

# **Informal Education as Freedom – re-considering youth and community work through a Capabilities Approach**

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## **Introduction**

Austerity policies have failed to recognise and account for the value of youth and community work. Against a backdrop of excessive cuts since the 2008 financial crash, youth services have been disproportionately affected, with a growing emphasis on measurement, outcomes and, ultimately, performativity (de St Croix, 2018, Youdell and McGimpsey, 2015). In their recent research project, Louise Doherty and Tania de St Croix have highlighted tensions in measuring and evaluating youth work, and argue that the way practice is recognised and valued by young people and youth workers is disconnected from the way it is measured, monitored and evaluated. They argue that, rather than seeking to ‘measure’ practice, a grassroots democratic approach to accountability would attempt to create the conditions in which high quality practice can be nurtured and developed’ (Doherty, 2019).

Therefore, our sector faces a problem; not in articulating youth and community work values but, instead, a battle against the deficit model of targeted and instrumentalised funding in the communities in which we work. Policy-making based on this deficit discourse has depicted these groups as out of control and in need of punitive measures (Coburn and Gormally, 2019). Youth and community workers have been tasked with responding to both government policy and the diverse needs of their communities, but in such a way that outcomes and impact are demonstrated (Fyfe, 2019). This kind of work has been co-opted for groups deemed as ‘dis-advantaged’, such as the one in this study, in order to tackle wider social issues, like reducing anti-social behaviour, drug use and teenage pregnancy (Aitken and Shaw, 2019).

This article seeks to take a new approach to valuing youth and community work in an attempt to cut across deficit modelling. We engage with Sen and Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993) as a way of acknowledging an assets-based position on young people and a human development approach to community development. Firstly we describe a student-led research project undertaken across three settings within a new youth and community provision based in the north-west of England. We explore the utility of the Capabilities Approach, and in particular the concept of 'functionings' as a theory for change that emphasises informal education, critical pedagogy and social justice. We argue that youth and community work offers an expansion of capabilities which affords the education of a particular set of values, and enables a variety of beneficial functionings. Therefore, the Capabilities Approach can serve as a framework for the future evaluation of this work.

### **Ashton Youth and Community Project**

Ashton-under-Lyne, in Greater Manchester, suffered under austerity with drastic cuts to its local authority services. Following the withdrawal of youth and community services from the locality, divisions within the community became widened: 'I hear people blaming each other for how sh\*t their lives are,' says a local youth worker, adding that 'Older people blaming younger people, young people saying there's nowt to do' (Williams, 2019). The Ashton Youth and Community project was adopted by the Lindley Educational Trust (LET), an outdoor learning provider, based in the Derbyshire Peak District. LET works with schools and youth groups on personal development programmes and aims to support groups of young people with higher levels of vulnerability. A student-led research project, funded by Nottingham Trent University focused in particular on generating data across three different projects: sports activities and community partnerships, targeted work with 'hard to reach' young people, and the Winter Skills youth leadership project.

Two third year Youth Studies students undertook a three-week placement in June/July 2019 where they observed a variety of youth work projects and settings. This included observing the projects, undertaking 17 interviews with both staff and young people, and facilitating a focus group with young people. The research brief set for them by

LET was to capture and articulate the value of the new provision in relation to a model for change for youth and community development. A particular emphasis was placed upon the development cycle which sought to engage young people in progression from weekly drop-in sessions to volunteering. This paper therefore, applies a Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993) in analysis of the data, as a way of identifying what 'functionings' were on offer (what young people are able to do) and how this led to an expansion of 'capabilities' (the opportunities a person has to lead a valuable life) through the projects.

Applying a Capabilities Approach to informal education work with young people enables a focus on an individual's ability to convert their resources into functionings, commanding resources and affording agency so that individuals can shape their own lives (Walker, 2003). Some people are not well placed to convert these, for example those living in poverty and newly arrived communities, and therefore this approach recognises new ways of being and doing on offer. Stemming from a human development approach, the starting point is based upon individual and community assets, intrinsic measures, the imagination and the conditions of emotional health (Nussbaum, 2002). Sen championed the human development approach in order to make sense of happiness, desire fulfilment and direct relevance to well-being and freedom and then linked to social change (Sen, 1993). A focus on the future, not deficit past (Saito, 2003).

As an empowerment approach, young people's assets are the key focus and their capability to develop these assets as a starting point. As an assets-based approach, it focuses on and celebrates what young people can rather than can't do. A 'bottom up approach' which supports the empowerment of local people to exercise voice and agency through critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996). In contrast to current impact driven policy making and performative outcomes, a Capabilities Approach recognises intrinsic values such as personal motivations for participation, freedom, choice and ability to pursue aspirations (Clark et al., 2019). This paper engages with Sen and Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (1993) as a new attempt to articulate the value of youth and community work, acknowledging an assets-based position on young people

and a human development approach to community development, cutting across deficit modelling.

### **A theory for change**

The project provided a wide range of sporting activities for young people, with the most popular sessions being football and cricket, including a 'girls only' sessions. Sport was a big draw for young people to the project which worked in partnership with Active Communities sports coaches and local community members. The different pedagogical approaches of the Youth Workers and Sports Coaches were noted by the student-researchers with LET staff being more concerned with getting to know the young people and building relationships, and the coaches focused on sports skills development. Sport was used effectively as a vehicle for youth work, and functionings for young people included social interaction as well as building sports skills. In this way sports activities were often positioned by staff and coaches as 'social problem solvers' offering an opportunity for the community to come together. One participant explained that: 'there were many issues before but since cricket has come in the way more and more people have been coming and thanks to [Youth Worker] and running this for us and because its free'. Young people reported health benefits: getting fitter, being competitive and gaining confidence socially. Many also reflected on the enjoyment and passion they felt towards the sessions and reported wanting to start their own sports clubs, with several transitioning to peer leaders, where older young people were leading activities for younger groups.

