

## Book Review

# Youth, Education, and Marginality: Local and Global Expressions

Kate Tilleczek and H. Bruce Ferguson, editors  
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This edited collection with contributions by scholars, educators, policy-makers, and notably, dozens of young people endeavours to cast a critical light on the nuances, complexities, and menacing subtleties of youth marginalization in “a moment of making space” (p. 2) for renewed alternatives and reinvigorated voices. The text is at once hopeful and heartbreaking, at times frustrating, even incredulous, but never lacking self-reflexivity and an appreciation for the myriad factors that serve to reproduce disparity and exclusion. Certain contributors quite justifiably point fingers (see King, Edwards, and Blackstock’s scathing appraisal of the federal government’s treatment of Aboriginal communities in Chapter 5), but more so the reader is encouraged to prepare for an *interior journey* of introspection and self-critique (see especially the self-incriminating tone of Smyth in Chapter 2).

Several themes dance and mingle throughout the text. For instance, juxtaposition of disparate youth experiences is used to emphasize plural particularity over and above universal abstraction. This tactic effectively demonstrates the globally applicable threads of marginalization without relegating any individual or population to some holographic universal status, which collapses under the weight of its own particularity. Rummens and Dei portray this in simpler language in their exploration of racialized, immigrant, and Aboriginal youth:

Important to note is that while marginalization trajectories may be unique both to specific individuals and different groups both within and over time, the overall processes of social exclusion are often very similar. The same is true of the attendant detrimental impacts and outcomes. (p. 119)

Mitchell effectively captures this theme throughout his juxtaposition of youth experiences in the southwest Pacific archipelago of Vanuatu with those in a low-income urban area of Prince Edward Island, an exercise that “allows us to rethink differences through connection” (p. 88). Indeed, an essentialist one-size-fits-all strategy is eschewed throughout the book and instead a refreshing ethos of nuance is embraced.

Another subject threaded through the text centres around what might be called stressors, or the array of systemic cultural and societal factors that work to marginalize and disenfranchise youth. Tilleczek and Kinlock stress that it is “unwise to separate youth experiences from social and political contexts and to over or underestimate the extent to which individuals construct their own identities” (p. 19), while Smyth broadly interrogates the institution of schooling, seeking alternative conditions that might allow marginalized students to re-engage with

learning. Rummens and Dei insist that “[w]hat is very much needed in rethinking our education system is careful attention to the systemic and structural inequalities of schooling itself” (p. 126), while King, Edwards, and Blackstock devote an entire chapter to exposing institutionalized discrimination against Aboriginal peoples in Canada. What these discussions accomplish is an effective illumination of the complex institutional complicities of marginalization and exclusion that are at work, speaking to an audience of broad and variegated positionalities.

The theme of stressors converges with a theory-laden topic that gets ample attention throughout the collection: the conceptualization of marginalization. Mitchell’s comparison and contrast of the experiences of youth in Vanuatu and urban Prince Edward Island serves this task well, and Rummens and Dei devote much of their chapter to moulding a critical praxis around what it means to be marginalized. They begin by claiming that “[m]arginalization is a social process, not a label. It is an action that yields a desired end result” (p. 115). Furlong distinguishes between marginalization and social exclusion, and, in one of the book’s few nods to canonical theorists, he draws on Bourdieu and the notion of social capital. John Rawls and bell hooks are also cited in the text but for the most part, contributors spend little time engaging with prominent social theorists. As a graduate student with a strong appreciation for foundational theoretical and cultural studies, I found this somewhat disappointing. However, other audiences will no doubt appreciate the text’s grounded approachability and emphasis on evidence-informed practice.

Afewerki and Shafique’s chapter provides a glowing example of such evidence. The authors share a case study of an avant-garde community program that they developed in the inner-city Regent Park neighbourhood of Toronto, the neighbourhood in which they both grew up. Aptly named Youth Empowering Parents (YEP), the program places youth as service-providers rather than receivers and while the model was in its exploratory stage at press time, it showed great promise and scalability and was clearly described with emulation in mind. Further, Chaban highlights the irony of Ontario’s goal to have an 85% high school completion rate, suggesting, he says, “that 15% of the student population are not part of the strategy” (p. 219), and dedicates his writing space to a heartfelt call for evidence-informed and inclusive practice. Chaban’s chapter argues compellingly that special education marginalizes young people and he calls for an equal partnership between schools and research centres to carve out a solution.

