Polarizing Participation in Local Government: Which Young People Are Included and Excluded?

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Abstract
In recent years in New Zealand, international and national imperatives have prompted local government authorities to find ways to consult children and young people. We analyze the workings of selected participation initiatives in one urban and one rural setting in New Zealand and argue that young people's inclusion in local government processes depended on adult organizers' perceptions of who should be "targeted." We show how two "types" of young people, "achievers" and "troublemakers," were often "targeted." If local government in effect focuses only on those young people from opposite ends of the continuum, we argue they are reproducing a polarized representation of young people and excluding the participation of "ordinary" young people; we describe this group as "the excluded middle." We conclude with some suggestions for adults who are interested in the ongoing challenges of developing relevant ways of working with youth, based on insights from our two case studies.

Keywords: **young people**; **local government**; **inclusion**; **exclusion**; **participation**; **target groups**

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Introduction

In recent years in New Zealand, international and national imperatives have prompted local government authorities to find ways to consult children and young people.[1] Whether these imperatives are viewed as requirements or endorsements of existing policies and practices, the overall effect has been increasing attention on how young people might be involved in advising on or participating in decision-making processes of local government (Freeman and Aitkin-Rose 2005; Henderson 2000; Hetzel, Watson and Sampson 1992; Meucci and Schwab 1997). Although the number of participation initiatives has grown steadily since 1990 in New Zealand, they tend to be ad hoc, unevenly distributed and reactive rather than proactive. Research on young peoples' experiences of such initiatives is sporadic and dispersed across a number of disciplinary interests (Freeman and Aitken-Rose 2005; also see Campbell 2000; Doesberg 2000; Freeman and Nairn 2000; Moore 2000; Simms 2000; Willoughby 2000). While the proliferation of participation initiatives contributes to a critical mass of action, the ultimate test is young people's experiences of these initiatives at the local scale. In the process of researching young people's experiences of local government participation initiatives, we realized it was important to consider *which* young people *did* and *did not* participate.

We analyze the workings of selected participation initiatives in one urban and one rural setting in New Zealand and argue that young people's inclusion in local government processes depended on adult initiation, invitation or "targeting." We show how inclusion therefore depended on *which* groups of young people adults in local government deemed important to include and, by default, which young people would therefore be excluded. We show how this process in effect polarizes participation to two "types" of young people. One group is comprised of those young people who are considered problems; local government attempts to find ways to meaningfully occupy such young people with particular types of participation. The other group is made up of those who are considered to be community-focused or high achievers, and are therefore "future leaders." We argue that local government provides participation initiatives for these two groups in the first case to protect society from "unruly" groups of young people, and in the second case to advance a new generation of administrators or leaders. If local government in effect focuses only on those young people from opposite ends of the continuum, we argue they are reproducing a polarized representation of young people and excluding the participation of "ordinary" young people. We use the term "the excluded middle" to refer to the diverse young people who occupy the continuum between the polar opposites of "achievers" and "troublemakers." While "the excluded middle" risks homogenizing the many groups covered by this umbrella term, we use it nevertheless to highlight the significant proportion of

[1] Two international policies are the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) signed by the New Zealand government in 1993; and Agenda 21, which came out of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Two recent national policies are the "Youth Development Strategy" (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002) and the "Agenda for Children" (Ministry of Social Development, 2002), which identified increasing children and young people's participation as key action areas.

young people that may be excluded from participation in local government.

Revisiting the Case for Participation

The case for participation has been convincingly argued in the literature. The justifications for and positive outcomes of appropriate participation have been detailed by authors such as Ewen (1994), Hart (1997), Freeman and colleagues (1999), Lansdown (1994), and Malone (1999). Justifications for young people's participation include upholding their rights; fulfilling legal responsibilities (for example, concerning the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child); improving services and decision-making; enhancing democratic processes; promoting protection; enhancing skills and self-esteem; and empowering young people.

Generally, the participation literature is of the following types: descriptive examinations of participatory initiatives for young people (for example, Bessant 2004; Elsley 2004; Horelli 1998; Pinkerton 2004; Stafford et al. 2003); analyses of issues with reference to participation (such as Hall et al. 1999; Hill et al. 2004; Jamison and Gilbert 2000) that often include recommendations for improving practice; and practical guides and reviews for including young people's participation in public life (such as Adams and Ingham 1998; Davies and Kirkpatrick 2000; Lewing 1998; Willow 1997).

The literature contains some assessment of the quality of various participatory initiatives. Some authors (for example Hart 1997; Shier 2001; Sinclair 2004) have placed participation projects on a scale showing the degree of young people's initiation, autonomy and action with the aim of encouraging "higher levels" of participation where more positive outcomes for young people are expected. In the assessment of participatory initiatives, there are frequently cited concerns that participatory initiatives are adult initiated and managed (Hill et al. 2004; Matthews 2001; Tisdall and Davis 2004) and that young people may view consultation as tokenistic because they do not see outcomes or action as a result of sharing their views (Matthews et al. 1999; Sinclair 2004).

The literature regarding participatory initiatives (see Checkoway et al. 2005; Hill et al. 2004; Matthews 2001) questions *which* young people are involved in decision-making and suggests that particular types of young people are likely to be selected or volunteer to participate. Matthews (2001, 310) states that there is a danger that "participation advances the interests of the vociferous, articulate and confident at the expense of others." They question which young people get to participate and what their responsibilities are in relation to representing other young people. It seems that "participation initiatives may reinforce existing patterns of social exclusion and disadvantage" (Lowndes et al. 2001, 453).

