YOUNG PEOPLE’S VOICES BEING HEARD IN THE COMMUNITY OF CLAYTON BROOK

JONATHAN LENIEWSKI (Social Work)

Abstract: Young people are constantly blamed for creating a nuisance and scaring others in the community; whether this is true or not it still affects the rest of the youth in the community. Evidence suggests that towards the end of the twentieth century, there has been growing recognition of young people’s ability to understand and contribute to their local communities. However, the government has introduced policies and legislation that continue to exclude and oppress the young people in our communities, resulting in socially excluded and frustrated youths. When young people participate in the community and have a voice, the young people feel empowered, valued, and important in their community. This article examines research carried out in this field before analysing data collected from a small focus group in Clayton Brook, Lancashire. The data was recorded and coded utilising the initial coding method. Within this small sample, the participants claimed that if they were listened to and felt part of the community then the negative attitudes displayed towards them may breakdown and relationships between the young and old would have the potential to develop. Zeldin & Petrokubi’s research (2008) demonstrates that when young people and adults work together they can build a better community, where all opinions are valued and respected.

Keywords: Young People, Communities, Social Policy, Legislation, Government, Social Exclusion.

Introduction

Clayton Brook is a residential community situated between Preston and Chorley, with a mean population of around 7,200 people from diverse backgrounds. However, Clayton Brook does have high crime statistics: from January to October in 2012 over 1,090 crimes were recorded. Interestingly, the highest type of crime recorded (481 in total) is for Anti-Social Behaviour, which includes personal, environmental and nuisance Anti-Social Behaviour (United Kingdom Crime Statistics 2012). Clayton Brook Community House (CBCH) is a drop-in centre that offers assistance to all residents in areas such as benefits, counselling and social activities. One of its goals is to empower all members of the community to solve local issues and to support new opportunities that will enhance their skills and confidence so that they can create a better future (CBCH Annual Report 2011-2012).

Young people are constantly blamed for creating a nuisance and scaring others in the community; whether this is true or not, it often seems to be exaggerated and this affects the rest of the youth in
the community. The Police and Community Together (PACT), meeting in November 2012, found that the main issue for the older adults was that young people were gathering around Clayton Brook Primary School and causing a nuisance, so the local policing team agreed that they would move them on to a new place, where they would gather again. So this problem has not been resolved and it will be brought up again in the future (Lancashire Police UK 2013).

Arches and Fleming (2006) suggest that since the end of the twentieth century there has been a growing recognition of young people’s ability to understand and contribute to their local communities. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) maintains that all young people should be represented and should participate in the decisions that affect their lives as citizens. The emergence of the idea that young people should be involved in decision making in their lives and communities has become more focused in public debate and government policies. Prout (2003) points out that, due to social change, organisations and institutions have to be more responsive and flexible, and seek the views and opinions of those affected by their policies at local meetings. Nevertheless, previous governments introduced policies and legislation that continue to exclude and oppress the young people in our communities.

The aim of this study is to help young people work collaboratively with older members of the community and the policing team, tackling issues that have arisen, so that young people are respected in the community and can have a say on issues that are affecting them.

**Government tackling youth issues**

In the late 1990s the New Labour government focused on tackling social exclusion (Fairclough 2000). Fergusson (2004) argues that participation is important for social integration within the community. Levitas (1998) likewise believes that participation is vital in promoting ‘active citizenship’. ‘Active citizenship’ involves all members of the community playing an active and influential role. Whilst the social exclusion agenda focussed on people becoming ‘active citizens’, it is evident that the government was concerned about the problematic behaviour that young people were involved in and addressed this with oppressive policies (MacDonald 1997; Barry 2005). To this day, young people who were subjected to the social exclusion policy find it difficult establishing relationships within local communities and their voices are being excluded, which can be very problematic (Dalrymple 2003). In 1992 Hart criticised the government and argued that:
‘participation’ is a right of citizenship that involves sharing decisions which affect one’s life and the life of the community in which one lives (Hart 1992, 5).

Therefore, as a ‘right’ of citizenship, it is vital that the current government stops excluding the youth and makes it more accessible for young people’s voices to be heard in the community.

In 2002 the New Labour government introduced statutory citizenship lessons as part of the national curriculum for 11-16 year olds in England, which would teach young people the knowledge, values and practices essential for a citizenship concerned with belonging, participation, mutual responsibility and identity. There have been many criticisms of this, as it failed to address the impact of increasing individualism and the atomisation of citizens, particularly in its failure to explain what the values of citizenship actually are (Hart 2009). Blair (1998) argues that it failed to explain what duties and responsibilities the citizen should hold. This approach to ‘active citizenship’ had a negative effect on the youth: it failed to see young people as citizens and subsequently-worked against their sense of belonging in their local communities. The New Labour government failed to recognise young people as citizens; they were, in effect, excluded and had no recognised place in the community (Lister 2007). What the New Labour government focused on was attributing societal problems entirely on young people’s behaviour, instead of focusing on empowering young people to become ‘active citizens’.

