The Right to be Heard: Young People's Participation in Policymaking and the Power of Storytelling

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of storytelling to increase young people's participation in policymaking. The relevance of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is discussed followed by the history of young people's active participation in human rights movements. The theoretical frameworks around political participation and the power of storytelling are reviewed. Six case studies are presented, including two from Canada, one from Indonesia, and three from the United States. Finally, findings suggest that storytelling has the potential to bring young people's voices to the forefront of the human rights issues impacting their lives and to empower them to recognize their individual and collective agency.

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Introduction

Young people across time and cultures have been active participants in human rights movements (Rogers, 2020). They organized sit-ins in the Southern United States during the civil rights movement, led the pro-democracy movement in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, and today are major leaders in the climate movement across the globe (Burrow, 2014; Rogers, 2020; Tai, 2019; Fridays for Future, 2021). One way in which young people are fighting oppression and injustice is by sharing their personal stories and experiences with these human rights issues. Storytelling has the potential to empower young people and bring their voices to the forefront of the issues impacting their lives (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020). According to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), young people not only have the right to express themselves, but they have the right to be involved in the decision-making processes that impact their lives (Bala and Houston, 2016).

Last summer I completed a practicum with the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth (MACY) in the areas of policy and research. During this time, I learned about several human rights issues affecting young Manitobans, including the use of solitary confinement in Manitoba's youth centers and the social inequity experienced by children with disabilities (MACY, 2021). I also learned about the many ways that the Manitoba Advocate is working to amplify the voices of young people. One MACY project that I found particularly interesting was their provincial wide Listening Tour in which MACY staff travelled across Manitoba to hear directly from young people about the issues impacting their lives and their communities. Inspired by this project, this study focuses on the power of storytelling.

This paper explores the role of storytelling to increase young people's participation in policymaking. The term "young people" is used throughout to include children and youth,

meaning those under the age of 18 and in their early 20s. This preliminary study is grounded in human rights and storytelling theory in which six case studies are presented and discussed. The paper begins by looking at the relevance of Article 12 of the CRC and young people's activism in human rights movements. Then, it focuses on the theoretical framework around the political engagement of young people and the power of storytelling. Finally, an analysis of six case studies and findings is provided.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, known as the CRC, was adopted by the United Nations in 1989 and entered into force in 1990. This international treaty has been ratified by 196 state parties, including Canada, and has become the most ratified international human rights treaty in history (UNICEF, n.d; Bala and Houston, 2016). The United States is the only U.N. member state who has signed this treaty but has not yet ratified it (Rodgers, 2020). The CRC includes 54 articles and comprises over 40 civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights for those under the age of 18. The creation of the CRC was influenced by the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which was endorsed by the League of Nations in 1924. This declaration was the first intergovernmental legislation that focused on the rights of children (Rodgers, 2020). However, the CRC was the first legally binding human rights legislation under international law to focus on the rights of children (Lee, 2010).

Article 12

During the drafting of the CRC, Article 12 became one of the most controversial aspects of the convention (Lundy, 2007). Article 12 (1) states:

> States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Article 12 gave official recognition, for the first time in international law, that young people have the right to be active participants in society and express themselves in the matters that affect them (Lansdown, 2014; Lundy, 2007). Moreover, Article 12 goes beyond the right to freedom of expression and places a legal obligation on states to create spaces where young people can express their views, as well as an obligation to act in response to these views. For example, the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth is mandated through government legislation to amplify the voices of young people (MACY, 2021). Article 12 sets an expectation for governments and organizations that they must work in collaboration with young people and not simply for them (Lansdown, 2014).

This idea has been controversial because it acknowledges the fact that children have the civic right to participation (Lundy, 2007). One important reason why the U.S. has not ratified the convention is because of the political influence of conservative groups and their focus on "paternal rights" (Rodgers, 2020). These groups believe that decisionmaking powers should be made by parents alone, without children, to ensure "the best interests of the child" (Rodgers, 2020). In contrast, Article 12 places importance on the active participation of young people. It is one of the few provisions of the CRC that recognize the fact that young people are entitled to be involved in the decisionmaking processes that impact their lives (Bala and Houston, 2016). This highlights the importance of young people's voices and their right to be heard and listened to. It also insinuates that decisions made in "the best interest of the child" cannot and should not be limited to the views of adults. Other provisions from the CRC that relate to active participation

and the right to be heard include the right to freedom of expression (Article 13) and the right to peaceful assembly (Article 15).

Young People's Activism in Human Rights Movements

Throughout history, young people have been active participants in human rights movements. Rogers (2020) argues that children as participants in social movements have been understudied in social movement theory, leaving gaps in our theoretical understanding of agency, mobilization, and rights. McEvoy-Levy notes that framing youth as agents of change implies that young people have the capacity to make social and political change. Critiques have argued that identifying young people as agents of positive change may underestimate the inequalities faced by young people within power structures and the complexities of intersectionality (McEvoy-Levy, 2012). Within the field of peacebuilding, McEvoy-Levy (2012) suggests documenting and analyzing young people's achievements and viewing them as complex agents to strengthen theory and practice.

Children's participation in social movements can be separated into three categories: children as (1) strategic participants, (2) participants by default, and (3) active participants (Rogers, 2020). In the third category, children as active participants, Rogers (2020) notes that young people are aware of the goals of the movement. In addition, they may be participating voluntarily in organizations, be social movement leaders themselves, or start their own organizations (Rogers, 2020). Significant examples of young people's active participation in human rights movements, include the civil rights movement, Tiananmen Square, the Arab Spring, and the Fridays for Future climate strikes.

