Youth Participation and Young People as Agents of Change:  
A Cross National Perspective  
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Presentation Summary

Overview

This presentation will consider how emerging theoretical underpinnings of enlisting better social support for young people coupled with key aspects of their resiliency building can enable better participation by youth in civic society and lead to better outcomes for them. In order for young people to be actors ‘of’ and ‘for’ change the benefits of civic engagement of youth will be stressed, particularly for those who experience or live in adversity. It will be argued that this possibility as a method to work with young people is generally untapped and needs greater development.

However, new perspectives of and clarifications for youth civic engagement need to be advanced, for example, valuing citizenship by youth in school settings, the role of young carers in the home as active citizens, and the positive capacity of troublesome or troubled youth (previously not considered as civically active candidates) needs greater exploration and to be ‘rechanneled’. Having connected civic engagement to social support and resilience, the paper will explore these factors within the context of fragile or in conflict states. Activating positive participation of youth is explored using Northern Ireland and Zambia as cross national comparatives, with some consideration of learning for other countries including the USA.
Connecting Resilience to Youth Civic Engagement

While over recent years the potential of hobbies and leisure interests as an enabler of resilience in young people has been well established (for example see Gilligan 2009), accessing this capacity in the context of youth social or political civic engagement and through acts of altruism has received much less attention in terms of potential. Apart from the prospect that by active citizenship including positive acts in the community or doing with and for others can offer respite from a young person’s sole attention to his/her own difficulties, it can also enable their self-efficacy and lead to better personal outcomes. However given that in society and certainly within schools other than sporting or academic achievement civic engagement is often overlooked or not highly valued a new perspective on how such participation can be developed is required.

Emerging Social Support Theory as Key to Building Capacity in and for Youth

For many youth who live with severe stress there is growing evidence that the connection between having social support and better mental health is key to their coping. Recently, three aspects of social support networks have been established which may be key to enabling young people to get by and get ahead. Firstly their capacity to reciprocate support with others either in familial school community of civic society has particular resonance and cross culturally. Secondly, their receipt of hidden support from others (support that they are almost unaware of) can be of most benefit and in a civic engagement context this has been found to be constructed most easily. Thirdly, the concept of a convoy model of accessing and providing support to youth as an untapped resource in community settings is particularly noteworthy. This suggests that where a youth’s own social network is weak or unhelpful, through one alliance with a peer or adult with his/her own strong supply of good quality of support, new opportunities can easily accrue. Thus, a young person can access the help they need to enlist through the network of another, and in this context civic engagement of youth opens up not just new relationships and networks but a ‘convoy method’ or access to give and gain support.
Youth Participation in Fragile and or post Conflict States – A Comparative!

For many youth who live in fragile countries or countries in conflict their participation and contribution can often be solely viewed in a context of violence as a method for perceived survival. Many UN programmes (see UNICEF and UNESCO) focus on deterring youth from soldiering and seek to engage youth in humane and positive social civic engagement in non-conflict contexts. Negatively, Bartone (2006) has shown that in a conflict state or context there are ‘six key stressors’ which can impair any person young or old

1. Isolation
2. Ambiguity
3. Powerlessness
4. Boredom
5. Danger
6. Workload

However, he and others suggest that these can be counteracted in order to enable resilience and a more positive participation in society. For youth living in conflict or fragile states these six issues also have strong meaning and can be counteracted by a series of benefits associated with positive civic social (or social justice related) activity. This includes known benefits of youth civic programmes for example the ‘4 H’ programme which according to Villareul et al (2003) enable a sense of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. This presentation will argue that in states such as the Republic of Ireland (Dolan, 2010) and Northern Ireland which is more or less in post conflict and Zambia where youth face noticeable stress as listed above, such interventions hold specific promise. In the former, recent downturn in the economy is leading some Northern Irish youth towards risk of re-emergence in anti-social and/or para-military activities while in the latter being infected or affected by HIV-Aids is imposing negatively on young Zambian citizens. New initiatives in both states to enable greater participation of youth will be described (briefly). Finally it will be suggested very tentatively that both the six stressors and four counteracting factors outlined above, may have equal resonance for detached or vulnerable youth in the context of the United States of America.
References


