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Title:
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Date:
2025-01-01

Citation:
Waite, C., Walsh, L., Gallo Cordoba, B., Cutler, B. & Bao Huynh, T. (2025). About them, without them? figures of youth in Australian policy 2014–2021. Journal of Youth Studies, 28 (7), pp.1038-1053. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2024.2325447.

Persistent Link:
https://hdl.handle.net/11343/352316

Journal of Youth Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjys20

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To cite this article: Catherine Waite, Lucas Walsh, Beatriz Gallo Cordoba, Blake Cutler & Thuc Bao Huynh (11 Mar 2024): About them, without them? figures of youth in Australian policy 2014–2021, Journal of Youth Studies, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2024.2325447

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2024.2325447

Published online: 11 Mar 2024.

JOURNAL OF YOUTH STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2024.2325447

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

About them, without them? figures of youth in Australian policy 2014–2021

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the multiple and contradictory depictions of young people in youth policy and reflects on how youth engagement is constructed in Australian Federal and State policy. In this journal, researchers have been challenged to critically reflect on 'figures of youth' (Threadgold, 2020) and we take up this challenge and consider how and why 'figures of youth' are deployed in Australian youth policy. Drawing on an environmental scan of youth policy documents published between 2014-2021, we analyse the ways young people's voices are positioned to legitimate policy claims about what is required to help young people in Australia across multiple domains. Despite the apparent agreement among policy-makers that youth consultation is important in the policy development process, our scan points to a wide variety of interpretations of what 'youth voice' might look like, how young people participate, and how their contributions are actually utilised. We argue that the persistence and frequent emergence of particular 'figures of youth' throughout Australian youth policy reflects the endurance of adult-centric interpretations of youth, and the partial and superficial procedures that claim to engage with young people, but which ultimately privilege the interests of other agendas.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 12 September 2023
Accepted 15 February 2024

KEYWORDS
Youth policy; figures of youth; youth engagement

Introduction

This paper considers the multiple and contradictory depictions of young people in youth policy and reflects on how youth engagement is constructed in policy-making. The analysis draws on an environmental scan of policy documents published in Australia between 2014-2021. Using Fielding's (2001a) concept of 'youth voice' and his typologies of youth engagement, it analyses how young people's voices are positioned as sources of evidence. The discussion reflects on how youth voice is used to legitimate policy claims about what is required to help young people in Australia.

Drawing on Threadgold's (2020) 'figures of youth', the analysis identifies clear and consistent 'figures' that emerge in policy publications. These figures are pared back, simplified

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representations of youth experience reflecting familiar stereotypes. The regular and frequent occurrence of such figures underscores the apparent persistence of adult-centric visions of youth, irrespective of claims about the central role of young people's perspectives. Such persistent depictions include the romantic idea of youth as the embodiment of hope or as makers of the future. Another is of young people as at-risk, or conversely as purveyors of risk themselves.

Despite the apparent agreement among policy-makers that youth consultation is important in the policy development process, our scan points to a wide variety of interpretations of what 'youth voice' in policy might look like, how young people participate, and how their contributions are actually utilised. The regular and frequent figures of youth that emerge reflect persistent adult-centric interpretations of youth, and partial and superficial engagement procedures that pay lip service to engaging with young people, but which ultimately privilege the interests of other adult-centric agendas.

Literature review

In the following discussion, we explore recent Australian youth policy documents published between 2014 and 2021. Analysing these documents as texts, we attempt to unpeel the onion of policy (Ricento and Hornberger 1996) in relation to two research questions. First, how are young people positioned and portrayed? Second, to what degree is youth voice utilised within these documents? And how are the findings from various forms of youth engagement used and articulated?

These questions are important for two reasons. First, assumptions about young people and their (selective) representation could inadvertently reproduce romanticised and/or deficit approaches to understanding young people. Such representations over-simplify young people's experiences and necessarily impact the development of policies designed to support those very young people.

Second, evidence-based policy is prominent in discourses of contemporary governance (e.g. Productivity Commission 2016). Consequently, clarifying how the various forms of evidence derived by, and about, young people in contemporary Australian youth policy is important because it questions the relationship between evidence and policy with implications for how evidence might be used in future youth policies, while also encouraging improved incorporation of young people's experiences and perspectives. This paper explores how young people's voices are depicted and used as evidence in policy contexts and points to how the persistence of particular figures challenges claims about 'authentic' youth engagement to inform and make policy.

