

The civic engagement of young people living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage

Introduction

The introduction of Citizenship Education (CE) into the Secondary National Curriculum in England in 2002 was rooted in anxieties about levels of civic engagement amongst young people. This anxious starting point has very much influenced the ways in which attention has been paid to young people's civic engagement. Policy concerned with young people and civic engagement has been dominated by a deficit view of young people as inadequate performers in civic society. By way of example both the current coalition government and the previous labour UK government have each developed their own programmes aimed at encouraging a more civically engaged body of young people in Britain. Young people's lack of civic engagement is portrayed as manifesting itself in various guises, from apathy to anti-social behaviour, each of which are generally held to be problematic for other members of society. By way of contrast, civic engagement is held to be beneficial for both individuals, and for society as a whole, and it is therefore generally perceived to be intrinsically rewarding behaviour that is to be encouraged amongst young people.

Those interested in pursuing social justice have turned their attention to examining the civic engagement of marginalised young people including those from socio-economically disadvantaged communities. This interest perhaps reflects a concern that whilst these young people potentially have the most to gain through being civically engaged, they are also those facing the most challenges which may adversely affect their levels of engagement. This risk is heightened because some altruistic behaviours relevant to these young people are not traditionally regarded as indicative of civic engagement because they do not occur within the public, and therefore civic, domain. Instead, they occur in the private domain.

This chapter has a specific focus on young people living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. It examines the evidence base that has focused on the civic engagement of young people. Then, having found the evidence base to be lacking, it argues that if we know little about the civic engagement of young people in general, then we know even less about the civic engagement of young people living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. It finds that issues of epistemology and measurement are significant in explaining the

diversity of views about whether or not young people are civically engaged. The chapter begins by addressing the question what is civic engagement?

What is civic engagement ?

Civic engagement is a term that is variously defined (when it is defined at all). It is something that is often portrayed as synonymous with civic action and therefore with 'doing'. Interest in what young people 'do' in their leisure time is of great concern to policy-makers and this is reflected in the number of studies dedicated to exploring what young people 'do' . The Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO), for example, recently sought to explore and summarise the evidence base relating to young people's involvement in 'positive activities' which was, in this study, defined as 'participation in structured leisure-time activities outside of school and home'. Positive activities were varied but these were predominantly sports-based activities with arts and/or culturally based activities far less prevalent.

A report from the study (Adamson and Poultney, 2010) found that around three-quarters of young people participated in some form of positive activity but far fewer young people from lower-income families or from rural areas participated in these activities. The under-representation of young people from these two groups is concerning since a range of positive outcomes were reported to be delivered through young people's participation in positive activities including developing personal, social and emotional skills, improved relationships between young people and their peers and adults and improved educational outcomes. The more positive activities young people engaged in, the greater their resulting benefit. It was also recognised, however, that there was a lack of robust evidence in terms of social return on investment and on longitudinal outcomes and that much of the evidence was based on young people's self reports.

The findings from the C4EO (Adamson and Poultney, 2010) study supports the belief that young people benefit from being engaged in positive activities, however, there was no suggestion that such engagement demonstrated 'civic engagement'. Civic engagement then is not confined to positive activities - it involves more than young people being positively occupied in socially acceptable activities.

Civic engagement is defined in this chapter as an umbrella term used to describe a collection of behaviours by either individuals or groups which contribute to the 'common good' often through promoting or delivering positive change. Specific behaviours that potentially fit under this umbrella

include formal political participation, volunteering, campaigning, fundraising and participation in decision-making.

Focussing on 'civic' engagement is however potentially problematic because it can overlook activities which can be classified as 'contributing to the common good' but which may not occur within the public domain. Morrow (1994) found that 40% of 11-16 year olds had regular home responsibilities (minding siblings, cleaning, laundry etc) and almost as many helped in a family business or earned money outside the home. Some European children (unpaid usually) are the main carers of disabled parents or other family members (Becker, Dearden and Aldridge, 2001). In immigrant families children's language skills are frequently used by the family in dealing with officialdom (Orellana, Dorner and Pulido (2003). It is suggested here then that a definition of civic engagement that rests on actions for the 'common good' should include a broad range of activities that require young people to exert their energies to aid others since, it is argued, this enables a greater 'common good' to be achieved.

Civic engagement also has an implicit temporal dimension as not only does civic engagement benefit both young people and wider society in the immediate time-frame, it is also believed that having civically engaged young people will ensure positive outcomes for individuals and for wider society in the future. By ensuring our young people are civically engaged in the present there is a hope that the future will also be secured. A key issue here is of course young people's role in upholding democratic society through voting and other associated behaviours.