Only recently has the current Conservative - Liberal Democrat coalition government recognised that youth are most vulnerable, not least those in care, those with disabilities, and those who struggle at school and who are at risk of poor future outcomes. The coalition recognises that young people need early intervention to overcome the challenges they face. New policy now informs the public that young people do not feel a sense of belonging, hence their disrespect for the communities in which they live and their criminal behaviour. To tackle this, the current government introduced the Positive for Youth policy (2012). The aim of this policy is for everyone to work together to support families and disadvantaged youths and improve their outcomes. The government insists that young people should be in the driving seat, making decisions about their communities and that this would improve their sense of belonging, develop supportive relationships, prevent them from committing crimes and provide opportunities for them to succeed in the community. To tackle youth crime the coalition government has increased the age at which young people must participate in education or training to prepare them for work to 18, as they believe young people realise their potential in school.
(Education and Skills Act 2008). The coalition understands that the youth have valuable ideas that can improve local communities, so the focus of the policy is to promote ‘young voices’.

Between 2011 and 2013 the government invested £850,000 in the British Youth Council, money provided so that local councils could create youth councils in which young people can make decisions about their communities. Evidently, this government is aware of the social exclusion young people face in their communities and this Positive for Youth policy is all about empowering young people to contribute effectively in their communities. Nevertheless, even with this policy in place, the young people in Clayton Brook have not, at the time of conducting this research, seen any of the £850,000 and they are still not empowered to make any decisions in the community.

**Why listen to young people?**

First and foremost, young people must be motivated to get involved, which is why my research involves those who want change in the local community. Young people are the future generation, for this reason it is vital that they have a say in the community. Research conducted by Hart in 2009 makes evident that respect, belonging, and having a voice are key to inclusion in the community. Young people in Hart’s research explained that, if respect was given to them, they would respect the community and its people. However, the Respect Task Force (2006) commissioned by Tony Blair believed that young people must demonstrate respect for their elders and that adults had no obligations to respect the youth. With the introduction of Gordon Brown in 2007 New Labour disbanded the Respect Taskforce and introduced the Youth Taskforce which focussed more on young people contributing to our society and making a positive contribution. In Hart’s study, young people also stated that they felt ignored within their communities and that the discrimination by adults prevented them from developing a sense of belonging. Hart maintains that the government had failed to help develop a sense of belonging between citizens and the respect that all should receive (2009, 30). Her research shows that young people want to work with adults in the community, to develop community spirit and to strengthen relationships. In my own research young people likewise expressed a desire to work with adults to develop relationships and break down stereotypical views.

**The impact of adults and young people working together**

In the United States of America they have introduced Youth-Adult Partnership (YAP), which involves community decision-making. This requires the adults working with the youth to empower them to take on issues of concern in the community so that they can contribute to these issues. Everyone
involved in the partnership has ways to engage in the areas of their respective skills and interests, which helps to contribute to a strong sense of belonging among the young people. YAP has proved that reciprocal and respectful relationships can be established between both groups and that communities can come closer together. Zeldin and Petrokubi (2008) point out that YAP, in helping to develop relationships, has resulted in instrumental benefits for young people, such as providing references and access to information and networks which, most importantly, lead to jobs within the community. Zeldin and Petrokubi’s research also demonstrates that when young people and adults work together they can build a better community, in which all opinions are valued and respected.

The young people, according to this study, felt empowered, trusted and, most importantly, a sense of belonging. Although research indicates that YAP has outstanding benefits for youth (Mitra 2004; Youniss & Hart 2005; Zeldin, Larson & Camino 2005), regrettably YAP has only taken off in America and few adults have worked closely with youth on issues of common concern in the UK.

Evans (2007) explored young people and adults working together in Canada and he showed that, when young people feel valued, needed and treated with respect, they are drawn into the community and use their voices in an influential way. Evans found that if adults helped to create opportunities for young people, offered feedback to enhance their learning, provided support and challenges, then the community can open up to the young. However, due to low self esteem, many of the young people involved in this study did not feel their opinions mattered or could make a difference. In general, Riger (1993) suggests that there is a power imbalance and that adults have control mainly because many young people feel disempowered and have little opportunity to be involved in social change.