Understanding policy

Most commonly, policy is understood as a form of text and a driver of change linked to political actors, in reference to proposals, legislations or programmes (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). There are different and multitude government and non-government institutions and organisations that shape and contribute to policy making and implementation (Peters and Pierre 2006).

Ball (1994) asserts that there is a gap between policy and practice, rising from the clash between policy-driven change and pre-existing organisational systems and

behaviours. For Weimer and Vining (2004), policy represents an imagined future-state that is necessarily a simplified version of reality. Policies are generally assembled in response to what are seen as problems, and cannot be separated from the social, cultural or economic milieu in which they arise. Policy development, then, is a process that is imbued with values, assumptions and stereotypes, irrespective of claims about policy as value-free, objective (Rizvi and Lingard 2010), or indeed evidence-based. Because of this, there exists substantial scope for interpretation between the generalised vision for change articulated in policy and the specific, complex state of affairs that exists on the ground.

Policy can also be conceived as a set of interconnected tiers or layers. Ricento and Hornberger (1996) use the metaphor of an onion to articulate the complex, intersecting functions of various levels of policy. The outermost layers of the onion are institutional layers, outward facing objectives such as national level legislation or high court rulings, these being regulations or guidelines which are interpreted and enacted across a range of settings and contexts. Within these settings is the interpersonal layer, in which people from diverse backgrounds and communities work to implement guidelines and regulations. At different layers of the policy onion are 'competing discourses [which] create tensions and ambiguities' (Ricento and Hornberger 1996, 407), echoing the values and ambitions of the individuals and institutions involved at each stage. Moving from one layer to the next necessitates interpretation and modification, whereby 'agents, levels and processes . . . permeate and interact with each other in multiple and complex ways' (Ricento and Hornberger 1996, 419).

Constructions of youth in policy

Youth researchers agree that adult anxieties about young people dominate policy discourse (Kelly 2000; Te Riele 2015) across contexts such as schooling, policing, housing, employment, and in what are commonly constructed as 'risk' activities such as sex, eating, or drug-taking. Kelly (2000), for example, cites popular commentary claiming a 'crisis of youth', in which 'youth looms large in community perceptions and in policy areas' as a problem needing to be fixed (302).

These persistent narratives of control and problematisation are broadly linked to understandings of young people in terms of their 'unruly young minds and bodies . ..in such a way as to energize diverse surveillance and management practices' (Kelly 2000, 303). Such narratives contribute to policy interventions which are justified by a need to address problems first and foremost, but which also rationalise the control and surveillance of young people. While Kelly's analysis is over 20 years old, the arguments remain salient with numerous others pointing to similar dynamics in the ensuing years (e. g. De Roeper and Savelsberg 2009; Farthing 2015; Kuskoff 2018; Moore and Prescott 2013; Te Riele 2015; Turnbull and Spence 2011; White and Wyn 2008).

In the context of youth policy development, overlaying narratives exist in contradiction (Milbourne 2010). Increased regulation and supervision, as described above, can be linked with persistent narratives of young people being at risk and in need of protection - which often results in more surveillance (Turnbull and Spence 2011). But narratives of control lie in contrast to the theme of increased independence implicit in the youth voice agenda that intersects youth policy (Milbourne 2010). Such incongruous narratives lead to

'ambiguity in [the] ways that young people understand their freedoms, and different perceptions of justice in enacting policy' (Milbourne 2010, 1–2).

Where contradictory narratives about youth autonomy, responsibility, vulnerability and risk underscore youth policy, there is likely to be confusion about policy intentions and outcomes. The impacts of poor youth representation in policy were demonstrated in Kuskoff's (2018) review of a youth homelessness policy in Australia. Kuskoff drew tangible links between the ways young people were constructed in policy texts and outcomes of those policies. Here, young people were constructed in passive terms, but expected to be active in their engagement with homelessness services. This points to a profound disconnect between how young people were constructed and the ways they were expected to respond and interact with programmes. Such contradictions ultimately had a negative impact on the outcomes of policy interventions.

