

Wellbeing and Children's Association: Processes of Poverty and Social Exclusion in British Civil Society

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"it all becomes about the mechanism of association" (Interviewee)

Introduction

There has been a dramatic intensification of interest in children and young people's wellbeing in the last ten years, but the positive outcomes of this focus are debatable. A number of important initiatives have shaped policy in the UK (see Cockburn, 2005a). Most of these 'key policies' aim to extend rights or services to children and young people. However, recent commentary also suggests the poor comparative record of the UK in securing children's wellbeing, the lack of systematic monitoring of wellbeing and the magnitude of the changes in society needed to better this position (UNICEF 2007, UK Children's Commissioners, 2008). Whilst a substantial amount of attention has focussed on economic and health status, education and childcare, there is less evidence available on the role that life skills, social skills and participation in decision making, volunteering and community service play in children and young people's wellbeing (Bradshaw and Mayhew 2005). In this research we aim to outline the some of the linkages between these different elements of wellbeing, to construct a lens through which to examine the associational lives of children and young people.

Academic literature links the subject of children's association to a range of inter-related issues. There is an increasing interest in the UK around issues of 'active citizenship'. The interest in young people's citizenship is an important plank of government policy, as exemplified in the *Every Child Matters*¹ and *Youth Matters*²

¹ *Every Child Matters* is part of the Children Act 2004 that establishes a children's commissioner for England. The legislative and governmental initiative has placed children and young people at the heart of government (both national and local). Children's association and wellbeing is clearly established and there are elements of accountability and an acceptance of the possibility of children being able to work at the centre of government. There is a shift in emphasis from a provision of services to the outcomes for children around 5 domains; namely: health, safety, economic wellbeing, achievement and making a positive contribution.

² It proposed that young people should have: More things to do and places to go in their local area - and more choice and influence over what is available; More opportunities to volunteer and to make a contribution to their local community; Better information, advice and guidance about issues that matter to

agendas. Interest in the inclusion of children and young people in society is also addressed at international level, notably by the UN. Additionally the European Commission published its *White Paper on Governance* and the path towards promoting active citizenship of young people by implementing the European Youth Pact (European Commission, 2005). More recently the representatives of the governments of the Member States adopted council conclusions for an “approach to youth policy with a view to enabling young people to fulfill their potential and participate actively in society” (Council of Europe, 2007). The Commission invited member states to “further implement the structured dialogue with young people and youth organisations ensuring that young people with fewer opportunities and those that are not members of an organisation are included in the structured dialogue”. Although the Council of Europe conclusions are not legally binding to EU members, they are viewed as the common opinion of governments.

Whilst public involvement as an active citizen may be important in terms of making a positive contribution to society, such participation is no magic bullet for achieving wellbeing. A number of trends and policies may adversely affect children’s associational life and wellbeing. For many children in Britain life chances continue to be restricted by poverty and identity based discrimination. Numerous education acts restrict the curriculum and add to the stress experienced by children at school. The ‘youth justice’ legislation (*at least* ten major bills in the last 10 years!) link children and young people with trouble and misbehaviour, and further restricts their opportunities (for example to play or meet in public places). Critics point to poor treatment of children in England who are deemed are criminally responsible at the age of 10, may be locked up institutions and are subject to state actions with reduced access to legal process (NSPCC 2005). There are also legal restrictions on the role of children and young people on boards of charities and private companies and what they can do to participate in society.

In short there is ambiguity here. Different models of engaging with children include courting them as active citizens (whose voices are ‘listened to’ and whose rights and welfare are paramount), educating and instructing them as passive beings *and* controlling and disciplining them as potentially anti-social threats to society.

Thinking About Association

We have drawn on a number of concepts to inform our thinking about children and young people’s association.

