



Building Voice Civic Action and Learning
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The development of civic capital in young people – a radical educational response.

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Abstract

Throughout Europe concern is being expressed with regard to young people's patterns of civic engagement (Kerr 2002). Increasingly young people are being portrayed as apathetic, self centred and dis-engaged from their neighbourhoods (Jowell and Park 1998). As a consequence educational policy is giving increasing attention to how young people can be supported with being more civically engaged.

This paper draws from the 'EngagED - Building voice, civic action and learning' research project presently being conducted within the UK, funded by the Society for Educational Studies (SES). It focuses in upon the focus group data to consider a systems based ecological model of young people's civic engagement drawing in particular from the work of Bronfenbrenner (2004). From this conceptual understanding the paper moves on to identify a manifold notion of young people's 'civic capital' that is crucially seen to be flexible and developable over time and space. This leads to the presentation for discussion of a radical pedagogical response that seeks to adopt a participative and collaborative approach to providing apt civic engagement learning opportunities for young people. Whilst recognising the multiplicity of ways in which young people can act and contribute within their communities in order to realise their own sense of civic agency, this educational approach supports the idea that we need to shift away from strategies to 'make' young people citizens towards finding ways of supporting them 'as' citizens.

1. Introduction

This paper reports on work conducted as part of the EngagED – building voice, civic action and learning research project. This project is based in England and funded by the Society for Educational Studies (SES). It began in April 2009, and will continue until March 2011 and represents a collaboration between the Universities of Cambridge and Leicester and the charity ‘Community Service Volunteers’. EngagED seeks to respond to the question of whether young people in general and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged communities in particular are civically engaged, exploring the opportunities and barriers that they face.

EngagED has three distinct stages. Stage One, *Setting the Scene*, involves a systematic literature review that explores the existing knowledge base pertaining to young people’s civic engagement and, in particular, what is already known about the civic engagement of young people living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Stage Two, *Narrowing the Focus*, builds on this literature review and seeks to ‘listen harder’ to young people. The EngagED research project aims to prioritise the voices of young people within its methodology, and to lead to knowledge that builds capacity for civic action and learning in new ways. In so doing it seeks to connect to the wider social agenda of accessing excluded voices and reducing the effects of disadvantage and missed life opportunities. Consequently Stage 3 involves putting the learning into practice and working with three case study secondary schools to create and investigate a series of civic engagement educational innovations.

This paper specifically draws upon the findings from the focus groups conducted with young people in stage two of the Engaged project. Haste and Hogan (2006) argue that we won’t understand what motivates young people to civic action unless we ask them and until we know the answer, how can civic education be effective? In keeping with this perspective 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 procedure was piloted in December 2009, following a rigorous ethical approval process. The focus groups broadly covered a number of common topic areas: the identification of issues of concern at both local and global levels, young people's sources of a sense of community, examples of where young people feel they are being civically engaged and the identification of both barriers and opportunities for civic engagement that they had experienced.

To date 163 young people have been involved in 24 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. The focus groups have been located in a mix of inner city and rural areas of socio-economic deprivation and included a range of settings such as:

- Two secondary schools and an inner city Post 16 College
- An out of school service for young offenders
- Young people living in social service care
- A series of focus groups with young people already supported by youth volunteering organisations to develop their civic engagement.

2 An emerging theoretical framework

A synthesis of the Engaged literature review and empirical investigations highlights the complexity of how both personal and contextual factors interact in order to influence a person's civic participation. Increasingly the EngagED research project is recognising the usefulness of an ecological systems model for capturing this interconnected contextual complexity of influences over young people's civic engagement. This approach draws in particular from the psychological theory of ecological development by Bronfenbrenner (2004). A similar theoretical model has in fact been adopted by The IEA study of Civic Knowledge and Engagement (Amadeo et al, 2002). This study conducted surveys with 140,000 upper secondary students in sixteen countries to 'identify and examine in a comparative framework the ways in which young people are prepared for their roles as citizens in democracies'. In order to develop a theoretical underpinning to the project the research team developed a model that 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.' (Amadeo et al 2002:21)

It is upon this model that the Engaged project seeks to build, as shown in Figure 1.

