

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



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ABSTRACT

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

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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.

Table 1
Publication venues for social work youth civic engagement scholarship, 2004–2014.

	Journal name	U.S.-focused articles	Non-U.S.-focused articles
Core SW journals	<i>Total</i>	6	2
	<i>Social Work</i>	3	0
	<i>Research on Social Work Practice</i>	1	2
	<i>Children & Schools</i>	2	0
	<i>Health & Social Work</i>	0	0
	<i>Journal of Social Work Education</i>	0	0
	<i>Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research</i>	0	0
	<i>Social Work Research</i>	0	0
	<i>Social Service Review</i>	0	0
	Other journals	<i>Total</i>	65
<i>Children and Youth Services Review</i>		14	10
<i>Journal of Community Practice</i>		21	2
<i>Children & Society</i>		1	20
<i>Child & Youth Services</i>		7	1
<i>American Journal of Community Psychology</i>		1	2
<i>Childhood</i>		0	3
<i>International Social Work</i>		0	3
<i>National Civic Review</i>		3	0
<i>Small Group Research</i>		3	0
<i>Families in Society</i>		2	0
<i>Journal of Community Psychology</i>		2	0
<i>Child & Family Social Work</i>		0	2
<i>Youth & Society</i>		2	0
<i>American Journal of Public Health</i>		1	0
<i>Childhood Obesity</i>		1	0
<i>Community Development</i>		0	1
<i>Equity & Excellence in Education</i>		1	0
<i>The Foundation Review</i>		1	0
<i>Health & Social Care in the Community</i>		0	1
<i>Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment</i>		1	0
<i>Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies</i>		1	0
<i>New Directions for Evaluation</i>		1	0
<i>New Directions for Youth Development</i>	1	0	
<i>Social Development Issues</i>	0	1	
<i>Social Work with Groups</i>	1	0	

fundamental rationale for youth civic engagement and a basis for promoting participation. These authors draw on the CRC to legitimize youth participation and discuss the CRC as creating incentives for institutionalizing youth decision-making within both governmental and non-governmental systems. While all of these articles draw on the CRC broadly for positioning youth participation, many directly reference Articles 12 and 13 which assure the rights of young people to express their voice, ask their own questions, and access their own information (Scherrer, 2012). As Kellest, Forrest, Dent, and Ward (2004) state in framing their research, “Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC require that children should be informed, involved, and consulted about all activities that affect their lives” (p. 329). Our analysis of word frequency in abstracts provides additional support for the influence of the CRC in framing international youth civic engagement work. While not present in all abstracts, the word “rights” appeared 24 times across the 48 abstracts.

Embedded in many of the non-U.S. articles in this sample is the idea that youth participation is a normative practice, backed by the CRC. Words such as “participation” (94) and “participatory” (19) are reflected within the non-U.S. abstracts; “participation” is in fact the second most common word in these abstracts. The non-U.S. articles discuss youth participation as a formal part of large social systems such as the child welfare system. Articles also commonly examine the incorporation of youth voice within policy decision-making at various levels of government. The impact of the CRC in these articles is evident as the authors discuss the assumptions that drive policy and practice around

youth, especially in relation to social work and the roles of social workers in supporting youth participation.

In countries such as Australia and various countries in Europe, the importance of youth participation is reflected in charters or ordinances that create youth advisory boards at multiple governmental levels. For example, Badham (2004) outlines a process in the UK through which ten key national departments actively developed plans for strengthening youth participation in government's work. Fleming (2013) details a number of legislative pieces in the UK that make youth participation “mainstreamed in much of the policy and practice in the UK” (p. 484). In Australia, youth participation has been supported nationally through youth summits, a nation-wide youth agenda, local and regional advisory youth councils, and participatory forums for youth within many state level agencies (Head, 2011). In Ireland the “National Children's Strategy” has been “widely praised” as a national policy initiative for youth (Pinkerton, 2004, p. 120). O'Leary noted that this strategy “has the potential to widen children's and young people's participation in public decision making” (as cited in Pinkerton, 2004, p. 120). Kina's (2012) work in Brazil articulates links youth participation to a deeper historical discussion about participation and the specific role of social workers as a tool to “defend the right to citizenship” (321).

