

***Building voice, civic action and learning* : Variation in levels of civic engagement amongst young people living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage**

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- Dr Carolynne Mason, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge
- Dr Hilary Cremin, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge
- Dr Paul Warwick, School of Education, University of Leicester
- Tom Harrison, Community Service Volunteers

Overview of the *Building voice, civic action and learning* project

The collaborative *Building voice, civic action and learning* research project, funded by the Society for Educational Studies, originated in part in response to concerns about the absence of young peoples' voices within existing empirical studies focused on the civic action of young people. The collaboration involves the Faculty of Education at Cambridge University and The School of Education at Leicester University working in partnership with the voluntary sector organisation Community Service Volunteers (CSV). The aims of the project are:

- To investigate the ways in which young people from socio-economically disadvantaged communities express their civic identities, engage with their communities at local, national and global level, and reflect on processes of participation
- To build the capacity of schools and voluntary agencies concerned with active citizenship education to provide opportunities for student voice, civic action and learning that reflect the preferences and contexts of young people from socio-economically disadvantaged communities

Research findings

Surveys conducted with adults working with young volunteers living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage

A survey was distributed to UK based organisations known to the research team in order to discover which organisations work with young people from socially disadvantaged communities. This work was undertaken in order to identify sites which would facilitate access to young people living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage where the focus groups could then take place.

Based on existing CSV contacts a database was compiled of organisations thought to be working with young people and the list was extended following an internet search to locate other organisations offering young people opportunities for civic action. The resultant database consisted of 340 organisations and responses were received from 175. Of these organisations 144 were deemed relevant (31 respondents either did not work with young people between the ages of 14-25 or alternatively did not work with any young people from socially disadvantaged communities). The largest organisational grouping returning the survey was universities (62) followed by local youth groups (29), volunteer centres (20) national charities (13), local charities (12) and local authorities (9).

Types of opportunities for civic action offered to young people

Volunteering brokerage was the most frequent opportunity for civic action offered to young people by respondents to the organisational survey (55%), followed by learning, development and accreditation (17%), and sports, arts and cultural experiences (15%). A small number of organisations (5%) offered advice and support services to young people. There was overlap between the services offered so for example organisations offering sports, arts and cultural experiences also offered other services and opportunities to young people such as advocacy, advice and support, leadership and volunteering.

Benefits of volunteering for young people

Volunteering was the activity most likely to be offered to young people by these organisations and survey respondents were able to suggest a number of extrinsic benefits arising from engagement in volunteering activities. The benefits that were identified by the adult respondents are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Benefits of volunteering for young people

Facilitating educational and employment opportunities	Through accreditation, learning basic skills, networking, obtaining references, learning how to deal with ‘the system’
Developing soft skills	Including confidence, independent living skills, developing friendships, teamwork, self-discipline, developing maturity and tolerance
Being valued	Through having a ‘voice’ and having a sense of achievement
Making a difference	To their own lives and to their communities
Greater social cohesion	Achieved through young people meeting new people and by challenging the prior expectations of all those involved.

Barriers to recruiting young people from socio-economically disadvantaged communities

Within the survey organisations were asked what they considered to be the main barriers to recruiting young people from socio-economically disadvantaged communities to the services offered by their organisation. The barriers these adults identified to recruitment were grouped into: Young people related barriers, Organisational barriers and Structural barriers and these are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Barriers to recruiting young people from socio-economically disadvantaged communities

Young people related barriers	Organisational barriers	Structural barriers
Financial and temporal	Matching young people to suitable opportunities	Cultural barriers
Lack of appropriate skills	Negative attitudes towards young people	Lack of suitable role models
Young people’s attitudes to volunteering	Opportunities to volunteer which were not attractive to young people	Disaffection
Young people’s lack of knowledge about available opportunities	Communicating opportunities to volunteer to young people living in areas experiencing socio-disadvantage	Lack of power to bring about change
	Ensuring that staff working had suitable skills	Lack of transport

Financial and temporal constraints were the most frequently cited barriers. Examples included young people who could not afford to offer their services for free particularly where there were costs such as transport involved and issues faced by young people who were also working, studying or had family commitments. Lack of appropriate skills was cited as another key barrier for recruitment. Skills that were noted as problematic include confidence levels, resilience, communication and language skills, lack of power, IT skills, poor self-esteem and the belief that they have nothing to offer. Young people’s attitudes to volunteering, and in particular, their lack of belief in volunteering being a developmental opportunity and peer pressure were also suggested as factors prohibiting them becoming involved. Young people’s lack of knowledge about available opportunities and a reluctance to actively seek opportunities were also suggested as barriers to recruitment.

