Youth Activism, engagement and the development of new civic learning spaces

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It seems straightforward to suggest that well educated people are more likely than others to understand and play a constructive role in democratic societies. This is perhaps the central purpose of education and all schools are likely to want their students to develop their understanding of the world around them and to have the skills and dispositions to take part in ways that make that world a better place. We could go further and suggest that outside school (either after they have left or simply in their lives in communities during the time they are students) those people will continue to learn. Their citizenship education will outside school take on a less formal shape. Through their engagement they will understand more about key issues and be better able to make things happen. Thus a virtuous circle is established between education and engagement: one nicely reinforcing the other. In this way it is no surprise that governments around the world are so keen to encourage (and at times insist) that schools play their part in the development of cohesive communities.

But is everything so simple, straightforward and positive? Is it possible to suggest that a vicious rather than a virtuous circle exists between education and engagement? If schools and individual teachers look as if they are insisting that students should become involved in particular causes for specific purposes when do we need to draw the line? When would we suggest that indoctrination is being attempted? Indeed many countries have enacted legislation to prevent such unprofessional behaviour. And what happens when those young people become actively involved in the ‘real’ world beyond school? Is it possible that education is the last thing on the minds of most activists? If they want to achieve a particular political goal and if understanding does not need to be secured for that to happen then why would they develop educational work?

These very different possibilities are always of vital importance. And perhaps now more than ever before we need to pay attention to the interface between education and engagement. The particular context that affects us is significant. Are we living through a time of economic crisis, austerity, renewed nationalism, neo-liberalism and populism? If so, towards the end of the second decade of the 21st century, what sort of engagement is in the ascendant? Do we want young people to engage in a context in which nationalism is officially promoted? If so, would it be acceptable for us to clarify in what ways and for what purposes that engagement should occur? And if we do want them to engage what would be the key causal factors and the key motivational drivers that would increase involvement? Broadly, what explains people’s willingness to engage and how can that be made to be educational?

For some the answers to what drives engagement may be found by considering broadly based societal factors. Amnå and Zetterberg (2010) have drawn attention to 4 broad contexts in which key trends may drive engagement:

* **modernization** (as people become better off and better educated so they are more likely to want more of a say in public affairs);
* **public institutional hypothesis** (the design and performance of democratic systems may facilitate or hinder engagement);
* **social capital hypothesis** (the connections between individuals facilitate or hinder engagement);
* **civic volunteerism** (the resources available to people in the form of time, money and other things make possible engagement; the motivation that people have to be involved alone or with their friends, relatives and associates arise from personal factors leading to activity).

The above factors may suggest that educational professionals need to do little. Perhaps in Bernstein’s classic phrase “school cannot compensate for society”. The prevailing social and political forces will determine the actions that are possible and actually taken by young people. But not all, of course, would agree with removing agency from educational professionals. Many suggest that there are very obvious and practical things that may be done to promote informed and responsible engagement.

Research evidence on amounts and types of engagement tends to be rather inconclusive. Even identifying who is engaged is not easy. Many surveys give the impression that approximately 40% of young people are socially engaged but it is often unclear as to what that actually means. If a young person was to join the Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Oxfam, Amnesty International it is likely that we would accept those activities as evidence of social engagement. But what if a young person was a member of a local football team? Is that social engagement? Is it educational? Is it really citizenship education? How far can we stretch the idea of engagement and its educational potential? Would we see social engagement to be revealed through securing paid employment to support the family income; by translating for parents at school open days; by being a cheerful neighbour? Is it possible that some indications of social engagement are framed by imagined norms associated with social and economic status, gendered roles and so on? And, if so, are some people likely to be seen more readily than others as being engaged and, as a result, (depending on one’s point of view) being better educated.

How one might go about encouraging social engagement is similarly problematic. There is mixed evidence about the effects of rewards (giving certificates; academic credit; work experience; salary etc. to people who ‘volunteer’). Does it undermine or devalue engagement if it is rewarded and what impact would that have on educational potential? Peer group advocacy is said to be important by some for promoting engagement but not by all. Do we see some young people as being educators of other young people? Some put the emphasis not on young people but on those who work with them and so what should youth workers do? Should they publicise opportunities, develop an inclusive ethos, provide a welcoming physical environment and be willing to deal realistically and honestly with issues that affect individuals and communities in contemporary society? Would these things make them better educators or just better facilitators?

Much of the debates about social engagement and education have been seen at local and national levels. We are now increasingly seeing international and global efforts. This is exciting and provides even more complexity. Globalization is a reality for which people should be educated but it is framed through various perspectives (economically, culturally, politically etc.); it is variously expressed (concretely through institutions and vaguely as a means of expressing harmony and tolerance); and it is differentially influential (positive and negative as well as the degree to which it affects people). In these complexities what promotes educational social engagement? What can we – what should we - expect young people to do?

An international team has been established to explore these key ideas and issues about the ways in which young people participate in society and what implications that has for education.

A Leverhulme Trust funded project will explore the meanings of youth activism and engagement to young people, professionals/policy makers; patterns of participation across individuals and groups; and, how education may promote forms of civic activism and engagement congruent with democratic pluralism in a range of different socio-political contexts. This will be done using comparative perspectives with insights derived from Australia; Canada; Singapore; Hungary; Lebanon and the UK. The changing experiences of youth activism and how these experiences influence education and youth policy and practice will be discussed. During the life of the project we will organize academic seminars, workshops and events involving a range of contributors (politicians, activists, teachers, community-based educators and academics).

Our research focus is about how youth civic activism is changing, why and with what implications. As such our research questions are as follows:

* How do young people, their educators and policy makers understand and construct their civic activism, including different forms, spaces, expectations, aims, and learning and teaching processes?
* What are the mobilizing factors and inhibitors of such engagement?
* What are the educational benefits and drawbacks of young people’s civic activism principally regarding identity, capacity and efficacy for individual and social benefit from the local to the global?
* What educational processes are apt for optimising the educational benefits of young people’s civic activism?

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Those who wish to know more about the project are encouraged to view our web pages (<https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/cresj/researchthemes/citizenship-education/leverhulmeyouthactivism/>) and contact us by email (education-youth@york.ac.uk)