This assumption of youth participation as a right is uncommon in U.S. social work research. We find only a handful of U.S. articles that focus centrally on the CRC as a framework for social work practice with youth. The word “rights” appears just three times across all 71 U.S. abstracts. Only five of the 71 U.S. articles (7%) address “children's rights” in the article text, each making explicit reference to the CRC. These authors reference portions of the CRC that discuss children's participation to frame their work; in doing so, most of these articles discuss the CRC's potential as a model for social work to use in furthering youth civic engagement.

Social work scholars of youth participation largely contextualize this work as being marginalized within the U.S. literature. As such, our review of the U.S. articles finds that articles present youth civic engagement in opposition to the traditional frames of young people as disconnected, victims, or problems that commonly dominate the U.S.-focused social work literature. For example, Nygreen, Ah Kwon, and Sanchez (2006) state, “despite a dominant discourse that frames urban youth as disengaged or troubled, our experiences suggest that these youth, if given the opportunity can become competent citizens, active participants, and powerful agents of change” (p. 108). While scholars focus on asserting the importance of youth participation, limited attention is paid to the contexts and mechanisms that support widespread participation.

Instead, U.S. scholarship emphasizes terms such as “engagement” (52) and “empowerment” (21). While these terms suggest a more progressive discourse around young people's roles than is often found in U.S. social work literature, these terms may be limiting in some ways by focusing on individual roles rather than on systematic changes. Such language may indicate a focus on seeking to integrate youth into systems that may not otherwise involve them, rather than on creating institutions that take youth voices and roles seriously. While we do not want to suggest that empowerment or engagement are problematic terms, social workers need to be attuned to the potential of such language and corresponding approaches to limit the power of youth participation to a focus on individual integration into systems or outcomes for specific individual youth, rather than on a more robust understanding of youth participation as a concept of rights, decision-making, and system change.

Without the CRC as a basis for guiding youth work, most U.S.-focused social work lacks a framework or shared understanding about the rights and participation of youth. Even when social work scholars in the U.S. are attuned to the CRC, their scholarship tends to approach children's rights from the perspective that children, too, have human rights, rather than from the perspective that there is an intrinsic value in children being active participants in institutions shaping their lives.

For example, while a panel, "Thinking Through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child", at the 2014 Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education focused on the importance of the CRC as a framework for social work practice with youth, similar to Scherrer (2012), most of the panelists spoke about the CRC through the angle of the rights youth possess in regards to issues such as safety, housing, trafficking, health care, and immigration, but not specifically about the CRC as a tool for increasing youth participation.

3.3. Approaches to youth civic engagement research

These divergent starting points about how youth are viewed seem to shape the assumptions that drive both research and frameworks for practice. The types of questions being asked about youth civic engagement vary noticeably. U.S. articles are concerned with program impacts, while articles outside the U.S. context focus more on quality and depth of participation.

In the U.S.-focused articles, we find an emphasis on research that focuses on making the case for engagement – the what, why, and case examples showcasing the potential for youth participation and the possible impacts participation can have on youth development. The methodological approach most common in U.S.-focused scholarship is case studies (36.62%). Somewhat less common are conceptual articles, constituting just under 30% of the U.S. literature. Just over 10% of U.S.-focused articles utilize intervention testing methods.

Thematic analyses of the primary foci examined by the authors of each U.S.-focused article yield 16 distinct categories, as shown in Fig. 3. Consistent with the favored methodological approaches, over the last 10 years U.S.-focused articles most commonly have sought to understand the impacts of youth civic engagement programs (19.72%) or to explore lessons learned from specific case studies (18.31%). No other research focus exceeds ten percent within the U.S.-focused sample.

In the non-U.S.-focused literature conceptual articles are most prevalent, constituting 35.42% of international articles. These articles incorporate deeper discussions about the quality and level of participation, institutional capacity to support participation, and the relationship between the rhetoric of participation and the reality of youth engagement. In some cases, this literature incorporates a critique of how participation

is actualized. As in the U.S., case studies are common, constituting 27.08% of the articles presented. Approximately 17% of international articles utilize qualitative methods to examine the experiences of youth engaged in civic engagement.