Association

them, delivered in the way they want to receive it; Better support when they need extra help to deal with problems

In this research we emphasise that there is a spectrum of association ranging through private to public life, and that different forms of association are likely to have both 'light' and 'dark' sides. Whilst interested in the patterns of formal associational life we are keen to highlight the 'missing' associational activity that makes up the bulk of civil society interactions for most children and young people. The notion of association is a useful concept as it allows us to make comparisons with adults, one of the people we interviewed states:

"I like the word association because it's like a meeting – I don't need a purpose, if we go to the pub we go to the pub, to a youth café, a youth café! It's a game exactly, but association for young people is about these issues that we mention – it's about their place, about their right to hang out; their right to wear a hoodie in a public place. They don't have a pub, so do they have a place? No, they don't have a place. If you talk to ... about equivalence – the adults can go to four different pubs, clubs or whatever. He has the bus shelter – you know, where is the equivalence?"

Wellbeing

The concept of wellbeing is increasingly seen in both research and policy as a useful tool for linking multiple aspects of human flourishing. It provides a promising framework for thinking about children's association and civil society because it links the provision of basic needs with social relatedness, the exercise of meaningful agency and attainment of enhanced quality of life:

"Wellbeing is a state of being with others, where human needs are met, where one can act meaningfully to pursue one's goals and where one enjoys a satisfactory quality of life." (WEDC, 2008)

Arguments for wellbeing suggest that the multi-dimensional concept (embracing material, relational and psychological wellbeing) allows for a focus on the attainment of positive states (wellbeing, social inclusion) rather than solely on the amelioration of negative states (poverty/exclusion). It is a concept which allows for the study of both *states* of being and *processes* – wellbeing outcomes are generated through conscious and sub-conscious participation in social, economic and political processes. Wellbeing is more than the 'good life', it is about having meaning in life and it implies both a focus on the local politics of everyday life *and* on the operating of wider systems of society and governance. As McGregor has argued:

'wellbeing is functioning meaningfully and feeling well within a specific context. On the other hand it is having resources, capabilities and opportunities to achieve goals which go beyond those that present themselves in local contexts.' (McGregor, 2007).

UK policy is beginning to refer to wellbeing; the Local Government Act 2000 makes it a requirement for local authorities to promote the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of their areas whilst the *Every Child Matters* Framework uses some of the terminology of wellbeing to promote an integrated and multi-dimensional approach to children's flourishing. The concept can justifiably be critiqued for its 'catch-all' application and as a potentially de-politicising term (for example by diverting policy focus from overcoming poverty and inequality towards the achievement of happiness). We nonetheless find it a useful conceptual tool as it allows us to integrate material, psychological and social factors and to explore young people's perspectives – what do they see as 'good' association with beneficial outcomes? Crucially it is broad enough to incorporate both a focus on individual and on societal wellbeing.

Social Capital

The generation of social capital through association has come to be seen as a way of addressing many of the challenges of contemporary society. Mainstream social capital theorists argue that high levels of association are thought to generate trust, social cohesion and to enhance political engagement and economic activity (Putnam 2000, Woolcock 2000). Such capital is seen as a societal resource which links people with the state and provides the essential 'glue' of cooperation. Ideas about the potential for social capital have informed policy in both developed and developing countries.

The concept of social capital and its application in policy have been vigorously critiqued for overlooking the 'dark side' of bonding and association, and for tending to depoliticise and domesticate the concept to avoid addressing gross structural inequalities (Edwards et al 2003). However, we have drawn on it in this analysis because it points us towards the need for examining the content and practices of association, the meaning people attach to interaction and ways association perpetuates or overcomes inequalities (Bourdieu, 1977). We use it to focus on the 'unseen' as well as the 'seen' manifestations of interaction (Wong 2007), to look beyond the formal institutions of democratic and economic life to different forms of sociability and informal networks (Edwards et al 2003).

The concept of social capital proves useful in understanding the spectrum of children's association. Borrowing social capital terminology we distinguish between *bonding* forms of association (those between families, close neighbours, children of similar identities), *bridging* association ('horizontal' links between children of different identities) and *linking* association ('vertical' relationships between children and powerful adults, such as service providers or politicians). Nevertheless this research finds that such forms of association may have both a light and a 'dark side'. For example as Henderson and colleagues declare:

“We have seen in our case studies that in many instances the bonding type of social capital that binds a young person to their community or family, can limit their possibilities for pursuing the individualised route to social mobility, and that they need to get out of such communities to get on (Henderson et al, 2007, p.45)”.