While there is a considerable literature on young people's participation in a variety of contexts – school, local government and community – much of this literature is descriptive rather than theoretical. But there are notable exceptions to this trend. Several authors (Morrow 1999; Roche 1999; Sinclair 2004; Smith 2002; Trine Kjorholt 2002) acknowledge how "childhood" is a socially constructed phenomenon

and the place of children and young people in an adult-dominated society is a result of historical, social and cultural patterns. Other authors (for example, Bessant 2004; Hall et al. 1998; Matthews 2003; Roche 1999) have theorized young people's participation with regard to human rights and citizenship. France (1998) suggests that rights and responsibilities are linked and that young people's reluctance to participate in public life is linked to their lack of rights (to vote, to socialize where they want to, and to feel valued, to name a few).

Theorizing around place and space is also evident in the literature. Karsten (2002) describes young people's exclusion from public (adult) spaces and the provision of separate activities and spaces to ensure that young people have "meaningful" and "useful" pastimes. Invariably, these are more easily accessed by young people with social capital who are then able to increase their existing resources. Malone (1999) also reflects on the ways in which power is mapped out in public spaces and finds young people in a "liminal zone" where they are too old for playgrounds but not old enough to enjoy "spatial freedoms" taken for granted by most adults, although such spatial freedoms are shaped by gender, ethnicity and social class.

Building on a spatial analysis and linking it with identity, Prout (2000) explores the separation of public/private spheres and state/family. He notes increasing attempts to control young people in the public sphere, while it is expected that the private sphere of the home and family is generally considered the appropriate space for young people to express greater autonomy. Prout describes this juxtaposition of surveillance and autonomy as an expression of the tension between "public" control and "private" self realization characteristic of late modernity.

Rose (1993) goes beyond, and indeed seeks to break down, dichotomies such as private/public and inclusion/exclusion by considering how "opposing" features are inextricably linked. Although Rose (1993) has theorized how "masculinist" spaces (social spaces that are dominated by and reproduced to favor men) exclude women, her theorizing also has broader application to understanding how "adultist" spaces exclude children and young people. Rose (1993) is similar to Foucault (1995) in her belief that the working of power is more complex than simply the exclusion of subordinate groups by dominant groups. Indeed, policies requiring the inclusion of subordinate groups such as women, indigenous peoples and children and young people mean that subordinate groups are invited – or *required* to be invited – to participate in decision-making processes from which they were previously excluded.[2] As we go on to show, this means subordinate groups are participating in decision-making processes on terms defined by the dominant group, but their inclusion can also constitute a challenge. The status quo might be maintained in cases where members of subordinate groups experience local government initiatives as oppressive and leave disillusioned or find their desires subsumed by the dominant group's agenda. But the status quo might also be

[2] For example, New Zealand's recent Local Government Act (2002) requires community participation and consultation but does not specify which communities should be consulted. In comparison, the Resource Management Act (1991) specifically requires consultation with Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand.

resisted by members of subordinate groups who find ways to challenge or rework the dominant group's terms to achieve their own goals.

Rose (1993) developed the concept of "paradoxical space," which describes how it is possible to simultaneously inhabit the centers and margins of social spaces (such as local government meetings and public streets) – to be *both* an insider *and* outsider in these social spaces, or "an outsider within" (Collins 1990, 11). Any particular social space may be understood, paradoxically, as *both* inclusive *and* exclusive, empowering *and* disempowering. Just as poststructuralist theorizing has enabled more complex understandings of the workings of power so that any one person might be understood as both powerful and powerless depending on context and a viewer's subject position (Jones 1991), it also enables readings of social spaces as paradoxically "both/and," that is, *both* inclusive *and* exclusive (Fuss 1989). For example, it is no longer theoretically adequate to understand social spaces as only dominated by powerful social groups, such as men and adults, to the exclusion of women and young people. Although the relatively powerful position of adults (in this case) is not to be underestimated, we sought theoretical resources for understanding how the young people in our study (of secondary school age, between 12 and 18 years in New Zealand), who would generally be considered "outsiders" to local government because they do not vote or pay rates, might also be understood as "insiders" or "outsiders within."

Rose's theorizing of how inclusion, exclusion and power work in paradoxical ways provides us with the tools for a more nuanced reading of the subtle differences in the social spaces inhabited by different groups of young people "invited" or "targeted" by local government. For example, although we argue that there are two groups of young people "targeted" by local government, the "achievers" and the "troublemakers," it is not simply the case that both groups are invited into "the center" of local government processes. Rather, the "troublemakers" tend to be included on the periphery of local government. In other words, they are included insofar as services and activities are provided for them, but are also excluded if they are not invited to participate as advisors or decision-makers regarding the services and activities provided for them. Before we report on how these processes of inclusion and exclusion operated in two case studies of local government, we outline how the research was conducted.

Different Methodologies for Different Places

The data for this paper came from research carried out in two settlements: one large urban center and one small rural town in New Zealand.[3] Given the different geographic scales, it was necessary to adopt different research approaches. We chose the respective methodologies for their appropriateness in enabling young people to communicate their experiences rather than for comparability.