Civil Rights Movement

During the 1950s and 1960s young people participated in the civil rights movement across America. They organized principled nonviolent protests, such as demonstrations, boycotts and strikes (Franklin, 2015). Black children and youth led and initiated several civil rights campaigns in the South, including the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, and voter education-registration projects (Burrow, 2014). According to Burrow (2014), Martin Luther King Jr. understood the importance of young people's involvement within the movement and respected their agency, as well as their worth. Dr. King recognized that Black children and youth experienced racism just like adults and therefore had a right to make their own contributions to the movement (Burrow, 2014).

In 1955, fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin refused to give up her seat to a White passenger on a Montgomery, Alabama city bus. This act of resistance inspired the actions of Rosa Parks nine months later and helped spark the Montgomery Bus Boycotts (Hoose, 2009). When Colvin refused to give up her seat, an entire row for one White passenger, she was yelled at by the bus driver and transit and city police were called. It did not matter that since 1900, city laws stated that no rider had to give up their seat when free seats were available. The Montgomery buses simply ignored these laws and hired drivers to enforce the Jim Crow laws with the power of the police behind them (Hoose, 2009).

As Colvin refused to give up her seat, she yelled "It's my constitutional right to sit here as much as that lady. I paid my fare, it's my constitutional right!" (Hoose, 2009, p.34). It was reported that the two policemen physically dragged her off the bus calling her a "black bitch" and a "black whore" and kicked her multiple times (Burrow, 2014). As Colvin was being dragged, she yelled "It's my constitutional right!" (Hoose, 2009, p.35). Colvin was jailed and

charged with: “violating segregation law, disturbing the peace, and ‘assaulting’ a police officer” (Hoose, 2009, p.48). The charges: violating segregation law and disturbing the peace were later dropped on an appeal (Hoose, 2009).

Colvin’s act of civil disobedience contradicted the ideas that racism in the Deep South affected only Black adults and that young people were not fighting against racism or segregation (Burrow, 2014). Rogers (2020) states that the image of a young person taking a stand may be more unsettling than that of an adult. For example, Colvin’s age may have been the reason why she was not chosen to represent the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in their lawsuit against transportation segregation (Rogers, 2020). Later at age 16, Colvin was given the opportunity to testify in the case Browder v. Gayle where the court found bus segregation to be unconstitutional. She was one of two teenage girls to testify, the other was Mary Louise Smith (Hoose, 2009).

Tiananmen Square

In the Spring of 1989, pro-democracy protests erupted in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, following the death of China’s former general secretary Hu Yaobang, a political reformist (Cunningham, 2014). This movement calling for democratic reform was led by Chinese students and quickly spread across the country (Tai, 2019). By June there were more than 1 million protestors in Tiananmen Square (Cunningham, 2014). These were nonviolent protests, but on June 4th, 1989, the Chinese government sent in the People’s Liberation Army to put an end to these peaceful demonstrations. Armed soldiers and military tanks opened fire on the unarmed demonstrators. Estimates indicate that between 3,000 and 10,000 people were killed (Kuo, 2019). The incident has become known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre.

As a student-lead movement, there were many young people protesting at Tiananmen Square (Cunningham, 2014). Hu Jia, now one China's most well-known political activists was only 15 years old when he participated in the protests (Johnson, 2014). In an interview, Jia explains that he couldn't go to the protests every day because he was still in high school and had tests (Johnson, 2014). Jia's parents were labeled Rightists in the 1950s and 1960s and were persecuted for opposing the government. According to Jia, his parents could have made their lives easier by telling the government that they had been wrong, but instead they stood by their beliefs. This character was passed on to him (Johnson, 2014). On the evening of June 3rd, 1989, Jia's father physically pushed him back and stopped him from leaving the house because he had heard that something was going to happen (Johnson, 2014). Jia went out the next day and still witnessed violence (Johnson, 2014). Jia describes the youthfulness of the movement:

> Do you know how old [student leader] Wang Dan was then? He was nineteen. Even Liu Xiaobo, he was just around thirty. We didn't have any experience but we had a sense of responsibility. We wanted democracy, we wanted an end of corruption. We wanted dialogue. (Johnson, 2014, n.p.).

Now an adult, Hu Jia is one of many activists who are placed under house arrest each year around June 4th by the Chinese government, for attempting to commemorate the anniversary of the massacre (Kuo, 2019). His life experience demonstrates that young people can discover activism and participate in human rights movements at a young age and go on to become prominent political activists as adults.

Arab Spring

The Arab Spring began on December 17th, 2010, when 26-year-old Mohamed Bouazizi, a produce street vendor, lit himself on fire in Tunisia (Jahanbegloo, 2014). His self-immolation occurred following harassment by police and the confiscation of his cart and scales (Jahanbegloo, 2014). In a country dealing with government corruption, rising food costs and high rates of unemployment, Bouazizi's actions sparked a 28-day protest, forcing the Tunisian president Ben Ali to flee the country. Hundreds of unemployed youth joined the strikes within days (Jahanbegloo, 2014). This became known as the Jasmine Revolution (Jahanbegloo, 2014).

Interestingly, the youth who participated in these protests came from diverse backgrounds. This included highly educated unemployed youth from urban areas, as well as lower educated unemployed youth from rural areas (Waechter, Bogner, and Musik, 2019). According to Jahanbegloo (2014), young people played an important role in the movement by publicizing abuses committed by government officials and raising awareness about the protests by uploading images and videos to social media. Indeed, the Jasmine Revolution has often been referred to as the first Facebook revolution (Jahanbegloo, 2014). The movement sparked a series of mass protests across several Arab countries in 2011, known as the Arab Spring (Jahanbegloo, 2014; Roberts, 2015).

