewees candidly spoke of being aware of their own limitations based on experiences of burnout. For example, Aroha recounted that 'I've learned what I need and what I can't cope with; when I need to delegate', while Sage said she understood the importance of 'hav[ing] lives outside of [the organisation]' as burnout, apart from impacting her wellbeing, also translated into resentment and 'frustration' towards an organisation. Interviewees also spoke of proactively seeking to support the wellbeing of other young people who were volunteering. Wayne, who volunteers as a mentor for young people, noted the risk that volunteering 'takes over your life', and actively counsels some of his mentees 'not to volunteer if they need to focus on themselves'.

In light of these demands, interviewees spoke of their time and energy as a limited resource that they needed to consciously preserve and allocate. How volunteers negotiated these decisions varied. Some described making a deliberate and strategic decision to commit 'a lot of energy' (Elaine) or time to a particular event or cause that they deemed especially important or with high impact. Others like Gavin spoke of having 'a big think' about volunteering activities: 'Is this good for me? You know, like, do I want to spend my time elsewhere?' These questions could be especially significant when volunteering activities placed young people within potentially traumatic situations. While there was organisational support in place, Gerry spoke of developing 'quite bad anxiety' as a result of his volunteering and asking himself, 'What's the cost to me? You know, I'm putting so much time on this and it's damaging me. Why, what, why should I be doing this?' James likewise noted the stress that could also come from the possibilities – the 'what ifs' – that might occur in the future with his continued engagement: 'I'm there, I'm giving my time, I'm not getting paid for anything […] I don't want to be liable for something if I screw up'.

4.3. What they fight

In addition to what they give, interviewees spoke of a number of structural issues such as discrimination and marginalisation that they need to 'fight' within their organisations. Some interviewees pointed to the attitudes of important individuals within the

organisation whose actions marginalised and excluded, while other interviewees spoke of challenges that were systematic and embedded in the makeup, practices and procedures of their organisations. Established organisations were 'adult' organisations, and while this could provide a source of intergenerational learning, interviewees also spoke of it presenting challenges for their participation. Barriers existed from the outset: 'It's quite hard to find that first door' (Michael), following which 'the processes around volunteering are not always structured in a way that caters to young people' (Goldie). Interviewees spoke of being dismissed by older members because they did not have 'anything to offer' because of their youth and because 'you don't have a degree behind you yet' (Aroha) or 'pre-existing skills' (Gerry).

Besides age, young volunteers were confronted with other intersectional challenges, particularly relating to race, gender and class. Aroha described the environment in which she operates as openly racist and felt that certain members within the organisation would never wholly support her because of her Māoritanga [Māori culture]. Sage similarly felt her Māori identity is subtly challenged through a lack of appropriate and respectful comprehension of Māori perspective and tikanga [Māori correct procedure and custom] within the organisation she volunteers with. She wished for greater acknowledgement in meetings of the presence of Māori voices 'because I feel like sometimes people begrudge us being there'. Sarah, a former refugee, also talked about racism, noting that close friends had faced discrimination in organisations because of wearing their headscarves. Another Muslim interviewee, Muslimah, considered discrimination and victimisation to have had a seriously demotivating influence on her community's willingness to volunteer. When she had recently asked her peers to help out, their response was: 'We're happy to do that for you, but every 'X Y Z' for no reason talks about us, right? And there is no point we are volunteering our time, our money'.