At the time of the research, the urban area had a population in excess of 300,000,

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[3] We do not name the respective settlements because it would identify staff at each of the local government offices. There are relatively few staff with roles dedicated to working with children and young people in New Zealand, even in the larger offices of urban centers.

of whom 20 percent were considered "young people" (aged 13 to 25). The data from this urban center was collected via a multi-method approach, including questionnaires, street interviews, focus group and key informant interviews, and participant observation. Table 1 provides an overview of the data sources for each of the case studies.

Table 1. Overview of data sources for the urban and rural case studies

<table>
<tr><th>Urban Case Study</th><th>Rural Case Study</th></tr>
<tr><td>1) Youth forum in low-income community
▪ Key informant interviews with adult organizer and youth worker who accompanied a group of young people to the forum
2) Youth conference
▪ Participant observation of the entire conference
▪ Key informant interviews with two adult organizers
▪ Focus group and pair interviews with 6 attendees (from one school)
▪ Completed questionnaires from 34 who did not attend conference (from the same school)
3) Youth council
▪ Key informant interviews with youth support worker and ex-youth councillor
4) Street interviews
▪ Two youth workers interviewed 55 young people in a central area of the city in an attempt to hear from those who might not have participated in the initiatives listed above.</td><td>1) Completed questionnaires from 110 of approx. 250 high school students in a rural town.

2) Key informant interviews with three adults: youth worker, youth advocate and member of the district council.</td></tr>
</table>

Questions covered both youth and adult respondents' awareness of local government initiatives for young people, whether young people had participated, what kinds of young people the respondents perceived local government initiatives

to be targeted to, and suggestions for how young people would like to have input into local government decision-making (see Appendix). In order to hear from those not involved in formal initiatives such as the conference and the youth council, students from one school who did not attend the conference were surveyed and two youth workers were employed to carry out 55 street interviews with young people in the central area of the city.

The small town had a population of approximately 1,900, and the representative local body was a district council with its base in a larger nearby town. Nearly all young people in the small town attended the local high school, which had a roll of approximately 250 students. After consultation with local students, we decided to administer written questionnaires at the high school, because the students felt that street interviews – our initial approach – would not work in this small settlement. Nearly half of the students at the school – 110 – completed questionnaires administered by 10 senior student researchers who worked in pairs to administer them. The student researchers also participated by completing their own questionnaires. The questions asked in the urban and rural questionnaires were similar, although we modified the question about respondents' perceptions of the types of young people the city council's initiatives targeted for the rural context because the absence of such initiatives in the rural context made this particular question meaningless. Instead, we asked rural respondents to imagine what types of young people the district council might want to hear from. We conducted semi-structured interviews with three key adult informants: the local youth worker, a local advocate of youth participation and a councilor on the district council.

We primarily employed a thematic approach to analyze the data collected from our varied sources, supplementing the thematic analysis with statistical data and demographic information. For example, in analyzing respondents' desired modes of participation and reasons some young people did not participate, we focused on emergent themes among the responses; for other data, such as how many respondents knew about local government initiatives and participated in them, we calculated the proportion of different respondent groups according to age, gender, "race" and socioeconomic status.[4] Given the small size of each of the respondent groups, any "general" patterns reported are indicative, rather than statistically significant.

We drew on both qualitative and quantitative forms of data, but it is our poststructuralist theoretical knowledge that provided the impetus for noting what is

[4] Wall's (2000) research shows that "race" is often not directly talked about in New Zealand amongst young people; instead, she researched young people's music listening practices as an indirect way of investigating "racialized" practices. "Race" is written in quotes to "indicate its arbitrary connection to anatomical features and its primary political meaning," and therefore to give this term (and related terms "racial" and "racialized") "an unnatural quality" (Kobayashi and Peake, 1994, 231). Social class, like "race," is often not directly talked about because of the myth of New Zealand as an egalitarian society, but research by Lauder et al. (1999) and Nash (1999; 2000) makes it clear that social class divisions are entrenched in New Zealand's education system.

not in the data. Lee (1996, 16) provides a useful summary of Foucault's (1984) thinking on the power of discourse to shape attention and investigation:

> *A discourse has the power to create reality by naming and giving meaning to aspects of experience from a particular perspective. This power to create is always a "distributive" politics; that is, what is deemed to be real and true determines what is included and excluded, so that what cannot be named may not even be noticed.*

Material processes of exclusion – including the exclusion of young people from local government – exist, even though it is difficult to obtain data to provide evidence that this is so.

In analyzing our participants' descriptions of which young people participated in local government, we have focused on the differentiation our participants (both adults and young people) made between "troublemakers" and "high achievers." Descriptions did not always include explicit reference to these categories in relation to social class, "race" and gender. Nevertheless, the categories of "achievers" and "troublemakers" were underpinned by assumptions about the social class, "race" and gender of these respective groups, and we identify instances in which our participants explicitly or implicitly mentioned "race" and social class (Wall 1997).