According to Waechter, Bogner, and Musik (2019), before the movement erupted at the beginning of 2011, youth in Arab countries were already joining youth groups and becoming more politized and organized. There were several youth-led movements in Egypt prior to the Arab Spring. For instance, in 2008 two young activists, Esraa Abdel-Fatah and Ahmed Maher, created a Facebook page to support textile workers on strike in Mahalla. Within weeks, 70,000 people joined the group (Jahanbegloo, 2014). In 2009, Mohamed Adel, another founding

member, travelled to Serbia to study strategic nonviolence tactics by the Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) connected to the Serbian student Optor movment that berought down Slobodan Milesovic's government. Upon his return to Egypt, Adel distributed nonviolence materials and facilitated workshops on how to apply nonviolent methods (Jahanbegloo, 2014). These earlier youth-led movements laid the groundwork for nonviolent tactics used during the Arab Spring (Schwartz, 2010).

In recent years, increased interest in young people in international policy and academia have focused on the theory of the "youth bulge" (Schwartz, 2010; McEvoy-Levy, 2012; Waechter, Bogner, and Musik, 2019). The idea that populations with high numbers of young people are at increased risk of violent armed conflicts (McEvoy-Levy, 2012). McEvoy-Levy (2012) notes that this theory can create a distorted image of the lives of young people by reducing them to "threats" and demonize young men as being inherently violent. During the Arab Spring, young people in Egypt, Tunisia and other countries used strategic nonviolence in their strategy for change. The use of these nonviolent strategies by young people in Arab countries contradicts the idea of the "youth bulge" and demonstrates that young people have the capacity to be agents of positive social change (Schwartz, 2010).

Fridays for Future Climate Strikes

In August 2018, 15-year-old Greta Thunberg started a climate school strike in front of the Swedish Parliament. She sat there every day leading up to the Swedish elections protesting the government's inaction in addressing global warming (Fridays for Future, 2021). Thunberg began the strike alone but was soon joined by other school strikers. On September 8th, 2018, these young people started the hashtag #FridaysForFuture to encourage others around the world to join

the school strike on Fridays (Fridays for Future, 2021). Thunberg spoke at the *2019 United Nations Climate Action Summit*, calling-out world leaders for their inadequate action in addressing climate change. (Skafle, Gabarron, Dechsling and Nordahl-Hansen, 2021). She spoke these powerful words:

> You are failing us, but the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you and if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up and change is coming, whether you like it or not. (Thunberg, 2019, 03:14)

The Fridays for Future (FFF) movement has erupted around the globe, receiving extensive media attention and the support of thousands of climate scientists (Cologna, Hoogendoorn and Brick, 2021). An estimated 7.6 million people have participated in the FFF strikes across 185 countries, making it one of the largest youth-led movements of all time (Cologna, Hoogendoorn and Brick, 2021). The goal of the FFF movement is to place pressure on policymakers to listen to climate scientists and to take serious action to reduce the effects of climate change (Fridays for Future, 2021).

According to Cologna, Hoogendoorn and Brick (2021), young people are motivated to participate in school climate strikes due to a serious concern about climate change, as well as the joy of participating in the strike. They also argue that young people are more likely to participate in FFF strikes when they perceive their actions will encourage others to act in addressing climate change (Cologna, Hoogendoorn and Brick, 2021). A low trust in government action in addressing climate change has also influenced youth participation in the FFF social movement (Cologna, Hoogendoorn and Brick, 2021).

The climate activism of Thunberg and other young activists around the world indicates young people's ability to organize themselves collectively in their fight for climate justice.

The Political Engagement of Young People

The previous section demonstrates young people's capacity to be politically engaged. According to Giugni and Grasso (2021) this political participation does not always occur through traditional political institutions. For instance, a young person may participate in politics through alternative avenues, such as through youth organizations or social media. Therefore, young people may appear to be politically disengaged, but be simply participating in non-traditional ways (Giugni and Grasso, 2021). In *The Political Life of Children*, child psychiatrist Robert Coles (1986) spent decades interviewing children from countries around the world to learn about their political views. Coles (1986) found that children are much more aware of political issues than we think they are. He notes that children are constantly absorbing information from the world around them. For instance, a comment made by a classmate, or a statement heard on T.V can give young people a surprising level of moral perspective about themselves and their place in society (Coles, 1986).

Previous research on political participation has highlighted the importance of a person's social milieu (where they were raised) as a key factor in understanding their political life (Giugni and Grasso, 2021). The term political socialization refers to a process through the media, peers, parents, schools, and religious institutions in which individuals learn about, adapt to, and at times change the political culture of their communities. This political socialization is a part of a person's general developmental process (Andersson, 2020). Giugni and Grasso (2021) define political socialization as "the process through which individuals acquire political knowledge as

well as a specific view of politics and certain political attitudes and values" (p.4). In other words, young people develop an understanding about where they fit into civil society through this process of socialization. Political socialization also helps explain why some young people are engaged in politics while others are not, or why young people will participate in social movements or politics in different ways (Giugni and Grasso, 2021). Storytelling can be an accessible form of political engagement for young people.