With organisational efforts towards institutional inclusiveness, several interviewees from Māori, Pasifika and other ethnic communities believed they had been intentionally recruited by organisations because they hail from certain demographic groups and thus 'tick boxes' for institutional diversity, particularly if gender is also considered. For example, Aroha described being head-hunted by multiple organisations to attend events after giving a public speech in Te Reo Māori [Māori language]. She attributed this interest – 'we need that young girl to come along to this' – to the fact that not many young Māori women work in her sector and so she is something of a 'novelty'. Speaking of a lack of ethnic diversity within the organisations she volunteers with, Kalani described feeling like she 'sticks out a bit' as one of very few Māori and Pasifika members, while Goldie spoke of the difficulties of young volunteers operating within an organisation where 'they look around and they don't see anybody like themselves'. Likewise, Sage felt intense pressure as a female Māori advocate: 'The thing I'm increasingly frustrated by actually is, that when you're Māori – and then probably again when you're also a woman – they want to hold you up as, like, this grand success story'. She resented 'the different, sort of, expectations that get put on you' because of her ethnicity, such as being asked to perform Māori rituals at events. When she is asked to recite a karakia [ritual chant or prayer], her response is 'Why don't you guys learn it if it's important to you? If it's not important to you, why are you asking me to do it?' All three participants who talked of burnout were Māori and female, perhaps highlighting the potential for organisations to over-rely on some volunteers who 'tick' various diversity boxes.

Interviewees also noted that organisations' symbolic acknowledgement of diversity often did not translate into meaningful voice in decision-making, especially within organisations that had well-established agendas and approaches. So while these organisations could be a source for empowerment for young people, Aroha explained that to cut through and be taken seriously often demanded a lot of young volunteers: 'You've got to be pretty thick-skinned and kind of headstrong as a young person to be able to […] get involved and make change'. Monstera compared being within an organisation which catered primarily to older members as reminiscent of the post-earthquake period, when 'young people really [felt] like we weren't listened to'. Wayne likewise reflected that 'there's not much [sic] young people's voices coming through; or if it is, it's kind of hitting a place and then it's either being kind of filtered or it's just kind of getting swatted away'. This lack of voice appeared as a core issue for young volunteers, with interviewees emphasising their desire to see young people 'have a voice' (10 respondents) and be given the space to participate (5 respondents).

In this context, some interviewees worried that a relatively narrow 'type' of youth volunteer was often encouraged to get involved in established organisations. Marie, involved in multiple youth groups, summarised it as 'the same people doing the same things', explaining that she had begun to notice that 'the same people are in the same groups, or have been in those groups in the past'. Tracy similarly remarked that she tends to volunteer with the same people because they are interested in the same causes and move in the 'same circles'. Alongside concerns of burnout, interviewees raised concerns of an emerging 'divide' (Monstera) in organisational participation among young people. Organisational practices were identified as contributing to this divide, including tokenistic processes within organisations, a tendency to seek out already highly engaged individuals, and a lack of acknowledgement of the capacity and resources required of young volunteers to participate.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Volunteering is often promoted as an activity that benefits both young people and the organisations and communities in which they participate (Davies 2019). Yet resonating with other studies that have explored the 'lived' experience of youth volunteerism (e.g. Eliasoph 2013; Holdsworth and Quinn 2012), this study similarly suggests that volunteering can be a conflicted participatory space for young people. For the young volunteers in Canterbury we spoke to, participation in established organisations offered the possibility for empowerment, but also required young people to 'give' substantially and to 'fight' discrimination and tokenism within their organisations, amplified across multiple intersections of age, ethnicity, gender and class.

What is especially striking in this study is how consciously and carefully many young people negotiated their participation in established organisations. Participation was not a simple 'win-win' for these young people (e.g. Holdsworth and Quinn 2012); conversely, neither was a lack of participation a matter of 'disengagement' or 'deficit' (Bečević and Dahlstedt 2021). Rather, our study points to a more complex negotiation of agency and power embedded in young people's participation in established organisations. Resonating with Garcia et al.'s (2020) research on counter-narratives in youth participation, young volunteers in Canterbury were hopeful of the possible agency that could come

from engaging with established organisations and working within systems with existing legacies and influence, while also having the scope to reshape them. The potential power that came with this engagement was discussed in multi-dimensional terms, including relationally by connecting and working with others, and temporally through long-term and intergenerational engagements. However, while aware of this potential, young volunteers were also conscious – often through lived experience – of the multiple constraints to this agency. These boundaries related to their capacity as volunteers, for instance ensuring they or their peers did not burn out (Nairn 2019), or the limits on resource or time that young people were able to give as a result of their age or class (Allan 2019; Nissen 2019). Further, the young people we interviewed tended to be mindful that established agendas and existing structures within organisations could exclude or marginalise as much as they could empower, for example in situations that diminished aspects of young people's identity, or that offered spaces of visibility without meaningful voice (see also Bečević and Dahlstedt 2021; Finlay and Hopkins 2020).