The non-U.S.-focused literature, as shown in Fig. 4, focuses on slightly fewer distinct categories of research foci (12). In contrast to U.S. scholarship, research is most concerned with examining mechanisms that promote or inhibit youth participation and voice (22.92%). This is consistent with a more advanced integration of youth participation into social institutions. Also common is research that focuses on moving from rhetoric – e.g., the language of policies promoting youth engagement – to practice (16.67%). This segment of the literature focuses on how institutions and programs can successfully implement concepts such as youth rights and youth participation. Theoretical examinations of youth engagement are also common (16.67%). Just over 12% of the non-U.S. scholarship examines how to ensure that youth participation is meaningful.

Overall, then, we find that U.S. literature focuses primarily on what works to expand youth involvement in civic decision-making and its impacts on youth, while non-U.S. scholarship is seemingly more concerned with how to make this participation meaningful. These findings are further supported in the analysis of the differences in the language used to describe the youth's civic engagement in article abstracts. In the U.S.-focused articles, young people appear to be framed most often around their participation or potential participation in specific programs and mechanisms to engage them in specific civic engagement endeavors. For example, words such as "organizing" (28), "service" (27), and "political" (24) refer to specific ways in which youth may engage. None of these words emerge commonly in non-U.S. abstracts; instead the non-U.S. abstracts focus on broader domains in which youth participation is of importance and underlying dynamics at play, such as "power" (18), "rights" (24), and "process" (18) when seeking to further youth engagement.

3.4. Which young people are engaged

An additional difference between the U.S. and non-U.S. scholarship is who is included when discussing youth civic engagement. Where age

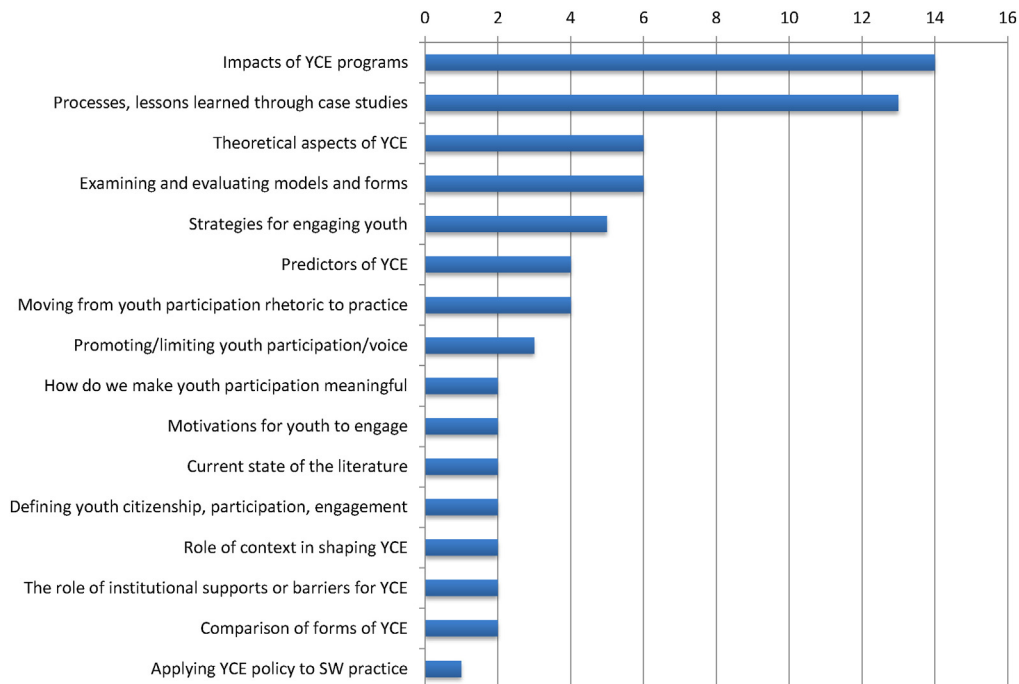


Fig. 3. Research approaches, U.S.-focused articles.

