### Employable, Entrepreneurial, Empowered? How the Voluntary Sector Supports Youth Citizenship

- **Full title of paper**: Employable, Entrepreneurial, Empowered? How the Voluntary Sector Supports Youth Citizenship
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  (sole author)
- **Attending Conference (Y/N)**: Y
- **150 word abstract for inclusion in the conference programme**: My research explores youth participation through two case studies of voluntary sector initiatives. Youth citizenship research tends to focus on formal education, or else summits, rallies, occupations and other extraordinary spaces. The significance of voluntary sector organisations as commonplace ‘civic intermediaries’ (LeRoux 2007) is often overlooked, yet for many young people these provide an entry point into public action, aside from stereotypes of apathy and activism. Findings are drawn from 16 months of ethnography with two NGOs that run projects to ‘engage and empower’ young people. Global Youth Advocacy enabled youth lobbying of the UN and UK Government, and Youth in Communities offered an extracurricular active citizenship programme. This paper describes how successful efforts to support youth citizenship involve a combination of approaches, which I call amplifying, bridging and capacity building. It also considers the influence of professionalisation and employability on NGO youth citizenship projects and draws out implications for practice.
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Introduction
This paper presents findings from my thesis on *Youth Citizenship, Social Change and Non-Governmental Organisations* (NGOs) of particular consequence to voluntary sector researchers and practitioners. The aim of this project is to explore the meanings and practices attached to contemporary citizenship by NGOs and young people in the UK. I am especially interested in the role of NGOs as ‘civic intermediaries’ (LeRoux 2007) that support and shape participation in the public sphere, including how they interact with policy priorities and markets (Trudeau 2008). The paper is organised as follows:

1. a brief synopsis of the research’s original contribution and theoretical orientation;
2. an overview of the methodology and the two research case studies;
3. research findings on three themes: empowerment, employability and entrepreneurialism;
4. closing remarks, including implications for practice.

1. Research origins and original contribution
My research interest developed in response to paradoxical appraisals of youth citizenship (Farthing 2010; Furlong and Cartmel 2007) that either dismiss young generations as self-centred, apathetic harbingers of political crisis (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2003; Park 2004; Putnam 1995), or else valorise youth ‘alternative activism’ as the revolutionary vanguard (Juris and Pleyers 2009). Such damning and optimistic verdicts are only arrived at with exaggeration, as well as inattention to difference and organisational contexts that support participation. I was eager to substantiate an intuition that there is more to young people’s associational activity than vacuous consumerism and lifestyle choices (Rheingans and Hollands 2012). Since researching youth participation in traditional politics leads to cries of ‘generational deficit’ (Farthing ibid.; Furlong and Cartmel ibid.; Park ibid.), voluntary sector action appeared to offer a fruitful alternative. Voluntary sector growth and public visibility, both at home and internationally (Florini 2000; Smith and Yanacopulos 2004), warrants attention to the ways in which NGOs enlist and influence young people as social and political subjects. In particular, my research advances understanding of voluntary sector professionalisation processes (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011; Salamon 2003) and their impact on young people.

2. Case studies and methodology
My fieldwork comprised 16 months of ethnography with two NGO youth citizenship projects, volunteering as a participant observer. This methodology was chosen for practical and analytical fit with the research topic. In previous voluntary sector studies, ethnography has proved an effective
means of understanding complex relationships, choices and meaning-making from the standpoint of those researched (Benson and Nagar 2006; Markowitz 2001; Murdock 2003). NGOs are often under resourced and ill thought out research can be an inconvenience (Markowitz ibid.). Exchanging volunteer time for immersive research access opens up possibilities for dialogue, deep engagement and reciprocity. The notion of ‘compositional studies’ (Fine and Weis 2005) or ‘studying up’ from NGOs (Markowitz ibid.; Nader 1969) appealed as a means to research structural influences on citizenship, without negating people’s actions and values at frontline level. Through thick description of projects as they unfolded, I could explore the social reproduction of citizenship identities whilst allowing my subjects ‘a greater sense of interpretation, negotiation, dialogue, and conscious engagement’ (Murdock ibid. p.511), than by interviewing or surveying them as a one-off.

Preliminary field research identified significant heterogeneity within the sector (Kendall and Knapp 1995; Phillimore et al. 2009). Key differences between NGOs included: issue focus; spaces of operation; staffing and resources; membership criteria; accountability; and the extent to which projects were youth-led. Though case study research does not aim to generalise (Stake 1995), I was curious as to whether any commonalities might be observed in diverse organisational contexts. The table below summarises core similarities and differences between the two chosen case studies.1

Primary data was collected between April 2011 and August 2012. This includes field notes (n=73) from participant observation in project delivery, staff and volunteer training, team meetings and five weeks of international fieldwork accompanying GYA members to United Nations summits. Additionally, I conducted focus groups (n=3) and interviews (n=20) with young people and their mentors and drew supplementary insight from emails, blogs, training and promotional materials.

