

How children and young people win friends and influence others

Young people's association, their opportunities, strategies and obstacles

This is a summary of a report that explores the relationship between children, young people and civil society with a focus on associational activity. The report takes a broad view of associational activity that includes formal associations and more informal associational activity.

The research is primarily an extensive literature review, supplemented by semi-structured interviews, case studies, focus groups, non-participant observation and participatory exercises.

Key points

- The report draws on the concept of well-being to understand how it can shape the mechanisms, the processes (social capital) and the outcomes of associational activity.
- The relationship between well-being and association is circular. Associational activities shape wellbeing outcomes (voice, social inclusion and future economic well-being). In turn these outcomes shape the range of associational opportunities and processes experienced by young people.
- Public policy: models of engaging with young people include courting them as active citizens, educating and instructing them as passive beings and controlling and disciplining them as potentially anti-social threats.
- Formal associational activity dominates the literature, however, the 'missing' majority experience for children and young people is informal. More emphasis needs to be put on exploring informal associational activity to better understand how young people exercise active agency and generate well-being outcomes through informal channels.
- Additionally, it is important to better understand how formal mechanisms for participation relate to informal means of association and how the journey between the two can be facilitated and best navigated by young people.
- Formal associational activity is likely to provide more bridging/linking social capital (informal is more likely to provide bonding). However, one key divide where bridging is not happening in formal associations is across class.
- Obstacles to formal association include social inequalities, time, legal obstacles and young people's perspectives on volunteering.
- Participation in formal deliberative forums (youth parliaments, etc) is dominated by a few super-participants; as with formal associational activity deliberative forums primarily engage more privileged young people.
- Top-down approaches to engage young people are normally met with a lack of enthusiasm by young people themselves since the initiatives they give rise to tend to be hierarchical and characterised by an unequal distribution of power. Young people value spaces that are both safe and free of adult supervision.

This is a summary of a full report written by
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Background

This research was commissioned by the Carnegie UK Trust to inform the Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland, which was established to strengthen civil society. The Inquiry is informed by a Commission, chaired by Geoff Mulgan, and an International Advisory Group.

The objectives of the Inquiry are to:

- Explore the possible threats to and opportunities for the development of a healthy civil society, looking out to 2025;
- Identify how policy and practice can be enhanced to help strengthen civil society;
- Enhance the ability of civil society associations to shape the future.

Through the Carnegie Young People Initiative (CYPI), the Carnegie UK Trust has been working with young people for over a decade. Given the focus of CYPI was to increase the influence children and young people have over decisions that affect them, it was imperative for the Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society to actively explore the relationship between young people and civil society.

This report connects with the work that the Inquiry has conducted to explore the relationships between children, young people and civil society. It therefore complements the findings of the Inquiry's futures workshop conducted for young people aged 16-21, and a project supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation that engaged children in the Inquiry's futures work using the arts. Findings from this work are available on the Inquiry website: www.futuresforcivilsociety.org.

The final report of the Inquiry Commission will be published in early 2010.

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Well-being

The concept of well-being provides a promising framework for thinking about young people's association in civil society because it links the provision of basic needs with social relatedness, the exercise of meaningful agency and attainment of an enhanced quality of life.

It allows for the study of both states (for instance social/material inequality) and of processes (in this case associational). Associational processes are viewed through the sub-categories of social capital; bonding, bridging and linking (see below).

The outcomes of association can be tracked by looking at various dimensions of well-being; these include the effective exercise of voice, social inclusion, emotional and physical/economic well-being.

The progress of well-being indicators for young people is variable. Whilst some indicators are improving (overall wealth, school attainment), areas of serious concern remain (numbers of young people living in poverty, restrictions on their use of, and access to, public space, increased exclusions from school).

The UK was ranked in the bottom third for five out of six of the dimensions of well-being in a recent UNICEF report (2007). Significantly, the UK was at the bottom of the table for family and peer relationships and for children's subjective ranking of their own well-being.

Disadvantage limits the scope of associational activity. The barriers to formal association (volunteering) for disadvantaged groups are well documented and include:

- poverty
- unemployment
- literacy problems
- language barriers
- disability.

Consequently, formal association is out of reach for many disadvantaged young people. Associational activity for these groups is thus limited to informal bonding processes.

Limiting associational experiences to family and friends in turn impacts on the well-being outcomes that derive from experiencing a wider range of associational activity.

Sport is just one example of where associational life can provide an opportunity for the generation of bridging social capital. However, access to sporting facilities is shaped by social inequalities. Young people were less likely to have engaged in sporting activity if they were Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Black Caribbean, Black African, female, disabled and/or poor. This trend is supported by a recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) report (Sutton, 2007) that found that young people from poorer areas spent much more time associating on the 'street'

unaccompanied by adults. By contrast, young people who attend a private school participated much more in (costly) clubs, organised activities and formal associations.