Very few studies have been conducted in the UK which focus on the impact of adults and young people working together and the few which exist have their difficulties. In the UK exclusion policies and practices mean that the young invariably feel unheard, or they lack confidence, and this prevents them from contributing in community meetings. Lack of experience, no influential voice and low self esteem mean that they do not have a say in their communities (Borland et al. 2001). Research conducted by Macpherson (2007), found that in Scotland adult members of the community dominated community meetings, Macpherson also found little discussion between young people and adults. The young people in the Scottish meeting stated that they felt unheard, sidelined and frustrated about the lack of influence they hold.
In the area which is the focus of this study, Clayton Brook, one group which does not work together is the police and the young people. Since crime is high in Clayton Brook, stop and search procedures are not uncommon. Clayman and Skinns (2012) found that young people have negative experiences with the police, because when being searched the police give no explanation as to why they are searching them. Young people said they were being treated like criminals and it made them angry, hence relationships did not improve. Another reason that influences young people’s relationships is their social networks. Clayman and Skinns showed that youngsters will not cooperate with the police if they know their peers have committed a crime, this is because ‘snitching’ is frowned on, and if caught ‘snitching’ their peers will reject them and bullying may ensue.

**Clayton Brook Study**

**Design**

Informal focus group discussions were conducted with three teenagers aged between fourteen and fifteen; two of the three participants were from the Clayton Brook Community House (CBCH) youth panel and the other participant was a member of the Clayton Brook youth club. CBCH is managed by members of the community, and the youth panel consists of teenagers who represent the teenage population in Clayton Brook. CBCH has been running for over 16 years, providing services such as counselling, welfare rights, or simply coming in for a chat (CBCH 2012). All the participants that were involved in the research had the opportunity to refuse participation, and because all the participants were under the age of eighteen, parent or guardian permission for participation was obtained beforehand.

**Obtaining data**

The focus group discussions with the teenagers took place at the Clayton Brook Community House; we met on three occasions between September 2012 and February 2013; each discussion lasted around thirty minutes. I wanted to collect qualitative research but also to understand and carefully consider the young people’s thoughts, opinions and experiences in the community (Krueger & Casey 2000) hence the discussions were recorded for further analysis.

**Personal involvement**

When using qualitative methods you have to enter the participant’s world, you must therefore build a rapport with your participants so that respect can be given both ways. For this reason I worked as a volunteer at CBCH for six months before starting any research. This helped me to understand how Clayton Brook Community House works and who uses its services.
Methodology

Constructivist grounded theory method was used in this research project, as grounded theory gathers data first, thereby providing a solid base for building a reliable analysis. Grounded theory was also used as this enables ‘thick description’, i.e. description of social behaviour which includes the social context. Grounded theory can give flexible guidelines during the analysis, rather than having rigid prescriptions. With flexible guidelines I could direct the study, but the participant’s imagination can flow and be more descriptive.

A constructivist approach was chosen because it places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both the data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants (Charmaz 2006). The logic behind the constructivist approach means learning how, when, and to what extent the participants experience is embedded in larger societies such as relationships and networks (Charmaz 2006).

The questions

In trying to assess the participants’ views, feelings, intentions and actions, as well as the structures of their lives, they were asked two questions about having a ‘voice’ in the community:

1. How do you see you can get your views across in the PACT meetings without being stigmatised?
2. What would you want from the PACT meetings if you had a ‘voice’?

Data analysis

Coding data is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain the data. Through coding you define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means. The focus group recording was coded utilising the initial coding method. The advantage of using initial coding helps spark thinking and allows new ideas to generate.

Coding the data resulted in four different themes:

- working collaboratively for a better community
- negativity towards young people
- what youth want
- future community spirit
From here, I developed properties within these themes based on the participants’ responses.

Findings
The focus group, being representative of youth in the community, suggested that young people feel more involved in the community and more of a communitarian when they ‘work collaboratively with older adults’ and feel as though they have been listened to as they sometimes get ‘what they want’. However, they revealed that ‘negativity towards young people’ and the stereotypical labels shown towards them, affects their sense of belonging in the community, hence why they sometimes cause a nuisance. The participants envisaged a community working together that would help everyone and anyone, being the final theme: ‘future Community Spirit’. If the teenagers had the opportunity to take part in the PACT meetings and had the ability to influence the PCSOs and the older adults, the teenagers expressed that they would feel listened to and powerful. The teenagers expressed that, if they were listened to and felt part of the community, then the negative attitudes displayed towards them may breakdown as the PCSOs and older adults realise they are not that bad. It became evident in the focus group that when the young people talked about the potential of a better community they became animated and had a lot to say about how good it would be for Clayton Brook. In order for the community spirit to grow it is essential that both young and old work together.

Working collaboratively for a better community
As evident from the extracts quoted below, the participants believed that young people need to interact with adults who value their voice.

Yeah if they saw us as an equal, we can all work together. Like, doing something good. Like help with their gardening, or walking the dog.

All the adults moan, but if we can work with them we would get along.

It is important for young people not to be stigmatised in the PACT meetings and they must work with adults so that they can build relationships.

If the adults looked down on us and started disrespecting us, we would not take part, in it.