The organisations offering opportunities to young people to volunteer also suggested that there were other challenges for recruiting young people which were faced by their organisations. These challenges included matching young people to suitable opportunities within a short timeframe. It was suggested that finding attractive opportunities for young people to volunteer can be time consuming and it was not always possible to respond to young people quickly enough to match their expectations. Negative attitudes towards young people meant some organisations are not very enthusiastic to offer volunteer opportunities to young people

Other challenges for organisations included finding opportunities to volunteer which were not attractive to young people due to their location such as those linked to churches or universities for example. Communicating opportunities to volunteer to young people living in areas experiencing socio-disadvantage was also seen as challenging. Sometimes organisations do not have existing links within these communities through which they can reach young people and additionally access to IT can be another barrier faced by young people in these communities. Ensuring that staff had suitable skills for working with young people and being able to create a rapport and ongoing relationship with young people was also challenging.

There were issues that were suggested as barriers for recruiting young people in areas of socio-economic disadvantage that could be described as being structural issues going beyond young people and organisational issues. Examples of structural issues were cultural barriers, lack of suitable role models and disaffection. Lack of power to bring about change was also suggested as a barrier. Lack of transport in rural and socio-economically disadvantaged communities was also noted as an important issue affecting both recruitment and retention.

Barriers to retaining young people from socio-economically disadvantaged communities

Many of the issues identified as barriers to recruitment were also identified as barriers to retaining young people from socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Pressures resulting from paid work, education and family commitments were again identified as the main barriers to retaining young people. Lack of confidence, self-belief and poor social skills were also identified as important challenges. It is also important to note here that many of the opportunities to volunteer were time-limited in nature and therefore retention was not a key aim. A successful outcome in this instance is for young people to move on to other volunteering, paid employment or education for example.

Maintaining the interest of young people and making the experience exciting was suggested as barrier to retention. There were suggestions that often the reality of the experience did not match the young person's expectations. Lack of social comfort with the volunteering experience also impacted negatively on retention of young people. Organisations also struggled with facilitating progression for their young volunteers. Other factors that made retaining young people challenging were changes in young people's lives which are often chaotic along with lack of ambition and motivation and lack of parental support. Another barrier to retention was seen as of lack of meaningful engagement by young people with volunteering being seen as a means to an end.

Young Persons' Survey

The surveys and focus groups conducted through this project sought to put young people at the heart of the project and to access voices that may otherwise have been silent. Surveys were distributed to young people living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. The surveys were distributed to pupils in years 9 and 10 in four schools and to young people engaged with the organisations previously surveyed and described in the previous section. A total of 977 surveys were returned. Questionnaires were returned from slightly more girls (54%) than boys, the majority white (next largest group Pakistani at 20%).

Motivations for volunteering and helping others

In response to the question ‘In school have you / were you involved in any volunteering or other activities where you have helped other people?’ 48% of respondents stated that they had. Young people were asked to explain why it was that they had volunteered or helped other people. Respondents were asked what activities they did to help other people. The list of activities was broad and included: Fundraising, advocacy, charity work, community and enterprise challenges, supporting school events such as open evenings, helping primary children to learn and with sports, peer mentoring and school council. Some young people were sports volunteers and others felt that playing sport and taking part was a form of volunteering and helping others. Other students suggested pro-social behaviours such as ‘being helpful’ and ‘being a friend’.

Respondents were asked about their motivations for volunteering and helping others. They were offered a number of motivations which they were able to tick and they were also given the opportunity to offer other reasons for volunteering. The motivations most frequently offered were *To make a difference to someone*, *To do something different* and *To gain skills that will help me to get a job*. Young people were least likely to select *I had to do it*, *To help gain a qualification* and *To meet new people*.