Our argument that local government in New Zealand tends to target two groups of young people at either end of a continuum to the exclusion of "the middle" structures the reporting of our research. In the following section, we show how our research participants (adult and youth) perceived that particular groups of young people were targeted by local government initiatives, and we argue that these "named" groups implicitly identify who is also excluded (the unnamed groups that we refer to as "the excluded middle"). Once we have made the case for who is included – and, implicitly, who is excluded – we then analyze the data collected from young people who did not participate in local government initiatives in order to consider how those in "the excluded middle" might also participate in their own invisibility because they are not aware of what local government has to offer, or are not interested in participating. We then move to consider the example of one young person who was "targeted" to participate in local government. We have chosen this participant because he maintained his involvement in spite of doubts about the efficacy of young people's participation, and then went on to deploy his knowledge of local government structures in a different organization working with youth. We conclude by revisiting our arguments about who is and is not included in local government initiatives and offer some suggestions for adults who are interested in the ongoing challenges of developing relevant ways of working with youth, based on insights from our two case studies.

Which Young People Were "Targeted" to Participate?

The Urban Case Study

In the urban center, the appointment of staff responsible for incorporating young people's perspectives came about as a result of research the council commissioned

on the "state of youth" in the city. As that information started to come in, the elected members made the decision that they were not prepared to wait for all of the information to be compiled. They thought the problems facing youth were "urgent enough" that they employed a youth support worker immediately. Other staff members were expected to incorporate the consultation or participation of young people into their work over time. The city council developed a range of different ways for young people to participate in or interact with local government, including youth forums in different areas of the city, a youth conference, a youth council, a youth unemployment service, a graffiti exhibition, youth music festivals, a snowboarding display and groups focusing on the development of skate parks. Some of these activities could be interpreted as being for particular groups of young people, especially for the containment or channeling of "negative" behaviors such as youth unemployment, graffiti and skateboarding, while others are not so clearly "targeted." In our case study, we focused on one youth forum organized for a low-income community, a youth conference and the youth council. We take each of these initiatives in turn and focus on how the adult organizers talked about their processes for involving young people.

Adult organizers either invited groups of young people to attend or sourced "representative" groups of young people that they assumed would be interested through institutions and organizations, such as schools and youth groups. Adults also liaised with other adults who had management roles with young people to "source" participants. For example, the organizer of a youth forum in a low-income community talked about the problems of accessing the "right" young people:

> *So we had to decide: where were we going to get the young people from? So we decided the high school in the area. One of the youth workers was on the [forum] committee so he got a bunch of kids from there. There was another guy who runs a boxing program there, so he got all the kids that weren't involved in school or any sort of structured education.*

The organizer identified two distinct groups: those attending school and those no longer in any "structured education." In his description of the young people who attended the youth forum, the organizer indicated that consulting members of these two groups constituted including a "range" or "diverse groups" of young people:

> *I think we had a really good cross-section. Because you had, like, some from the school that were kids that were in the higher streams, you know, and the employment training thing they want to be doctors and lawyers. And then there were the kids that weren't involved in it, were just basically not far from being street kids, they were like 13, 14 [years old] but they're not in any program.*

These two excerpts reflect a recurring theme from our research. There were two distinct "types" of young people that local government staff were especially interested in working with: "achievers," whom they expected to find via schools, and possible "troublemakers," whom they expected to find via youth workers (or

other adults) working with "at risk" youth.

In contrast to the youth forum, the youth conference was aimed specifically at "future leaders," as one of the adult organizers explained: "So, it was the idea of trying to provide a base for our potential leaders of tomorrow, where they could come in and share some of their ideas, learn some new things." In the case of the youth conference, our research participants were from the same school; we interviewed those who participated in the conference and surveyed their classmates who chose not to attend. Those who attended the conference described how their teacher, who was liaising with the conference organizers, approached them. Not everyone was invited to attend. Some attendees were sponsored by local businesses or organizations to cover the cost of attending the conference.[5] When asked about the types of young people they thought the youth conference was intended for, the 34 non-participants referred to "brainy kids" and young people with an interest in issues, the community and the future; only two respondents thought it was aimed at all young people. Although the conference was generally perceived as being for "achievers," the association of young people with trouble was a prominent theme at the event, as indicated by this participant's description of the conference topics: "We talked about a lot of youth issues, like, your drugs, and your violence and stuff like that."

In the case of youth councils more generally, "sensible and industrious" young people tend to be called on to be "representatives" of all young people. It became clear that the city council youth support worker involved in our case study was mindful of this trend, as he mentioned, "Some of the criticism of youth councils is, you tend to get your very academic kids," and went on to explain that:

> *We work very hard to get a diverse youth council, and we do. Incredibly diverse. That brings another set of problems because you end up with a group of young people sitting round a table who actually don't have a lot in common. Therefore, it's very difficult to bring them to a point whereby they can act in a cohesive way and work on anything together. You end up putting a lot of time into team building. And that's difficult too, because if you have a diverse group of young people—you have people who are in the workforce, people who are in tertiary education, secondary education, unemployed, on courses, part-time work, the whole gambit. Consequently, people's discretionary time comes at different times.*

But a youth councilor who had been on one of the councils organized by the same youth support worker still felt that the recruitment process favored particular kinds of young people. For example, he explained how particular individuals from his school were invited to apply to be youth councilors. These chosen few had to apply

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[5] Some of those who chose not to attend the conference said it was because of the cost. But there was some confusion between the costs of two conferences over consecutive years. Some referred to a fee of NZ$360 to attend, but this was the cost of the previous year's conference that was ultimately cancelled because it was undersubscribed. The conference reported in this study cost NZ$50.

by writing an essay, followed up by an interview with councilors. He considered this process to be exclusionary in favor of those with written and oratory skills and confidence. Nevertheless, this youth councilor acknowledged that the youth support worker had done

> *really, really well in bringing in a diverse range of people ... But I think the people that could stick in were the white middle-class people. The other people—there were a couple of Pacific Islanders and one other Maori on the [youth] council when I started and they all fell away.*

This youth councilor was aware of the significance of diversity and representation – "I was their token brown person on the council" – and he was also a member of other minority groupings defined around sexual orientation and youth subcultures, such as "skaties."

