

Connected Communities and Covid-19

Action for Youth Citizenship - A moral imperative

Suzanne Wilson, Research Fellow in Social Inclusion and Community Engagement, UCLan West Lakes Campus, Moor Row, Cumbria

The Covid-19 outbreak has caused all members of society to review and revise the way we function, particularly in response to the lockdown measures imposed by the UK Government. This blog reflects on the potential impact of these measures on young people, particularly in relation to how they can enact their citizenship when civic participation opportunities are limited. It also considers the important role that citizenship can have in promoting resilience and recovery from the Corona virus outbreak, and calls for policy and practice to acknowledge the intersectional inequalities that leave certain groups at a disadvantage.

Background

I have been working with a group of girls for two years in a disadvantaged community in Cumbria who are now aged 12 and 13 years old, involving them in community research. This group, called Girls Gang, has proved transformational for these girls, who continue to meet to participate in community action projects almost two years after the community research was completed. The benefits of young people being able to enact their citizenship are well documented (Cleaver, et al, 2006), but opportunities may be limited as young people are often categorized as being 'sub-citizens' (Larkins, 2014).

At the Centre for Citizenship and Community, we seek to promote community capital. We measure this through four social impacts or 'dividends': well-being, capacity, citizenship and social value (Parsfield, et al., 2015). I have measured the individual impact of community action in this group of girls using the first three dividends:

- Wellbeing: A strong sense of belonging was fostered through meaningful collective projects, and all girls reported feeling more confident.
- Capacity: New skills were developed through the training opportunities this group offered and through a range of social action projects they were involved in.
- Citizenship: Through making a positive impact in their community, the girls were able to reflect on their stake in their community.



Furthermore, I have conceptualized how the process of participation in community research can contribute to young people feeling inspired and empowered to help their community:

- Engagement: A safe, youth-led, supportive space provided an environment within which to the initial engagement with the girls could take place towards development of trust and a culture of co-production.

- Exploration: Community research provided the girls with the opportunity to physically explore their neighbourhood, speaking to residents they would not have otherwise spoken to. The group also gave the girls a platform to openly share their ideas and explore solutions to meet the needs of their community identified through their research.
- Empathy: Through hearing stories of loneliness and realising the value of connections, the girls developed an empathic passion and drive to support their community.
- Empowerment: The result of these experiences was an empowered group of girls who possessed the confidence, capacity and compassion to engage in a range of social action activities to enhance community capital (Wilson, 2019a).

Follow up interviews and focus groups with the girls and their families revealed that the key ingredient in the success of the group was the physical and symbolic space created by Girls Gang.

Youth Community Capital Under Lockdown

The Covid-19 outbreak caused all schools to close on 20th March 2020 which was followed swiftly by a national lockdown, imposing strict social distancing rules on the nation. The implication of this is to effectively proscribe physical social contact between young people who do not live together.

From talking to local youth providers and community stakeholders, and from my own observations, I propose a typology of how young people are responding to the Covid-19 outbreak from a community perspective. This is based simply on anecdotal evidence, but it provides a framework to reflect on how our community capital may be impacted upon during times of crisis.

- Wellbeing: The ways in which individuals respond to and cope with trauma is impacted upon by socio-economic factors, including access to financial, social and emotional resources. This is particularly true for young people. From meeting weekly through Zoom, the girls of Girls Gang are able to connect, but they feel this is no substitute to congregating in person and this lack of a collective space is having a detrimental impact on their wellbeing.
- Capacity: It is often assumed that young people have the capacity to connect online. However, not all households can afford to provide the equipment and subscription fees to make this possible. Furthermore, capacity has been somewhat limited by measures to ensure safety. For example, young people are not able to hold a Zoom account and WhatsApp calls are limited to four participants per call. This deprives young people of the opportunity to meet collectively without adult supervision, which is so important for their development.
- Citizenship: Opportunities to participate are also influenced by socio-economic limitations (Kiili & Larkins, 2018) and these are further exacerbated during the Covid-19 lockdown. However, through an online weekly facilitated group, Girls Gang has been resourceful, enacting their citizenship in a number of ways:
 - Designing positive posters to go in welfare food packages.
 - Helping to develop 'boredom boxes' for older people who are shielding.
 - Helping around the home (for example, painting a garden fence).
 - Caring for elderly relatives (for example, visiting a Grandma who has dementia and cooking her dinner).
 - Calling relatives who are self-isolating or shielding.

These activities not only help young people to enact their citizenship, but a number provide examples of how the girls are supporting older people, building on previous work to develop inter-generational community connectivity (Wilson, 2019b).



I made my grandma crackers and cheese



Understanding Young People's Experiences

The lockdown is undoubtedly having an impact on the girls I have been working with, as for young people across the globe. Early adolescence is a formative period for young people, particularly in relation to social and interpersonal development (Caissy, 1994). To help me understand their interpretations and experiences of this unique social phenomenon the girls are currently participating in a project called 'Girls Gang Corona Diaries'.

The girls are generating data to capture their experience of the social distancing measures taking place within the Covid-19 outbreak, mainly through film and photography. We will then meet in person after the lockdown measures have been lifted to share the material produced and discuss what these represented. This will provide not only original academic data of an under researched topic, but hopefully provide benefit for the girls through engaging them in activities that will help them to try to make sense of a unique and challenging experience.

Youth-Led Resilience Building

The Corona virus outbreak is causing communities to pull together, developing forms of active citizenship and resilience and we can use this experience to build community capital. Whilst doing this we must be mindful of the need to include, as citizens and future leaders, young people themselves in this response. I call for community groups and local authorities to include young people in the community response, believing in and entrusting the capacity of young people, helping to build generational resilience. I have been speaking to youth workers regularly since the Covid-19 crisis broke in the UK, and one thing is clear, the disparities associated with children and young people's access to resources to thrive (and to simply survive) are widening during this pandemic. Youth leaders tell me about their concerns for young people who were vulnerable before the pandemic (such as those in care, with existing mental health issues, or those living in poverty) but also of fears for the newly vulnerable (such as those experiencing a

bereavement or whose family are experiencing financial hardship). Strong youth leadership and provision is going to be vital and reconnecting young people following this crisis, we need to heal collectively to make sense of it all, and I worry that schools and youth services having the capacity (and willingness in some cases) to do this.

With the real possibility of a major economic slump that will, from the outset, impact disproportionately on working-class children, young people's ability both to access opportunities for active citizenship and to realise their economic prospects will be negatively affected as education is disrupted and employment options and opportunities shrink. In this context we all have a particular moral duty to our young citizens; an imperative to do what we can to provide capacity-building opportunities for young people, particularly those with limited access otherwise to the resources that will enable their contribution to becoming resilient, empowered citizens of the future.

The societal landscape as we know it is in the process of changing fundamentally. Let's lay the foundation for our young people to build a society based on inclusivity, compassion and citizenship.

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