Table 3 : Motivations for volunteering or helping others in school

I had to do it	65
To make a difference to someone	159
To do something different	152
To learn new things	140
To meet new people	80
To make me look good at school and in the future	120
To help gain a qualification	72
To gain skills that will help me to get a job	136

Other motivations for helping others offered by young people were:

- To help the person learn how to do it
- To help the school
- Because I enjoyed it
- To help other people enjoy school like I have
- To help someone’s life and to raise money for charity
- To help towards leadership in Y10
- It sounded interesting
- To help people
- To gain more confidence.
- Fun, something to do in lunch time
- To have fun and get skills for the future
- To be kind
- Because I have a passion for the sport
- To give me an idea what I want to do in the future

A third of young people completing the survey stated that they regularly spent time volunteering or helping others whilst two thirds did not. Those who regularly volunteering and helping others were asked how they started and there were a number of different ways in which they began:

Personal interest/motivation

- *I got interested in helping others and learning new skills and then decided to join.*
- *When I was 11, my friend and I appealed for funding to start a girls football team in the community*

Through involvement with a sports club

- *I got injured, and decided that I would help teach other people sword dancing because I am okay at teaching/ tutoring people at maths etc. and so I thought I would give teaching/ coaching a go.*
- *I do kickboxing in which we do events for disabled and under-privileged people and I also am on the youth council for my school*

Through their family

- *My nana got me into it*
- *I started going with mum to help her with Homestart. Me and her interacted with children if they did not communicate.*
- *By my mum teaching me*

By invitation

- *Got asked to do it*
- *Invited by teacher*
- *They asked me and I said yeah and if people are in need of something I help them*
- *Started doing volunteering for Islamic Relief and it was suggested by my teacher*

Some young people reported helping their families on regular basis. Often this was grandparents who were in need of support and the motivations were to help their families. When the activities were more civic young people reported a range of motivations including enjoyment, feeling good, learning new skills, to help others and to gain qualifications including GCSEs as these comments illustrate.

- *I wanted to help*
- *To give a helping hand*
- *To make them feel happy and me 2*
- *To help the community*
- *I have met lots of amazing people I have learnt new skills*
- *I do these things to get a good record and to give something back to my school*
- *To help them from struggling*
- *I thought it would be fun*
- *I like it and it will help me get my B-Tech*

Young people were asked how they benefitted from their volunteering or helping others. For some they did not feel that they did benefit from their activities whilst others varied in their rewards. For some enjoyment and feeling good was the main motivation whilst others suggested learning new skills and confidence and for many there were a number of different rewards as these comments indicate.

- *Nothing at the moment*
- *Friends, respect and more confidence in teaching*
- *Learning new skills which relate to the job I want*
- *I sometimes get money but not always*
- *Feeling good that I have helped someone achieve something*
- *I enjoy doing it :)*
- *When I volunteer I get fun as I can also enjoy the thing I am volunteering for and I also learn new skills*

For the two thirds of young people who reported not regularly volunteering or helping others a number of reasons were offered to explain this. For some they were not able to offer a reason and actually stated that they did not know why they did not do it. Others suggested they were too busy with school or paid work or with their hobbies. Family pressures were also

suggested as being a deterrent. Young people struggled to offer ideas about how they could be further encouraged to volunteer or help others in the future. In addition to stating they did not know how they could be encouraged other comments were:

- *By a positive community and atmosphere in school and at home...*
- *By getting rewarded*
- *By the teachers*
- *To be accepted for more stuff*
- *By people saying i can do it*
- *Working with other people who like to do this*
- *The school council could introduce more things*

Focus groups with young people

The aims of the focus groups were to:

- Explore young people's experiences of expressing their voice, civic participation, volunteering and altruism
- Examine young people's motivations for civic participation
- Identify the challenges they face in their lives that may prevent civic participation and action
- Explore existing avenues for civic participation and action

The focus group was piloted in December 2009, following ethical approval being sought and given. Participants in the focus groups completed a form identifying their first name, gender, ethnicity and postcode. Postcode was included as a means of confirming that the young participants lived in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Letters of thanks were sent to the participants in the focus groups in recognition of their contribution to the project.

To date 163 young people have been involved in focus groups. Of these 105 were female and 58 male. The youngest participant was 11 and the oldest 21 with the average age being 15 years old.