The adults in Clayton Brook are also to blame, as they have not given any opportunities to the youngsters, they do not let them participate in PACT meetings. It would seem that in Clayton Brook
there is a power imbalance, participants believed that what is needed in the community is for young people’s voices to be heard and for them to have power so the community can change.

I want all young people and old people to work together, and for us to get along.

Negativity towards young people
Participants claimed that young people are constantly stigmatised and labelled as thugs in Clayton Brook, and unfortunately this affects their sense of belonging in the community.

All the adults look down on us, but they are just hypocrites because the police are always at their doors.

They all recognised that when the adults complained about them in the PACT meetings, it would have a negative effect, as the PCSOs would then tackle the petty issues that had arisen. One issue that the adults complained about in October 2012 was that youngsters were hanging around the local ASDA supermarket.

The adults are too harsh on us, we only sit around ASDA were not harassing anyone. The PCSO’s are really annoying and I just hate them. They can’t do anything.

I think because when we hang around ASDA and we are with are mates, they probably think we are intimidating and scary.

Labelling young people affects their sense of belonging; Moses (2009) explains that labelling is a matter of great concern as it makes the young people vulnerable to stigma and that the labels of stigma create barriers to adulthood.

What we [youth] want
Young people want activities to take part in, so that it tackles boredom and keeps them out of trouble. The young people need the opportunity to tell the council and the adults of the community what they want to participate in, so that it can develop their confidence and let them grow as adults. This is known as opportunity role structure (Maton & Salem 1995).
We want more activities, like cricket and football clubs. If we have more activities it would keep us out of trouble and off the streets.

We want a football team so it can build community spirit, the women have one why can’t we. In football we learn how to work as a team and our confidence will get better. Also the coach could be a positive role model.

The ideas suggested indicate that if these were introduced it would lower Anti-Social Behaviour and keep young people out of trouble.

Future community spirit
According to the participants, many young people in Clayton Brook feel small and powerless. The fourth major theme that emerged from discussions concerns what the young people want to happen in Clayton Brook to create a better future for the next generation.

I want surrounding communities to stop disrespecting Clayton Brook and stop them from calling us tramps. Get all the young people to get along with everyone in Clayton Brook, and stop arguing and fighting with the adults and also for the PCSOs to stop being so negative towards us. I want trust.

Let’s make PR5 a decent post code again and have everyone respect each another and see us as equals.

To have young people listened to and feel part of the community.

As revealed by these comments, the young people of Clayton Brook do not feel part of the community and do not feel valued. It is, therefore, vital that adults create opportunities so that young people have an important part to play in the community and act as ‘active citizens’ (Levitas 1998).

Discussion
Although in America crucial steps have been taken in establishing a working partnership between young and old, in the UK there is still a stigma attached to the young people. Here they are portrayed as troublemakers, problematic and yet to be citizens. Whilst conducting my research I
took this into consideration and when talking to the young people they too expressed a view that working with adults would help build a better community. It is generally agreed that adults have to lower their barriers and accept the young people for who they are and embrace them into the community and let them have a voice.

Research indicates that young people disengaged from mainstream society or subject to social exclusion have, until recently, been few opportunities to effectively feed their voices into decision-making settings. Also in a policy climate where the most socially excluded young people continue to be viewed as victims or problematic groups, we must make sure that their voices are the ones we hear that influence future policy. There is also a need to focus more on offering young people choice on whether they want to engage or not, and if we do not then we continue to create marginalisation. In all of the research the results showed that when participating in the community and having a ‘voice’, the young people felt empowered, developed a sense of social responsibility, valued, belonged, and important members of the community.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

Many of the young people in Clayton Brook live in low income households and these young people do not experience any form of empowerment. Unfortunately, it would seem that the power held by adults is too strong and without support from them change will be limited.–Riger (1993) explains that, for young people to feel empowered and have the potential to change something in the community, they need limited barriers and plenty of opportunities. In Clayton Brook differences and distinctions between the young and old are very apparent in terms of hierarchies, opportunities and communication; young and old remain separated which then causes conflict in the community. A good working relationship between the young people and the police is non-existent in Clayton Brook and it is evident that the police need to provide anonymity so that the young people can trust them if they disclose anything and not be harassed by peers for ‘snitching’.

This study is the first to be conducted in which young people were personally asked what they want in the Clayton Brook community and the thoughts and opinions of these young people were recorded. What this research suggests is that adults need to encourage young people to say what they want at the PACT meetings, so that both age groups can come to a conclusion on what is best for both and that will have positive outcomes for everyone in the community. Adults must realise that, at present, they are creating a barrier for a better community for all and they must provide opportunities for the young to develop as successful communitarians.
References


Macpherson, S. 2007. ‘Reaching the top of the ladder? Locating the voices of excluded young people within the participation debate’, *Policy & Politics* 36:3, 361-79.