The Power of Storytelling

Humans have been telling stories for thousands of years. Stories have the ability to transport us to a different time or place, no matter what our age. They allow us to see through the eyes of another. They have the potential to shift our perspectives and motivate us to make positive change in the world (Fitch, 2020). Stories are powerful because we feel them and they can influence our attitudes and our behaviours (Ganz, 2009; Renken, 2020). When we hear a story, we do not only understand what happened, we feel what happened. They take us beyond cognitive understanding and connect us to our hearts (Ganz, 2009). Stories have the power to foster empathy, as well as bridge cross-cultural and class divides (Senehi, 2002). According to Uri Hasson, a professor of neuroscience at Princeton, when we listen to a story, our brain waves begin to synchronize with those of the storyteller (Renken, 2020).

According to Moyer, Warren and King (2020), little research has explored the use of personal storytelling to influence policy and legislation. However, critical race theory and black feminist theory have emphasized the use of storytelling to create counter-narratives and resist against racists ideologies and stereotypes. Both theories acknowledge and value the importance

of experiential knowledge and lived experiences in understanding and countering the dominant discourses of race and gender (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020).

Accessibility of Storytelling

Those who hold power often have better means of producing knowledge, such as through mainstream media or academia (Senehi, 2002). These avenues of knowledge are not very accessible to everyone and often exclude certain groups and voices (Senehi, 2002). Senehi (2002) states that storytelling is accessible for several reasons. First, the storyteller is accessible to the audience because storytelling occurs is a shared space between the storyteller and the listener (Senehi, 2002). This direct interpersonal interaction allows for a relationship to develop between the storyteller and listener. Compared to other modes of narration, such as film or books, the listeners can question the storyteller, creating a more balanced power dynamic between those involved (Senehi, 2002).

Second, storytelling is intellectually accessible because no literacy or special training is needed to participate (Senehi, 2002). Children as young as three-and-a-half years old, as well as people with significant cognitive delays can understand stories (Senehi, 2002). People from diverse backgrounds, ages, and abilities can be included in storytelling. According to Smith (2012), stories are effective for learning because they support all different types of learning styles. Visual learners benefit from the mental images brought on by the story, auditory learners can focus on the words, and kinesthetic learners connect to the emotions and feelings in the story. Stories are also easier to remember than learning from facts alone. Based on the research of psychologist Jerome Brume, we are 20 times more likely to remember facts when they are

part of a story (Boris, 2017). For this reason, stories are not only intellectually accessible, but they also enhance our learning.

Third, storytelling is accessible because it is low tech (Senehi, 2002). Senehi (2002) states that storytelling does not require any sort of special equipment or training and is therefore not restricted by socioeconomics. Senehi (2002) writes: "Storytelling is a resource even when stripped of all possessions and in the face of overwhelming power" (p.45). People living in extremely oppressive circumstances, such as prisoners or slaves, have used storytelling as a form of comfort, resistance and survival (Senehi, 2002).

Digital Storytelling

Storytelling can also occur in digital form. Digital storytelling blends pictures, videos, music, text, and voice narration to tell stories (Beck and Neil, 2020; Trimboli, 2020). It is a participatory form of digital media that combines oral traditions and modern computer technology (MACY, 2021). Digital stories can be individual or collaborative and offer a medium for creativity (Trimboli, 2020). Research on digital storytelling has shown its potential to increase social engagement and critical thinking (Beck and Neil, 2020). Joe Lambert developed a digital storytelling model in the mid-1990s to allow ordinary people the opportunity to share their stories using computer software technologies. His goal was to democratize media and empower everyday people with the belief that sharing stories can lead to positive change (Trimboli, 2020). Like other forms of storytelling, digital storytelling can foster empathy and understanding from the audience (Beck and Neil, 2020).

Digital storytelling projects have been used to amplify the voices of marginalized groups and increase equitable knowledge sharing. This form of media can empower participants by

showing them that their stories have value and meaning (Trimboli, 2020). On the other hand, socio-economic backgrounds may restrict accessibly to computer technologies. Therefore, digital storytelling projects may not always be a feasible option for individuals and some participants may feel less comfortable using computer software (Trimboli, 2020).

Young People, Storytelling and Policymaking: Case Studies

This section focuses on the connection between young people, storytelling and policymaking. Six case studies are presented, including two from Canada, one from Indonesia, and three from the United States. Several human rights issues impacting young people are explored, such as racism, climate change, and immigration.

Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth: Listening Tour

The Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, often referred to as MACY or the Manitoba Advocate, is an independent office of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly. For this reason, it is separate and apart from the Manitoba Government (MACY, 2021). MACY is mandated through the Advocate for Children and Youth Act (ACYA) and guided by the CRC (MACY, 2021). Their mandate includes advocacy services, child death reviews and investigations, research, monitoring, public education and youth engagement, and providing advice to ministers (MACY, 2021). Under the ACYA, MACY is responsible for monitoring designated government services that serve children and youth. These include “child welfare, adoption, disabilities, education, mental health, addictions, victim supports, and youth justice services delivered provincially” (MACY, 2021, p.22). Their mission it to “amplify the voices and champion the rights of children, youth, and young adults” (MACY, 2021, p.22).

From February 2019 to December 2021, MACY conducted a provincial wide Listening Tour, which led to the publication of the special report titled *The Right to be Heard* (MACY, 2021). The goal of this tour was to raise awareness about children's rights and to hear directly from young people about the issues affecting them and their communities (MACY, 2021). The tour began in-person but was required to become virtual due to the Covid-19 pandemic. MACY staff gave 19 presentations to over 1000 youth on children's rights and heard directly from 293 youth through 11 focus groups and a survey. Fourteen focus groups had to be cancelled due to the pandemic, which was replaced by the survey (MACY, 2021).