Focus group findings

The analysis of the focus groups is ongoing and the results presented within this paper are therefore offered tentatively. The preliminary findings from the focus group indicate that young people living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage vary enormously in their civic engagement and participation. We met young people who were participating extensively in a range of different activities that could fit within our maximal definition of civic engagement noted above this being - 'An active concern for the common good.' Equally we spoke to young people who offered us far less evidence that they were civically engaged even when a maximal definition was utilised. Some young people felt strong connections with issues and causes beyond their lived experiences, their families and their local communities whilst for others their concern for 'common good' was much closer to home. Some young people had been specifically supported by organisations to develop their civic engagement and participation and they were able to describe the journey this experience had taken them on. Within this paper the experiences of three different groups of young people are described to offer a flavour of the variations between groups of young people and between the individuals within these groups.

Young Offender group

Description of group

The focus group involved four young people, three male (aged 15, 16, 19) and one female (16). The reason for the group coming together is because they have all been 'young

offenders'. They come together to engage in activities that encourage them to change their offending behaviour. They live in the east of England and experience rural deprivation.

Issues of concern

The young people in this group were able to identify issues that were of concern to them. Neighbours, the police, old people and foreigners were all identified as issues of concern along with stereotyping and racism. When asked whether there were any issues that concerned them at a global level such as global warming one participant responded:

'We don't really worry about that until we are older innit.'

Motivations for civic engagement

Even using a maximal definition of civic engagement it was still difficult to find evidence that these young people were civically engaged. As part of the focus group discussions the young people were asked about whether young people should be encouraged by the government and others to engage in community action and this was understood by participants to be associated with community service within the criminal justice system and as such they equated it specifically to litter picking. Perhaps understandably these young people were not enthusiastic about this idea:

'If it was my rubbish. If it was my rubbish then fair enough. Anyone else's no.'

'But if the area aren't respect me yeah why should I respect them? Do you know what I mean?'

Only one member of this group was considering formal volunteering. For this young person the motivations for this volunteering were closely linked to the extrinsic benefits of the volunteering experience:

Int: You are trying to do some voluntary work in a residential home?
R: Yes.
Int: So why are you wanting to do that Claire.
R: Because I want to work in a residential home when I leave school?
Int: Okay. So you are trying to get some experience under your belt.
R: Yeah. Then I will get a good reference for when I go to college as well, obviously from working in one. Get a good reference and then go to College then aren't I.

She later suggests however that her motivations are more extensive than the reference for college:

'I want to go to college. But no I just find... I think I will find it really rewarding, so I can look after my nan, because my nan is disabled. I don't know I find it really rewarding, and help to develop myself as much.'

Envision Group

Description of group

The second focus group discussed in this paper involved nine young people living in a deprived area in central London. There were eight young women and one male all aged 17. The young people attended the same school and had been working with the group Envision during their lunch breaks for the majority of the academic year on projects including raising issues around homelessness.

Envision was set up by four young people in 2000 to challenge the stereotype of 'youth' as apathetic and disengaged with the issues going on around them. Envision programmes help young people to design their own local community projects tackling issues ranging from street crime to climate change and aim to provide individuals with a powerful and rewarding experience of making a positive difference.

Issues of concern

This group of young people were very able to list issues that were of concern to them. Their lists included stereotyping, the recession, sweat shops and fair trade, train ticket prices, people and child-trafficking, migration, exploitation, safety on transport, Chelsea fans, rules, university, job opportunities, the Olympics, pollution, more things for young people to do, knife and gun crime and war.

Motivations for civic engagement

In contrast to the young offenders this group were able to speak about motivations for, and barriers to, young people being civically engaged. They had been working on a project to promote greater awareness of homelessness within the school and had deliberately picked this issue as it was one they felt was relevant to young people and with which young people had a connection. The young people were very positive about their experiences of working with Envision as they felt it had been very beneficial for those involved. The same young people were also very honest that their initial motivation for being involved was to enhance their CVs.