Although this youth councilor stayed on the council longer than his Pacific Island and Maori counterparts, his description of how the white middle-class environment of local government worked to exclude non-white and non-middle-class youth councilors indicates how difficult it is to sustain diversity even if recruitment has achieved some measure of diversity in the first instance. We return to this youth councilor's experience later in the paper, referring to him as an ex-youth councilor because that was the case at the time of our interview with him.

The point that we wish to make here is that even when recruitment targets "diverse" young people, as in the case of the youth council, this is often still mediated by organizations such as schools. The youth councilor (quoted here) had written and oratory skills and confidence *and* he belonged to multiple social categories often sought by adults (researchers included) aiming for "diversity." Given that these groups of young people are often under-represented, we are not challenging the importance of recruiting from these groups. But, if only exceptional Maori, Pacific Island and/or gay young people are recruited and go on to serve on youth councils for a period of time, then "ordinary" Maori, Pacific Island and gay young people are part of "the excluded middle" that we are concerned about. Irrespective of whether the three Pacific Island and Maori youth councilors who were described as "falling away" were exceptional or ordinary, their ultimate exclusion by the white middle-class environment of this city council negated any achievement of diversity by the youth support worker at the recruitment stage.

Having outlined how each of the three participation initiatives "targeted" particular groups of young people, it is also worth commenting on how we perceived each of these initiatives in terms of their potential influence on the city council. The organizer of the youth forum in the low-income community reported that it was difficult to attract young people from this community to the forum. We would argue, therefore, that it is debatable whether the forum ultimately represented the needs of young people from the community. Attempts at inclusion can still contribute to exclusion, especially if the processes for engaging particular groups of young people do not have meaning for them. A youth worker who accompanied some Maori and Pacific Island youth to this forum reported how some members of

her group said: "Oh it sucks, it sucks. We don't know what's going on and like half the time we're just going here and then we go over there." This group experienced marginalization instead of inclusion, and as a result could be understood to occupy "the periphery" rather than "the center" of local government.

Although the ex-youth councilor described how the youth council was constrained in its influence, we would argue that relative to the participants in the youth forum, the youth council was more "central" to the decision-making processes of the city council and that it is not surprising that the ex-youth councilor reported his perception of the youth council as "It's very ... white, middle-class." That is, it was more like the adult council and therefore represented less of a challenge to the status quo.

The Rural Case Study

Although the city council in our study had a range of ways young people could be involved in local government, this was not the case for the rural district council. An adult councilor from the district council had personally tried to initiate a youth council but told us that canvassing the views and addressing the needs of young people was not a primary concern for the council. She suggested that there would need to be legislation to compel district councils to consult with young people before it would ever become a reality. When asked about provisions for young people, this proactive councilor said that their cultural and sporting needs were addressed by the district council, but "grassroots democracy for the youth is not there." A local youth worker concurred: "I can't think of any instances when young people have had the opportunity to voice their ideas in regard to council policy." This local youth worker had approached the district council (along with other concerned adults) with regard to the implementation of a youth center and described how the council had liaised only with adult representatives and never directly asked young people in the community what they wanted. The appointment of the youth worker, and the development of a skate park and youth center, were all prompted by perceptions of "youth as a problem" in the rural town.

In our interviews with adults working with youth in the rural area, a similar pattern of attending to the needs of two groups of young people ("achievers" and "troublemakers") was evident. The youth worker described the need to "channel" the "negative" behaviors of young people in the rural area because they were seen as unfocused with nothing positive to do and therefore in need of surveillance:

> *Well, we have a high number of people who hang out in the street. There's a real street culture. It's the same all over. And that's where the skateboarder comes from. It's a street sport really. It's something that can be done on the street. So, it's that culture that we're really wanting to break because that leads into anti-social behaviors.*

The adults with whom we spoke indicated that the skate park and a planned youth center would give young people places to go away from the main street. A local youth advocate described the views of locals: "They are as concerned, I think, as most of the population are, about them, young people on the streets after hours,

young people drinking, young people not having anywhere to go." From the perspective of local authorities (police as well as local government), the invisibility of young people is transformed when they are seen to be creating trouble or being a "menace to the moral order of neighborhoods" (Valentine 1996, 590). Groups of young people in public spaces are considered "troubled and troubling" (Checkoway et al. 2005, 1151).