Figures of youth

To make sense of the ways young people are positioned and utilised in youth policy, we draw on Threadgold's (2020) 'figures of youth' typology. Threadgold draws on Garfinkel's (1967) work to articulate a 'figure' who stands in as a theoretical, simplified construct. As figures, constructions of youth encompass many different things, sometimes simultaneously being 'a stereotype, cliché, meme, target, scapegoat, folk devil, stigma, discourse, and signifier' (Threadgold 2020, 688). While Threadgold traces different uses of the concept of 'youth' across disciplinary bounds rather than policy contexts, per se, the figures articulated are clearly rendered in policy and policy discourse and are clearly imbued by broader values and assumptions about young people and the challenges they face (Rizvi and Lingard 2010).

Hence, while Threadgold's figures have not been applied in the context of policy specifically, they are nonetheless applicable in contexts in which 'youth', and what it is to be young, are articulated and constructed. This is clearly the case in youth policy, where figures are summoned to denote a cohort of people in relatively straightforward terms. The utility of this framework is demonstrated in discursive contexts that draw on broader value structures about youth and what it is to be young in Australia. Indeed, these figures emerge again and again in policy contexts and beyond, and we use Threadgold's (2020) approach to theorise and illustrate discussions about youth within such contexts. We argue that the persistence of 'figures of youth' within youth policy points to a perseverance of adult-centric, pared-down versions of youth that belies claims for authentic engagement in policy-making processes.

The 'figures'

Just as there is contradiction in how young people are characterised in policy domains, there is also little consistency in how young people are represented more broadly; contradictory positions are held side-by-side and conceptual messiness is left unresolved. This analysis draws on a subset of figures as outlined by Threadgold, including 'figures of hope', 'risk figures', and 'revolutionary figures.'

A key figure articulated by Threadgold (2020) is a 'figure of hope' for the future. This figure positions young people as a representation of the future, in which the future

can be secured for all if young people are effectively looked after and protected. Future-facing concerns situate young people as a 'surrogate for anxiety about the future' (Threadgold 2020, 693), which is especially emphasised during times when the present is precarious and uncertain. As Gorur (2015) explains, young people are seen as inherently vulnerable, while also being vital for future prosperity. For example, Brooks (2018) points to how students in higher education policy are constructed as future workers capable of contributing to the economy, and who must therefore be protected from unscrupulous educational providers and practices.

A further figure outlined is 'risk figures'. As figures of risk, young people are constructed 'as a problem to be disciplined, regulated and fixed' (Threadgold 2020, 695). Here, young people are positioned in terms of risk, either as sources of risk themselves, or as being at-risk (e.g. see Third et al. 2019). This relates to being subject to, or as perpetrators of, antisocial behaviour, as well as engaging in non-normative behaviours such as being unemployed or leaving school early. Such figures are particularly common in the discipline of Youth Studies, as well as in developmental psychology approaches to youth (Threadgold 2020).

Risk discourses abound in youth policy. Indeed, 'powerful narratives of risk, fear and uncertainty' underscore understandings of young people in a 'restless problematization of youth' (Kelly 2000, 302). Risk discourses can be linked to discourses about young people as proxies of the future. This is because figures of risk, in part, encapsulate adult fears and anxieties about an uncertain future. This can lead to young people being targeted by policy for certain forms of intervention and care, which are only possible through certain forms of surveillance, and which may further stigmatise young people as vulnerable and in deficit (Gorur 2015).

In more positive terms, young people can also be constructed as 'revolutionary figures' or 'agents of change.' Here, young people emerge as the 'vanguard of progressive and emancipatory politics' (Threadgold 2020, 692), who are looked to as the choice-makers of the future. Han and Ahn (2020), for example, identify how young people are cast as protagonists and heroes in the push for positive change in climate policy. While the link between Threadgold's 'revolutionary figure' and youth empowerment narratives in policy is less direct than the relationship between 'figures of risk' and 'figures of hope', it is nonetheless possible to discern a more agentic 'figure' of youth in the pervasive empowerment narratives that underscore contemporary youth policy.

Following Threadgold, we explore how policy 'forms powerful affects for the ways that 'youth' is brought into being' and 'how young people are governed and exploited, and the ways young people – their selves, their lives, their struggles' (Threadgold 2020, 7) are articulated in policy. We consider the meaning and implications of the continuous emergence of contrary youth 'figures', which emphasises an agentic, creative version on one hand, and a risk in need of control and surveillance on the other.

Student voice

The rise in youth voice and youth inclusion has been cited as gaining traction following the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which elicited a global focus on youth inclusion (Milbourne 2010), and an increased focus on incorporating youth voices into

educational initiatives and developments (Fielding 2001a, 2001b). 'Youth voice', or 'student voice', has been broadly defined in the context of education as the 'desire to encourage young people to articulate their concerns and aspirations about a whole range of matters' (Fielding 2004, 197).