**Table 1: Comparing case studies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Global Youth Advocacy (GYA)</th>
<th>Youth in Communities (YIC)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age of participants</strong></td>
<td>16-29</td>
<td>16-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Core focus</strong></td>
<td>Political advocacy</td>
<td>Active citizenship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decision making</strong></td>
<td>Young people, by consensus</td>
<td>Strategic by management, frontline by young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Funding</strong></td>
<td>Small grants, donors and member fundraising</td>
<td>Public sector delivery contracts, corporate sponsors, large and small grants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Membership</strong></td>
<td>Application for volunteer role</td>
<td>Through participating schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scale</strong></td>
<td>UK and international projects</td>
<td>England (regional operations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spaces of operation</strong></td>
<td>Online, ad hoc UK events and training, UN, one office</td>
<td>Schools and FE colleges, four offices, online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staffing</strong></td>
<td>Voluntary, by young people</td>
<td>Waged permanent staff and interns, volunteer mentors</td>
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1 Pseudonyms are used throughout.
3.1 Empowerment
Though GYA and YIC work across different spaces, scales and remits, both organisations focus on ‘engaging and empowering’ young people. Empowerment is a frequently appropriated term (Kesby et al. 2007), so my research records the practices and meanings NGO staff and young people associate with empowering citizenship experiences. I identify three interrelated activities which support youth citizenship as an empowerment process: amplifying, bridging and capacity building.

- **Amplifying** includes: youth advocacy work; providing a collective forum for young people; and most importantly confidence building to support young people speaking for themselves.
  ‘GYA acts like a loudspeaker for us to get our views heard.’ (Holly, GYA member)
  ‘It’s about their message too, not just what we have to say. The best type of media activity is students themselves doing stuff in their city, their neighbourhoods.’ (Ellen, YIC manager)
  ‘We just direct questions and make sure everyone’s having an equal say. There’s a couple of shier ones and I try to encourage them to voice their opinion… I’ve been in their situation, I know what it’s like not to be listened to. I just like developing their ideas.’ (Janet, YIC mentor)

- **Bridging** includes: showing how and where decisions are made; highlighting opportunities for participation and influence; setting up meetings, consultations and lobbying events; and preparing young people for more than tokenistic involvement.
  ‘The whole point of GYA for me is to give young people the ways to engage with structures that they would otherwise be excluded from.’ (Nina, GYA project co-ordinator)

- **Capacity building** includes: critical thinking through dialogue with peers and mentors; strengthening networks; opportunities for leadership and skills development; training and support; direct experiences of impact that instil confidence in future actions.
  ‘I’ve developed a connection with people on different topics that I’ve never had before. I’ve been interested and involved and passionate about different parts of politics… becoming motivated and the reason I can get involved is because I know people like that in GYA and others who are out there.’ (Claire, GYA member)

The potentiality of NGOs to contribute to social citizenship by offering opportunities for critical reflection, representation, peer support and consciousness-raising is highlighted elsewhere (Diprose 2012; Gervais 2010; LeRoux 2007). Kirshner (2007 p.367), for example, identifies four distinctive qualities of youth activist learning environments: ‘collective problem-solving, youth-adult interaction, exploration of alternative frames for identity, and bridges to academic and civic institutions.’ The current work develops this discussion by specifying the role that NGOs play.

3.2 Employability
Evidence from research on international volunteering for development (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011; Simpson 2005), gap years (Heath 2007) and citizenship activities in schools and universities (Brooks 2009; Staeheli et al. 2013) suggests that young people’s choice of social and political association is increasingly influenced by pressure to perform ‘employability’ by engaging in activities that provide ‘something for the CV’ to enhance formal qualifications. This positions youth
participation in the voluntary sector as a pivotal terrain of struggles over social mobility, potentially reproducing ‘differential citizenship’ (Lake and Newman 2002) by offering the means of successful middle class transitions to some at the expense of others. My research underlines the influence of employability within NGO youth citizenship projects, in funder expectations, NGO marketing and young people’s reasons for getting involved.

NGO recruitment of young people was perhaps the most obvious way in which this was expressed:

‘Joining YIC gives you the opportunity to make a real difference on issues that you are passionate about. But on top of that, there are loads of personal benefits... This is a chance to develop skills that will be useful in the future such as teamwork, communication, leadership and time management. Universities and employers do not just look for what sort of qualifications a person may have... [YIC can] help to improve CVs and UCAS applications and really set you apart from the crowd.’ (YIC school presentation)

‘If you want to gain skills, experience and knowledge within the fields of fundraising, finance or communications and social media you are welcome to join the GYA team - a volunteer opportunity that has aided others in gaining fantastic jobs across the UK and around the world.’ (GYA recruitment ad)

On the one hand, training opportunities and workplace signposting were genuine and sought after. Young people reported significant personal gains from participation such as increased confidence, organisational skills and public speaking, and in GYA’s case transitions to professional voluntary sector work. On the other, the specialisation and competition implicit in employability discourse was sometimes detrimental. YIC staff strove against teacher expectations that citizenship was an extracurricular add-on for academic achievers (Brooks ibid.), whilst its CV writing, employability and enterprise activities directed young people’s learning towards individualised marketable outcomes.