Arguably, the collection’s most profound contribution is in its ability to capture the agency, decency, and efficacy of youth. This is accomplished not only through the accounts of the scholarly authors, some of which include poignant quotes from young research participants, but via the extensive array of youth contributors who convey their experiences powerfully through poetry, prose, and visual art. This strategy works to fulfill the editors’ mission to “work with, for, and by youth to assess, diarize, and resist” the processes of inequality, exclusion, and marginalization (p. 242) while making the book feel all the more authentic and captivating. Tilleczek and Kinlock see the frenetic resurgence of arts-based research in recent years as *humanities-infused praxis*, as an enactment of de-marginalization through the infusion of student art. Such praxis, they argue, conducts youth experiences and ideas to the larger community, educates youth outside of the constraints of formal schooling, and communicates “the esoteric hope and liminal experiences of youth in a public education system in decline” (p. 18). Here and throughout the text, we can sense the authors wincing under the status quo as they raise an optimistic message to inspire a variety of audiences.

Furthering the theme of youth agency, Caine, Lessard, Steeves, and Clandinin (and separately, Mitchell) portray truancy and early school-leaving as manifestations of agency and

resistance. Accordingly, disengagement from schooling can be seen inversely as enhanced engagement with the complexities of youths' lives outside of the school environment. In this way, Caine et al. re-conceptualize (dis)engagement, demonstrating early school-leaving as a dynamic process or "drop-out dance" (p. 210). By and large, students do not summarily reject learning but instead insist that they are "not in school for now" (p. 210), while they work through more basic life challenges, such as caring for siblings or putting food on the table. These insights were effectively gleaned in a relational inquiry space co-composed by the authors and youth participants. In addition, in Chapter 8, Tilleczek conveys the thoughtful voices of marginalized youth:

As young people have so aptly told me, schools and societies must become more flexible, proactive, and caring if they are to take seriously the complex lives of contemporary youth and offer them a rightful quality of education and life. (p. 168)

Indeed, a central purpose of this book is to evince the insights of marginalized youth, premised on the notion that young people are just that—people—and deserve a significant say in the structure of their education.

Biography is a key concept evoked in the collection as well. In his class analysis of marginalization, Furlong proclaims the power of biographical approaches "as a way of understanding how individuals make sense of their lives within the dynamic processes of transition and change" (p. 147), while Caine et al. elucidate the complexities over time and the competing plotlines for young people who must negotiate cultural and familial narratives at home. Furthermore, Tilleczek argues that "[e]xamining experiences, intersections, and social processes of marginalization across regional, social class, identity, and cultural divisions illustrates the culminations of severely flawed educational and youth policies" (pp. 155-156) even in Canada, a relatively progressive and humanitarian society when compared to many others. Biography is not only championed but also employed poignantly by Tilleczek to communicate the experiences of youth research participants dealing with poverty, a powerful and persuasive technique.

A prevailing tenet of this cutting-edge edited collection can be encapsulated by a single question: are students failing school or are schools failing students? Hilton's narrated account of the distinct experiences of several queer youth in Canadian schools argues compellingly for the latter while also highlighting the judicial maelstrom in which students and administrators are struggling to stay afloat. Hilton asserts that one particular queer youth's "recollection of his high school travel experiences uncovers and, perhaps, summarizes the difficult balancing act confronting today's public school administrators—how to be fair to everyone without getting sued" (p. 190). Further, Hilton's chapter elucidates two particular themes that I see as inextricably implicated in most, if not all, social issues: contradiction and paradox, as both change and stagnation characterize sexual and gender minority youths' experiences in high school and as "pedagogies of tolerance and inclusion that require added justification by/for/about/from the other in turn reproduce exclusions, marginalization, discriminatory treatment, and lock-outs" (p. 182) from meaningful academic, social, and/or economic participation. Such dislocations and paradoxes are, without doubt, frustrating and disenchanting for all who seek to engender progress.

As I mentioned above, despite the depressing status quo illuminated throughout the text, the collection espouses an ethos of hope. This is accomplished in large part by the contributors'

attention to reasonable, actionable, and sustainable recommendations for policy and practice. Smyth champions the active school of democratically nurturing relationships; Mitchell encourages us to draw on the socio-centric Pacific model of the gift economy that privileges relationality and reciprocity; King, Edwards, and Blackstock implore us to hold the Canadian government accountable for its treatment of Aboriginal learners; Rummens and Dei describe and promote a “critical inclusive approach” (p. 127) to education that centres and thereby demarginalizes all learners and engages local communities and parents; and the list goes on. Finally, this review would be incomplete without an enthusiastic nod toward Boydell’s brilliantly organized and delightfully concise chapter on the use of visual arts to promote mental health literacy in schools. Boydell portrays humanities-infused practice in action through accounts of three exemplars developed by her and her colleagues. Her final discussion raises several important questions about the nuances of using visual arts as an alternative medium to formal lectures on mental health.

Geared toward a variety of audiences, and effectively excluding none, this edited collection belongs on the shelf of any graduate student of education, teacher, administrator, policy-maker, educator, or anyone with an interest in promoting social justice and inclusion for young people. Moreover, the text walks the walk by infusing numerous contributions by the very sorts of youth whose agency it serves to promote. The result is profound, novel, informative, disturbing, and inspirational.

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