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Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

The Democracy Challenge: Young people and voter registration.

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In May 2009, at the height of the MP's expenses row, the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown (Brown 2009) talked about the need for "major constitutional reform" which included "the case for votes at 16". In March 2009 one of his cabinet colleagues, Ed Miliband, (Scottish Labour 2009) went even further stating;

We need to do more to hear the voice of young people in society. That is why we need to transform young people's role in our democracy and in my view, introduce votes at 16.

In Scotland the rhetoric of British Parliamentarians has been put into practice by the Scottish Parliament. The passing of the Health Boards (Membership and Elections) Bill and the introduction of a new model scheme for Community Councils in April 2009 will mean that 16 and 17 year olds will be able to stand for and vote in elections to these bodies.

Whilst this extension of the opportunities young people have to engage with the electoral process should be welcomed, it does present a fundamental challenge. However I would suggest that this challenge also presents an exciting opportunity for community educators. The challenge concerns the wider context of young people's apparent disengagement from the political process. Specifically, a key prerequisite for young people's active involvement in this electoral process is their inclusion on the electoral register, yet young people as a group, are amongst the least likely to be on the electoral register or to engage with formal political processes. However this context also presents community educators with increased opportunities and motivation to work with young people so they can fully understand and engage with this extension of the electoral process. Therefore learning for and about democracy should be an increased priority for community educators who work with young people, particularly with 16 and 17 year olds.



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In this article I want to comment on some aspects of young people’s political engagement and in doing so I want to do four things. First I’ll give an example of how the low registration rate amongst young people can be addressed by using a youth voter registration initiative as a case study. Second, I’ll go on to emphasise that in this context of young people’s disengagement from the formal political process, educational work aimed at fully developing young people’s political literacy must be a core part of any voter registration initiative. Third, I want to make a case for community educators playing a lead role in this educational work. I’ll conclude by suggesting that despite the flaws in our system of democracy, opting out by young people is not a realistic alternative. The only real potential for their voices to be heard and to influence change is for them to learn about democracy and be encouraged to actively engage in the formal political process. Therefore, rather than tinkering at the edges of the franchise, I’ll argue that the voting age should be reduced to 16 for all elections.

Young people and electoral registration

The scale and detail of young people’s lack of engagement in the electoral and formal political process is well known through research. For example analysis of the 2005 UK parliamentary elections by MORI found that:

... young people were half as likely to vote as older age groups and estimated turnout among young people was lower than in 2001: according to MORI, it was 37% in 2005 compared to 39% four years ago. (Electoral commission, P7 2005)

These findings lead some to suggest that there is a potential crisis for democracy in the UK, for example as Russell et al (2002) state:

A central worry for those concerned with the state of democracy in Britain is that young voters might be suffering from what Eliasoph (1988) has termed “the shrinking circle of concern”: that widespread indifference to and ignorance of politics is causing an evaporation of the concepts of citizenship and



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participation.

In relation to voter registration, this low level of engagement was confirmed by an investigation conducted by West Lothian Council officers which found that only 49% of attainers (young people turning 18 in any one year) actually registered to vote in West Lothian. The investigation showed that this was one of the lowest rates in Scotland and this low rate of registration therefore provided the stimulus for action and as a result the Democracy Challenge was created, with the principle aim of raising the registration rate for attainers.

The Democracy Challenge is a one hour presentation given to S5 & S6 students in all eleven high schools in West Lothian. The sessions consisted of four elements: (i) how politics affects your life, (ii) the process of registration, (iii) the promotion of further opportunities for engagement in civic activity, (iv) an opportunity, for those eligible, to register at the session. These sessions involved three community educators from West Lothian Council and staff from the Electoral Registration Office (ERO).

The results of this initiative demonstrate clear evidence that the proportion of attainers registering has increased as a direct result of the Democracy Challenge. The ERO publish the number of attainers on the register in December every year: the figure for 2007 was 1082, the figure for 2008 was 1256. From our partnership with the ERO we are able to confirm that the Democracy Challenge was responsible for 182 of these 1256 registrations. Furthermore as a result of follow up work with schools to include those young people who missed the Democracy Challenge session, a further 71 young people registered after the 1st of December and these figures were not included in the ERO return for December 2008. Therefore the total number of young people added to the electoral register as a result of this initiative is 253, some 20% of the total.