This paper draws on the concept of 'youth voice', as it has been applied in education contexts by Fielding (2001a, 2001b, 2004), to make sense of the forms of youth engagement used in youth policy development in Australia. We argue that young people's engagement in policy and education can be understood in comparable terms. This is because both education and policy have similar ambitions to involve young people in the development of services and programmes, and both struggle with accusations of tokenism and superficial engagement.

For Fielding (2004), there are differing levels of youth engagement, ranging from more passive modes through to young people's voices representing the 'initiating force' (201) for change. From this, Fielding articulates a typology which encompasses a range of student involvement; including more passive forms termed 'students as data source' (e. g. student attitude surveys, test scores), towards 'students as active respondents' (e. g. young people being on a traditional school council where they have agency to express their perspectives), followed by 'students as co-researchers' (e. g. a closer partnership between student and teacher). The most active form of engagement in Fielding's typology is 'students as researchers', in which students initiate and inform the research and teachers act as supporters, and in which the student is the one to say what issues are to be interrogated (Fielding 2004).

In addition to this, Fielding (2001a,b) applies a critical lens to student engagement and reflects on the broader structures shaping or limiting genuine involvement. Fielding's (2004) aim is to provide 'a means of grounding and interrogating much of the ambitious rhetoric' (203) associated with developments in youth engagement by asking 'who is allowed to speak', 'who are they allowed to speak to', and 'what are they allowed to speak about' (Fielding 2001a, 100). In posing such questions, Fielding untangles claims that student voice is about young people having a platform to talk about what concerns them from their own perspective, arguing that young people are not always free to talk or use the language they may want. Rather, 'who is allowed to speak' is often 'framed by the realities of power' (Fielding 2001a, 101). In terms of 'why are they listening' and 'how are they listening', those in power often do not listen, even if they hear what is said. Within educational contexts, 'the frameworks of performativity provide both the motive and the means of a carefully constrained consultation' (Fielding 2001a, 103). In this sense, the *appearance* of consultation, genuine or otherwise, is more important than sincere attempts to authentically involve young people.

It is important to note that the meanings of terms such as 'authentic' and 'genuine' are contested, particularly the extent to which such concepts are understood in absolute terms or along a spectrum. We ask if it is useful, or even possible, to assume these concepts in dualistic terms and instead consider the shades of grey implied in what it is to achieve 'authentic engagement' with young people. For the purposes of this discussion, we focus on young people's contribution as being on a spectrum from 'manipulated' and 'tokenistic', to 'consulted and informed' or even 'youth-initiated and directed' (Hart 1992).

Method

Publicly available policy texts from Australian Commonwealth, State and Territory jurisdictions were thematically analysed to examine how young people are represented and the ways in which evidence about them, and from them, is depicted. Policy documents were coded inductively and repeating themes were recorded in a database to identify the most commonly recurring themes, alongside relevant subthemes. This coding approach meant that categories of meaning could be identified and coupled where relevant, and that methodological transparency could be maintained (Kuskoff 2018).

Texts were identified via online search using keywords including: youth, young people, Australia, policy and strategy. Relevant jurisdictions were also included, such as Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania, Western Australia, Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory. Further, particular departmental domains were included as key words, including education, employment, justice and health. Only federal or state level publications within Australia were included. All council or community level policy documents were excluded from the analysis.

This scan focused on young people aged 15–24 years, following a widely used definition (Third et al. 2019). However, understandings of youth within the documents reviewed varied considerably. For instance, Youth Justice documentation tended to characterise 'youth' in developmental terms, cognitively and emotionally. Health policy documents were more likely to draw on age-based definitions, while education and training documents do not provide a clear definition beyond an individual's student status.

A total of 43 youth policy documents published in Australia between 2014 and 2021 were reviewed (see Table 1). Types of documents included action plans, strategy documents, frameworks, and procedure documents. Areas of policy consulted included young offending and youth justice, education and training, social media, racism and multiculturalism, health and wellbeing, vocational learning, health and wellbeing, disability, child protection, family violence, and defence.

