

Youth Voice, Epistemic Justice and Arts-Based Development

By The May Group

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Youth Voice, Epistemic Justice and Arts-Based Development by the May Group is an example of collective writing and co-production that we do not often see in the writing up of academic books. It is a compelling contribution to youth studies, participatory arts practice, and development scholarship. Emerging out of the seven-year AHRC-funded Changing the Story project, and building on the foundations laid in the authors' earlier 2019 book (Cooke & Soria-Donlan, 2019), the book also theoretically draws on Mkwananzi and Cin's 2022 work on post-conflict participatory arts from the same project. The May Group goes on to deepen the conversation by rethinking knowledge, rethinking power, and, crucially, rethinking how we listen to young people.

A central argument threaded across the chapters is that young people occupy a deeply paradoxical position in global development discourse. They are simultaneously framed as vulnerable, marginalised, and living through overlapping crises, yet also idealised as society's greatest "assets" for the future. The authors show convincingly that this paradox is not merely rhetorical: it shapes how young people are consulted, included, instrumentalised, or silenced across policy, research, and programming. One of the book's greatest strengths is its careful analysis of how this tension plays out in practice, and authors do this through four key concepts.

The first one is youth voice: The authors take the frequently invoked concept of "youth voice" to argue that voice is not treated as speech or participation, but as an epistemic practice; a way of producing knowledge, meaning, and critique. Their most significant intervention is the elaboration of the transrational, a conceptual framework that moves beyond rationalist, linguistic understandings of voice and instead recognises expression as embodied, affective, spiritual, aesthetic, and even more-than-human, which challenges decades of policy approaches that equate agency with verbal articulation. In relation to this, a particularly powerful thread in the book is the notion of "sayability": what young people can express is deeply shaped by what is socially, politically, and emotionally permissible. Arts-based methods become essential here. They offer pathways to express the unsayable experiences of conflict, trauma, silenced histories, or collective memory that evade verbalisation. As the authors argue, the art speaks when words cannot.

The second concept is participatory arts: One of the book's most compelling contributions is its insistence that artistic outputs are not supplementary, nor merely tools to elicit verbal responses. Instead, artworks whether films, dances, poems or animations are treated as forms of knowledge in their own right, carrying emotional weight, historical depth, cultural meaning, and political critique. This is especially important when considering how women's experiences and other marginalised knowledges are surfaced and made visible. Art does not simply illustrate youth voice; it is the voice.

The third concept that the authors weave into their argument is the Youth Research Board (YRB), which they use to rethink participation. It provides a striking example of what meaningful youth involvement can look like. Far from tokenistic engagement, the YRB led workshops, evaluated projects, and generated international activism. Their silent workshop, famously insisting that "academics talk too much", forced adult researchers into discomfort, into embodied learning, and into forms of non-understanding that exemplify the transrational approach. Moments like these reveal the transformative potential of alternative pedagogies.

The final concept of the book is the ecologies of change: The book offers a sharp critique of the dominant development logic of "scaling up." Instead, it advocates for "pockets of action"; small, relational spaces where affective, embodied, transrational expressions generate epistemic justice. These pockets recognise the centrality of context and resist the flattening tendencies of standardised

interventions. At the same time, the authors are careful not to romanticise such pockets. They acknowledge the structural constraints that limit what youth can do: short project cycles, weak institutional support, silencing educational systems, and policy frameworks that continue to instrumentalise young people.

Despite its substantial conceptual and empirical contributions, the book also opens several critical questions that warrant deeper engagement. First, the authors' ambitious theorisation of the transrational raises the practical challenge of whether such embodied, affective, and relational forms of knowledge can genuinely penetrate policy spaces still governed by rationalism, metrics, and measurability. If development institutions remain structurally invested in indicators and outcomes, how and to what extent can transrational voice meaningfully shape decision-making? Second, while the book acknowledges the ethical risks of arts-based work, the wider field often does not; without careful attention, there is a danger of aestheticising young people's suffering, turning trauma into something palatable for donors or audiences. This raises important questions about how youth-created art can be protected from becoming yet another consumable artefact within donor-driven ecosystems. Third, although the book highlights the immediate impacts of participatory arts, it also concedes the absence of longitudinal evidence. We still know little about what happens one, three, or five years after a project ends; how agency, critical consciousness, or collective action are sustained over time, and under what conditions. Finally, the political risks embedded in artistic expression, particularly in contexts such as Kosovo, Zimbabwe, Colombia, and Cambodia, are significant. When expressive acts can provoke surveillance or repression, supporting youth voice requires thoughtful strategies around safeguarding, anonymity, and collective protection. These unresolved tensions do not weaken the book; rather, they point to the urgent need for further work that can extend, challenge, and deepen the conversations it has so powerfully initiated.

In closing, *Youth Voice, Epistemic Justice and Arts-Based Development* is a powerful and timely book precisely because it refuses easy simplifications. Rejecting neat policy narratives and thin versions of "youth empowerment," it pushes us to rethink how we understand knowledge, participation, creativity, and justice. It reminds us that youth voice is not a resource to be extracted but a relationship to be nurtured, and that arts-based practices enable young people not only to tell stories but to inhabit silenced histories, challenge dominant narratives, build solidarities, and imagine alternative futures. The book opens a conversation that must continue, leaving us with the urgent challenge not simply to recognise youth voice, but to transform the systems that make it so hard to hear.

Melis Cin © 2026

Senior Lecturer in Education and Social Justice

School of Social Sciences

Educational Research

Lancaster University

m.cin@lancaster.ac.uk

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6015-0447>