In this context, the young volunteers we spoke to appeared to actively and repeatedly reflect on and (re)evaluate their participation. Reflecting the critiques of Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) and Eliasoph (2013), it was not automatic to these young people that volunteering was necessarily a 'good thing'; while most volunteers we spoke to maintained their engagements, several spoke of actively deciding to withdraw. At the same time, many young volunteers expressed a desire for established organisations to be more inclusive of young people – not least because of the recognised potential for empowerment through participation. As Amy identified:

> decision makers have, you know, rights to what they can and can't do, [but] they also have obligations side-by-side of that power. Obligations to support the capacity of us because I think our generation's wicked.

The established organisations that young people engage with differ significantly, including within this study. While acknowledging this difference, listening to the perspectives of the young people points to an important consideration for organisations seeking to bring young people into their activities: to be responsive to the aspirations young people seek to enact through their participation. In this sense, our study reinforces calls for organisations to act affirmatively to reduce inequality for young people in established participatory processes (e.g. Augsberger et al. 2018; Matthews and Limb 2003), not only through recruitment processes, but also through reflection on internal processes and practices. It was notable that the young people we spoke to came to their engagements with openness to its possibilities, including for social connection and mutual learning across generations. Yet while some young people did feel that their perspectives were listened to and acted on, many experienced their voice being diminished, their concerns marginalised, and their identity undermined (also e.g. Allan 2019; Finlay and Hopkins 2020). Thus, many interviewees emphasised a desire to see young people 'have a voice' or for that voice to be respected in ways that did not require a 'thick skin'.

Concerns of responsiveness raise a question of listening (McLeod 2011). While these practices were often present within organisations, there is scope for them to be extended, for instance through active and regular discussions with young volunteers about how they can be supported in their contribution, and to allow the time, space and psychological safety for them to voice concerns about marginalisation and discrimination. There is a

further issue of resourcing. Giving was identified as a vital aspect of volunteering by the young people we interviewed, and many did not begrudge what they gave. Also acknowledged was the reciprocity that existed within many organisations that supported young people's capability, such as through mentoring, training or, more informally, intergenerational connection and learning. However, there is an important question for organisations to consider about how these volunteers could be more substantively supported, given differing obligations towards communities, issues of burnout, and concerns that there was an emerging 'divide' in participation stemming from unequal access to resources (also Augsberger et al. 2018). Some of the interviewees in this study, particularly those who identified as Māori, had been in positions where they provided what they considered to be token presence in initiatives that they had little substantive input. While many of the interviewees seemed willing to engage in these processes (and disrupt them if necessary), this participation placed additional and often heavy demands on them, particularly when confronting dominant structures within institutions at the intersection of age, ethnicity and gender. Perhaps most apparent is the need, at a minimum, for organisations to cover costs for young people's participation, such as transport to and from meetings or events and providing food and accommodation, given young people's often restricted financial means. Yet like research by Allan (2019) and Holdsworth (2017), our study also points to the necessity for ethical discussion about at what point this work deserves to be paid.

In conclusion, our article has argued that participating in established organisations can be a conflicted and actively negotiated participatory space for young people. While these spaces can offer empowerment by way of social connection and political voice, they also place demands on young people in terms of time, energy and financial resource, with risks of burnout, as well as issues of discrimination, marginalisation and tokenism. Our analysis emphasises the need for established organisations to listen and be responsive to the aspirations that young people seek to enact through their participation, particularly the potential for connection and political voice. However, this analysis reflects the experiences of the study cohort: young people within Canterbury who displayed high levels of engagement in volunteer activities. Future research might look to determine whether youth people with more 'peripheral' involvement in volunteering, or living in a different context, share similar perspectives on what they seek, give and fight through their participation. There is also scope to explore in more depth the different ways in which young people negotiated these conflicting situations over time. Particularly with efforts towards institutional diversity, and with young people's participation becoming a feature within public administration rhetoric, there is a need to consider multiple ways in which established organisations might support young people in their participation.