Rather than establishing an advisory group from the population with whom the youth worker had been primarily employed to work, he recruited senior high school students for this role. Another adult who saw her role as an advocate for youth in the town explained the two groups of young people actively participating in the rural town in the following way:

> *The skateboard committee were by and large lower ability young men up to the age of about 21, 22, tended not to have a lot of stickability. Whereas the [advisory] group tend to be sixth and seventh form young people. Many of them are children of people who are involved in community groups.*

Although this advocate does not specifically describe the advisory group as made up of "achievers," we interpret them as such because they have remained at high school to senior levels and their parents' involvement in the community is indicative of their families' social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 2004). This example also demonstrates how two different groups of young people occupy differing positions even when both groups are targeted by local government. In this case, the school students occupied a more central and powerful position as advisors relative to the skateboard committee youth, who were not taken as seriously because they "tended not to have a lot of stickability" – a phrase that could be understood as implying the social class positions of the speaker and the young men (via the speaker's perspective). More specifically, middle-class adults, although well-meaning, may contribute to the (re)production of class inequalities via their assumptions about who has the "right" dispositions for making appropriate contributions to local government. If the "right" dispositions are assumed to be middle-class and school-orientated, this can have the effect of relegating particular groups of young people to the periphery of local government decision-making processes. The skateboarders referred to above are included only to be excluded from more significant roles.

Identifying and targeting two groups of young people for different modes of participation in the urban and rural case studies was often in response to the perceived needs of the respective communities. On one hand, young people who were perceived as likely to threaten community safety were encouraged into activities and places considered more appropriate, and/or where they could be supervised. In contrast, those who were seen as having skills and maturity were utilized as representatives of their generation by local government, with the long-term goal of creating society's leaders. When young people are viewed as members of two different homogenous groups in this way it universalizes young people on the basis of "achievement" (or lack thereof) and denies the other social categories they occupy.

The difficulty with this "stratification equals diversity" line of reasoning is that it neglects those who are not in either group; that is, groups of young people between these polar opposites are excluded. Approaching or working with such select groups of young people means that the outcomes of consultation may further reinforce existing stereotypes and prejudices about some young people while ignoring the needs of others, especially those of "the excluded middle."

Which Young People Do Not Participate? The Urban and Rural Case Studies

It is difficult to find out about the perspectives of "the excluded middle" (or of "non-participants" in local government) because their exclusion or non-participation makes it difficult to find points of entry to recruit them for research. We nevertheless attempted to find out about the perspectives of young people who did not participate in local government more generally by conducting street interviews in the urban center and surveying high school students in the rural area, and by surveying those students who did not attend the youth conference in the urban center.

Two female youth workers were employed to conduct the street interviews. They approached young people going past in a pedestrian precinct to see if they would be prepared to answer questions about their perceptions of local government. Although a relatively small number of young people were interviewed, we believe this method did reach "ordinary" young people. One of the interviewers described the young people they interviewed in the following way: "I thought the majority of young people we've talked to have pretty much looked like the run-of-the-mill young person, which is the majority." Of the 55 young people who participated in street interviews, 26 percent perceived that the city council mainly addressed the needs of "troubled youth": the badly behaved or those with not enough to do. But 22 percent perceived that the council provided events and facilities for all types of young people. Interestingly, females were more likely to say that the council was targeting young people who belonged to distinct subcultures (such as "homies" and "skaties"), while only males said that the council attracted mainstream young people.[6]

The young people who thought the city council was targeting specific groups did not attend the council-led initiatives or events, evidently because they felt they did not belong to the targeted groups. For example, none of the young people who said that the council targeted "skaties" participated in skateboarding or made use of skateboard parks. Indeed, the terms young people interviewed on the street used to describe those they thought council targeted – such as "teeny boppy," "immature," "homie" and "alternative" – all suggested people "not like" themselves. Such terms could be read as implying that the city council catered for young people "not like" an implicit, unnamed norm such as "the mainstream," or in our terms,

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[6] While the term "homie" can refer to people who listen to rap music, it is often used as a replacement term for Maori and Pacific Island youth in New Zealand, thus having the effect of avoiding direct reference to "race" (Wall 2000; see her endnotes).

"the excluded middle." We are aware that we are constructing a group that is usually considered advantaged ("the mainstream") as disadvantaged ("the excluded middle"), but we do so cognizant of broader unequal power relations between adults and young people, which often (but not always) marginalize young people. Adults are not always more powerful than young people, however, and there are inequalities amongst young people themselves (Nairn, Munro and Smith 2005; Orner 1992; Valentine 2000).

In the rural area, we modified the question about the types of young people councils targeted (as outlined in the section describing our methodology). Of the 109 who completed questionnaires, 28 percent thought that the district council *should* want to hear from everyone, but there was a similar proportion (23 percent) who expected that the council would only want to hear from people who were sensible, had "good" ideas or were "smart." Only a small number of young people thought that the district council would want to hear from the "troublemakers" or people hanging around on the street, despite comments made earlier in the questionnaires about activities needed to entertain disenfranchised young people.

While it was valuable to find out about young people's perceptions of who the city council's initiatives seemed to be aimed at or, in the rural case, who they *should be* aimed at, a more fundamental issue was revealed via the surveys of non-participants.

We found that young people in both the urban and rural cases were often not sure what opportunities for participation were provided by their local authority. This was especially true of the rural town, where several people responded to the question about what the district council provided for young people with examples of activities or events that were provided by agencies other than local government. Likewise, in the urban center, the young people who had attended the youth conference coordinated by the city council said they did not know who had organized the conference. Local government initiatives aimed at encouraging young people to participate were therefore not well-known to most young people. If young people do not know what modes of participation are made available by local authorities, then their ability to take part or to make their views known to their local council remains limited.