Limiting associational activity to bonding can also lead to an increase in 'risky' behaviours, such as smoking, drinking and unprotected sex. The UNICEF (2007) report shows an increase in such behaviour among children in Northern Europe and it links this to the fact that Northern European children spend more time with their peers than with their families.

However, the links between social inclusion and positive well-being (normally implying a healthy range of associational activity and material well-being) are complex. Whilst social isolation and a lower sense of well-being generally go together, there is no correlation between 'pro-social behaviour' and a high sense of personal well-being. Personal well-being and high self-esteem, usually connected to material and social advantage, can be linked to very prejudicial attitudes towards others, particularly those of a different identity or class.

Complexity also marks the connection between space and well-being. Attachment to a locality (space), with particular social networks, may produce positive well-being outcomes, supporting a sense of identity, responsibility and relatedness. However, these very same relationships and sense of attachment can also act as a barrier to aspirations and opportunities for young people. Too much attachment to locality can act as a brake on an individual seeking opportunities outside that locality (JRF 2007). Market forces and the level of material well-being within a given locality clearly mark that space and influence the range of potential associational activity.

This very brief consideration of the connection between association and well-being illustrates the complexity of the relationship between the two. Well-being outcomes both shape, and are shaped by, associational activity.

Social capital

The research acknowledges the contested nature of social capital. The concept and application of social capital have been critiqued for overlooking the 'dark side' of bonding and association, and for tending to depoliticise the concept to avoid addressing gross structural inequalities (Edwards et al, 2005).

However, we have drawn on the concept because it usefully frames an analysis of the content and practices of association, the meaning people attach to interaction and ways association perpetuates or overcomes inequalities (Bourdieu, 1977). We use it to focus on the 'unseen' as well as the 'seen' manifestations of interaction (Wong, 2007), to look beyond the formal institutions of democratic and economic life to different forms of sociability and informal networks (Edwards et al, 2003).

Social capital theory distinguishes between 'bonding' forms of association (between family, close neighbours and young people of a similar identity), 'bridging' forms of association (connections between young people of different identities) and 'linking' association (relationships between young people and powerful adults, such as service providers or politicians).

The focus of researchers and public policy on formal institutional mechanisms for participation/association has resulted in a lack of understanding of how bonding processes relate to an individual's propensity and ability to associate beyond immediate peers and family. Bonding relationships are both an essential precursor of the generation of other forms of social capital, and, at the same time, can act as a brake on widening associational activity. The nature of the relationships with family and close friends can enhance or restrict further associational activity.

The role of families in young people's association is often forgotten or overlooked. It is vital to understand the family better, as young people have both public and private lives. The research identifies four further points that underline the importance of the family environment:

- the level of family support young people have in relation to associational activity;
- the key role played by family members as role models for young people;
- the crucial role they play in defining a young person's identity;
- refugee children often take on the 'adult role' in mediating the family with wider society.

Young people are spending an increasing amount of time with their peers rather than in family situations. It is therefore crucial for research to focus on this aspect of their lives. Young people attach a high importance to their peer networks; this is especially true when they go wrong, for instance, in the form of bullying. It is within these peer networks that young people are, to an increasing extent, learning the habits and norms of association.

Given the paucity of associational opportunity for many young people, the street becomes the space for peer association. The media is obsessed with gangs, consistently portraying them as threatening and criminal. In some cases, this is true; however, most groups of young people or 'gangs' are not involved in criminal activity. Again, the importance for civil society is that, within these groups or gangs, young people are learning associational skills such as taking turns in talking, reciprocity and responsibilities.

So bonding relationships are the key building block for wider associational life. They provide opportunities for the generation of 'good' and 'bad' social capital. They are good in the sense that they provide identity, support and friendship and give young people an informal nexus to negotiate social spaces. However, they can be limiting by being too closely connected to specific localities and/or

identities, providing less opportunity for wider association and making bridging with others more problematic.

The research shows that young people do not have too much difficulty in bridging when given the opportunity, even when they previously held prejudicial perspectives on the 'other'. The Bradford Schools Linking Project (BSLP) highlights that, when provided with the opportunity and support, young people can create bridging social capital and overcome social divisions. In the words of one young person on this scheme:

"I didn't think we'd get along, because we're Asian and they're English. But we did. My buddy and I have the same thoughts."

The key problem is that much bridging occurs in formal associations or in more costly social/sports clubs out of the reach of the more disadvantaged. The need for projects like the BSLP illustrates how few arenas exist in which 'organic' bridging can happen. Schools can segregate according to faith, ethnicity and class in specific areas and so the opportunities for bridging to occur organically in educative institutions is becoming increasingly limited.