One element of the project was a 'hard to reach' session for males. Taking place inside a local church, young people were welcome to come and spend time there. One young person referred to the group as a 'safe space ... where everyone could be themselves'. Being safe and developing a sense of belonging were key functionings of this group, as attendance was often through word of mouth or family connections. Standard youth work activities were offered, including table tennis, pool and computer games, which are used as diversionary techniques for relationship building. The student-researchers reported that there was a strong atmosphere of 'equalness' with youth workers working hard to reduce the power dynamics through enabling safe spaces. Young people felt

as though the Youth Workers offered them role models, behaviour they desired to echo, and a feeling of being part of a valuable community: revaluing what they were already experiencing, rather than seeking change.

The third group, the Winter Skills project was a youth leadership project with a focus on outdoor education. The key aim of the group is to support young people to develop as peer leaders through taking part in a range of outdoor sports. This includes new and exciting opportunities such as mountain climbing and skiing, but also more simple activities such as bike riding. One young person commented that 'You can laugh if you like, but I didn't know how to ride a bike. But whilst I was there I learnt how to ride one. That's what 'skills' means to me'. Young people reported on the value of social interactions through meeting new people, 'being challenged' and the development of functionings such as empathy, determination and growing independence. As well as the outdoor expedition, the group developed entrepreneurial projects in order to fundraise for the trips and excursions. These included preparing items for sale – Asian tea boxes, sweet bags – and bag-packing and tea and coffee sales. Incorporated into these fundraising objectives was the development, not only of entrepreneurial skills, but also a sense of togetherness through shared activities such as counting money and eating meals together. Through these activities young people are 'inducted' into youth and community work values, with the acknowledgement of cultural difference (Batsleer, 2013) being a key functioning:

You get people from different backgrounds and from different areas – they come together and they find something that they have in common. And that's what bonds them together and buildings their relationships and their friendships. I think that is more important than communication and resiliency as there's lots of different scenarios – as we're all teenagers we're all growing up – and part of this growing up is finding different opportunities.  
(Winter Skills Participant)

Analysis of data from student-researcher's interviews, observations and focus groups across these three projects highlighted a range of diverse functionings, which were beneficial ways of being and doing for the young people involved. On an individual level these included the personal improvement of sports skills, new outdoor activities

and a sense of community. Young people reported being able to live more healthy lives, enjoyment and passion for participation, as well as determination and independence. Being 'safe' and 'feeling challenged' were key functionings, which are often reported by research into youth and community work (Batsleer, 2008, Alldred et al., 2018). Entrepreneurship was a particular offer of this project, with the Winter Skills group young people seeking opportunities to 'give back their time' to the projects that had supported them, in the form of volunteering. In this way Youth Workers had developed shared values with these young people.

From a social perspective, functionings included the development of trusted and meaningful relationships, again often reported in research (Hart, 2016, Lohmeyer, 2017). Social interaction and a sense of commitment to a group were key and were part of an 'induction' into the set of values derived from youth and community work. Drawing our attention to these functionings for the purposes of evaluation demonstrates the potential use of a Capabilities Approach in order to highlight the opportunities these participants have to lead a valuable life; opportunities that are currently present and forward facing, rather than being deficit-driven. Data from this research also demonstrated new affordances for future personal and social development, from small things such as 'learning to put up tents' to 'learning to be a leader and running their own activities'. New opportunities for participants emerged for diverse communities to come together, to build a sense of belonging and to develop feelings of greater equality. These communicate a particular set of values for youth and community work.

### **Applying a Capabilities Approach**

These findings present nothing new about the value of youth and community work that is not already well documented. However, these values continue to be overlooked and under-regarded by funders and policy makers. This paper is an attempt to draw on a Capabilities Approach, in order to offer an alternative that takes an assets-based position, and emphasises informal education, critical pedagogy and social justice. If, as argued, providing compulsory education is not enough to enhance children's capabilities (Saito, 2003), it is important to explore the opportunities and values that

informal education offers young people. The Capabilities Approach serves as a framework for evaluating youth and community work as an offer of functionings, as ways of being and doing. Analysing, using this approach, enabled a more nuanced and holistic understanding of informal education and the values of this work, rather than a simple conception of the development of 'skills' and instrumentalised outcomes.

Sen (1999) argued that education was a central human capability and Nussbaum believed that education was a space for freedom (2006). In this paper we argue that this extends to informal education, where taking a Capability Approach provides a useful framework for organising a more equitable society, which demonstrates a theory of change guided by participation and empowerment (Clark et al., 2019). Participation in informal education through youth and community projects, such as the one in this study, are a means for identifying functionings, which plays a constructive role in the conceptualisation of values, needs and priorities. The projects engaged with by the student researchers not only provided evidence to support LET's theory for change, but also demonstrated a particular set of values of youth and community work. This research has highlighted the valuable functionings that youth and community work has to offer, which opens the door for further research engaging with a Capabilities Approach.

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