Even when young people did know about local government initiatives, such as the youth conference, some were simply uninterested in participating, or the timing of such events during school holidays was viewed as unattractive or inconvenient. Of the 34 non-participants in the youth conference, most (80 percent) could remember hearing about the conference, and 60 percent of those who could remember hearing about the conference were not interested in going, while 40 percent expressed some interest in attending. For those not wanting to attend, the main reasons were: not knowing what the conference was about, that it sounded boring, and several had other plans for the holidays or did not want to go because it was during the holidays. While these are hardly surprising findings, they do indicate a disconnection between the conference organizers and the community's youth; if the conference organizers had done better marketing, made the conference themes

more relevant to young people's lives and/or held the conference during school time, perhaps many more young people would have attended. Alternatively, it could be argued that young people have a right to not participate, but the danger in this argument is that it exempts adult organizers from examining how their participatory initiatives for youth might not be attractive to them. It might also imply that young people are disinterested, even apathetic, which in effect blames young people for their non-participation.

Most young people interviewed for the research, however, were interested in sharing their views with local government. The majority of the young people in both centers (65 percent of the rural participants and 71 percent of the urban) wanted to inform the council of their needs. They had a range of suggestions for how they could do this, including writing letters and emails and answering surveys, but they expressed a lack of knowledge about how to coordinate such activities. They also had an expectation that young people should be approached, rather than having to initiate contact with local government themselves. One of the urban street interviewers summarized what she had been told by young people:

> *It's interesting to note that a lot of youth don't feel as if council will take them seriously. And they don't, like, they'd be interested in sharing their opinions but it's council's job to actually go to them. And they don't feel like they should have to go to council, or some of them do, but you know, if council came to them it would be a lot easier.*

Because young people felt hesitant and inexperienced, they were less likely to put themselves forward or become actively involved in policy, thus contributing to their own marginalization. For example, the young people who attended the youth conference said:

> **Participant 1:** Because we're always like, 'Oh we're just kids. We can't do anything till we're older.' But you can do stuff and you can get involved in things, and that was probably one thing that I really got [from the conference].
> **Participant 2:** Yeah. And I think, because most people want to make a difference … . They just don't know how to go about it.

As we have already argued, particular groups of young people were specifically approached to participate in council initiatives such as the youth council, and while some of those targeted for inclusion at the recruitment stage left because they experienced council processes as exclusionary, others stayed in spite of the problems they noticed. In the next section, we explore in more depth the experiences of the ex-youth councilor, because he maintained his involvement in spite of doubts about the efficacy of young people's participation, and then went on to deploy his knowledge of local government structures in a different organization working with youth.

The Paradox of Being an Insider and an Outsider: The Experience of an Ex-Youth Councilor

The ex-youth councilor was an "outsider" in two senses; first as a young person in the adult-dominated context of the city council and second as a "representative" of categories of young people that are often under-represented in local government, that is, Maori and Pacific youth. But he could also be understood as an "insider," given that he continued his involvement in the youth council for some time. With his experience on the youth council behind him, the ex-youth councilor saw things as the adults from the council had described them:

> *Now I have to agree we were naïve. But there's nothing wrong with being naïve if there are other people that can actually make it happen safely. Because we had energy and we had enthusiasm, we just didn't know about process.*

This ex-youth councilor acknowledged young people's inexperience and, later in the interview, he talked about the support that young people needed to work within council structures: "Youth councils have huge potential, but you need full-time workers to be able to coordinate them or even 20 hours a week to coordinate them." Most of the adults interviewed also talked about the need for adults to support young people's participation.

The ex-youth councilor from the urban area also described some of the difficulties of being an "outsider on the inside." Although youth councilors were informed that their role was to advise on policy, they also wanted to "do things" for young people. The youth councilor agreed that the goals of the city council and the individual youth councilors differed. He considered this to be a core reason for disharmony and difficulties:

> *It became quite clear that our role was to advise the council and it was also really clear to me but not so clear to the other people, which sort of pissed them off a little bit that the council doesn't have to listen, and that we're not actually allowed to* DO *anything ... . And if only that was explained because that caused a lot of strife in the council. People wanted to be doing stuff, but it wasn't their role to be actually doing stuff. (Emphasis in original.)*

These variations between adults' and young people's expectations of participation meant that young people's experiences of the youth council were often frustrating.

Despite such frustrations, the ex-youth councilor spoke about how he was able to work within the city council, although he could also appreciate why other young people found it alienating. In the quote below he, in effect, describes how he used the terms of the dominant group (adults on the city council) to achieve the goals of the subordinate group (the youth council):

> *Because I took that youth policy that they wrote as a blooming batting stick. It actually says there: you have to have youth participation. So, let us on ... . Because we were there and we were doing that whole advisory thing and*

> *that's one of the goals that they had, was to involve young people in what they do … . It was tokenistic though, to a point. But we took it past that point when we actually started talking and not saying what they wanted to hear. And there's nothing wrong with tokenism for a beginning because it always develops into a big hard stick that's poking them in the eye.*

This young man was able to challenge how things were done. He was aware that the policy initiatives promoting youth participation, highlighted at the outset of this article, provided an entry point into a space that in the past had been reserved for adults. So, although this ex-youth councilor's appreciation of an adult perspective of youth participation could indicate his co-optation into an adult perspective, his comments clearly indicate his strategic awareness of the significance of gaining a foothold, even if initially tokenistic, in local government in order to progress young people's agendas.