Young People living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage

This chapter is concerned with issues relating to the civic engagement of young people from socio-economically disadvantaged communities who are often marginalised and who face many challenges arising from poverty and other associated disadvantages. In Britain around 2.8 million children were living in relative poverty in 2008/09 (Department for Work and Pensions 2010) leaving them vulnerable to a range of negative outcomes which frequently persist into adulthood as noted by Darton et al. (2003) who stated that:

“Poverty in Britain is inextricably intertwined with disadvantages in health, housing, education and other aspects of life. It is hard for people who lack resources to take advantage of the opportunities available to the rest of society.” (Darton et al., 2003:9)

There is a greater risk of experiencing poverty for children living with lone parents, in workless households or for children from Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Black ethnic groups. Almost half of all children from minority ethnic families are in households experiencing income poverty (Kenway & Palmer, 2007). The lower a child's socio-economic group at birth, the greater the probability they will experience multiple deprivation in adulthood (Feinstein, 2007). There is also an established link between educational under-achievement and low income. It is known that 11 year-olds eligible for free school meals are twice as unlikely to achieve basic standards in literacy and numeracy as other 11 year-olds and more than a quarter of white British boys eligible for free school meals do not obtain five or more GCSEs, a much higher proportion than any other group. (Palmer, 2008).

If civic engagement is positively associated with being, and becoming, a 'citizen' then it is important to explore the civic engagement of young people living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities recognising that they face more challenges than most young people. It is disappointing then to report that much research examining the civic engagement of young people is conducted with little or no reference to this issue. Some of the evidence that has examined young people's civic engagement is presented in the following sections. The evidence has been collated under three subheadings: civic engagement as formal political participation, civic engagement through volunteering, campaigning and fundraising and civic engagement as participation. The evidence base indicates that identifying civically engaged young citizens is a challenging task.

Civic engagement as formal political participation

Some authors have argued that young people's lack of engagement in formal politics is resulting in a 'democratic deficit' (Jowell & Park, 1998, Putnam, 2000). This viewpoint has however been contested by others arguing that it is not apathy that fuels young people's abstinence from formal political participation but instead disaffection with a political system that does not reflect contemporary youth culture (Loader, 2007). Other authors have argued that young people are no different to other adults in their variations in formal political participation processes (Edwards, 2007, Banaji, 2008). Kirshner et al remind us of the complexity of young people's political positioning 'Young people are often cynical and hopeful, or both critical and engaged' (2003: 2).

The Young People's Social Attitudes Survey of 663 12-19 year olds was conducted by The National Centre for Social Research. The study found that young people generally were disaffected about politics but were more likely to be interested in households where the adults in their house were

interested in politics and where those adults were both educated and wealthy (Park et al., 2004). They found that young people's attitudes were not static and varied across both time, and age groups. Socio-economic status was more important than other factors in predicting the types of activities, such as voluntary and charity work, that young people were engaged in.

The Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS) was conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research. The study aimed to examine the impact of citizenship education on students in England. The NFER produced annual reports on the findings from the study throughout its duration (2001-2010). Using data from the 2004/05 survey of 13,646 English students aged 13/14 Lopes et al (2009) explored the impact of citizenship education on four specific dimensions of young people's future intentions: voting in general elections, voting in local elections, volunteering time to help other people, and collecting money for a good cause. Regardless of the reliability of these measures for predicting future action, the results reveal some interesting differences between groups of young people. Female students and those living in homes with more books (a proxy for socio-economic status) were more likely to indicate an intention to participate, as were Asian students. Importantly though, the strongest relationship identified was the relationship between perceived benefits of participation and intention to participate in the future. The authors suggest that future research could usefully explore the impact of both knowledge and self-efficacy on this relationship:

“Bringing out the personal advantages of participation through citizenship education and other initiatives may be desirable if young people's engagement in civic and political life is to be stimulated”
(Lopes et al:15)

Some authors have suggested that a unique attribute of young people's political participation is their distinctive preference for single-issue political action (Haste 2005, Roker, 1999).

Civic engagement through volunteering, campaigning and fundraising

Volunteering, campaigning and fundraising are other behaviours that fit under the umbrella of civic engagement. Available evidence indicates that whilst young people may be disengaged from formal political participation there is evidence that young people do get involved with actions that are concerned with a variety of activities which contribute to the 'common good' – activities including signing petitions, fundraising and donating money.

In the sixth CELS annual report the authors argue that young people's civic engagement is connected to 'near environment' experiences and issues (such as family, peers, school, or neighbourhood) and away from national and European community issues (Benton et al., 2008). They argue that this creates the potential for new learning spaces or sites of civic engagement that are more personalised to the interests of young people and subsequently more accessible than traditional and more formal sites of civic engagement. CSV highlight the 'hidden volunteering' taking place, particularly among BME communities, which is informal and not necessarily professionally organised, but is driven by communities or faith groups themselves according to their needs (Hoodless, 2005:11). Haste (2005) found that around a quarter of young people in England were very involved in their communities, it also found a similar number were disengaged and disaffected.