The tour gave young people the opportunity to tell their stories and share their opinions, thoughts, and suggestions for improving the lives of Manitoba's young people. For example, one youth participant describes the need for increased supports for low-income families: "They're basically just giving you enough money to barely even survive. And it's not even really surviving. It's like just enough to maybe not die." (MACY, 2021, p.22). A strength of MACY's Listening Tour was its diverse representation of young people. Youth participants came from rural and urban areas, including First Nation communities, Northern communities, as well as youth in custody. Out of the 293 participants, 37 percent identified as Indigenous and 11 percent as newcomers (MACY, 2021). During the planning process for the tour, MACY staff prioritized youth who may be facing social barriers and who are often excluded from decisionmaking (MACY, 2021).

In the report, MACY (2021) included the top 10 issues identified by youth participants:

1. Substance Use
2. Mental Health and Wellbeing
3. Poverty

4. Violence
5. Racism and Discrimination
6. Bullying
7. Family Conflict/ Fighting
8. Environment/ Climate Change
9. Education
10. Physical and Sexual Health (p.19)

The Manitoba Advocate encourages leaders and decisionmakers to use this report to prioritize the issues identified by youth and improve the lives of young people in Manitoba (MACY, 2021). Although the Listening Tour was not described as a storytelling project, it created a space for young people to share their stories and be heard by policymakers.

Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth: Digital Storytelling Project "Lied to"

During the summer of 2021, Michael Breland and Trevor Merasty, two young First Nations men and members of MACY's Youth Ambassador Advisory Squad (YAAS!), participated in a digital storytelling camp (MACY, 2021). The camp was organized by the Manitoba Advocate and led by Indigenous researcher Dr. Marlyn Bennett and Mike Elliot (MACY, 2021). Throughout the digital storytelling workshops, Breland and Merasty discussed and explored two questions: (1) "What is your truth as a young Indigenous male living in your community?" and (2) "What is your truth as a male youth previously involved with public systems (CFS, justice, school, etc.)?" (MACY, 2021, p. 51). Choosing to collaborate on their digital storytelling project, Breland and Merasty wrote their own lyrics and created a music video titled "Lied to." The music video showed powerful themes of racism, social exclusion and

colonization, as well as themes about hope and connection (MACY, 2021). For example, here were some of the lyrics related racism:

> Tired of seeing all the cops still dropping us.
>
> No job hiring then it's back to the block for us.
>
> We can never see what the top is like.
>
> Not a lot of us get the spotlight, so we work three times harder our whole life (MACY, 2021, p.53)
>
> I just moved from an almost all white school,
>
> In an almost All white town, Because Foster care, Cfs, Still made the choice, Not my voice (MACY, 2021, p.54)

The project was created in the summer of 2021 when the unmarked graves of hundreds of Indigenous children, who never returned home from residential schools, were being discovered across Canada (MACY, 2021). This tragedy and the legacy of residential schools came out in the lyrics:

> But I don't understand how you Could make me stand, When the bodies found are the evidence Of Canada's original plan
>
> Now, we gotta topple the queen so our people can See their dreams Finally free. At last, we can Cast it into the past (MACY, 2021, p.54)

This digital storytelling project was part of MACY's special report titled *Finding the Way Back: An aggregate investigation of 45 boys who died by suicide or homicide in Manitoba* (MACY, 2021). The report aimed to examine Manitoba services and the systemic barriers that increase the risk of Manitoba boys dying by suicide or homicide. Including this digital storytelling project by Michael Breland and Trevor Merasty into the report provided a unique opportunity to honour the

voices, experiences and art of two First Nations youth. In a challenging report on the increased risk of death for Indigenous boys in Manitoba's Child and Family Services (CFS), Michael Breland and Trevor Merasty offer a counter-narrative by demonstrating the strength of Indigenous men and boys in Manitoba and to provide hope for the future.

Youth Voices from the Frontlines: Community Digital Storytelling and Climate Change

Young people in Indonesia are impacted by climate change and environmental derogation in rural and urban areas. They are affected by air and water pollution, forest fires, carbon emissions, floods and droughts (Plush, Wecker and Ti, 2020). UNICEF's Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Unit developed the 2016-2017 Youth Voices from the Frontlines: Community Digital Storytelling (CDST) for social change. A project in Indonesia to engage young people and connect them to policymakers on the topics of "climate, disasters, environment, child rights, health, and well-being" (Plush, Wecker and Ti, 2020, p.835). The project was implemented by the Children in a Changing Climate (CCC) coalition in Indonesia, a partnership between five international humanitarian organizations: Child Fund Alliance, Plan International, Save the Children, UNICEF, and World Vision International (Plush, Wecker and Ti, 2020). The Youth Voices initiative was co-designed and facilitated by PannaFoto Institute in Jakarta and an international organization. The CDST guide was developed in English and Bahasa, but the program was delivered in Bahasa (Plush, Wecker and Ti, 2020).

The goal of the project was to strengthen youth voices across the region. It trained 11 CCC network members and 14 young people from 19 organizations to implement the CDST methodology (Plush, Wecker and Ti, 2020). The program used CDST to engage young people being impacted by climate change and other environmental issues. This included working with

over 300 young people from urban and rural areas (Plush, Wecker and Ti, 2020). The CDST was created to allow young people the opportunity to tell their own stories and address their concerns about environmental issues in their own words and language. The project takes a youth-centered approach to addressing climate change (Plush, Wecker and Ti, 2020).