Virginia Morrow (1999) encourages us to reinterpret the way social capital is applied to children. She argues “in much existing work on social capital, children and young people are constructed as the passive recipients of culture, their agency is denied and there is no acknowledgement of how children actively generate, draw upon, or negotiate their own `social capital` or even provide active support for parents”. During our research we found that `formal` civil society associations were problematic for most young people. Even `super-participants` required support when entering formal, adult initiated fora. Such difficulties suggest that we need better understandings of where children and young people feel active, comfortable and purposeful in association and how they learn the associational skills to navigate both `private` and `public` life.

The above discussion about children’s association testifies to the requirement to update older theories of civil society to properly understand and make sense of children and young people’s contributions. Irene Bruegel in her research on improving children’s friendships across ethnic and faith divides concludes that day-to-day contact between children is essential to breaking down barriers between communities (Bruegel, 2006). Research in Northern Ireland also saw the importance of cultural divides being bridged by children and young people, suggesting that investment is better placed in young people leisure and nightlife industries than in formal projects (McGrellis, 2005).

Michael Edwards argues that in order to facilitate a healthy civil society it is necessary to generate: “an inclusive associational ecosystem matched by a strong and democratic state, in which a multiplicity of independent public spheres enables equal participation in setting the rules of the game. (Edwards, 2004, p.94 One can perhaps go further and search for dialogues occurring in the `free-spaces` of civil society networks and how they can be supported, listened to and heard in a context that is “fragile and difficult to maintain” (Baicocchi, 2003).

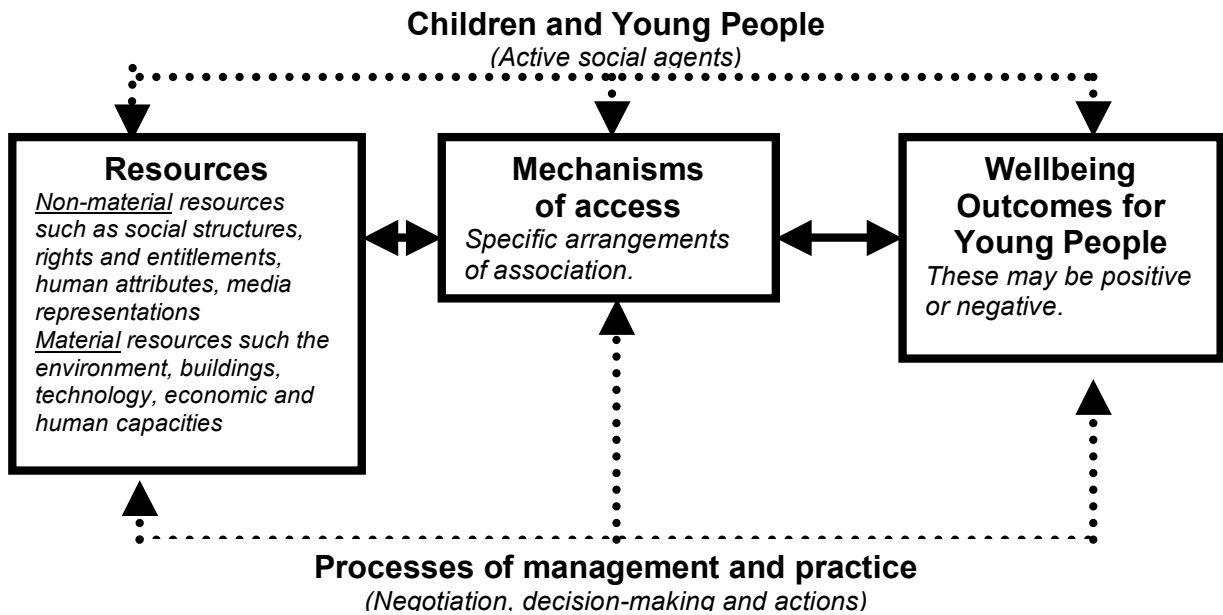
Conceptual Framework: Resources, mechanisms and outcomes of association

