***Youth matters in social justice: are UK policies generating new spaces for young people’s voice and participation?***

#### Dr Linda Milbourne

#### School of Social Sciences, Birkbeck College University of London,

**26 Russell Square, London WC1B 5DQ**

l.milbourne@bbk.ac.uk

**Abstract**

Recent UK policy changes have generated renewed public and academic interest in the changing contexts and goals surrounding work with young people. The emphasis on youth action and participation as components of policy discourse associated with citizenship and community cohesion contrasts with policy trends concerned with increased supervision and control of young people but has received limited attention in research to date.

The question of children and young people’s position in debates on social justice, similarly, has had little discussion. How do we understand social justice in relation to young people? Research on the barriers which deter people in deprived areas from civic participation has identified a lack of respect for their views and poor expectations of change following community consultations. To what extent do young people experience similar disincentives?

This paper explores these questions, drawing on two empirical studies of community-based organisations working with young people to consider how recent policy initiatives are perceived by groups of young people and representatives from the organisations. Do the greater emphases in policies on community level involvement and young people’s participation mark transitions towards more responsive services and activities, with greater space for young people’s influence?

#### Research suggests significant gaps between policies and perceptions of their delivery at local levels. The rhetoric of localism, participation and inclusiveness has intensified with the change of UK government but related resources and support structures are suffering widespread cuts. Where professional initiatives have apparently created new and ‘equal’ spaces for young people to participate in decision-making, dominant institutional cultures and service targets present barriers to involving disengaged young people and undermine youth-led activities. The paper argues the need for a better understanding of the complexity of issues involved in engaging young people’s greater participation, located in debates on social justice. This necessarily relates to powerful dynamics which surround spaces for voice and activism.

*Keywords: youth activism, youth services, social exclusion, community cohesion*

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