The key challenge for researchers and policy-makers is to find ways for bridging to occur within attractive (to young people), less formal (or expensive) associations. The BSLP is one example of utilising a universally-used institution (school) to facilitate wider informal association based on facilitated friendships.

However, projects with similar aims and objectives have not fared as well. For instance, one project that aimed to use the arts to express local identities and to make bridges between two disadvantaged communities in Halifax and Manchester had only limited success. For the girls involved in this project, the exchange visits became a means to reinforce the divisions between them, using hostile chanting, rather than as an opportunity to explore commonalities. Girls who were articulate in their own youth centres (bonding) were monosyllabic or silent in the context of project activities (Poursanidou & Farrier, 2008). This again reinforces the need to better understand the relationship between bonding and bridging social capital in order to ensure that bonding processes lead to the propensity to bridge.

Linking social capital involves relationships between young people and more powerful adults and is, therefore, the most problematic for young people. There have been a number of innovations in providing associations that link young people with power; youth councils, youth forums, scrutiny commissions and youth parliaments are just some examples. Associations that mirror adult structures and do not promote a style of leadership/participation that is open and informed by young people are problematic even for the most able of young people. These initiatives are generally

populated by the few super-participants. Power still resides with the adults and the degree to which young people can translate their voice into action is circumscribed by adult concepts of appropriateness. A youth worker cited the example of members of the Bradford and Keighley Youth Parliament (BKYP) asking an official whether they could hire a bus to participate in an anti-war demonstration in London:

"Of course the official froze and half-heartedly laughed, but at that point the betrayal of participation in the public debate we are seeing is that we are ultimately in a situation where we are talking about what you can participate in on my terms. It is not about being able to actively participate as citizens, including the right to dissent and protest."

Underpinning considerations of power, these highly-formalised institutions make feeling comfortable problematic and thereby can hinder the expression of voice (struggle to be heard). Feeling comfortable with formality, from conversations with members of the BKYP, depends upon:

- a young person's educational background;
- a young person having a wide social network;
- the encouragement of parents and/or carers;
- adequate support from professionals;
- the development of positive learning of how to participate and enjoy those structures;
- a lack of bad experiences of previous associations.

These distinct processes of social capital require very different skills to engage, illustrated above using the example of voice. Expression and the exercise of voice is a key element of well-being outcomes. Additionally, the exercise of voice, especially political voice, in linking relationships with the powerful can shape future provision of services, for instance, and thereby enhance/hinder future well-being outcomes. Voice and self-expression among peers and family requires very different skills than it does in relationships with different people and the more powerful.

A study by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, for the Carnegie UK Trust Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society identified a number of characteristics of civil society associations that were important to young people (Pitcher, 2007). They must:

- be independent from state and family;
- offer support to young people without judging them;
- give practical help;
- listen to young people and care about their views
- help to give young people a voice;
- enable participants to make new friends as well as to learn;
- offer a safe environment for young people.

The challenge for formal civil society associations is to provide opportunities for young people to learn the skills required for bonding, bridging and linking in arenas that are able to accommodate young people on their terms and not just through adult-initiated or established models and processes. Edwards & Davis (2004) suggest that participation needs to be rooted in the lived lives (and spaces) of young people on tangible issues of concern and importance to them, not issues mediated by notions of adult appropriateness.

Conclusion

The report argues that young people's associations must be viewed in their totality. The wider literature often tends to focus too narrowly on the mechanisms (forms) of association without acknowledging the importance of material and non-material resources in shaping associational experience.

Association is viewed in the report as forms of social capital that are shaped by the resources available to young people. The relationship between well-being and social capital is recursive; well-being outcomes both shape and are shaped by association (social capital).

It is too simplistic to suggest that young people choose not to be engaged with politics and/or formal associational life; the barriers are too high and even the most resourceful young people struggle. Formal spaces require young people to have high levels of social, cultural and human capital. Given the huge inequalities that exist, the requirements of formal associations are setting many young people up to fail.

It is important to better understand how formal mechanisms for participation relate to informal means of association and how the journey between the two can be facilitated and best navigated by young people.

It is necessary for those responsible for formal spaces to become more flexible and/or informal; ideally, to find ways to engage with young people in their favoured spaces. Like us, they would probably be surprised by the creativity, imagination and intelligence of what they find.

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The **Democracy and Civil Society Programme** has two elements to its work. The main focus of the programme is the Trust's **Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland**. The second focus of the programme is the **Democracy Initiative**, which aims to strengthen democracy and increase the ability of citizens and civil society organisations to collectively influence public decision-making.

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