This model situates the individual young person at the centre to include intrapersonal factors such as personality, character, values, temperament and self-awareness. These intrapersonal elements then interplay with the wider social and historical context.

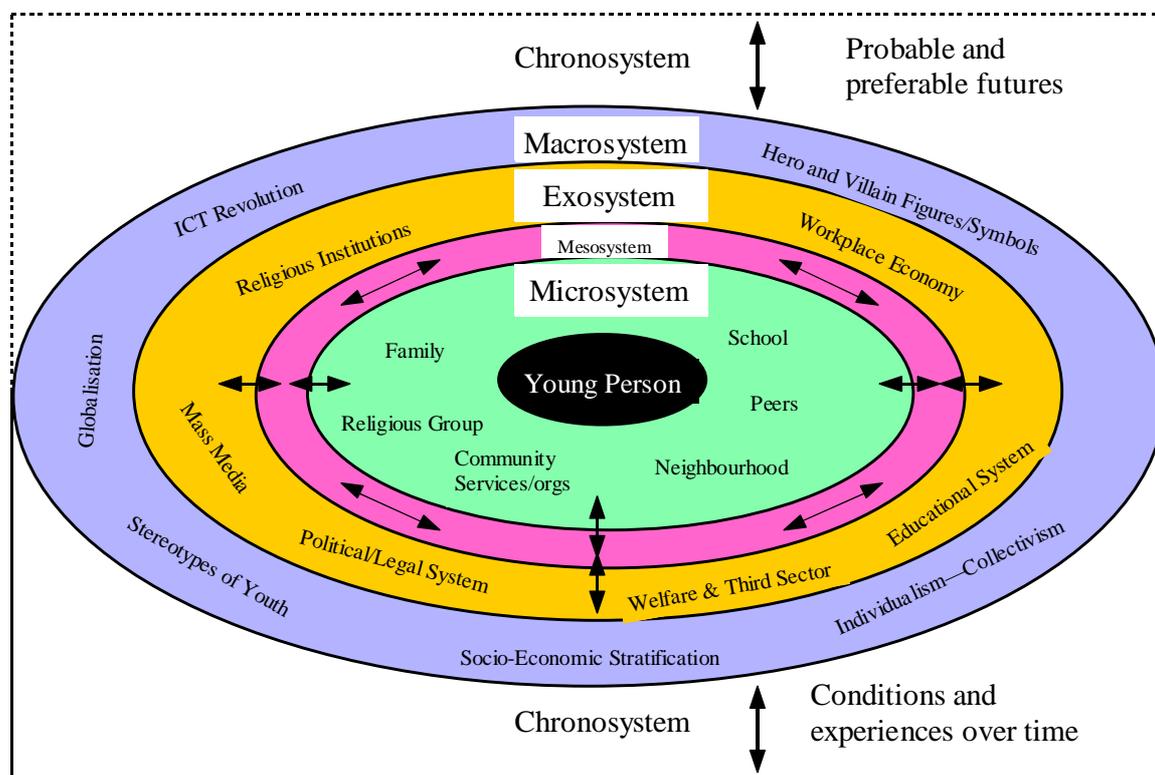


Figure 1 Eco-systemic model of young people's civic engagement

The model proposes that the public discourses and practices of the society have an impact on the young person at the *microsystem* level by direct contact with a variety of different agencies. These face-to-face relationships typically include family (parents, siblings, and sometimes extended family), school (teachers, implemented curriculum, and participation opportunities), peer group (both in and out of class), neighbours and religious/community groups.

Beyond this direct influence the model recognises at the *exosystem* level where society has an indirect impact on the young person's civic engagement through political, economic, community, educational and religious institutions and also the mass media. At this level the young person does not have an active role with these agencies but is nevertheless impacted by them.

Encompassing this array of agencies at the *macrosystem* level are attitudes, ideologies, narratives and discourses that have a cultural influence over the young person. This might include for example the cultural influence of globalisation and the country's international position, stereotypes of youth, and the social stratification system, including ethnic and gender-group opportunities.

