

Building voice, civic action and learning : Exploring the diversity of young people's motivations for civic engagement and participation

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Background

Expressions of concern about the civic disengagement of young people have become prominent in research, media and policy-making arenas in England in recent years (Jowell & Park, 1998, Putnam, 2000). The media typically portray young people as uninterested in anything other than television and computer games (Cushion, 2007). Such concern contributed to the introduction of Citizenship Education (CE) into the Secondary National Curriculum in England in 2002, and, more recently, to the Government's plans to introduce national community youth service (Brown, 2009). The Government's Citizenship Advisory Group, instrumental in the establishment of CE as a statutory subject in secondary schools, stated that reform was necessary due to, "worrying levels of apathy, ignorance and cynicism about public life" (QCA, 1998:8) but a decade of Citizenship Education has made little impact on these dominant discourses.

Research Questions

This paper presents early findings from the collaborative Building voice, civic action and learning research project, funded by the Society of Educational Studies. This originated in part in response to concerns about the absence of young peoples' voices within existing empirical studies. The project aims to explore the ways in which young people express their civic identities, engage with their communities at local, national and global level, and reflect on processes of civic participation. It has a specific focus on young people living within socio-economically disadvantaged communities and is concerned with building the capacity of schools and voluntary agencies working with young people to provide opportunities for civic participation that reflect the preferences and contexts of young people.

Methods

The project has four chronological stages and this paper presents findings from the first two stages. The first stage involved conducting an extensive literature review focused on the question 'What do we know about the civic engagement of young people, and in particular, those young people living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities?' The review painted a complex and often contradictory picture. Haste (2005), for example, highlights that the Nestle Social Research Foundation study found that whilst around a quarter of young people in England were very involved in their communities, a similar number were disengaged and disaffected. Similarly Roker et al. (1999) provides considerable evidence of young people being engaged in a broad range of civic activities, but found only 13% of the sample were involved in 'regular' volunteering or campaigning activities. Personal and contextual factors emerged as influences on young people's civic engagement (Kerr 2005, Benton et al 2008, Pattie et al 2003). Gender, ethnicity, locality, family background and religious affiliation (Morrow 2006, Benton et al. 2008, Roker et al. 1999) were seen to be influential determinants on young people's civic engagement and participation. Young people from socio-economically disadvantaged communities were less likely than other young people to be engaged in mainstream politics. (Young People's Social Attitudes, 2003). Some young people were excluded from formal volunteering by the prohibitive costs (both temporal and financial), language barriers and target-driven cultures (Roker et al 1999, Institute for Volunteering Research, 2002) and are dissuaded by negative stereotypes of volunteers (Pye et al , 2009). Despite this, an examination of young people's informal engagement documented that young people from socio-economically disadvantaged communities make a significant contribution to their families and communities (Morrow, 1994, Becker, Dearden and Aldridge, 2001, Orellana et al 2003).

Frame

The paper outlines the key findings from the literature review that highlighted the need to recognise the complex and transient context within which young people in the 21st century live as active social agents, and this led to the development of a new theoretical framework. The framework encompasses different theoretical lenses that have been prominent within the field over time, recognising that each lens serves a different purpose and is rooted in a particular philosophical standpoint. Our approach is consistent with Krishner et al. (2003) who remind us that young people are no different to adults in the complexity of their positioning and action, noting that young people are often cynical and hopeful, or both critical and engaged" (Krishner et al., 2003:2). We build on the findings to suggest that educators concerned with providing young people with engaging and apt learning opportunities for civic engagement should be supported to better understand the current experiences, opportunities and barriers to young people's civic engagement. This is dependent on developing a better understanding of young people's lives and experiences and we suggest that a broadened concept of what actually represents civic engagement and participation is a useful starting point. Building on stage 1, in the second stage of the project the authors have adopted a young person-centred approach to understanding young peoples' experiences, with a particular focus on civic engagement and participation, and the points of resistance that young people living within socio-economically disadvantaged areas face.

Research findings

In addition to documenting our projects' theoretical underpinning, this paper also presents findings from surveys completed by adults and young people, and from focus groups with young people living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities. We outline how we have begun to make sense of the findings using a model that suggests how adult-driven formal and informal civic engagement interacts with young-person initiated formal and informal civic engagement. We have attempted to map this onto the various theoretical lenses through which citizenship and civic engagement have been variously theorised. In so doing we have attempted to adopt a maximal view of young peoples' civic engagement and participation which recognises the complexity of young people's lives which we believe will enhance educators and voluntary organisations work with young people. This will be tested in the final stage of the project as we begin to work with young people in partnership with staff at three secondary and nine primary schools.