The degrees of participation in the formation of policy are categorised using an adaption of Fielding's (2004) typology. Discourses of young people are categorised according to figures of youth outlined by Threadgold (2020). Following Ball (1994), we analysed policy as text and discourse. Identifying figures of youth provides insight into how 'regimes of truth' flow through governance documentation (Ball 1994). We also draw inspiration from Ricento and Hornberger's (1996) analysis, in which policy is analysed with particular attention to the factors and forces shaping and enacting it.

Table 1. Categories and number of youth policy documents reviewed.

Policy category	Number included
Defence	1
Education	21
Health	10
Family violence / protection	4
Youth Justice	2
Other	5
TOTAL	43

Adapted typology of youth engagement in policy

Using the metaphor of a multi-storey building, this analysis adapts Fielding's (2004) typology for the policy development context:

> First storey: Acknowledgement of the importance of youth voice, but no engagement.
>
> Second storey: Demonstrated importance of youth voice through use of third-party data to passively align/underscore research findings.
>
> Third storey: Demonstrated importance of youth voice via the collection of data directly from young people to inform policy development. Can also include relatively passive, superficial engagement with young people as 'data'.
>
> Fourth storey: Evidence of engagement with young people's perspectives and opinions, with young people initiating directions of inquiry and nominating issues of concern.

This adapted typology traces the steps from acknowledgement towards what we interpret as sincere engagement. Like Ricento and Hornberger's (1996) onion metaphor, the levels of the proposed typology are relational and intersect in various ways.

Findings

The findings are divided into two sections. The first examines how youth voice is used (or not) as evidence to support policy, and the role of young people in providing that evidence. The second examines the figures of youth that underscore policy texts. Key differences in evidence use were represented by reports drawing on information collected directly from young people, using secondary data collected from young people, and relying on grey and academic literature. In a few cases, there was very little or no cited use of evidence.

Rigour of youth consultations

Youth consultations were conducted with between 118 and 3000 young people. In some cases, these were complemented with broader consultation processes including key stakeholders, parents and carers, and service providers.

In no instances were consultations conducted with young people exclusively for developing policy. According to several measures of youth engagement (i.e. Fielding 2004; Hart 1992) such consultations can be termed passive engagement. While young people participated in the evidence-gathering process, and some of the issues they raised were heard and incorporated, there appears to have been limited opportunity to engage in more substantive terms or to act as an 'initiating force' (Fielding 2004). Rather, young people are positioned as 'data sources' (Fielding 2004), passive bodies responding to externally designed and imposed instruments to aid the legitimacy of claims made by the policy.

Sample selection was described in the policy documents as purposive with deliberate attempts to ensure inclusion of young people from vulnerable or marginalised backgrounds. This speaks to active inclusion, but also reflects the views of evidence-collectors regarding who needs to be targeted for inclusion. This in turn invokes Fielding's (2001a) question of 'who is allowed to speak', highlighting the top-down choice-making determining the demographic groups selected.

While several reports highlighted the importance of engaging young people, it was clear that in a few cases, engagement had not occurred at the time of writing the report. Rather, an acknowledgment regarding the importance of involving young people was made, and an intention stated that this should be conducted in the future (i.e. Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2014; VicHealth 2017). In another instance (i.e. Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2019), references were made about the incorporation of young peoples' voices, but no additional information was provided regarding what young people had to say, nor how the information was incorporated. Representing the 'first storey' in our adapted typology, this points to a performative acknowledgement of youth consultation, and does not address 'how are they listening' (Fielding 2001a) as a key component of engagement.

How is consultation with young people framed?

A few reports (i.e. Northern Territory Department of Health 2018; Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services 2017) noted that drawing on the perspectives and experiences of young people was a vital component in the development of policy recommendations, with themes of youth empowerment being pervasive. For instance, one report stated that '[there is an] ongoing commitment to continuous engagement with young people' because 'involving young people in policy development results in better outcomes for young people' (Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services 2017). Within these documents, there was a collective agreement that youth engagement is important, consistent with a broader acknowledgement of the role of youth voice (Fielding 2001a, 2001b; Milbourne 2010). Threadgold's (2020) 'agents of change' figure emerged most prominently in these collective affirmations about the importance and value of incorporating young people's experiences and perspectives.

In these texts, young peoples' voices were solicited in the form of consultations, surveys or forum discussions aligning with the 'third storey' of our typology. Young respondents did not appear to have an active role in shaping the platform of engagement, nor did they contribute to the types of topics discussed. Therefore, they did not fulfil the parameters of 'co-researchers' and would be best characterised as 'data sources' at the most passive end of Fielding's (2001a) typology. However, the use and incorporation of young people's recommendations and advice appeared to be demonstrated by regular references to the findings of consultations.