Funding

ORCID

Sylvia Nissen http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5236-9860

References

Allan, K. 2019. "Volunteering as Hope Labour: The Potential Value of Unpaid Work Experience for the un- and Under-Employed." *Culture, Theory and Critique* 60 (1): 66–83.

Augsberger, A., M. E. Collins, W. Gecker, and M. Dougher. 2018. "Youth Civic Engagement: Do Youth Councils Reduce or Reinforce Social Inequality?" *Journal of Adolescent Research* 33 (2): 187–208.

Bargh, M. 2013. "Multiple Sites of Māori Political Participation." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 48 (4): 445–455.

Bečević, Z., and M. Dahlstedt. 2021. "On the Margins of Citizenship: Youth Participation and Youth Exclusion in Times of Neoliberal Urbanism." *Journal of Youth Studies* 24: 1–18.

Bennett, B., J. Dann, E. Johnson, and R. Reynolds. 2014. *Once in a Lifetime: City-Building After Disaster in Christchurch*. Christchurch: Freerange Press.

Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2020. "One Size Fits all? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?" *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18 (3): 1–25.

Carlton, S. 2015. "Connecting, Belonging: Volunteering, Wellbeing and Leadership among Refugee Youth." *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 13: 342–349.

Checkoway, B. N., and L. M. Gutierrez. 2006. "Youth Participation and Community Change." *Journal of Community Practice* 14 (1–2): 1–9.

Davies, B. 2019. "Youth Volunteering—The New Panacea." In *Austerity, Youth Policy and the Deconstruction of the Youth Service in England*, edited by B. Davies, 217–235. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Dean, J. 2016. "Class Diversity and Youth Volunteering in the United Kingdom: Applying Bourdieu's Habitus and Cultural Capital." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 45 (1_suppl): 95S–113S.

Eliasoph, N. 2013. *Making Volunteers: Civic Life After Welfare's End*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Elliott, T., and J. Earl. 2018. "Organizing the Next Generation: Youth Engagement with Activism Inside and Outside of Organizations." *Social Media + Society* 4 (1): 1–14.

Finlay, R., and P. Hopkins. 2020. "Resistance and Marginalisation: Islamophobia and the Political Participation of Young Muslims in Scotland." *Social & Cultural Geography* 21 (4): 546–568.

Garcia, P., C. H. Fernández, and A. Jackson. 2020. "Counternarratives of Youth Participation Among Black Girls." *Youth & Society* 52 (8): 1479–1500.

Go, J. 2020. *State of Volunteering* 2020. Volunteering New Zealand. Volunteering New Zealand website: https://www.volunteeringnz.org.nz/state-of-volunteering-2020/.

Hadfield-Hill, S., and P. Christensen. 2019. "'I'm big, You're Small. I'm Right, You're Wrong': The Multiple P/Politics of 'Being Young' in new Sustainable Communities." *Social & Cultural Geography* 22 (0): 1–21.

Hart, R. A. 1992. Children's Participation: From tokenism to citizenship. In *Papers* (No. inness92/6). Innocenti Essay. Innocenti Essay website: https://ideas.repec.org/p/ucf/inness/inness92-6.html.

Hayward, B. 2021. *Children, Citizenship and Environment (#SchoolStrike Edition)*. Oxon: Routledge.

Holdsworth, C. 2017. "The Cult of Experience: Standing out from the Crowd in an era of Austerity." *Area* 49 (3): 296–302.

Holdsworth, C., and J. Quinn. 2012. "The Epistemological Challenge of Higher Education Student Volunteering: "reproductive" or "Deconstructive" Volunteering?" *Antipode* 44 (2): 386–405.

Hustinx, L., R. A. Cnaan, and F. Handy. 2010. "Navigating Theories of Volunteering: A Hybrid Map for a Complex Phenomenon." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 40 (4): 410–434.