Before moving on to consider the educational work needed to support this promotion of registration, I want to make two points about the Democracy Challenge. Firstly, this is an easily replicated and cost effective initiative. Also, in securing a partnership with the ERO we



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have found willing collaborators with relevant expertise and appropriate responsibilities. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, whilst this initiative has been successful, on reflection we have discovered the limits of the work as it stands and uncovered the true scale of the problem.

Despite getting 253 young people on the register who would not have been otherwise, it only scratches the surface of the problem. The total number of attainers left unregistered for 2008 was 986. The problem we face with the Democracy Challenge therefore is that it is primarily focused on attainers who are in high schools, yet the majority of attainers are not in school. Therefore focusing on schools alone can at best only reach approximately 25% of those attainers who are least to register.

Our response to this is to work towards finding and engaging with the missing 986. As a result, we are now approaching employers, further education colleges and agencies that have contact with these young people and trying to find ways to offer them a similar opportunity to that offered to those in school. Examples of this work so far include sessions with the West Lothian Council's apprentices and information stalls, targeted at marginalised groups, to raise awareness and promote registration in the lead up to the European Parliamentary elections in 2009. The result from this work was a further 111 under 25 year olds entered on the register for the first time.

Learning for democracy

Whilst getting young people registered is a key pre-condition to democratic engagement, it is not enough in itself. Young people also have to develop their political literacy in order to see the need for engagement in the first place and then do so in an informed way. As John Stuart Mill (Ch 8) powerfully argued in the debates concerning the extensions to the franchise in the 19th century, "universal teaching must precede universal enfranchisement". This educational approach is confirmed in some of the current literature on young people's political engagement. As Russell et al (ibid p, 47) states:

If the youngest generations are not participating in politics because they lack



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sufficient social capital, education ought to be a necessary precondition for reinvigorating democracy. We would argue, however, that active citizenship comprises more than simply voting at elections: the whole range of participatory democracy needs to be covered by any citizenship programme.

This need for educational opportunities as a pre requisite to and means of sustaining young people's political engagement seems clear to me from my own work with young people. I would argue that in general they lack knowledge and awareness of what I would term the five Ps: Parties, Politicians, Parliaments and Political Processes. For example the following quotations come from young people who took part in a Democracy Challenge session and were eligible to vote in the European elections (on 4.6.09);

Modern studies has enhanced my understanding, however young people who have not studied this will probably have little or no knowledge of the voting system, how they work or the government and so no interest in voting. This needs to be put across to young people in a way that is accessible to all so that they all understand.

Need more educational courses in place within schools to help young people understand politics and how parliament works.

For younger people that are inexperienced at voting give them some sort of pack explaining parties intentions of what they plan to do because if you Google it you're not really sure on what you are looking for and what is correct information.

So to maximise and make meaningful the opportunities presented by this limited extension of the franchise, it needs to be accompanied by the promotion of electoral registration. However this should not just focus on the administrative detail of how to do it. It also has to involve educational intervention which engages young people in a critical dialogue which helps them understand why participation in the political process is important. Furthermore



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to make this educational intervention sustainable it needs to be both followed up and prefigured by longer and more in-depth educational opportunities which help young people to learn about democracy and the political processes and encourages their active involvement in it.

I would argue that the curriculum for this learning for and about democracy should certainly contain knowledge about political institutions, politicians and electoral processes. However, I strongly believe that it should also introduce young people to the history of and ongoing struggle for democracy and the social and political rights we take for granted today. In addition, this learning should help young people identify issues in their own lives and how they are affected by politics and what they can do to address these issues and influence changes.

