

# Making the good better:

do youth social action initiatives impact the life chances of young people equally and what role can educational establishments play?

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of cultural habitus and the structures of social, economic and cultural capital that can influence young people's participation in youth social action initiatives. Existing UK-based evidence suggests that social action projects deliver significant improvements in the skills required for life and work for young people who participate, but that socio-economic disadvantage has a negative influence on both the motivations for participation and the outcomes achieved by young people from these backgrounds. Research suggests that schools and colleges can play a crucial part in helping those from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate. However, it also indicates that those serving the highest proportion of young people from low-income families are the least likely to have a culture of social action. This literature review discusses the contribution educational establishments can make in levelling the playing field.

### KEYWORDS

YOUTH SOCIAL ACTION

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

CULTURAL HABITUS

SOCIAL CAPITAL

NATIONAL CITIZEN SERVICE

## INTRODUCTION

In the last few years the concept of youth social action – *'Young people taking practical action in the service of others in order to create positive social change that is of benefit to the wider community as well as to the young person themselves'* (CYSA 2013: 8) – has been mooted as the answer to everything from youth unemployment to social mobility. An evaluation of the flagship initiative of the current government's youth policy agenda, the National Citizen Service (NCS) – a summer programme designed to bring young people aged 16–17 together to create a more cohesive, responsible and engaged society – has

documented the positive outcomes for young people through participation in social action projects (Booth et al. 2015). Further research commissioned by the Cabinet Office from Chapman (2015) and the Behavioural Insights Team (Kirkman et al. 2016), among others, has also evidenced the benefits to both young people and communities of participation, and the government-backed #iwill campaign has been pledged £40 million of seed funding to ensure that 60% of 10–20-year-olds across the UK take part in meaningful voluntary social action by 2020 (Step Up To Serve 2017), alongside the £900 million projected investment in the NCS over the next four years (Murphy 2017). But can an activity often

perceived as being delivered primarily by the high-achieving, 'do-gooding' philanthropic middle class really bring benefits to young people whatever their background?

Dean (2015) suggests that young people from a socio-economically disadvantaged background are less likely to participate in social action initiatives due to the negatively reinforcing nature of their cultural habitus; the social structures one is brought up with that determine our responses to situations (Bourdieu 1986). Likewise, Chapman (2015) asserts that young people at a socio-economic disadvantage require more support and encouragement to achieve

in social action initiatives, yet are less likely to receive it, as a result of lower stocks of social, economic and cultural capital. A recent survey of 10–20-year-olds by Ipsos MORI (Pye & Michelmore 2016) found that teachers are the biggest motivator for young people from the least affluent families in encouraging participation; however, secondary school teachers working in schools with the highest proportion of young people from this background were also less likely to report that social action is part of their culture and practice (NFER 2017). With a skills survey report by Ofsted (2011) suggesting that well-managed volunteering projects in colleges and schools have the potential to enhance young people's learning experience, and the recent statutory duty placed on schools to promote the NCS (Murphy 2017), the aim of this literature review is therefore to question whether participation in social action initiatives serves to bridge the gap in attainment for young people from different socio-economic backgrounds, or whether it ultimately serves to make the good better.

## OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

Current research evaluating the impact of participation in specific social action programmes delivered across the UK (Arches & Fleming 2006; YAN & CSA 2009; CYSA 2013; Booth et al. 2015; Chapman 2015; Kirkman et al. 2016) has consistently demonstrated the 'double benefit' of youth social action – enabling young people to positively impact upon their communities and to develop personally and socially, thereby benefiting both the community and the individual. Young people's participation in practical activities that help the community is not only believed to have a positive impact on the people who benefit from the activity directly, but also on the young people delivering the activity (Birdwell et al. 2013), with research from the Department for Education (2012) suggesting that the resulting improvements in emotional, behavioural

and social wellbeing are associated with higher levels of educational engagement and academic achievement. McNeil et al. (2012) further suggest that there is considerable evidence to demonstrate that youth social action can be a powerful medium for enhancing the life experience of young people by developing a young person's intrinsic, individual capabilities, through enabling them to bring about social change.

Looking at specific examples of social action initiatives, then, we can begin to see these common themes emerging. The Behavioural Insights Team (Kirkman et al. 2016) were commissioned to evaluate a range of social action projects funded by the Cabinet Office Centre for Social Action and Educational Endowment Foundation, with a focus on key character skills for adulthood and future employment. Using quantitative data collected from randomised controlled trials, they were able to demonstrate that those who participated in the programmes displayed significant improvements in their skills for work and life compared to counterparts who did not participate (Kirkman et al. 2016). Chapman's (2015) evaluation report of the National Youth Agency Youth Social Action Journey Fund Programme similarly demonstrated outcomes on the individual level that can be extrapolated into benefits for society. The CYSA (2013) found that young people reported positive impacts against key indicators including cooperation, empathy, problem solving, wellbeing, attainment and grit, thought to contribute to longer-lasting benefits to the community, such as sustained employment, education or training, and reduced antisocial behaviour. Booth et al. (2015) evaluated the government-backed NCS initiative, which over the last three years has been found to have statistically significant positive impacts in all four of the outcome areas explored in the evaluation: transition to adulthood, teamwork, involvement in the community, and social mixing, which relates to concepts of increased social capital.