There is evidence that young people living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities are potentially excluded from formal volunteering opportunities by negative perceptions of volunteering and volunteers. Volunteers were seen by young people as hippies, affluent or old people and young people were dissuaded by these negative stereotypes (Pye et al., 2009) and many young people, particularly from socially excluded backgrounds, did not consider themselves as the sort of person who volunteers. Fiscal concerns also deterred young people from volunteering with costs such as membership fees and transportation costs being prohibitive (Roker et al., 1999). Organisations that aim to facilitate formal volunteering recognise the challenges they face in engaging young people from diverse backgrounds.

Where young people from disadvantaged communities are recruited into volunteering opportunities there is however evidence that they can find these experiences beneficial. An example of this is The Young Volunteer Challenge project which targeted the recruitment of volunteers from more diverse backgrounds, as defined by factors including young peoples' socio-economic status, ethnicity and gender. The evaluation feedback from the young volunteers about the impact of the programme was overwhelmingly positive and young people who took part were also more likely to progress into education and employment (GHK Consulting Ltd, 2006).

Civic engagement as participation

There has in recent years been an increasing interest in hearing the voices of young people and notions of 'voice' are intrinsically linked with notions of civic engagement. Young people are encouraged to become civically engaged or to demonstrate their civic engagement through contributing to decision-making

processes. There is a 'growing culture of participation' whereby young people's contributions are valued as having the potential to influence decisions that affect their lives and those of their communities (Halsey et al., 2008). This culture of participation can have a positive impact on young people's sense of 'self efficacy' which in turn has been found to be a key factor in influencing their levels of civic engagement (Benton et al., 2008). Halsey et al. (2006) suggest, however, that the time has now come for organisations to move beyond concerns with 'participation as a process', in order to direct attention towards exploring the actual impact of young people's involvement. They report that there is a paucity of evidence about the actual impact of young people's involvement, prompting them to recommend that the outcomes of young people's involvement are properly evaluated, through longitudinal research which prioritises young people's own perspectives.

Morrow (2006) examined the participation experiences of young people from socio-economically disadvantaged communities exploring the nature of social networks, local identity, attitudes towards institutions and facilities in the community. She found that participation in community decision-making for young people in the study was limited.

"Overall, the study highlighted how a range of practical, environmental, and economic constraints were felt by this age-group; for example, not having safe spaces where they could play, not being able to cross the road because of traffic, having no place to go except the shopping centre, being regarded with suspicion because of lack of money."
(Morrow, 2006:145)

The report concluded that 'linking social capital', that is, connecting or bridging groups to influential others, enabling access to power structures, was clearly lacking for the young people in the study.

Another social change relevant to a discussion about young people's civic engagement is an increasing interest in the impact of technological advances on young people's civic engagement (Banaji 2008, Coleman 2007). Perhaps unsurprisingly some studies suggest that there are considerable variations between young peoples' opportunity to access the internet. The UK Children Go Online study of 9-19 year olds' use of the internet and concluded that socio-economic differences are sizeable (Livingstone et al., 2005).

Discussion

The evidence presented within this chapter indicates that we have a long way to go in understanding the complexity of young people's civic engagement and this is even more so when we focus on young people living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. This section explores some of the factors underpinning the gaps in our evidence base. These factors include methodological issues, 'Adulthood', questions about the beneficial nature of civic engagement and the nature of young people's 'citizenship'.

The evidence indicates that young people living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage are less likely to be engaged in many of the behaviours currently associated with civic engagement. However, it is important to offer some words of caution here. Qualitative methods usually suggest that young people have higher levels of social and civic participation than are recorded through quantitative methods (Whiting and Harper ONS, 2003). In addition to young people's actions being under recorded, survey data also typically underestimates the participation of socially marginalized groups because it fails to capture the fluid and unstructured forms of participation that are attractive to young people (Fahmy, 2006).