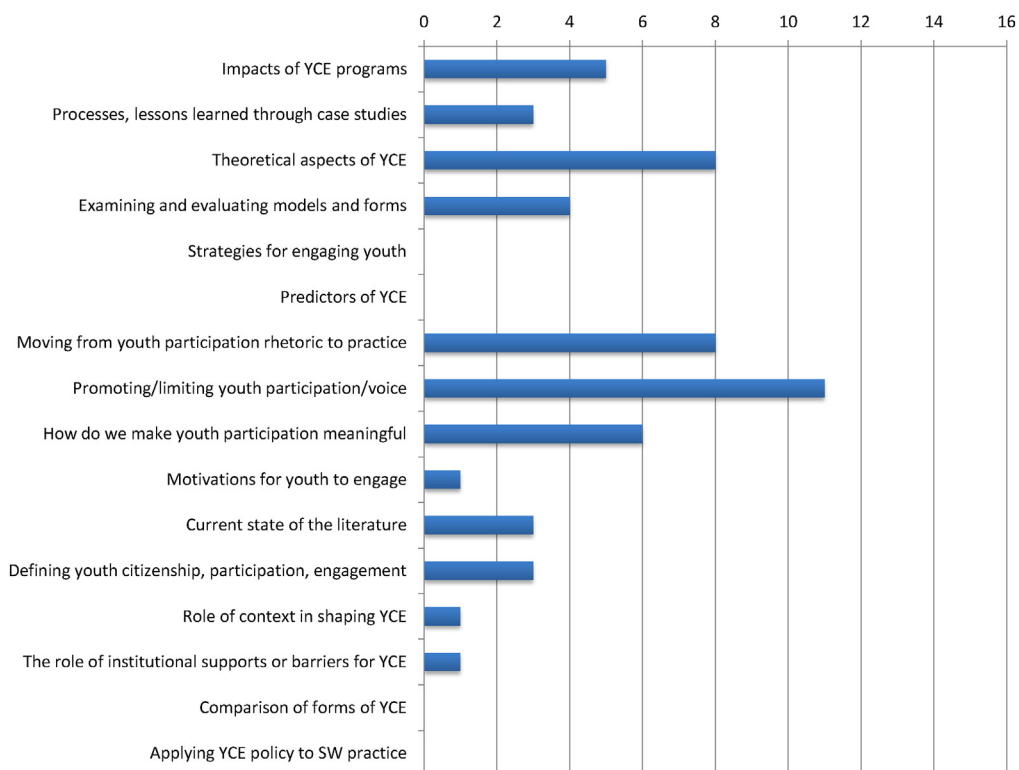


Fig. 4. Research approaches, non-U.S.-focused articles.

ranges are provided, U.S. studies incorporate youth ranging from three years old to 25; however, each age 11 and below is examined by fewer than five percent of U.S. studies. The mean age under study in the U.S. is 16.99 ($SD = 3.75$). A broader range of youth, from birth to 29, is incorporated in non-U.S.-focused studies. Two international articles examine youth civic engagement even in early childhood, although each age below five is included by fewer than five percent of these studies. Due to the greater inclusion of children elementary age and below, the mean age in internationally-oriented articles is a younger 14.56 ($SD = 5.10$).

While an array of terms are used in both contexts to refer to young people, our analysis of word frequency across the abstracts provides further support for a broader conceptualization of potential youth participants outside the U.S. In the non-U.S.-focused articles, the most common term across all abstracts is “children” (118), whereas in the U.S.-focused articles, the most frequently used term is “youth” (227). “Children” or its variants rarely appear in U.S. abstracts, while the word “youth” appears 67 times in non-U.S. abstracts. Limited conclusions can be made about how youth are viewed based on the frequency of words used in abstracts; however, these divergent word choices suggest that non-U.S. scholars may be more inclined than U.S. scholars to view participation as a right that extends into childhood. Ratification of the CRC, which makes no age distinctions in terms of calling for children and youth to have participation rights, may set the stage for researchers and practitioners to be more likely to view pre-school and elementary school as capable civic participants.

4. Implications for research and practice with children and youth

This analysis finds a comparative lack of maturity of youth civic engagement scholarship in U.S. social work. While non-U.S. scholarship benefits from taking place in a context in which government and non-governmental institutions may see participation as an essential component of childhood and adolescence, there is substantial room for U.S. scholarship and practice to grow even without ratification of the CRC.