Hustinx, L., L. C. P. M. Meijs, F. Handy, and R. A. Cnaan. 2012. "Monitorial Citizens or Civic Omnivores? Repertoires of Civic Participation Among University Students." *Youth & Society* 44 (1): 95–117.

Jones, A. 2011. "Theorising International Youth Volunteering: Training for Global (Corporate) Work?" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36 (4): 530–544.

Kallio, K. P., and J. Häkli. 2011. "Tracing Children's Politics." *Political Geography* 30 (2): 99–109.

Kallio, K. P., and J. Häkli. 2013. "Children and Young People's Politics in Everyday Life." *Space and Polity* 17 (1): 1–16.

Kallio, K. P., J. Häkli, and P. Bäcklund. 2015. "Lived Citizenship as the Locus of Political Agency in Participatory Policy." *Citizenship Studies* 19 (1): 101–119.

Kallio, K. P., B. E. Wood, and J. Häkli. 2020. "Lived Citizenship: Conceptualising an Emerging Field." *Citizenship Studies* 24 (6): 713–729.

Kassman, A., and J. Vamstad. 2019. "Local Public Administration as Facilitator of Political Youth Participation – Good Intentions and Institutional Shortcomings." *International Review of Sociology* 29 (3): 484–497.

Kay, T., and S. Bradbury. 2009. "Youth Sport Volunteering: Developing Social Capital?" *Sport, Education and Society* 14 (1): 121–140.

Kidman, J., L. MacDonald, H. Funaki, A. Ormond, P. Southon, and H. Tomlins-Jahnke. 2021. "'Native Time' in the White City: Indigenous Youth Temporalities in Settler-Colonial Space." *Children's Geographies* 19 (1): 24–36.

Kyroglou, G., and M. Henn. 2017. "Political Consumerism as a Neoliberal Response to Youth Political Disengagement." *Societies* 7 (4): 34.

Lang, K. 2010. *What do New Zealand Students Understand About Civic Knowledge and Citizenship?* Wellington: Ministry for Education.

Lister, R. 2007. "Inclusive Citizenship: Realizing the Potential." *Citizenship Studies* 11 (1): 49–61.

Matthews, H., and M. Limb. 2003. "Another White Elephant? Youth Councils as Democratic Structures." *Space and Polity* 7 (2): 173–192.

McLeod, J. 2011. "Student Voice and the Politics of Listening in Higher Education." *Critical Studies in Education* 52 (2): 179–189.

Nairn, K. 2019. "Learning from Young People Engaged in Climate Activism: The Potential of Collectivizing Despair and Hope." *YOUNG* 27 (5): 435–450.

Nairn, K., J. Higgins, and J. Sligo. 2012. *Children of Rogernomics: A Neoliberal Generation Leaves School*. Otago: Otago University Press.

Nissen, S. 2019. *Student Debt and Political Participation*. Cham: Springer.

Nissen, S., S. Carlton, J. H. K. Wong, and S. Johnson. 2021. "'Spontaneous' Volunteers? Factors Enabling the Student Volunteer Army Mobilisation Following the Canterbury Earthquakes, 2010–2011." *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 53: 102008.

Pilkington, H., and G. Pollock. 2015. "'Politics are Bollocks': Youth, Politics and Activism in Contemporary Europe." *The Sociological Review* 63 (S2): 1–35.

Tupuola, A. 2004. "Pasifika Edgewalkers: Complicating the Achieved Identity Status in Youth Research." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 25 (1): 87–100.

Vromen, A., and P. Collin. 2010. "Everyday Youth Participation? Contrasting Views from Australian Policymakers and Young People." *YOUNG* 18 (1): 97–112.

Wood, B. E. 2012. "Crafted Within Liminal Spaces: Young People's Everyday Politics." *Political Geography* 31 (6): 337–346.

Wood, B. E., and M. Homolja. 2021. "Strategic Solidarities: Cultural Festivals, Relational Encounters and Diasporic Youth Identities." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 42 (4): 1–17.