Plush, Wecker and Ti (2020) studied the Youth Voices initiative to explore how participatory media can be used as a strategy to increase youth participation in decisionmaking. They note that there are several factors that can make it harder for young people to be heard by decisionmakers. For example, young people may not speak the official language used in decisionmaking spaces or have access to these spaces at a local or international level (Plush, Wecker and Ti, 2020). Thus, Plush, Wecker and Ti (2020) argue that CDST can especially increase the participation of those often excluded from decisionmaking.

According to Plush, Wecker and Ti (2020), not all the organizations implementing CDST were able to complete the program. Indeed, challenges faced by facilitators included time availability and sufficient resources (Plush, Wecker and Ti, 2020). The Youth Voices program was the most sustainable when it was incorporated into existing youth programming with trained facilitators to support the storytelling process from start to finish. Therefore, participatory media programs aimed at increasing youth participation in decisionmaking may require extra training for facilitators and additional funding for organizations with fewer resources (Plush, Wecker and Ti, 2020).

Additionally, it was noted that facilitators should be able to support youth through the entire storytelling process, ensuring that they do not experience harm while sharing their stories. This highlights the importance for facilitators and organizations to have a strong knowledge of local issues to ensure that young people sharing their stories are safe and supported (Plush,

Wecker and Ti, 2020). Child protection was identified as a gap within the individual implementation of the CDST program (Plush, Wecker and Ti, 2020). This case demonstrates the importance of creating sustainable programs that prioritize trained and competent facilitators. As well as ensuring that young people are actively involved in researching the issues, they are passionate about and provided with the tools and knowledge to share their stories and opinions safely (Plush, Wecker and Ti, 2020).

Voices of Youth Chicago Education: Senate Bill 100

In 2015, Senate Bill 100 (SB100) became law in Illinois, banning zero-tolerance discipline policies, limiting suspensions, and promoting alternative options to exclusionary practices in schools. The grassroots campaign to pass SB 100, one the most progressive state laws on school discipline in the U.S., was led by a small coalition of young people in Chicago (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020). Voices of Youth Chicago Education (VOYCE) is a coalition of five community organization groups who work with youth in secondary schools and communities across Chicago. Many of its youth members are Black and Latino. (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020). Storytelling was a powerful tool in their youth-led campaign for SB100 (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020).

The youth leaders of VOYCE lobbying for SB100 shared common experiences of zero-tolerance discipline policies. In which, they and their friends received severe punishments for minor behavioural infractions (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020). VOYCE youth leader Jamie Adams recounts a story from eighth grade when she was punished for having gum:

> One time I had a pack of gum in my book bag, and apparently they classified that as candy, and they said that it would be a distraction to students . . . I don’t understand how

> that's a distraction, but they sent me to the office. And without talking to me, without talking to my parents or anybody else, they automatically said . . . "You have to pay a dollar per piece of gum that's in your book bag or you can't graduate" (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020, p.184).

The U.S. saw a rise in these punitive policies in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s with a "tough on crime" approach to school discipline. These harsh policies disproportionately affect students of colour. For example, a Black student in America is three times more likely than a White student to be suspended (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020). Students with special needs and gender non-conforming students are also disproportionally targeted by zero-tolerance discipline policies (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020).

The criminalization of students of colour led to a series of grassroots movements erupting in the early 2000s, where communities across the country began to push back against these racialized policies (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020). This also led to the popularization of the term school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020). In 2015, VOYCE began pushing for SB100. The bill was drafted by youth leaders with assistance from Jim Freeman a civil rights lawyer who led the STPP at the Advancement Project, an American civil rights organization (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020). VOYCE also made a strong alliance with state senator Kimberly Lightford who sponsored the legislation and became a strong advocate for the bill (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020).

During the 2015 spring legislative session, youth leaders began flooding the Springfield statehouse every week to lobby for their bill. This required students to travel nearly four hours from Chicago, a strong indication of their commitment and passion for the legislation (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020). The students combined research data on racially disparate discipline

with their own personal stories to convince state legislators to adopt SB100. They "met one-one with legislators, testified at hearings, and participated in the negotiating group convened by Lightford" (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020). Students were strategic in their efforts to influence votes by meeting with different legislators and even in chasing down those who avoided them (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020).

As legislators began to hear from students about their harsh punishments for minor behavioural infractions, they began to empathize with them. Storytelling was used strategically to counter stereotypes about "good" and "bad" students and to put a human face on the data (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020). VOYCE Youth leader Jose Mancilla explains the importance of young people advocating for themselves: "If it were just adult organizers that were lobbying for SB100, do you really think that they would have gotten it passed? Because legislators see that it's the youth's passion. It's their story, it's not the organizers' story." (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020, p.191).

In their study, Moyer, Warren and King (2020) found that storytelling influenced legislators by shifting their attitudes and giving them the opportunity to "do good." Additionally, storytelling strengthened relationships between the students and allowed them to see that their experiences were shared and part of a larger systemic issue. Storytelling was not only beneficial to the campaign but also empowered the students to develop as leaders and recognize their individual and collective agency (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020). This case demonstrates that young people can use storytelling to influence policymakers and make systemic changes to the issues that impact them. In addition, it highlights the importance of bringing those most impacted by injustices to the forefront of the issue and ensuring that their voices are being heard by policymakers.

