

# Rethinking youth citizenship after the age of entitlement

Lucas Walsh | Rosalyn Black

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Walsh and Black are Australian education scholars, who offer rethinking of citizenship that draws from the Australian context and their research with young people in Australia. To translate to international audiences, they provide comprehensive descriptions and explanations of Australian liberal democracy and politics with illustrative examples as to how these play out in Australian society, with a particular focus on young people. The context of ‘after the age of entitlement’ is a reference to a comment made by the Australian Treasurer Joe Hockey in 2014 that the ‘age of entitlement is over’ and the ‘age of opportunity’ had begun. Such sentiment speaks from the neoliberal agenda of ‘each to his own’, and ‘everyone to fend for themselves’, which is very easy to espouse when you are a comfortable white middle class or elite man. Ruthlessly, ‘neoliberals regard inequality of economic resources and political rights’ as ‘a necessary functional characteristic of their ideal market system’ (Mirowski, 2013). As Walsh and Black explain, Hockey’s statement ‘suggests that citizens can – and *should* no longer depend on the largesse of the state and on the use of social and economic welfare as a means of economic distribution to facilitate social equity’ (p. 7).

In these neoliberal times, young people are expected to ensure their own economic, political and social membership with diminished socioeconomic resources, as children and young people are the highest represented age demographic below the poverty line in Australia (see Davidson et al., 2020) and globally (see Ortiz-Ospina, 2017). To add further insult to injury, under resourced young people who are left to fend for themselves are frequently constructed in public discourse as ‘irresponsible’, ‘uninformed’ and ‘disengaged’. From the tensions of this contemporary context for young people, the authors problematise citizenship issues of membership, belonging, mobility and economics with reference to their own research and others and public debates in Australia with other nation comparisons intercepted throughout.

I applaud the authors for confronting the impact of racism on young people’s struggle for locating membership. However, the examples offered are largely from the migrant and asylum seeker experience, with minimal recognition and discussion of the violent racist acts of genocide, war, rape, slavery and theft of land, in the construction of Australia as a nation. Australia is the only British settler society without a history of treaty making or constitutional recognition of its Indigenous Peoples (MacDonald & Muldoon, 2006). For these reasons, Australian authors have a responsibility to communicate to international audiences the ongoing struggle for Australia’s first nations people to be recognised as citizens with sovereignty. Walsh and Black provide an example of Indigenous young people being perpetrators of racial abuse, what needed to be explained is that every day Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Australians are the targets of racism. Just by being present in their skin, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Australians are more heavily surveilled, evidenced through being 11 and a half times more incarcerated than non-Indigenous Australians (Visontay, 2021) and being 53% of 10–17-year-old population in detention (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2020), along with being more excluded, for example, through significantly higher school suspension and expulsions (Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, 2016).

As education scholars, Walsh and Black confront the responsibility of education in ‘schooling the citizen’, critiquing the flaws of schools as a democracy project, and authorised citizenship curricula. They also recognise the potential for schools as ‘enabling sites for young people’s active citizenship’ (p. 133) by initiating critical conversations and facilitating local community projects. This is not easy in an era when hope, trust and belonging are eroded, even more so now following widespread bush-fires and a global pandemic, since the book was written. Young people, as Walsh and Black argue need to be heard and recognised as shapers of citizenship.

Louise Gwenneth Phillips  
Associate Professor in Education

*Southern Cross University, Gold Coast, NSW, Australia*  
Email: [louise.phillips@scu.edu.au](mailto:louise.phillips@scu.edu.au)

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