The government has an interest in promoting activities that are thought to generate social capital – a concept that 'refers to connections among individuals, social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Putnam 2000: 19) – as a means to deal with concerns about social exclusion and the decline of neighbourliness seen in recent decades (Packham 2008). The theory behind it is that two different types of networks exist between people: 'bonding' social capital, which brings similar people together; and 'bridging' social capital, which unites outwardly dissimilar people (Tyler et al. 2009), and proposes that the greater the number of these networks between people, the higher the levels of social capital within a community, and thus the more community cohesion, that exist (Harper & Kelly 2003). The NCS provision of youth social action is the latest policy manifestation of the 'Big Society' agenda – the ideology that power, responsibility and decision-making is taken from the state and given to individuals and communities, which was the underlying political rhetoric of David Cameron's Coalition government. Although the term itself seems to have gradually disappeared from political dialogue (Macmillan 2013), significant elements of the strategy have remained, most notably the notion that deficits in public expenditure can be compensated for by a renewal of voluntary action and community spirit (Corbett & Walker 2012).

Brewis (2014) observes that social action is more than young people '*clocking up community volunteering hours in exchange for coveted CV points*' (p. 11) but should be about enabling young people to critically engage with the problems that affect them and genuinely provide solutions, whilst developing their social identity in the process. Birdwell et al. (2015) add weight to this argument, stating that

*'the unique contribution of young people taking part in social action could help to tackle some of our most pressing social problems: help to*

*create collaborative and relational services in health and social care, build more integrated communities, and enable young people to develop character capabilities, employability skills and a robust concern for civic activism and helping others in society' (p. 12).*

The NCS programme, however, has been somewhat criticised as the flagship vehicle for delivering youth social action. De St Croix (2017) notes that due to the time-bound nature of the four-week curriculum, the social action element of the scheme takes place within a tight timeframe which prevents genuine involvement at young people's pace and starting from their concerns. Arches & Fleming (2006) believe that this is a common theme in youth participation, asserting that while young people are encouraged to participate, it is often in environments designed by adults, or where adults set the agenda, meaning genuine opportunities for young people to campaign for real community change through social action are uncommon and somewhat tokenistic. Packham (2008) also believes that the government initiative is designed to develop personal capacities and increase 'human capital' – the tools and training that enhance individual productivity – as opposed to the acknowledged concept of social action, which does not seek solely individual outcomes (Arches & Fleming 2006); but, as Field (2003) advances,

*'policies designed to promote individuals inevitably end up degrading the meaning of volunteering, as the existence of inducements removes the element of altruism and channels people into doing something more out of self-interest than from a desire to serve others' (p. 119).*

The double benefit model of youth social action therefore has the potential for a considerable return on investment, and so, with ongoing austerity measures including cuts to local authority youth services amounting to £387 million since 2010 (UNISON 2015), it is understandable that

current government policy would focus on initiatives that appear to offer a win-win situation for all. In 2017, the government introduced the National Citizen Service Act (2017, c.15) placing a statutory duty on schools to promote this service, but with over £600 million of public funding already spent between 2011 and 2016 and a further £900 million projected for 2017–21 (Murphy 2017), one might question the value for money a time-bound, potentially tokenistic, programme aimed solely at 16–17-year-olds can deliver.

## PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH SOCIAL ACTION

Dean (2015) believes that participation in social action is also profoundly reliant on social class, exemplified by a highly dedicated middle class who inhabit what has been referred to as the 'civic core' of people committing regularly to social causes (Chapman 2015). Dean (2015) argues that recent youth policies have inadvertently reinforced this status quo, instead of encouraging involvement from working-class young people and those from more diverse backgrounds. According to Pye et al. (2009), class – and more specifically socio-economic status – has been found to be more important than any other factor in predicting the types of activities that young people engage in. For example, a report looking at the 2003 Young People's Social Attitudes Survey (Park et al. 2004) found that young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely than other young people to be engaged in mainstream politics, while research by the national youth volunteering charity 'V' concluded that young people from these backgrounds do not consider themselves as 'the sort of person who volunteers' (Pye et al. 2009: 16), not to mention the widely documented gap in higher education participation by young people from different socio-economic backgrounds (DfBIS 2015). The term 'socio-economic disadvantage' is one that is much broader than a primarily economic categorisation of 'poverty' or 'working class', however –

classifying individuals through measures such as their employment, earnings or savings – but highlights the interplay between these economic resources and 'social capital' (as described previously), in combination with their education and understanding of cultural institutions or 'cultural capital' (Dean 2015). It is a term that reflects how the differences in individuals stemming from economic inequalities occur in everyday actions and the fact that people who live in poverty can expect to face multiple difficulties in their day-to-day lives (YAN & CSA 2009).

