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**Citizenship and Participation of Young People
in Aotearoa/New Zealand**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Arts
in
Social Policy**

Massey University, Palmerston North, Aotearoa/New Zealand

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2013**

Abstract

This research explored young people's experiences of citizenship, the meaning of citizenship in their lives, and how they understand their connection to society as citizens. Participation was seen as a crucial component of 'the lived experiences of young people' and their experience of citizenship in their everyday lives. This study investigated the personal attributes, behaviours, activities and cultural processes that contribute to or define what it means to uphold citizenship. Also, it explored attitudes towards participation in the local community, and facilitators or barriers that affect participation in social, cultural, political and community activities.

The methodological approach was phenomenological, providing opportunity through nine in-depth interviews with young people to understand how they experience citizenship. Semi-structured face to face interviews were conducted with 16 to 25 year olds.

The research established that in defining citizenship, young people demonstrated a relational, inclusive, diverse and expansive interpretation of citizenship that goes beyond traditional, future-orientated neoliberal constructions of citizenship that position young people as 'citizen-as-workers', focusing predominantly on economic independence and employment. Young people experience social membership predominantly through leisure, sport, cultural and non-structured activities rather than through traditional civic and political associations. They place importance on a sense of belonging and are interested in and engaged in informal and organised activities which enable them to relate to other young people; suggesting a relational rather than non-relational citizenship identity. Family, friendship groups and school are key sites of connection for young people with leisure, sport, cultural and civic activities. They are able to clearly articulate their views on the responsibilities toward the community and are particularly interested in community volunteer work.

Young people do not tend to be engaged in traditional civic and political organisations. They are concerned about a range of issues that have affected them immediately and directly and discuss these in their relationships at home with family, at

school and with friends rather than in traditional civic and political forums. The research also found that young people struggle to be heard by formal political institutions. They had little influence over community decision making and felt that the views of young people should be given more attention through forums for this to be achieved.

Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the nine young people who participated in the research study. They gave their time, experiences, thoughts and knowledge that provided the material for the research. Their enthusiasm for the topic of study further inspired me that the project was a worthwhile venture.

I also wish to acknowledge my supervisors Dr Polly Yeung and Rachael Selby for their skill, experience, professionalism, interest in the topic and guidance during the last two years.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge my father for the time, skill and energy he put into proof reading draft copies of the chapters, and my mother for her on-going support.

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