Indeed, U.S. scholarship could benefit from a much stronger and more robust engagement with the international social work literature. This should include, at a minimum, exposure by both U.S. researchers and practitioners to the broader international literature, as well as more opportunities for social work dialogue across geographic borders.

Given how clearly the rights and participation clauses of the CRC map directly to the NASW Code of Ethics (Scherrer, 2012), social work can and should embrace its participatory principles as a fundamental form of practice. The Code of Ethics explicitly calls for social workers to promote “meaningful participation in decision-making” and “socially responsible self-determination” for *all* people, with no indication of a minimum age requirement. As such the CRC’s participation articles offer a guide for how social work can promote meaningful participation by children and youth, embracing youth civic engagement as an essential mode of social work practice. A critical first step would be for institutional leaders within social work to acknowledge that these integral components of the profession’s Code of Ethics do, in fact, apply to children and youth as much as they do to adults.

U.S.-based youth civic engagement research needs to shift from seeking to make the case for specific participatory interventions to exploring deeper questions that can guide practice: questions about capacity, quality, authenticity, and process. Certainly, research needs to continue to document and understand current best practices and the impacts and outcomes of such practices on youth, organizations, and communities. However, we also need a broader examination of how to institutionalize the various strategies for youth participation in civic engagement into our youth-serving institutions and the strengths and challenges embedded in doing so.

Checkoway’s (2011) article “What is Youth Participation?” offers an initial step in this direction, but more conceptual and theoretical critiques of the field are needed. The principles of the CRC can help to provide the context for more critical analysis within US-focused literature. Nybell (2013) and Mitra, Serriere, and Kirshner (2014) provide examples of this, asking critical questions about the legitimacy and authenticity of youth voice and youth engagement within U.S. institutions.

U.S.-based social work researchers also need to make a concerted effort to engage with global scholarship in this area, reflecting upon ways to integrate and test conceptual models and lessons learned about addressing barriers to meaningful participation in U.S. settings. Opportunities for U.S.-based researchers to engage and network with international researchers on conference panels and through special journal issues that focus on strengthening youth's participation and rights are needed. Cross-national research exchanges that explore lessons learned around youth participation through a social work lens would also add substantially to this discussion. A possible next step could be the organization of discussions at U.S. social work conferences such as the Council on Social Work Education and the Society on Social Work Research to explore strategies for developing cross-national youth civic engagement networks within social work.

A more participation-focused social work needs to develop practice models that can be evaluated and disseminated. While the non-U.S.-focused scholarship has a great deal to offer researchers and practitioners in the U.S., the small number of U.S.-focused articles that provide specific recommendations informed by the CRC also can provide a starting point for U.S.-based scholarship moving forward. For example, Roholt and Mueller (2013) draw on the CRC to discuss how youth advisory councils can serve as structures for youth decision-making in organizations and local governing bodies in the U.S. Developing and promoting such structures into governments and youth-serving institutions and systems is a crucial role for social workers and other youth-serving professions. Nybell (2013) explicitly discusses the potential for the CRC as a tool for engaging youth in transforming policy and practice within the systems that impact their lives, giving voice to youth within the US foster care system. Mitra et al. (2014) apply CRC principles to explore the potential for expanded youth voice within schools and educational policy making in the U.S. One of the most comprehensive attempts to apply the CRC framework in the U.S. is Golombek (2006) article "Children as Citizens." She explores ways to develop youth as citizens through youth service programs, youth philanthropy, youth democracy programs, and youth participation in organizational and governmental decision-making.

The CRC itself can guide a more participatory-oriented education agenda, enabling U.S. social work education to embrace the focus on youth rights and youth participation discussed here. Curricula can focus more strongly on youth's assets by incorporating practice strategies to promote youth participation in civic engagement, through youth organizing, youth participatory research, youth-adult partnerships, and integrating meaningful youth voice in institutional decision-making. Students training to become youth practitioners can be taught to serve as allies with youth, in classes and in field-based training. Professional development for those professionals already working within youth is also needed, focusing on promoting meaningful youth participation. To our knowledge, very little of this content currently exists in most practice courses focused on social work with children and youth or in professional education programs, leaving social workers unprepared to facilitate meaningful participation as part of their professional practice. As we infuse such content into social work courses, instructors should be mindful of the need to integrate international literature that can lead to deeper discussions about the potential roles of young people and what can be learned about approaches to youth civic engagement from other countries.