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital is concerned with the processes that mean people do not have equal access to resources and how this feeds into the formation of social class. A Bourdieusian conceptualisation of class puts the importance of social capital and cultural capital alongside the economic, and his theory of 'habitus' seeks to explain how the social structures one is brought up within affect later everyday practice (Dean 2015). Habitus is a construct where one's previous knowledge and experience combine to determine responses to situations, which, in practice, has been used to demonstrate '*the self-assurance of the middle class with the unease and discomfort of the working class*' (Bottero 2004: 993). This is significant in terms of youth participation because, according to Hart (1992), comparisons of parenting across different societies reveal that families with sufficient financial resources value different experiences than those on a lower income. For example, Dean (2015) has observed that children of professionals who place value on extracurricular activities such as social action initiatives tend to seek such opportunities out for themselves, whereas young people whose backgrounds make them less familiar with such concepts are not brought up to see them as part of their necessary habitus. This is substantiated by evidence that young people whose parents are not involved in volunteering are less likely to participate themselves (Andolina et al. 2003).

This also reinforces Chapman's (2015) view that young people do not all have the same starting point on a social action journey, which he measures by their willingness to engage, since a young person's habitus will inform the personal and material resources they have to begin with, and thus their levels of relative motivation. For example, Trueman (2015) states that young people from advantaged backgrounds are believed to receive more attention and encouragement from their parents from a young age, which then provides them with a foundation for high attainment, in contrast to more disadvantaged young people, who generally have parents with limited time and resources to dedicate to their child's development. Goodman & Gregg (2010) concur, identifying that behaviours and attitudes account considerably for gaps in attainment between young people from different socio-economic backgrounds, with young people more likely to do well in life if they have self-determination, confidence and autonomy, which can result from differences in primary socialisation – the period in which a child initially learns and builds their self through experiences and interactions around them. Chapman (2015) substantiates this theory with evidence that young people from a more affluent socio-economic background required less support to participate in social action and were more likely to sustain their involvement when they did. This is in addition to other barriers to involvement most frequently cited by young people, such as affordability, lack of information, time pressures and self-doubt, which are also more often seen to coincide with material deprivation (Pye et al. 2009).

Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural reproduction suggests that a lack of familiarity with cultural capital, and the absence of the proper disposition that typically comes from such familiarity, or habitus, serves as a barrier to attainment for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. To achieve success at school, for example, students

must use the capital they have received from their families, communities and prior experiences. Effective use of cultural capital typically results in success and positive feedback from teachers, which reinforces their habitus. Conversely, if young people have not been exposed to what is necessary to build cultural capital, they are subsequently placed at a disadvantage when they do not display the proper habitus in school, thus reproducing inequalities based on socio-economic status. However, DiMaggio (1982) believes that the diversity found in the school environment can allow young people at a socio-economic disadvantage to access a different cultural capital than they have previously experienced at home, allowing them to adapt their habitus and therefore better navigate the education system than they otherwise would have. It follows, then, that where a cultural habitus of participation from parents is found to be lacking, encouragement from educators and a positive school environment can have a significant impact.

## CONCLUSION

Although the gap in participation appears to be narrowing, young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are still less likely to take part in youth social action (Pye & Michelmore 2016). With approximately 2.7 million, or almost 30% of, young people aged 14–24 reported to live in poverty in the UK (New Policy Institute 2015), the Government has stated that it is committed to bridging the gap in attainment for the most disadvantaged young people (CO & DfE 2015). But if its sole investment in youth services is in social action initiatives that are failing to engage the most vulnerable young people, Dean (2015) believes there is a risk this will just 'amplify pre-existing inequalities' (p. 129) and that the civic core will remain the territory of a particularly privileged fraction of society. Chapman (2015) also observes that there is a danger that government initiatives will concentrate on those young people who are already inclined

to engage because results will be easier to achieve, whereas reaching those more likely to resist would require sustained and targeted investment. The biggest barriers for schools serving the highest proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds is cited to be a lack of awareness of the benefits of youth social action and a lack of recognition from the Department for Education and Ofsted that youth social action is valued (NFER 2017).

With participation in youth social action found to increase development of some of the most critical skills for employment and adulthood, but with those from lower socio-economic backgrounds less likely to benefit from partaking in social action, is the Government's funding of such initiatives therefore serving only to widen the attainment gap for young people from different socio-economic backgrounds? And if educational establishments can cultivate a cultural habitus that increases participation, is the mere promotion of the NCS programme doing enough to capitalise on the widely documented benefits of youth social action initiatives? Or is there a place for educators to acknowledge the potential to equalise young people's life chances by dramatically increasing opportunities for *all* young people to participate, by making youth social action a mandatory component of the National Curriculum? ■



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