'It's just the sense of achievement you get at the end of it really. And you just know that you're helping to build a better picture of young people, and like get them out of the stereotype that they're apparently in. But, to be honest, a lot of people do it for their CV.' (Male)

‘Most of the things that young people do to make a difference is often because of their CV. Like when I joined the [Envision] I thought ‘Let me throw it on my CV’, and I actually got a lot more from doing it, but I only started coming because of the CV thing. And the Duke of Edinburgh, it’s gonna be fun doing everything, but by the end of it you are more employable with a Duke of Edinburgh award’ (Male)

Whilst they had in the main been originally motivated by the benefit to their CV these young people had been retained by a number of factors including learning new skills, making a difference and enjoying their involvement. They were also very enthusiastic to ensure they left a legacy and became role models for younger students who may become involved with Envision in the future as they felt that young people do not understand that civic engagement can also be enjoyable:

‘Show ‘em the good stuff. So, yeah, it’s inspired me to do a lot more work now that I’ve seen what actually happens, because I just... I literally did it for my CV and then when I got involved I was like ‘Oh, this is actually really fun and it’s something you can do’.’ (Male)

Many of the young participants in this group spoke passionately about issues that could be considered political issues and yet they expressed their concern that they were not well-informed about, or represented within, political discussions that they felt impacted on them. This was particularly pertinent as many of those in the focus group would be eligible to vote in the 2010 general election.

‘That’s it, I think there should be more people our age involved in politics like this should be more a voice for us, ‘cos there’s voices for adults like they’ve got their constituency leaders they can go to and do stuff, but like we can’t even vote. And the university thing affects us directly, so I think it’s really unfair that we don’t get to choose who is in power.’ (Male)

‘Well we don’t even go into depth too much with politics in school ‘cos when they was talking about it, ‘cos you can do it at college and stuff. I don’t even know nothing about it or want to do it, except for I’m gonna have to vote and I don’t know who I would be voting for.’ (Female)

In response to a question asking how schools could be better at getting young people motivated to be civically engaged one female gave a very succinct and poignant response:

‘Just give us a reason for doing it.’ (female)

Youth Action Team

Description of group

This was a group of three individuals, two male (18 & 21) and one female (18), who were part of a youth action team located within the Midlands. The young people experienced rural deprivation. The group came together on a monthly basis to engage in a variety of activities under the umbrella of civic engagement.

Issues of concern

This group were hesitant at first but were then able to provide a list of issues that were of concern to them. The list included nothing to do, chavs, the environment, animal welfare, fitness and obesity, medicinal marijuana, pigeons, the job centre, the recession, unemployment, underage drinking and binge drinking and poor parenting.

Motivations for civic engagement

The young people in this focus group had actively joined this group in order to become involved in civic action activities. This decision was explained by one participant in the following way:

‘I just... I wanted to do something with my life, rather than just sitting there and doing nothing. I wanted to get out. So, like I said, I don’t like being stuck inside.’ (female)

Another participant stated that they had become involved with a group of peers with low aspirations and one day he decided he wanted more from life:

‘I don’t know, it’s just sort of refreshing to meet people really on a sort of a different wavelength. People that actually want to do something. I’ve been quite bogged down for so long by all these people who are just gonna live in (the town) for their entire life, you know, and like not do anything. And, you know, just go stale and I just felt like I was... I was just... you know, I would be sitting there wasting my life.’ (male)

In common with the Envision group this group were very positive about their experiences of being part of the youth action team. They also felt that the positive side of being civically engaged was not visible to young people generally:

‘I think it’s like... it’s ignorance actually, the whole thing. And like when I told people I was volunteering at the library, everyone was like ‘Oh, ha ha, you’re going to the library. You’re sad.’, and things like that. And like now you’re the sad one, because you’re sat on your own doing nothing. I’m actually going out and helping people, and if you think that’s sad then go and sit in the corner.’ (male)

Also in common with the Envision group the participants were disenchanted with politicians and they felt that young people were uninformed about politics:

‘The country’s not run by the people though, it’s run by like the elite and no matter what anyone thinks. Like you can put on this whole façade and, yeah, you can go about and do this. But you know there’s people behind the scenes pulling the strings, that you probably have no idea about, you know, people who own businesses.’ (male)

‘I don’t know, if they appeal to young people, it’s like people.. politics and everyone goes ‘Uh, politics’. But people don’t realise like how much... I don’t know, they surround themselves in all this jargon that no one understands, so they don’t have to actually tell you what’s going on.’ (male)

It is important to note that during the focus group these young people described the ways in which they were, in their viewpoints, stereotyped within their communities and by the media. This was an issue that was raised by all three of the groups reported on in this paper:

‘People don’t listen to young people that is the thing I don’t get. Why don’t they listen to young people? We are still humans, do you know what I mean? We are the same as everybody else. You could... Yeah, a girl dressed in a mini skirt and that I wouldn’t just think wrong of you do I mean... It is like your personality. It is you. It is not like the clothes you wear. People judge you by the clothes you wear. People judge me by the clothes I wear. And if I want to wear these clothes I wear them. Do you know what I mean?’ (Young offender, Male)

‘Everyone’s looked at, right, and judged within like the first, what, two, three seconds of just someone looking at you. And I could be wearing a tracksuit one day and then someone will think this way of me. And that’s the day I actually like went out to meet new friends, and then today I could be all dressed like smart and wearing a skirt, heels and everything and then think totally different of me, and that was just two different days.’ (Envision group, Female)

Discussion

The findings presented within this paper indicate that young people living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage vary considerably in terms of civic engagement. The survey with young people who were mainly 16 and under indicated that school is an important site where young people can be civically engaged and yet more than half of respondents did not report volunteering or helping others at school. When asked about regularly volunteering or helping others this number reduced to a third and yet 71% of respondents agreed that they would like to help improve their local area.

The routes into civic action appear to be equally varied. A route that seems effective is through clubs that young people already belong to such as sports clubs. Family and school also seem to be influential in encouraging for some young people to be civically engaged. Whilst some young people were able to articulate why it is that they volunteer or help others for others they do not actually identify any benefits for their efforts which is perhaps concerning.

Findings from the focus groups with young people also point to considerable variation in civic engagement. They indicate that young people's experiences with adults are formative in their decisions to become civically active and these experiences, which are both positive and negative, can result in both action and inaction. They also suggest that positive experiences of civic action can be re-inforcing – the more they do the more they want to do.

Both sets of findings suggest that young people frequently need to be encouraged to be civically active and that it is not something that is currently normative in their lives.

Whilst other authors have developed models which describe the complexity of the issues that potentially impact on young people's civic engagement and participation these models seem to be less useful in explaining variations in the types of civic action a young person may choose to engage in and at the same time explaining why some young people are (completely or partially) civically disengaged.

Examples of two contemporary psychological theories relevant to understanding young people's civic engagement are Ecological Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1988) and Situated Cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). These two models were drawn upon in the ambitious IEA study of Civic Knowledge and Engagement Study (Amadeo et al, 2002) to develop. In order to develop a theoretical underpinning to the project the research team developed an octagon which was:

‘A visualization of ways in which the everyday lives of young people in homes, with peers, and at school serve as a ‘nested’ context for young people’s thinking and action in the social and political environment.’ (2002:p.21

The individual learner is situated at the centre of the model. The model proposes that the public discourses and practices of the society have an impact on the student through contacts with family (parents, siblings, and sometimes extended family), school (teachers, implemented curriculum, and participation opportunities), peer group (both in and out of class), and neighbours (including people in out-of-school youth organizations). Beyond the direct influences the model includes institutions, processes, and values in domains such as politics, economics, education, and religion. It also includes the country's position internationally, the symbols or narratives important at the national or local level, and the social stratification system, including ethnic and gender-group opportunities.

The findings presented in this paper indicate that the salience of these influences will vary between individuals – for some family and peer group will have a greater influence than any other of these factors. Another feature which needs to be made more explicit is that all these influences will have the potential to be negative experiences (disengaging) rather than positive (engaging) experiences.

The research that this project is based on is timely because there is a strong belief that by engaging in civic action and learning young people can develop their social capital and contribute towards fulfilling their potential despite the disadvantages they face in their communities. Yet our research indicates that many young people are dissuaded from contributing to their communities by their belief that they cannot make a difference. As Percy-Smith (2010) argues:

‘It is now time to re-think children’s and young people’s participation in light of critical reflection on experiences in practice and the promises of radical discourses past, present and emerging.....we need to pay more attention to opportunities for children and young people to participate more fully in everyday community settings – home, school, neighbourhood – through the actions, choices, relationships and contributions they make, rather than being preoccupied with participation in political and public decision-making processes in organisations and systems that are removed from young people’s everyday lives.’

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