Primary data collected by third party

In some cases, consistent with the 'second storey' of our engagement typology, reports were partly developed using primary data collected by a third party (i.e. Bailey et al. 2016; Bullot et al. 2017). Others drew on the same research report one year apart (i.e. NSW Department of Health 2017; South Australian Department of Education 2018). In these instances, evidence relied on a more comprehensive view of Australia's youth, such as Mission Australia's annual youth survey. In 2016, 21,846 young people were surveyed by Mission Australia, while in 2017 24,055 were surveyed. Of all the reports and documents reviewed, this represents the largest group of young people identified by the analysis. However, the findings of the survey did not inform every element of the policy reports, but rather foregrounded select aspects of the discussion. This

misalignment was perhaps due to the third-party data not being specifically designed to address the topics of relevance to policy, and instead providing broader insights into Australia's young people.

Analysis of the policy documents indicates a clear recognition that soliciting and incorporating the voices of young people is of vital importance. These claims seem to contribute to the performativity of youth engagement, and attachment to the legitimacy granted by such claims (see Fielding 2001a).

In a small number of cases, the words and voices of young people, along with the key issues highlighted by them, were incorporated into reports (i.e. Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, 2016; Western Australian Department of Health 2018). In others, brief acknowledgement was made of issues raised through the consultation process, mirroring those already highlighted for attention by government bodies. Here, young people are not positioned as 'data sources' (Fielding 2001a), but they are barred from speaking on their own terms; young people's contributions are acknowledged but are excluded from the public-facing policy documents.

In cases where young people were actively consulted, and the outcomes of these consultations were transparently utilised to produce recommendations, it appears that young people are constructed and positioned as important shapers of youth policy. Young people seem to be made agents in their own lives, with valuable opinions and perspectives. Their involvement in the policy development process is seen to contribute to the successful implementation of policies that will have a positive impact. However, less clear is the degree to which the use of third-party data, combined with a performative affirmation of youth engagement, constitutes a genuine incorporation and collaboration with young people.

Other uses of evidence

In several instances, aligning with 'second storey' modes of engagement in our typology, reports drew on evidence from grey literature or secondary sources that do not necessarily engage the voices of young people (i.e. Department of Health 2019) or academic sources. Evidence used includes government and NGO reports, as well as previous iterations of the policy or framework documents.

In a few cases, little information was provided regarding evidence used (i.e. South Australian Department of Education 2018). In these cases, young people's voices were subsumed by an evidence base more centrally focused on statistical representation or consultation with other stakeholder groups (i.e. Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2014; NSW Department of Education 2017). Young people themselves tended to be characterised as sources of evidence, rather than shapers of evidence in these instances.

Figures of youth in policy

Future citizens

The most common theme intersecting the policy texts was young people as future citizens having to navigate an unknown future. As such, young people tended to be valued in terms of their future capacity (Kelly 2000; White and Wyn 2008), more 'transitory becomings' than young people with present-day concerns and challenges (Moore and

Prescott 2013). Young people as 'future citizens' emerges regularly in the context of education policy discourses, alongside a requirement for educationalists to participate in constructing a viable 'future citizen' optimised to meet the unanticipated challenges of future labour and skills markets. For example, young people are described as needing to be 'ready for a world yet to be imagined'; and government education is 'ensuring students are ready for the future' in which expectations will be new and different (Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2019).

In health, as well as education policy documents, young people were effusively heralded as the 'future' of society. Therefore, institutions were motivated to 'prepare' young people if futures are to be guaranteed and assured for all. For instance, young people are described as being 'fundamental to the ongoing prosperity and cohesion of Australian society.' How young peoples' health is managed and dealt with 'has sustained, long term impacts' on the 'social and economic wellbeing and connectedness of our community' (Department of Health 2019).

These 'figures of the imminent future' are deployed as a source of hope for an uncertain future, a 'surrogate for anxiety about the future' (Threadgold 2020, 693). If young people are doing okay, then the future of society more broadly will be similarly okay. If they are not doing okay however, this can motivate and justify surveillance and control to mitigate the impacts of any vaguely defined future-problems (Kelly 2000; White and Wyn 2008).