GYA’s international roles attracted competition from graduates up to 30 and younger members in particular ‘felt the pressure to carve some sort of niche’ (Faiza), anxious that ‘everyone had got a PhD or worked in an organisation or had been to Oxbridge’ (Claire). As is noted more commonly of curricular citizenship, a skills-based approach to citizenship generates tension as ‘competitive meritocracy conflicts with civic goals’ (Levine and Youniss 2006 p.4).

3.3 Entrepreneurialism

The prevalence of empowerment and employability work within NGO youth citizenship projects compels rereading of risk society, particularly the idea that young people only play at politics superficially (Rheingans and Hollands 2012). My research illustrates the adaptability of NGOs and young people to a changing economy and uncertain future, as they perform employability whilst making space and holding ground for collective citizenship practices predicated on voice, representation, participation in governance, conscience and social responsibility. This may be interpreted as performance-as-resistance (Changfoot 2007), ‘working the spaces’ between states and markets (Bondi and Laurie 2005) and/or resourceful resilience work (Katz 2004; Salamon 2003) that enables and curtails citizenship prospects.

A third key finding from this project, which explains the coexistence of the first two, is the extent to which NGOs and young people are obliged to engage in ‘entrepreneurial’ (Swyngedouw 2005) and
‘self-regulatory citizenship’ (Simpson 2005) whereby they assume responsibility for risk management in their everyday and strategic practices (Levine and Youniss 2006). Remarks such as ‘You have to be resilient to work in this sector’ (Kirsty, YIC regional manager) and ‘I am a lot stronger than before, and I’m more resilient and know how to work in groups, and I can be patient and get over troubles and things a bit more’ (Tim, GYA member) were commonplace. Becoming entrepreneurial citizens entails threats and opportunities for young people and NGOs. A discourse of self-sufficiency can be empowering (Changfoot ibid.) and ward off fatalistic responses to social change (Katz ibid.), but it also consolidates the material and psychological conditions that reproduce ‘differential citizenship’ by localising and individualising risk. By being enjoined to become entrepreneurial, both my case study NGOs and the young people they worked with more frequently succeeded in self transformation than their professed business of social transformation.

4. Conclusion
My research demonstrates the capacity of NGOs to work as valued civic intermediaries that provide young people with formative associational experiences of social and political action. The combined effectiveness of amplifying, bridging and capacity building to support youth participation in public life, from local to international level, forms NGOs’ and young people’s idea of empowering citizenship practice. As well as the potential to achieve tangible outcomes for young people, the educative aspects of this practice-focussed citizenship approach are especially important. NGO youth citizenship projects must strike a balance between present and future orientation, working with young people as citizens now (Checkoway et al. 2003) as well as grounding them in conventions of collective action that support on going activism.

The research also details resilience work and risks inherent in promoting citizenship as a means of employability. Empowerment and employability aspirations coexist uneasily, with tensions and trade-offs to beware of. Though citizenship-as-practice undoubtedly entails skills development, if the experience is individualised and reduced to marketable outcomes, its social consequence and transformative potential may be lost. The impact of voluntary sector professionalisation on young people includes the impetus to specialise, perform citizenship as distinction and become ‘entrepreneurial’ subjects. This can perpetuate existing inequalities and diminish citizenship: ‘in an economic system driven by choice and risk, young people may act out civic roles for instrumental purposes without an accompanying commitment’ (Levine and Youniss 2006 p.4). NGOs must make careful work of recruitment and design if they value pluralism over privilege (Clarke 2005).

There is some cause for optimism, as the outcome of this interplay between NGO empowerment and employability work is by no means given. Professionalisation does not render the political ambition and impact of youth citizenship projects redundant. It may in some instances make unexpected incursions. I would like to end with one such example from my research - one GYA’s members’ account of her ‘awakening’ - to illustrate the potential of NGO participation:

‘I don’t have great reasons for getting involved to be honest. It’s more like, once I was involved... my reasons completely changed. If I stay involved it will now actually be to do something, not ‘cause I want to be employable... I can’t put into words the feeling of doing something that I’m proud of. It’s nice to do something that makes a difference, or that’s at least trying to... I feel I originally came across as quite mercenary and focussed on employability. I think what I’m trying
to get across is that I didn't know what I was getting myself into - but through exposure to so many dedicated, passionate, amazing people, my life has been massively impacted. I was thrilled to discover that people were willing to teach me and work with me... I feel like I've had my eyes opened to this whole world, which has been really exciting for me, where young people, as long as they work hard and work together, are able to make an impact and get involved in their global society and actually have a voice.... I can't really emphasise enough how grateful I am, even when it's frustrating and difficult.’ (Sally, GYA member)

References


