YOUTH ACTION NETWORK

RE:ACTION

YOUTH LED RESEARCH

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF YOUTH ACTION IN ENGLAND

Project Re:action *is a joint project between Youth Action Network, a national youth volunteering charity, and the Centre for Social Action at De Montfort University.*

The research project 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.

More specifically, the research explored the advantages of Youth Action volunteering over placement volunteering.

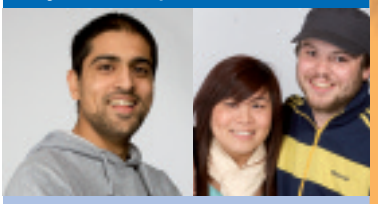
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A key feature of this project is 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 Youth Action and social capital. You can find out more inside – but first, an introduction to these key concepts…



YOUTH ACTION

Youth Action is a way of supporting young people to develop and lead their own volunteering opportunities and allowing 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 projects; we call it putting them in the driving seat. We promote nine principles of Youth Action (scattered below in purple boxes).

This research examines the impact of Youth Action volunteering on both young people themselves and their communities.

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.

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PARTICIPATION INFLUENCE & TRUST

KEY FINDINGS

- 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.

- 78% of young volunteers feel that volunteering has helped them to open themselves up to trust other people.
- Young people feel that Youth Action creates positive expectations of young people and offers opportunities for young people to stretch themselves.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOUTH ACTION ORGANISATIONS AND PROJECTS?

For young volunteers, being able to make their own decisions and being trusted to make these decisions are important aspects of promoting participation. Within this, the support they get from workers was identified as an often ignored but clearly crucial element.

The importance young people place on being trusted by their volunteering organisations puts workers in a position of great power, which has to be treated sensitively. It has to be noted that not all young volunteers want to, or are able to, take on leadership roles, and organisations should recognise that and express their expectations accordingly.

The huge investment in youth volunteering over the last few years has led to a big increase in young people wishing to volunteer and therefore an increased workload for those working within the sector. Youth Action workers will only be in a position to offer support and give power and trust to young people if they in turn have confidence in their skills and have access to support.

"I think a lot of adults don't really trust children because we don't get the opportunities to show them that we can be trusted. But I think in volunteering ... you work with other people, you manage other things, you have to take care of other people, so I think that gives young people a chance to show that we can be trusted and that we deserve that trust."

"I don't think you have to be in a leadership role to have your say and have your opinions. I think if you go about it the right way you can be heard even if you are not in that position."

CHALLENGES FOR YOUTH ACTION ORGANISATIONS & PROJECTS

- Some young volunteers pointed out that the possibility to set up their own activities is not always promoted by their volunteering organisation, and so they were often unaware of it as an opportunity.
- Many young volunteers feel as if they are not listened to or not heard within political and government levels, and therefore feel disillusioned by the notion of participation in political or government affairs.
- It can be difficult to match expectations with the reality, which can lead to feelings of disappointment and disillusion, particularly bearing in mind the importance for young people of feeling valued and trusted.
  - Young volunteers sometimes feel that the demands placed on them by projects and workers can be too high.
  - Young people's expectations that their volunteering will give them power and voice are not always met.
- Neighbourhood volunteering is not less 'valuable' than other types of volunteering, but in order for young people to maximise their learning and get the biggest benefit, they need to access new contacts by entering new social spheres.

MESSAGES FROM THE PROJECT RE:ACTION STEERING GROUP

MESSAGES FOR WORKERS

- Trust young people and support them in taking control – you'll be surprised with the outcomes.
- Be prepared to invest your time – trust doesn't come easily or quickly.
- Be aware that trust is fragile; once lost it is difficult to regain.
- Encourage young people who start in small groups to expand into the wider community.

MESSAGES TO VOLUNTEERING ORGANISATIONS

- Volunteering organisations should promote Youth Action volunteering in the wider community.
- Give young people the chance to prove themselves through Youth Action volunteering.
- Enhance partnership work between organisations and third parties, not only at a local level, but also at a national and international level.

MESSAGES FOR THE GOVERNMENT

- Value quality over quantity.
- Continue to support youth volunteering initiatives.
- Support volunteering organisations to enable young people to personally develop, enhance social capital and increase participation.
- Support networking between organisations and third parties.

HOW YOUTH ACTION VOLUNTEERING ENHANCES SOCIAL CAPITAL

KEY FINDINGS

- The environment and dynamics which create high levels of participation, influence and trust (PIT) also enable better processes through which social capital is enhanced.
- Young volunteers state that Youth Action volunteering encourages them to change and challenge the way that they think about current affairs, other people and their own life.

  - Almost half of the volunteers asked (45%) felt that volunteering has changed the opinion that they previously held about other types of people.

  - Over half of those surveyed (51%) started to socialise with people who are somehow different to them as a direct result of their volunteering.

- Young people get the biggest benefits out of volunteering in national and international settings.

  - These young people receive an average of 35% more benefits than those who volunteer at a neighbourhood level.

  - 66% of young people who volunteer in national and international settings reported that they benefited in education and career support through meeting new people, compared to 44% of young people volunteering in neighbourhood settings.