From a policy perspective, a more participatory focused social work practice with youth raises questions about the structures needed to engage young people in decision-making roles in organizations and municipalities. While there is some legal backing for youth's ability to serve as voting members or on advisory boards, there is more need to explore policy alternatives to support such initiatives within various institutional structures within a U.S. context. The non-U.S.-focused literature is suggestive of the need to explore an expanded perspective of the "youth" who can be involved in decision-making roles. Non-U.S. social work scholars explore a broader age span for youth involvement –

including children much younger than typically discussed within the U.S. scholarship – raising questions about the potential ways that young children can be civically engaged. For example, how could the voices of children in early childhood or of elementary age be included in discussions around issues that directly affect them, such as education, child care, community well-being in the institutions and communities with which they interact? How could information gained from young children shape community programs and decisions in potentially new ways? Overall, as we seek to expand youth participation in civic engagement in the U.S., we must be attuned to the concerns raised in non-U.S. literature about the quality of participation and strategies to ensure that participation is not tokenism, but is instead authentic and meaningful. The non-U.S.-focused articles offer valuable guidance for examining authenticity, legitimacy, and quality within youth participatory efforts.

5. Conclusion

This analysis suggests that the CRC principles offer potential for social work research and practice to support meaningful youth participation in civic engagement. Certainly U.S. ratification of the CRC could have much to offer social work and the youth of the U.S., and both individual social workers and our professional organizations should consider engaging in advocacy on behalf of this convention. Yet, there are many obstacles to pursuing both ratification of the CRC and more meaningful participation on the part of youth. The social work profession in the U.S. operates within a national and cultural context that is not necessarily facilitative of youth participation. Given the current trajectory of politics and institutional structures in the U.S., near-term adoption of the CRC or a set of provisions that create state or federal rights for young people to have a voice in decision-making seems unlikely. Indeed, Scherrer (2012) outlines the challenges inherent in current U.S. laws that create substantial barriers to adopting the CRC. Furthermore, there is opposition in some vocal segments of U.S. society to adopting the CRC's principles. U.S.-based youth-serving institutions typically serve to protect youth well-being and not necessarily to expand their rights; accordingly, large systems set up to serve youth (e.g., education, child welfare) are not set up to engender active or meaningful youth participation. Structures like the youth advisory councils prevalent in some other countries are rare in the U.S. Furthermore, this perspective challenges the traditional framing of youth within social work and therefore much work will be needed to help broaden perspectives of U.S. social work faculty, researchers, and practitioners to begin to incorporate principles of youth participation in decision-making.

Despite these challenges, there is much to be learned from exploring the CRC's lessons for strengthening youth participation in civic engagement within U.S. social work practice. Embracing non-U.S.-focused examples in educating youth practitioners in the U.S. would be one step toward making this sea change. Strong curricular content on the rights and capabilities of youth can help prepare a new generation of social workers to bring a more participatory lens to direct service and administrative leadership throughout their careers. Those that write about youth civic engagement within a U.S.-based social work context often lack unified terminology and a core language that leave us unable to develop a strong research base in this area (Pritzker & Richards-Schuster, *under review*). A stronger collective voice for integrating the principles of youth participation in civic engagement is needed to move the field forward and to provide a framework for how research and practice in the U.S. can draw on the CRC more centrally.

Our conclusions that a nation's status relative to the CRC can impact the perspectives and understandings about youth civic engagement among scholars and practitioners are critical to repositioning youth civic engagement within U.S. social work. While the entrenched U.S. social work frameworks may be difficult to change uniformly, and a children's rights perspective may continue to not be a primary focus for youth-based social work practice and research in the U.S., greater

embracing of the intrinsic value of promoting children's rights and participation can strengthen our ability to serve youth. Indeed, social work scholarship in the U.S. can learn a number of lessons from our colleagues around the world in terms of incorporating rights, engagement, and participation as core foundations for social work practice. Through scholarship, we can highlight the CRC and the case examples, questions, and theoretical framing that are being engaged with globally. In doing so, we may take an important step toward beginning to meet Sherrer's challenge to the field.

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