Another factor impacting on our understanding of young people's civic engagement is 'Adulthood' (Dalrymple and Burke 1995: 141-2) which Roche (1999) argues is as pervasive a force as sexism and racism. Much of the attention that is paid to the civic engagement of young people is done so from an adult viewpoint and it is therefore frequently structured according to the concerns of the adult rather than the young people. Where authors have attempted to adopt research that is young-person led a more complex picture emerges. For example, Haste (2005) found that young people have a different definition of what being a good citizen means, and also of what it means to be civically engaged. This report found that:

"Young people's definition of the good citizen, as well as the pattern of their own motives, indicates a broader picture that includes both quasi-political activity related to specific issues they wish to make their voices heard on, and community involvement to help the disadvantaged and to support others. This latter kind of activity is not usually seen as explicitly 'political' – either by its practitioners or by political science – but it clearly plays a very important part in motivating civic involvement and perhaps in providing basic skills for action." (Haste, 2005:27)

Civic engagement is commonly perceived to be desirable and intrinsically beneficial for all. The indicated under-representation of young people from

socio-economically disadvantaged communities in civic engagement opportunities is considered to be problematic *inter alia* because of the missed opportunities for development that are denied to the excluded young people and their communities. It is important to recognise that the assumption that all young people universally benefit from formalised civic engagement educational opportunities is one that again may not reflect the complexity of young people's lived experiences. In their paper 'Dead end kids in dead end jobs?' Quinn et al (2008) challenge the notion that young people in 'jobs without training' would necessarily benefit from being encouraged into alternative educational pathways. Their assertions are based on a longitudinal participative, qualitative project involving 182 interviews with 114 young people in jobs without training. The study attempted to challenge existing notions and respond to the lack of research that examined the complexity of these young peoples' needs, work experiences and priorities. They concluded that whilst young people in jobs without training face serious structural inequalities, this is not necessarily a deficit category and the term does not reflect their complex lives. In contrast, these young peoples' lives are not without learning, both in the workplace and in their worlds outside and that these contexts are preferable to those offered by school or college. Quinn et al therefore suggest trying to force these young people 'into formal, linear educational pathways is anachronistic and likely to be actively resisted.' This study highlights the importance of not assuming that 'civic engagement' opportunities are necessarily intrinsically or universally beneficial for all participants. It raises important questions about which young people learn what through being civically engaged.

Another issue relevant to this discussion about the civic engagement of young people living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage is the nature of citizenship and its link with aspirations of economic independence and financial contribution. The work of Lister et al (2003) indicates that young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are less likely to see themselves as citizens. Lister et al (2003) classified the 110 young people in their three-year qualitative, longitudinal study of young people aged 16/17, 18/19 and 22/23 as 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Insiders were studying A levels on route to university and graduate occupations whilst 'outsiders' had no qualifications and were mainly unemployed. Among the many conclusions they draw is that there are differences between the 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in terms of the way they perceive themselves to be citizens.

'At each wave, 'outsiders' were less likely than 'insiders' to identify themselves as citizens.'(Lister et al, 2003:241)

The young people in their study recognised different models of citizenship which were more or less relevant to them and their experiences. Many felt that the link between being a 'good' citizen and earning money excluded them because of their age and lack of inclusion in the job market. This is an issue that is likely to become increasingly pertinent to young people's civic engagement as young people feel the impact of the current economic constraints disproportionately.

Conclusion

This chapter has raised many questions about current understandings of young people's civic engagement, particularly those living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Whilst it is possible to find evidence that supports the idea that young people are, or are not, civically engaged there is also much evidence to suggest that this is a much too simplistic approach. A broad definition of civic engagement was adopted in the chapter in order to explore the complexity of young people's civic engagement and in response to the problem that focusing on very narrow aspects of young people's behaviour simplifies their actions and ignores young people's viewpoints and realities. It is recognised that adopting this broad definition is of course problematic because such a broad definition is necessarily difficult to operationalise. It is also recognised that in some cases it is the absence of a behaviour that can be considered to signify young people's civic engagement and that some behaviour such as protesting can be perceived both as civic engagement or as civic disorder depending on the perspective taken.

Research evidence indicates that young people can be both civically engaged and civically disengaged simultaneously. It is also important to note, however, that there is considerable evidence which indicates that young people living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage are amongst the least likely to *appear* to be civically engaged. This is explained in part by the inadequacies in collating evidence of civic engagement resulting in part from utilising adult-led narrow definitions of civic engagement. It is likely also however to be a reflection of processes that discourage, or even prohibit, these young people from being civically engaged and it is these issues that are in need of further scrutiny.

Interest in young people's civic engagement is underpinned by a hope that young people 'care' enough to be, or to become, fully-fledged citizens taking on both the rights and the responsibilities that this entails. This chapter has indicated that rather than searching for evidence that supports or refutes adult preconceptions of young people's civic engagement efforts are instead dedicated to recognising the complexity of issues surrounding young people's

civic engagement. The studies presented here indicate that we learn more when we prioritise the voices of young people in research, challenge assumptions about what constitutes civic engagement and challenge the implicit universally beneficial nature of civic engagement opportunities for all young people.

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