Agents of risky behaviour

Health and youth justice youth policy were most likely to position young people in risk terms. Discourses of risky youthful behaviour emerged in discussions about youth justice and the types of crimes young people are most likely to commit. Figures of risk also emerged in health policy documents, which centre around health risks for young people, including drug-taking, mental ill-health and car accidents. For instance, youth is constructed in terms of 'Increased risk taking, experimentation, independence and engagement beyond family … [which] can affect health and wellbeing, health choices and can increase risks of harm' (NSW Government 2014, 5).

Stereotypes in which young people are assumed to engage in risky behaviours due to their age, and 'youth' status underlie discussions about youth justice and health which position quantifiable risk prominently. Here, young people are understood in terms of problems that require fixing, as needing to be 'disciplined, regulated and fixed' (Threadgold 2020, 695).

Risk figures include both those more likely to be taking risks due to developmental or psychological reasons, as well as those engaging in antisocial behaviours; that is young people are both a source of risk, and simultaneously at-risk. For example, in youth justice policy: 'We expect children and young people to be law abiding and respectful. If they are not, we expect them to be accountable and put things right' (Queensland Department of Youth Justice 2018). In health policy, a range of particular youth-centric risk behaviours are cited as key mitigating circumstances in young people's health, including alcohol consumption, drugs, injury and healthy living issues such as obesity and smoking during pregnancy (NSW Department of Health 2017). A contextualised approach, in which social disadvantage, family dysfunction and poverty are highlighted as contributing factors is referred to. However, this tends not to occupy the central position of the

'risky' trope in the above cited reports. Instead, youth is implicitly characterised as a time of experimentation, in which a proportion of young people are likely to intersect with youth justice and health services.

Contextual approach to understanding youth

The analysis indicated several examples of a 'holistic' approach to understanding young peoples' experiences in health, youth justice, and education. These eschew the reductive 'figures' and embrace a more nuanced interpretation of youth experiences. This demonstrates that the policy documents reviewed do not entirely rely on stereotypes based on adult-centric fears and anxieties. Rather, some policy documents incorporate a more nuanced perspective alongside reductive 'figures.' Examples highlight the mitigating circumstances in young lives that contribute to health, educational or justice outcomes, such as social disadvantage and family dysfunction (Northern Territory Department of Health 2018; Western Australian Department of Health 2018).

Other examples include the sociological concepts of youth transitions (VicHealth 2017) and life course approach (Department of Health 2019). Further, Australia's Youth Policy Framework (Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2021) explains that it 'captures the voice of young people on policies that affect them' and that it 'listens and responds to young people on the issues that matter to them', while 'continu[ing] the journey to work together.' These frameworks also highlight the broader context of young people's lives, but speak to the specificity of the youth stage, and the impact that 'successful' transitions can have on later life.

Discussion

The analysis in this paper demonstrates a substantial gap between an imagined future, policy intention and what is ultimately developed (Weimer and Vining 2004). This reveals socially and politically derived values and stereotypes (Rizvi and Lingard 2010) about young people and the challenges they face. Discourses that underscore policy are in tension, and are interpreted and implemented to various, inconsistent degrees, thus contributing to vague understandings of young people and their experiences in contemporary Australia. Where such tensions and lack of clarity underscore policy, there will likely be confusion about the intentions and outcomes of such policies (Milbourne 2010).

Figures of youth

This paper unpacked some of the ways young people are represented in Australian youth policy. Our analysis identified several recurring themes. Particular figures of youth tended to emerge from particular areas of government, reflecting the agendas of those departments. For instance, education policy was more likely to be future oriented, while justice policy focused on risk. While the pairing of figures with policy domains might seem unsurprising, they speak to the prevalence of Threadgold's (2020) figures of youth, and a broader reliance on reductive visions of what it is to be young in Australia.

The 'figures of youth' approach enables distillation of adult-centric notions of youth, which are continuously relied upon in youth policy. Figures emerge time and again, despite claims about the importance of directly involving young people in policy

development. This demonstrates a reliance on representing young people consistently in adult-centric ways, alongside the seeming side-lining of actual youth experience. Hence, while youth engagement has been directly linked to positive policy outcomes, the extent to which this can be achieved in the context of the documents reviewed is much less clear.

Who gets to speak?

