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## The politics of cultural youth work practice

Abdallah, S.E.; Kaulingfreks, Femke

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**Title: The politics of cultural youth work practice**

Dr. Sebastian Abdallah<sup>1</sup> and Dr. Femke Kaulingfreks<sup>2</sup>

In the midst of growing political and economic disparities, young people use cultural expression and production to bring relief and publicly assert themselves. Youth work becomes in different ways a facilitator and forum for such activities, ascertaining a politicized feature. Youth workers and young people are not always aware of the – at times implicit – political nature of their activities. We explore the ways and degrees to which cultural youth work practice becomes politicized.

Today, the gap separating youth with and without strong social and institutional support systems and access to socio-economic resources continues to widen due to the COVID-19 crisis and its expected lasting effects. This is all the more concerning since young people generally have little influence on institutional politics and adults tend to exclude the young from decision-making in public life. Consequently, feelings of distrust and frustrations about a lack of representation are placing large groups of youth at a distance of authorities. Many are apathetic and lethargic about formal political involvement, while some express their discontent in disruptive, unruly ways.

Youth work has, since the 1960s, been an important forum for young people, especially the disenfranchised, to gain communal space, a public voice, and a creative outlet for their grievances and pertinent public issues. Youth workers can in current times also play a role in stimulating the political awareness of youth, facilitating youth advocacy and bridging the divide between youth and authorities. Particularly activities closely related to youth culture can help youth to envision social and political change. Based on qualitative fieldwork in the Netherlands, we analyze four dimensions of cultural youth work practices, to indicate how cultural expression may invigorate youth empowerment, especially for youth experiencing a lack of opportunities for effective mainstream political participation:

1. Micro-political humanizing interactions: When youth workers express genuine respect for the identity of youth and interest in their everyday lived experiences, they can contribute to a sense of humanization for youth who may feel “labeled” as problematic, excluded and othered. This act of recognition may carry political significance at a micro-level.
2. A politics of dignity: Youth workers pay attention to young people's “deep stories,” which they carry with them, through which they make sense of their place in society and through which they manage their emotions. This attentiveness can build relationships of trust and motivate youth to make constructive choices at the right moment, also in politically charged situations.
3. Creating and recreating the world: In creative and recreative activities, ranging from music-making, dance and poetry to theater, youth workers can encourage young people to imagine a better world, in which existing power-relations can be reworked and eventually remade.
4. Culturally infused social action: Youth workers can stimulate youth in using cultural and creative means to collectively advocate for their needs and negotiate for resources that sustain their wellbeing. Youth workers may inspire and support public youth social action in the areas of housing, education, labour, and (mental) health, today specifically in relation to the effects of the corona-pandemic.

Key words: cultural practices – political engagement – humanization

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<sup>1</sup> Lecturer and researcher at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, department of Social Work and the Centre of Expertise, Urban Education

<sup>2</sup> Professor of Youth and Society at Inholland University of Applied Sciences, Amsterdam