Youth Activists' Narrative Reframing of the Immigrant Rights Movement

In 2009, undocumented youth across the U.S. and their college-aged American citizen allies became frustrated with the leadership of adult citizen-led advocacy groups on immigration rights (Cabaniss, 2019). Until recently, public discourse around immigration reform in the U.S. has been dominated by politicians and citizen-advocates (Cabaniss, 2019). Many undocumented youth involved with citizen-led advocacy groups report feeling marginalised, disempowered, and controlled. Many of these young people chose to form their own youth-led groups to fight for immigration reform (Cabaniss, 2019). Within these groups, undocumented youth were considered leaders and their citizen-allies as supporters (Cabaniss, 2019).

These youth-led groups used storytelling to differentiate themselves from citizen-led advocacy groups and create space for themselves within the movement. Their goal was to generate a movement led by those most affected by the issues around immigration (Cabaniss, 2019). To assert themselves as political agents, they used collaborative storytelling to create a narrative that placed themselves as leaders of the immigration movement and reduced the influence of citizen-advocates (Cabaniss, 2019). According to Cabaniss (2019), undocumented youth across America used very similar language in their public stories and training materials.

To shift the dominant political discourse that presented undocumented people as vulnerable victims, undocumented youth leaders spoke-out proudly about their "undocumented" status and framed themselves as being the most qualified leaders for immigration reform (Cabaniss, 2019). They depicted citizen-advocates as being privileged and untrustworthy because they were being paid to care, as well as being out of touch with the realities faced by undocumented people (Cabaniss, 2019). Some young people also argued that citizen-advocates were passive and ineffective in their leadership because they relied too heavily on their funders,

making them more cautious in their tactics for political and social change (Cabaniss, 2019). By framing citizen-advocates as illegitimate leaders, these youth-led organizations made space for their own voices and constructed themselves as important leaders within the movement (Cabaniss, 2019).

Youth-led groups also used storytelling to recruit and empower other undocumented youth (Cabaniss, 2019). Youth leaders were framed as being effective agents of social change and other undocumented youth could be the same (Cabaniss, 2019). In addition, they made it clear to new recruits that their personal stories had the power to change laws and minds (Cabaniss, 2019). Many also found inspiration by reading stories about young people fighting for social justice in American history, such as the civil rights movement. Cynthia, an undocumented youth activist, describes turning to these stories in times of discouragement:

> For me, it really helps to go and read history and what happened, like, for example, in the 60s and what a lot of these students did. And seeing that this has happened before and seeing that the *youth* came together. And *youth* organized – *SNCC* – the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, they came together. And now it's like, wow, this is exactly what we're doing. (Cabaniss, 2019, p.498)

These young people used personal storytelling, collective storytelling, and stories from history to establish themselves within the movement.

Cabaniss (2019) notes that storytelling was identified as being a “powerful tool for change” by the youth groups. They believed in the power of their own personal stories and did not want others speaking for them. One undocumented youth wrote this in a blog post: “I need to tell my story, my struggle, to show just how heavy the burden is on my back. But when you tell it then suddenly you own it, and everybody else can own it and if everybody has a piece of it

then what's the movement's meaning?" (Cabaniss, 2019, p. 500). Moreover, they also argued that the issues around immigration became more human when those most affected by the problem spoke-out about their experiences (Cabaniss, 2019). In sum, storytelling created a medium for these young people to challenge the current political climate and reclaim their power within the movement (Cabaniss, 2019).

The EVAC Movement: From "At-Risk" to "At-Hope"

Robert E. Lee High School is a predominantly Black public school in Jacksonville, Florida. Sometimes referred to as Bang-em, Jacksonville is the murder capital of Florida with a crime rate 50 percent higher than the national average (McCullough, Morrell, Thomas, Waugh, Shubert and Donofrio, 2020). In 2015, a 10th grade all-male African American leadership class was created at Robert E. Lee, taught by Amy Donofrio, a White woman. What began as a disaster, soon became a social movement. A movement powered by the personal stories of young Black men (McCullough et al., 2020).

For the first three months, Ms. Donofrio failed to teach the class. The students were constantly breaking out into fights and did not care about their grades. This changed when Ms. Donofrio went back to a lesson that they had done in grade nine, titled *Leaving the Cave and Facing Your Story*. In this exercise, students read Plato's philosophical tale the *Allegory of the Cave*. In this story, prisoners do not realize they are chained in a cave and are then unbound by a liberator and brought into the light. Afterwards, the class watched *The Lion King*, to explore Simba's journey through grief. They were asked to think about their own difficult experiences and how grief can leave us "in the cave." After completing the exercise, Ms. Donofrio asked the

young men to consider sharing their personal stories with the class. And one of them did (McCullough et al., 2020).

The following class, Kemon McCray told his classmates that his brother had been murdered the previous year and this was the first time he had spoken about it. This moment changed everything for the class. Several other students began sharing that they had also lost brothers. For the next two months, these youth took turns sharing their own stories and found that they had much more in common than they thought (McCullough et al., 2020). All had been impacted by racism, violence, loss and incarceration (McCullough et al., 2020). Out of the 13 youth:

- 12 had immediate family incarcerated long term
- 13 had been detained and questioned by police
- 7 had been arrested
- 5 had been homeless
- 9 had been shot
- 11 had seen someone get shot
- 12 have had a close loved one murdered (McCullough et al., 2020, p.201).

By sharing their personal stories these young people began to heal and they wanted to change their lives. They named themselves the EVAC Movement, EVAC is “cave” spelled backwards (McCullough et al., 2020).

