



Exploring the impact of Youth Action Volunteering in England

Project Re:action was a joint project between Youth Action Network, a national youth volunteering charity, and the Centre for Social Action, a training, research and consultancy unit at De Montfort University. The project received a research grant over three years from the **Big Lottery Fund**.

The research aimed to learn more about:

- The experience of young people who volunteer.
- The difference that full participation makes to the volunteering experience.
- The most successful ways of promoting participation within organisations.
- The wider benefits to and impact on the community of this type of activity.

Research methodology

A key feature of this participative research project was that young people themselves were fully involved in planning, steering and carrying out the research.

- We surveyed 920 young people, aged 14 – 25, from across Youth Action Network's member organisations, representing age, ethnic and gender diversity.
- We surveyed 40 youth workers.
- Qualitative fieldwork was carried out with seven Youth Action Network member organisations. This consisted of a total of 16 discussion groups with young people, two discussion groups with workers and eight discussion groups with community members.





Key concepts

The research uncovered an important relationship between participative youth volunteering and social capital. You can find out more inside – but first, an introduction to these key concepts...

Youth Action Volunteering

Youth action volunteering is different to placement volunteering and is commonly referred to as way of supporting young people to develop and lead their own group based volunteering opportunities. The participative process allows them to have more choice or say over what volunteering they do. This involves giving young people opportunities to play a key role in the design, delivery and evaluation of their projects.

Social capital

People engage with others through a variety of relationships forming many different types of networks. Social Capital is the resource that stems from these social interactions, networks and network opportunities which take place in specific environments, which in our research was the volunteering experience. There are different types of social capital, based around different types of networks.

Most commonly they are referred to as:

Bonding social capital

This relates to relationships with family, friends and peer groups that provide a sense of belonging in the here and now. It is good for 'getting by' in life.

Bridging social capital

This is about creating links with people outside our immediate circles, who can help us to broaden our opportunities and horizons. It is good for 'getting ahead' in life.

Linking social capital

This relates to relationships between people with varying levels of power. It is good for accessing support from formal institutions.

Developing a variety of social networks can therefore provide a number of benefits: from personal and emotional support to giving young people more opportunities, choice and power.



Enhancing Social Capital through Volunteering

Key Findings: challenging pre conceived attitudes

- Young volunteers state that volunteering encourages them to challenge the way they think about current affairs, about other people and their own life.
- Volunteering changes young volunteers attitudes towards people who are different to them and encourages ways of learning from each other.
- Almost half of the volunteers asked (45%) felt that volunteering has changed in some way the opinion that they previously held about other types of people.
- The biggest change in opinion identified through the research refers to attitudes towards people with different identities, lifestyles and social class. 51% of the volunteers started to socialise with people who are somehow different to them as a direct result of volunteering.

Significance

Whilst volunteering can encourage young people to change their attitudes towards people who are different to them and might enable them to learn from each other. However whilst there are a considerable number of young people who through volunteering enhance their **bridging social capital** creating links with people outside their immediate circles, there is also a group of young volunteers (about half of the young people) who do not benefit from this enhancement. It is to note that new and diverse networks can be very important for broadening opportunities and horizons.

Key Findings: Gaining access to resources through meeting new people

- Through meeting new people a majority of volunteers report an increase in their personal and social development. Over 60% of young people who took part in the research feel that through volunteering they gain confidence and a better understanding of people
- Half of the young people feel that volunteering broadens their horizons and makes them happy.
- Half of the young people feel that through meeting new people they benefited in educational and career/ employment support.
- 66% of young people who had experience of volunteering in national and international settings compared with 44% of young people volunteering in neighbourhood settings reported that through meeting new people they benefited in educational and career/ employment support.
- 77% (compared to an overall average of 52%) of young volunteers who said that they had engaged in some sort of anti social behaviour perceive that through meeting new people they benefited in educational and career/ employment support.

Significance

The benefits received through young volunteers meeting new people is affected by the setting where the volunteering takes place i.e. neighbourhood and local community, school, college or university and national or international. Young people's social capital is enhanced by moving away from their immediate community and interacting with new people. New and diverse social networks are not only important in terms of emotional support but also crucial for their personal and social development and giving young people more opportunities, choice and power.



Key Findings: Participation, Influence and Trust

- One of the most important findings of the research is that there is a strong relationship between levels of participation (P) and young people's sense of influence (I) and being trusted (T).
- The feeling that they have high levels of influence and are being trusted by adult workers is extremely important to young volunteers.
 - 44% of those surveyed reported that they are experiencing high levels of participation, sense of influence and being trusted.
 - Not all young people want to take on a leadership role, but this isn't affecting their sense of influence or being trusted: 40% are experiencing low levels of participation, with high levels of influence and trust.
 - 85% of young volunteers agree or strongly agree that, in their voluntary organisation, adults put a lot of trust in young people.
- However expectations and demands on young volunteers from projects and workers can be too high which can lead to in some cases to stress, disappointment and disillusion for the young people.
- Another central finding is that the environment and dynamics which create high levels of participation, influence and trust (PIT) also enable better processes through which social capital is enhanced.
- 63% of young people with high levels of PIT against 40% of young people with low levels of PIT reported that through meeting new people they benefited in educational and career/ employment support.

Significance

Youth action volunteering promotes group based participative volunteering; this also reflects government policies which promote young people having a greater say in the design and delivery of services and in decisions that affect them, being in charge of their organisation, of their volunteering and generally leading or playing a part in decision making processes.