- 63% of young people with high levels of PIT reported that through meeting new people they benefited in educational and career/employment support, compared to 40% of young people with low levels of PIT.
- Over 60% of volunteers surveyed felt that volunteering has helped them to gain confidence and a better understanding of people.
- Young people feel that their volunteering in the community can contribute to community cohesion and helps them to build bonding ties with isolated members of the community.

"Being open minded helps you gain benefits... You see other people and you learn from them."

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOUTH ACTION ORGANISATIONS AND PROJECTS?

Youth Action volunteering can significantly enhance bridging social capital, helping young people to create links with people outside their immediate circles and enabling them to broaden their horizons. The effect is further magnified when young people have an experience where they have high levels of participation, sense of influence and being trusted.

However, the number of benefits received as a result of young people forming these new relationships is affected by the setting where the volunteering takes place. Young people's social capital is further advanced by undertaking their Youth Action projects outside their immediate community and interacting with new people. New and diverse social networks are important not only for emotional support, but are also crucial for personal and social development and giving young people more opportunities, choice and power.

"... You just look around the room [and] there are people and they all look different and you all learn from each other, in the way they dress and things like that. So it just prepares you for different situations that you wouldn't look for on a normal day."

CONCLUSIONS

ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHO VOLUNTEER...

- Ultimately, Youth Action 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...

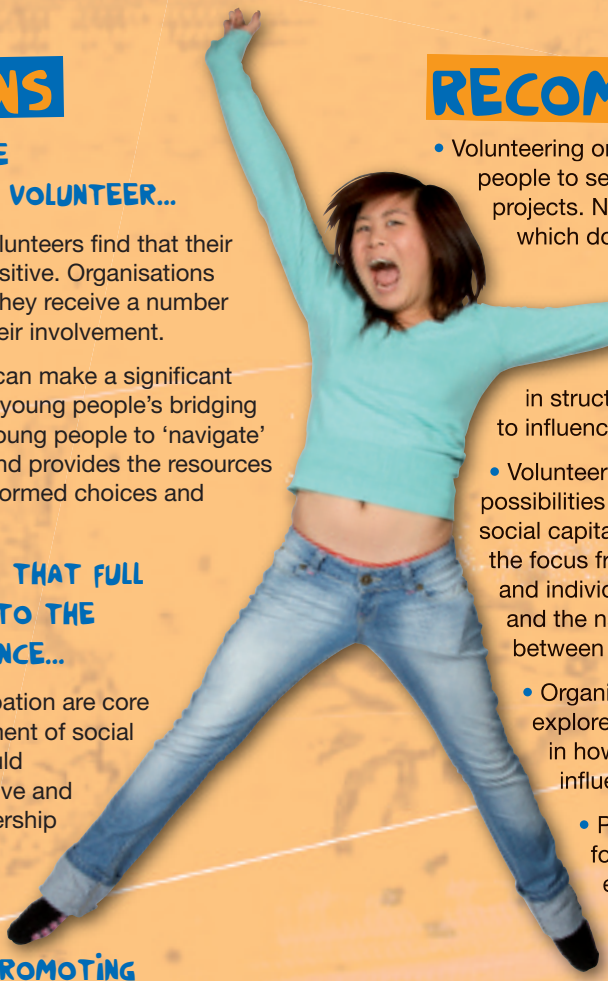
- Trust is the key. Workers within the field need to support young people beyond the merely informational level. The time of workers may be well spent in enhancing trust and creating mutual trusting relationships which are foundations for developing dynamic and extended social capital for young people.

ABOUT THE WIDER BENEFITS OF YOUTH ACTION TO AND IT'S IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY...

- Youth Action projects can have a diverse number 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.
- Youth Action projects have an important role in supporting isolated members of communities and building bonding ties.

Youth Action Network believes that these findings endorse our view that Youth Action has added benefits for young people over and above those provided by placement volunteering.

To find out more, please visit:
www.youthactionnetwork.org.uk
www.dmu.ac.uk/dmucsa



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 routes 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.
- Projects should 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).

WHAT YOUTH ACTION NETWORK CAN DO TO HELP

Youth Action Network offers services and resources directly to workers on the ground supporting young people in their volunteering, and we believe that this research provides evidence that our support is very important.

Youth Action Network has always recognised the important role of Youth Action workers and our services and products are designed specifically to support them in that role. Providing Youth Action workers with access to information, advice, networking opportunities, good practice development and training is our reason for being and what this research has told us will be important in our planning and design of services for the years to come.

We can support organisations via our interactive website, bi-monthly e-bulletin, training days, residential events and regular networking events. We also have a variety of resources including our ***VIP*** and ***Re:action*** toolkits, our comprehensive ***TREaD*** training programme and our nationally recognised quality assessment framework, ***Reach***.

Organisations that become a member of Youth Action Network will be joining a growing movement of agencies committed to providing real youth-led volunteering opportunities to young people, plus they will receive a 30% discount on all training courses and events.

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

YOUTH ACTION NETWORK

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