After sharing their stories with each other, EVAC began inviting police officers to the class for a round table on police brutality. As the officers got to know these young men, they began to understand why so many of them feared the police. As a relationship formed, law enforcement began to collaborate with EVAC on solutions to improve policing (McCullough et

al., 2020). Suddenly, their personal experiences gave them credibility as experts on youth violence and crime (McCullough et al., 2020). This group of young people had zero funding, resources, or connections but what they had was their stories. And they used them (McCullough et al., 2020).

EVAC began providing feedback to policy leaders at the local and national level. In 2016, EVAC testified on Capitol Hill and met with President Obama at the White House to inform U.S. leaders about juvenile justice (McCullough et al., 2020). In 2017, the Mayor and Superintendent consulted with EVAC when guns were found in their school (McCullough et al., 2020). EVAC also began transforming the narrative around "at risk youth" by changing the term to "at-hope." This term was adopted by Jacksonville's Mayor who announced the city's commitment to using "at-hope" for all young people (McCullough et al., 2020).

As EVAC gained media attention, they empowered a sense of pride within their communities. For the first time someone who looked like them was seen in the news for something positive (McCullough et al., 2020). EVAC went on to win Harvard's KIND Schools Challenge (McCullough et al., 2020). Storytelling had a positive impact on their personal lives, their communities, and youth-related policy.

Regardless of these incredible achievements, the EVAC class was cancelled in its senior year (McCullough et al., 2020). Many asked "How does a class that costs zero dollars, was recognized by the White House and Harvard, praised by members of every local system...end up, at its literal peak, our senior year, canceled?" (McCullough et al., 2020, p.217). This youth-led group came to realize that they were not the first group of empowered Black youth to be shut down. They argue that groups empowering Black youth need to be prepared to fight the backlash from racist systems. By sharing their personal stories, these young people highlighted the

inequalities and problems within these systems. But this did not mean that those in power were ready to address these issues (McCullough et al., 2020). EVAC member Nick notes:

> EVAC is an eye-opener to show youth their true power. And the bigger our platform grows, the more systems fear of us does too. Us surpassing their expectations threatens them, so any way to dismantle us they welcome with open arms. I truly believe it's a pride issue. They are afraid of putting their pride aside, even to give us the justice we very much deserve. (McCullough et al., 2020, p.24)

EVAC calls on system leaders to acknowledge these inequalities and to invest in the lives of young people (McCullough et al., 2020). EVAC asks policymakers to go directly to youth for feedback on all youth-related policies. And, to schedule these meetings around those most impacted by the policies. For example, plan meetings with youth during the school day at schools or in detention centers (McCullough et al., 2020).

Findings from Case Studies

This preliminary study looked at six case studies exploring how storytelling is being used to increase young people's participation in policymaking. These cases came from three different countries (Canada, Indonesia, and the U.S.) and focused on a variety of different issues impacting young people, such as racism, climate change, immigration, and the juvenile justice system. Several conclusions were drawn after examining these six cases.

First, storytelling appears to be especially beneficial in increasing the participation of marginalized groups. Young people facing social barriers, such as poverty, racism or

immigration status, are often excluded from decisionmaking spaces and are not often provided with opportunities to contribute to the policymaking process. Storytelling can be used as a tool to help make the policymaking process more inclusive. For example, MACY's Manitoba wide Listening Tour prioritized youth who may be facing social barriers and who are often excluded from decisionmaking. Storytelling is accessible because it is so versatile. It can be used in different forms, for different issues, and for different cultures. Thus, the versatility of storytelling can help more young people be included in social and political change.

Second, combining research data with stories may be an effective strategy to influence policymaking. Research accompanied by personal or collective stories puts a human face on the data and the issues. In addition, storytelling can provide a counter narrative to negative stereotypes about young people. This can foster deeper empathy and understanding from policymakers on the issues impacting young people and may influence their decisions about youth-related policies. High school students in Chicago used this strategy to encourage state legislators to ban zero-tolerance discipline policies in schools and their Senate Bill 100 was adopted in 2015 (Moyer, Warren and King, 2020).

Third, it appears that storytelling can empower young people to recognize their individual and collective agency. Sharing personal stories can bring young people together and allow them to feel less isolated. This may validate their experiences and help them feel more confident. By sharing their personal or collective stories, young people may also establish themselves as experts on the issues impacting their lives. This emphasizes the importance of experiential knowledge and bringing those most impacted by the issues to its forefront. For example, undocumented youth in the U.S. used storytelling to distinguish themselves from adult-led citizen advocacy groups by claiming that they were the true experts on immigration issues.

Finally, young people may experience a backlash from decisionmakers when they share their stories. This is likely to depend on each social and political context and whether policymakers are willing to address the issues identified by young people. For example, the youth-led group EVAC from Jacksonville Florida experienced a backlash from their school division when they gained popularity and identified gaps within the school system. Therefore, youth-led groups and youth programs may wish to prepare for a possible backlash and identify the level of risk of harm to the young people in their planning process. In the cases where young people are participating in storytelling programs, it is important that program facilitators have a strong understanding of the local context and culture.

Conclusion

To conclude, storytelling can create spaces for young people to be heard and participate in social change and policymaking. According to Article 12 of the CRC, young people have a civic right to participate in the decision-making processes that impact their lives. Young people have always been active participants in fighting for positive social change and social justice, and storytelling is just one tool that can be used to amplify their voices. It is an accessible tool because everyone can tell a story. It is versatile because it comes in different forms. And simply, it can be fun. To create a digital storytelling project, tell a personal story, or listen to the stories of others can be enjoyable and empowering. Therefore, storytelling does not only have the potential to influence policy and increase the political participation of young people in peacebuilding, but it may also bring joy into their lives.

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