Important aspects in promoting participation of young volunteers are for them to be able to make their own decisions and being trusted to make these decisions. Within this, the support and trust they get from workers was identified as crucial element. Whilst it has to be noted that not all young volunteers want to take on leadership roles there is still scope to further young people's power, say and leadership within volunteering projects. Recognising that at certain times in their lives young people might not be in a position to take up these opportunities and responsibilities should not deter workers to create environments where young people can take advantage of the opportunities and the arising benefits of high levels of participation.

Areas for improvement

- Some young volunteers were disillusioned by the notion of participation in political or government affairs feeling that their voice wouldn't make any difference. Many young volunteers feel as if they are not listened to or not heard within political and government levels.
- Young people also pointed out that the expectations of the young person in thinking that their volunteering will give them power and voice is not always matched with the reality which can lead to disappointment and disillusion.
- Some young volunteers pointed out that the possibility to set up their own activities is not always being promoted by their volunteering organisation, and so they were often unaware of it is a possibility.
- Workers need to be very careful not to overburden those volunteers which already have high levels of participation.



Enhancing Community Cohesion

Key Findings

- Young people highlighted the importance of fostering a sense of belonging and creating a safe environment where young people can meet other young people within organisations and groups.
- Young people feel that they can contribute to community cohesion:
 - by breaking down stereotypes in their community or neighbourhood
 - fostering understandings of different cultures and religions
 - solving social problems within communities and neighbourhoods
 - bringing different people from the community/ neighbourhood together
 - helping others to be more active in their community/ neighbourhood.
- About 60% of young people felt that their volunteering activity had an impact on the community or the neighbourhood, however around 40% think that volunteers are a small proportion of the community and they don't see how so few people can affect the whole community.
- Over 60% of young people perceive their volunteering to bring different people from the community/neighbourhood together and help others to be more active in their community/ neighbourhood
- Common in volunteering projects was the support they gave to isolated members in communities, supporting them and building bonding ties. However less common was to build bridging ties between isolated members and the rest of the community.
- Young people and members from communities feel that volunteering supports communities however it is less common in volunteering projects to build bridging ties between different communities, solving social problems or breaking down stereotypes.

Significance

Community cohesion is as vital to a vibrant community as economic and environmental success and good local services for the diversity of people living in these neighbourhoods. Youth Action volunteering projects happen within different types of community. Quite often higher levels of community cohesion stem from, and are a result of, young people having the opportunities to participate in decision-making and take an active part in the shaping of their community.

A distinction has to be made between supporting people within communities and enhancing community cohesion which is about bridging the gap, changing or challenging structures or interacting with organisations or people of other communities. Volunteering does not contribute to community cohesion per se; if volunteering projects aim to enhance proactively community cohesion they need to build this into their project plan and consider how to make cohesion outcomes sustainable.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

About the experience of young people who volunteer...

- Overall, volunteers find that their experience is inherently positive. Organisations respond well to them and they receive a number of benefits as a result of their involvement.
- Youth action volunteering can make a significant contribution to developing young people's bridging social capital. This helps young people to 'navigate' life transitions effectively and provides the resources to enable them to make informed choices and act upon them.

About the difference that full participation makes to the volunteering experience...

- Empowerment and participation are core elements for the enhancement of social capital. Organisations should actively promote consultative and participative styles of leadership which contribute to shared discovery and learning.

About the most successful ways of promoting participation within organisations...

- Trust is the key. Workers within the field need to support young people beyond the merely informational level. The time of workers may be well spent in enhancing trust and creating mutual trusting relationships which are foundations for developing dynamic and extended social capital for young people.

About the wider benefits and impact on the community...

- Youth action volunteering projects can have a diverse range of functions within the community that contribute to greater cohesion: breaking down stereotypes; fostering understanding of different cultures and religions; solving social problems; bringing people together.
- Volunteering projects have an important role in supporting isolated members of communities and building bonding ties.

Recommendations

- Volunteering organisations should enable young people to set their own agendas for volunteering projects. Needs identified by young people which do not fit within government priorities or agendas should not be dismissed.
- Organisations should continue to invest in structures and systems to enable young people to influence the decisions that affect them.
- Volunteering projects should explore the possibilities for creating conditions that nurture social capital. Thus volunteering should move the focus from individual skills and qualifications and individual behavioural change to relationships and the nature and purpose of interactions between people and groups.
- Organisations should build on and further explore the positive findings of this research in how young people feel that they can influence decisions by working together.
- Organisations need to develop clearer processes for young people who traditionally do not engage in volunteering especially young people who identify as NEVET (Not in Education, Volunteering, Employment or Training).

Youth Action Network

Youth Action Network offers services and resources directly to workers on the ground supporting young people in their volunteering. Youth Action Network can support organisations via an interactive website, bi-monthly e-bulletin, training days, residential events and regular networking events. There are a variety of resources including our **VIP** and **Re:action** toolkits, comprehensive **TREaD** training programme and a nationally recognised quality assessment framework, **Reach**.

To find out more, please visit:

www.youthactionnetwork.org.uk

Organisations wishing to get involved in our work or needing some support, should telephone us on **0121 455 9732** or email: **info@youthactionnetwork.org.uk**.

The Centre for Social Action:

The Centre for Social Action has been based at De Montfort University since 1995 and is part of the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences. A training, research and consultancy unit, the Centre has its roots in practical work with communities. The Centre conducts participative research, evaluation and consultations on behalf of a range of commissioners including central government, local authorities, voluntary organisations, community groups and funding bodies. We apply social action principles to the conduct of our research and often support community members as researchers.

To find out more, please visit:

<http://www.dmu.ac.uk/dmucsa>



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