This ex-youth councilor went on to describe how he applied what he had learned from his time on the youth council in his employment in an organization for youth:

> *We have a youth advisory group of about 30 young people, and then there's a core group and then like volunteers. And so they make up their own structure, hold their own offices and it's all quite flexible and open because that's how they wanted it. And it ticks along really, really well. We were thinking at one point that maybe we need to — maybe we could have an inter-agency youth advisory group. But that idea was sort of thrown away because we can just have lots of — there's lots of young people. And one group couldn't possibly advise on behalf of all of them. And it's quite exciting. There's a lot of stigma around advisory and is sort of political stuff. People don't think it really makes a difference. But when you put it across in such a real way, the people come through and it's really good.*

This ex-youth councilor has learned that young people's involvement in governance works best if there is flexibility in terms of how they can be involved, if they have some control over the structure of that involvement, and if there is a critical mass in order to avoid the problem of a few young people "representing" all young people. The ex-youth councilor worked to challenge the structures of local government while he was on the youth council and, as a result of his local government experiences, he has conceptualized a more flexible way of engaging young people in governance. This offers a glimpse of the potential for change when a range of ideas, beliefs and ways of doing things are brought together. In effect, he describes new ways of rethinking power, knowledge, space and identity (Mahtani 2001).[7]

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[7] Another New Zealand example comes from the "Youth First" research project (Tuhiwai Smith et al. 2002). This project privileged young people's voices via the use of "tribunals" that provided a unique space for listening to the "testimonies" of young people who are usually silenced. The tribunals varied in setting, personnel and number of participants according to the community in which they were located.

Conclusion

In our two research contexts, we found that local councils paid particular attention to two types of young people when designing participatory youth strategies: "achievers" and "troublemakers." Other groups of young people who did not fit either of these categories tended to be excluded by default, and we refer to these groups as "the excluded middle." If local governments' views of young people's needs are primarily based on those of two "distinctive" groups, and if participatory opportunities are designed with reference only to youth who fit the image of these polarized groups, then other young people might not perceive local government as relevant to them and might elect not to participate at all.

We are concerned that this polarization excludes "ordinary" young people (such as those who participated in the urban street interviews or completed questionnaires at the rural school) who said they were interested in sharing their views with local government but did not find existing participatory structures relevant or attractive. While local government employees do not consciously set out to polarize young people into categories of "achievers" and "troublemakers", and instead aim to recruit diverse young people, we have shown how polarization occurs despite good intentions. We therefore hope this article serves as a prompt for local councils working with youth to reconsider their conceptualizations of young people and of diversity. If diversity ultimately equals stratification into "achievers" and "troublemakers," then participatory initiatives aimed at "diverse" young people might (re)produce polarized practices. Instead, we encourage local government to offer a broader range of participatory initiatives to include "the excluded middle" and ideally dissolve unhelpful perceptual boundaries between different groups of young people. Irrespective of whether local government broadens its offerings, the lack of awareness of local government initiatives for young people among those in our study who did not participate suggests that local government must do a better job of promoting the available opportunities, because young people cannot participate in initiatives about which they are unaware.

Finally, in focusing on the experiences of an ex-youth councilor we showed how inclusion and exclusion often works in paradoxical ways. Recruitment might bring a diverse group of participants into local government, but if some of these participants experience local government spaces and practices as adultist, white and/or middle-class, then inclusion is ultimately exclusion and recruiters' efforts are negated. The example of the ex-youth councilor, however, shows that some young people continue to participate even if they find processes exclusionary. The ex-youth councilor found ways to use the dominant group's terms to advance young people's agendas; he then went on to work for another youth organization and to facilitate young people's involvement in its governance. In a paradoxical way, the ex-youth councilor described disempowering processes as also empowering and useful for informing his design of participatory structures in the youth organization for which he went to work. The key features of the participatory structures he developed were flexibility in terms of how young people are involved, young people's control over the structure of that involvement and the importance of a critical mass in order to avoid the problem of a few young people "representing" all young people. This ex-youth councilor offers a set of useful principles for adults in

local government (as well as those researching youth) who are interested in the on-going challenges of developing relevant ways of working with youth.

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Appendix - Interview Protocol

Young people's participation in local government

Street interview

1) Do you know about any of the events or facilities the City Council provides for young people? Yes No

   If yes, please give some examples of events:

   activities:

   facilities:

2) Have you ever taken part in anything put on by the City Council for young people? Yes No

   If yes, please give some examples of events:

   activities:

   facilities:

   IF NO, WHY NOT? *(important question)*

3) The events and facilities provided by the Council are often based on what young people tell them. Would you be interested in letting the City Council know your opinions? Yes No

   If yes, *how* would you like to let the City Council know your opinions?

   If no, why wouldn't you want to let the City Council know your opinions?

4) What kinds of young people do you think the City Council provides events and facilities for? (OR What kinds of young people tend to turn up?)

5) What could the City Council do to get you interested in sharing your opinions?

SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Gender: female male **Age:** **Ethnicity:**

How well off do you think the family you come from is money-wise?

Very low income low income average income high income very high income

Any other information you want to give or comments you want to make???

Thanks for taking part.