A crucial aspect of this eco-systemic model is the recognition it gives to the intersectional nature of these different agencies. The *mesosystem* level highlights the interconnections and relations both within and across the microsystem and exosystem levels. This recognises the contextual complexity of young people's lives through for example capturing the interplay of the school and religious group fused together with the opportunities that exist in the neighbourhood and influence of the mass media to collectively have a bearing on a young person's civic engagement patterns.

The model presented in Figure 1 also identifies the temporal dimension of the *chronosystem*. This highlights that it is not only the present context that influences a young person's civic engagement. It acknowledges the collective build up and changing nature of experiences over time. It also acknowledges the potential influence of personal and contextual notions of the future. How young people perceive the landscape of the future can impact upon their sense of responsibility and civic duty in the present.

The findings of the EngagED project to date indicate the salience of this model for capturing the interlinking influences that will vary between individuals and for whom their personal responses to similar experiences and observed behaviours may differ. The empirical investigations have highlighted how each of these interconnected agencies has the potential to provide both positive experiences (civically engaging) and negative experiences (civically disengaging) to young people who come into contact with them.

3 Civic capital development

Making sense of the findings and seeking to conceptualise the resulting impact of the array of contextual and personal factors outlined above has led to an emerging notion of 'civic capital development'.

Table 1 outlines the six key aspect of young people's civic capital as identified in this study and as also highlighted in the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study by Benton et al (2008).

- Self-Efficacy – whether or not a young person feels that their opinions and actions matter; and can have an influence on the outcome of a civic issue.
- Resource capacity - whether or not a young person has the time to civically engage, or has the income to cover costs
- Social capital – whether or not the young person has the trusting relationships, contacts and networks to be able to act upon a civic issue of concern.
- Human capital – whether or not the young person has the knowledge and skills to be able to act upon a civic issue of concern.
- Motivation through a sense of belonging – whether or not the young person feels a sufficient degree of membership attachment towards a particular community, group or issue.
- Social norms for participation - whether or not significant people close to a young person invite, value, encourage or inspire their participation in civic engagement.

Table 1: Key aspects to young people’s civic capital development

Crucially all these aspects are held to be fluid and flexible and therefore open to change over space and time. Consequently by engaging in civic action and learning young people growing up in socio-economically disadvantaged areas can develop their civic capital and be helped to fulfil their potential as citizens and change-leaders.

4 In pursuit of apt educational responses

Arguably many young people are at risk of being inhibited from contributing to their communities by their belief that they cannot make a difference or simply by not being mobilised through invitation. For example the study by Pye et al. (2009) found that over 2,000,000 young people might consider volunteering on a full-time basis simply if they were asked. Their report suggests that young people may not be self-motivated to take on volunteering or community service opportunities, but would seriously consider doing so if they were invited and more importantly given guidance and encouragement to do so. This raises the issue of young people’s levels of civic engagement being influenced by ‘mobilisation’, where they are made aware and invited to take part in civic engagement opportunities.

Another obstacle to young people's civic engagement is the perception that the opportunities they are provided with are irrelevant to their interests. It is important, therefore, that educators, youth workers and others concerned with providing young people with apt learning opportunities for civic engagement are aware of the diverse lived realities of their students (Fahmy, 2006). The EngagED research project is now giving attention to learning from these insights and putting innovative civic action education opportunities into practice. It is currently working with 2 secondary schools and informal education providers in the development of a youth community action education programme that seeks to embody the following ten elements:

- 1) Consultation – educators facilitating safe places for young people to scope their community contexts and to have meaningful conversations about questions and issues that matter to them. Moving towards the discovery of a common problems or issues of interest to serve as young person generated starting points.
- 2) Inspiration – recognising that communities are pregnant with possibilities and change agents, and that young people's lives count.
- 3) Team building – development of communication, conflict resolution and problem solving skills and also establishing trust both within the group and with key partners.
- 4) Personal affirmation – individual's creativity and talents prized, strengths and weaknesses acknowledged, personalised support and participation.
- 5) Critical literacy - open space for dialogue and enquiry providing opportunity to encounter different perspectives on the group's community issue of concern. Allowing for controversy and the chance to engage with challenge and critical reflection.
- 6) Creative collaboration – young people envisioning together how they can lead change/serve in their community. Designing an apt response (both in terms of the nature of the issue, imagined solution to a problem, context (time, resources, and access) and group make up.
- 7) Project management – servant leadership and distributed leadership approaches. Young people working co-operatively through the process of planning the community action idea.
- 8) Community Action – Undertaking the planned community initiative
- 9) Monitoring outcomes – Gaining the young participants' views on personal learning and community impact.
- 10) Celebration – marking the achievement/civic learning space experiment.

This youth community action education programme embodies a variety of participatory pedagogies. It draws on the work of Hart (1997) and more recently Fielding (2010) to realise that there are a variety of democratic participation roles that educators and young people can adopt within an educational context. This programme at various points seeks to provide opportunities for young people to act as co-researchers, co-enquirers, co-knowledge creators and co-change leaders.

Haysley et al (2006) argue that in a 'growing culture of participation' and in a climate of popular interest in democratic elements such as student voice what is currently required is not only experiments in participatory civic learning processes but also attention towards exploring the actual impact of young people's involvement. They report that there is a paucity of evidence about the impact of young people's involvement, prompting them to recommend that the outcomes of young people's civic engagement are properly evaluated, and that young people's own perspectives are prioritised. This research agenda is something that the EngagED research project seeks to make a positive contribution towards.

5 Conclusion

An overriding impression from the EngagED research project has been that young people growing up in socio-economically disadvantaged areas are, as a group, far from apathetic in the sense that they express concern and interest over a wide range of public life issues. The focus groups afforded an insight into the manifold nature of their perspectives and issues of concern at both local and global levels at the current time. Issues of concern at a local level have included: crime levels, lack of amenities for young people, community relations (e.g. racism, gang culture, immigration, care for the elderly) litter, negative youth stereotyping, unemployment, safety on public transport, homelessness, and substance abuse (alcohol and drugs). Global issues have included: war, global economic recession, climate change, child trafficking, pollution, racism, poverty, homelessness and aid to developing countries. Listening to young people's voices has highlighted the point that they are uniquely individual, and that their issues of concern occupy a specific context at a particular time. It has also highlighted the point of view as expressed by Lister et al that:

'young people take seriously the question of their relationship to the wider society'

(Lister et al 2003:250)

This raises the contestable issue of whether or not an aspect of young people's informal participation in civic engagement is simply one of 'voice'; the expression of concern and interest over public life issues. A survey commissioned by V (2007) discovered that, whilst young people are passionate about global and local issues, the majority of them do not act on these interests. It showed that young people encounter a range of barriers when they attempt to move beyond 'voice' engagement to putting their civic concerns into action such as time pressures, a lack of knowledge about where and how to get involved, and a lack of confidence in their ability to contribute.

The EngagED research project has shown that young people living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities often face multiple challenges, and that these have implications for their levels and patterns of civic engagement. Educators, youth workers and others concerned with supporting the civic engagement of young people in these communities need to be aware of the influence of their diverse and complex contexts. It is therefore important to see the civic engagement of young people from socio-economically disadvantaged communities through a new lens, one that allows for a broader definition of civic engagement. There needs to be greater recognition of the informal, local community based, issue centred, and globalised nature of their civic engagement in the 21st century. It is also equally important to ensure a diverse provision of relevant civic engagement educational opportunities that include more personalised educational responses, as indicated for example by the V survey:

We need to develop positive opportunities for young people which tap into the issues they are concerned about while providing an opportunity to enjoy personal passions.
(V, 2007:10)

As suggested by Haste and Hogan (2006) we won't understand what motivates young people to civic engagement unless we ask them. This ultimately requires a shift away from strategies to 'make' young people citizens, towards finding ways of supporting them 'as' citizens.

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