While young people might engage in consultations that inform the development of youth policy, the question of 'who is allowed to speak' is pertinent (Fielding 2001a). The degree to which young people have a platform to express their concerns is less evident. Further, the 'why' and 'how' of those who are 'listening' (Fielding 2001a), in this case, those developing youth policy documents, or the 'interpersonal layer' of Ricento and Hornberger's (1996) policy onion, likely have their own set of values, shaping an interpretation of youth through the lenses of 'risky', 'empowered' and 'hope for the future'.

The degree to which purposive engagement of particular minority groups of young people constitutes a 'benign but condescending' approach, rather than being 'supportive and ground-breaking' (Fielding 2001a) is limited. Youth voice is solicited only insofar as it adheres to the dictates of relatively narrow, adult-centric parameters. However, as Fielding (2001a) notes, performing engagement for the sake of being able to claim that engagement has taken place can lead to carefully constrained forms of engagement and superficial, top-down ways of incorporating youth voice and experience.

The contradiction found in narratives of young people in youth policy presents a conflict engendered by top-down approaches clashing with rhetoric regarding the importance of bottom-up approaches. While others (Kuskoff 2018; Threadgold 2020) highlight conflict between the rhetoric of youth empowerment clashing with narratives of youth risk, surveillance and control, this analysis identifies contradictory themes which positions young people as agents whose voices are imperative to successful policy development, alongside a performative routine which sees a more passive, tokenistic recognition of youth voice. Hence, the symbolic appeal of young people is utilised, without giving them any meaningful role in the policy making process. This can lead young people to become disillusioned and disempowered in policy development and implementation (Mitra 2018), and adds to the ambiguity around how young people are to be understood.

Conclusion

After a change of government in Australia, renewed commitments have been made with a new 'Youth Engagement Model' (Albanese 2021). At the time of writing however, it is difficult to anticipate how this new policy will be operationalised, considering the reliance on youth figures identified in this analysis, and a general lack of in-depth collaborative youth engagement. The question of how young people are positioned and portrayed helps shed light on issues with youth engagement. This paper has also asked how young people's voices are positioned as sources of evidence.

Using Threadgold's (2020) 'youth figures' typology, we point to the general persistence - irrespective of claims otherwise - of adult-centric narratives about what it is to be young in Australia. Such figures underscore many policy documents and shape the construction

of young people, along with how the social problems at the centre of these policy documents and the kinds of solutions derived are articulated. To rework Weimer and Vining (2004), policy texts position young people as future citizens and inheritors of imagined future-states based upon simplified figures of youth.

Youth engagement typologies, such as that provided by Fielding (2004) adapted by the authors for the youth policy context, illuminate the degree to which young people's voices are included, and help articulate how young people are utilised as a source of evidence to legitimate the claims made in policy documents. The analysis demonstrates that while young people are mostly utilised as a 'data source' (Fielding 2001a), their perspectives and opinions are included on a limited basis. Rather, a performative demonstration of youth 'empowerment' supersedes a more in-depth, collaborative form of youth consultation outlined in the 'fourth storey' of our engagement typology. The relationship between evidence and policy is not as close as it might seem.

Indeed, it is the risky figures and the figures of future hope that tend to underscore the ways in which young people are constructed and talked about. These signal reliance on over-tired stereotypes to provide a neat short cut to the problem-orientated justifications that birth policy responses. Limited engagement of young people, combined with over-reliance on simplified youth 'figures', precludes genuine inclusion of youth experience in matters of central concern to them, and risks poor policy outcomes.

Limitations

This paper considers various forms of State and Federal policy documents to evaluate the inclusion and engagement of young people based on their acknowledgement within the documents themselves, and the ways and degree to which young people's voices and perspectives appear to be included. This paper does not claim insight into processes that took place in the private spaces of policy making before publication. As such, it cannot include any elements of youth engagement that took place which were not made public. Further, while an attempt was made to review all relevant policies related to young people aged 15–24 published at the State and Federal level in Australia, it is possible that some publications were missed. Rather, this analysis rests on major, regularly cited policy and as many supporting documents that could be identified within the remit of the scan.

The evidence collected nonetheless provides a robust base for the analysis and findings about young people's engagement in youth policy development. The persistence of certain 'figures of youth' demonstrates how pervasive adult-centric, problem based, exclusionary and deficit-orientated constructions of youth are. The policy documents discussed in the paper articulate the government's agendas with regards to its youth population and have substantial power in the development of programmes and services designed to support young people. As such, highlighting the critical failures, contradictions and tensions in policy texts can enable development of a more constructive path forward that genuinely supports young people in Australia.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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