I know from experience that engaging young people in these educational opportunities is difficult as many young people find politics boring and can't see how it affects them. Yet the policy context does provide both the opportunities and the motivation to develop this work as youth empowerment, participation and citizenship are high up the public policy agenda. When it comes to developing this work with young people, particularly in and with schools, I would argue that, as a result of the nature of our training and the associated core competencies community educators are best placed to play a leading role in this work and can make a unique and decisive contribution. For example one of the five core values of Community Learning & Development is;

Empowerment - increasing the ability of individuals and groups to influence issues that affect them and their communities through individual and or collective action. (see Standards Council 2009);

Furthermore, community educators are trained to help participants; "...analyse and understand power dynamics and decision-making processes", "...participate in decision-making structures and processes" and "...campaign for change" (see Standards Council 2009).



Conclusion

In conclusion I want to turn to what I see as a crucial issue concerning young people's political engagement. Whilst research evidence does show that young people are disengaged from the political process, they are not necessarily apathetic or disengaged absolutely; just from the formal expressions of politics. It seems that they do care about politics and democracy. As Henn and Wienstein (2006: P 528, 529) comment:

...young people's apparent reluctance to vote in elections does not signal a lack of interest in 'politics', nor does it indicate political apathy; the evidence presented ... suggests that young people are concerned about political matters, and that they have a broad agenda of issue concerns. Furthermore, young people are generally predisposed to the democratic process. They have a strong civic orientation and a firm belief in the principles of voting and elections. However, there is an apparent inconsistency here in that this broad commitment to the democratic process is not translated into actual democratic participation.

The causes of this discontinuity between young people's apparent support for democratic values but lack of participation in the formal process are complex and varied and I don't have the space to explore these fully in this article. However I want to highlight what I think are two important features. One is to do with young people's lack of political literacy, whilst the other relates to how the formal political process operates and the behaviour and language of politicians and parties. As community educators we can't do anything about the latter, but I would suggest we have the competence and the moral duty to do something about the former. We have to find ways in which we can connect or reconnect young people with the formal political process.

Whether we or young people like it or not, and despite its flaws, we live in a representative democracy. As Winston Churchill commented in a speech to Parliament in 1947:



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No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

Our current political system is the only one operating and, as such, I would argue that we need to help young people understand it and actively engage with it, ultimately, it is the only real way their voices can be heard and they can seek to influence the decisions which affect their lives.

Young people are living through difficult times, not least as a result of the recession and the impact on youth employment. They are being affected by the decisions made by politicians in the UK and Scotland. Some examples identified by young people that I have been working with recently include: the increase in the legal age to buy cigarettes and the attempted increase in the legal age to buy alcohol at the Scottish Parliament; economic exploitation in the labour market and the operation of the system for allocating council housing.

In all these areas, and more, young people are being affected by the decisions politicians make, but they lack the political power to influence them. I would argue therefore that if the Government are serious about the outcomes of citizenship education and see young people as ‘citizens of today, rather than citizens in waiting’ (Learning and teaching Scotland 2002 P2), then a major contribution to achieving this would be to follow the direction of policy through to its logical conclusion and give young people full political power by reducing the voting age to 16 for all elections.

Having the vote and using it is an important right of being an active citizen. However it’s not just about expressing a preference periodically at elections. With the use of the vote comes a range of activities which can help develop and sustain political literacy. As Lockyer (2003: P 133) argues:

It provides the focus for a range of political activities – deliberating, debating,



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persuading, organizing, lobbying, canvassing, and perhaps declaring partisan allegiance. It therefore supplies the rationale for developing the knowledge, skills and attributes which constitute political literacy. It is the culmination of civic and political engagement.

Enfranchising 16 year olds may also mean that elected politicians and other decision makers would be more likely to listen to and take seriously the views of young people now. Furthermore enfranchising young people and the experience of being taken seriously, along with developing their political literacy, may also lead to an increased motivation for young people to engage in civic and political activity. By doing so they might begin to change and improve the political processes which they currently shun.

Michael Sandel (2009; P11) has argued that the values and virtues of democratic citizenship are:

...rather like muscles that develop and grow stronger with exercise. A politics of moral and civic renewal depends, it seems to me, on a more strenuous exercise of these civic virtues.

Community educators should seize the opportunity the policy context and the recent extension of the franchise offer to play a leading role, in both formal and informal settings, to help young people build up and exercise their 'democratic muscles' so they can learn about and take part in democracy and the political process and take full advantage of the opportunities crated by acquiring these voting rights.

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