Our understanding of children’s association and civil society has been shaped by a conceptual framework drawing on critical realist thinking and synthesising concepts of wellbeing, association and social capital. This framework allows us to understand both mechanisms and processes of association in the context of patterns of societal resources, and to see how different arrangements result in variable outcomes.

There has been a huge growth in the legal and technical apparatus created to institutionalise children and young people's formal civil society associations into a dialogue with government. However, these continue to exclude the poorer and more marginalised young people, even though the 'voices' of all children, including the most 'vulnerable' have been sought. Response to such patterns of exclusion has often been through the design of better rules and processes in decision-making that will encourage participation. However, we will argue that such *mechanisms* of association form only one small element of the process of participation in society. Greater attention needs to be paid to the structuring of resources from which such mechanisms are formed, to the exercise of agency and the processes of association and to the variable outcomes for differently placed individuals.

In scrutinising children's association we find an understandable tendency to focus on particular *mechanisms* of association. These might include channels for democratic engagement such as Youth Parliaments, projects to involve children as partners, events and services aimed at representing or advocating for children. In our research 'mechanisms' also include relationships with families and friends, 'informal' activities such as sport and socialising. We find that there is a need for greater scrutiny of the *content* and *practices* rather than simply the *form* of such association, particularly if we are to better understand how processes of inclusion and exclusion are reproduced.

However, such mechanisms cannot be understood without a) understanding *the context* in which they operate, the resources and societal drivers which shape them and b) a rigorous and differentiated scrutiny of their *effects* over time. We propose the following framework as an aid to understanding such mechanisms:



In this framework, particular mechanisms of association are shaped by the *structures and resources of society*. This includes material resources, in terms of the environment, buildings, technology and children and young people's access to these resources. It also includes non-material resources such as: societal structures and institutions (marriage, the family, gender roles) rights and entitlements and young people's access to the media. The relationship is two-way as mechanisms also shape the ways in which children interact with the resources of wider society.

Specific mechanisms of association produce particular *outcomes* for differently placed young people. Outcomes may be positive or negative, and relate to interlinked aspects of physical, social and psychological wellbeing. We could broadly conceptualise outcomes as relating to political voice, access to services, livelihoods and economic activity, social inclusion and feeling good. The outcomes also shape the ongoing ways in which children associate; positive and tangible outcomes may strengthen young people's willingness to participate and sufficiently empower them to extend the reach of their associational activities. Conversely negative outcomes and thwarted expectations can invalidate particular mechanisms of association and limit children's future participation.

Methodology: Entering Children's Worlds

In order to *extensively* map patterns in association and to *intensively* understand meanings and particular local processes of association, a mixed methods approach was adopted in this research. This combined a number of standard techniques, including an extensive literature review; 10 formal and informal interviews with key informants (academics, activists, practitioners and policy

makers); and 4 case studies of children's association that included informal interviews, focus groups, observations and participatory exercises. Of the interviews with key informants two were conducted over the telephone with verbatim notes taken. The others were carried out face to face either in their places of work or in the University. All these interviews and the focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed.

For reason of time and resources the primarily focused on the English context and experience. Undertaking some Bradford based case studies enabled us to capture some of the importance of the delicate social ecology of neighbourhoods. The primary data collection was undertaken in the Bradford district which has the third largest population of under 16s in the UK outside of London, of which 34% are from minority ethnic backgrounds (City of Bradford MDC, 2007).

The case studies included a series of participatory observational visits to a social housing estate in Bradford; a focus group with 4 young women in a project for young mothers; a focus group with 10 members of the Bradford and Keighley Youth Parliament (BKYP); observations of a group for children of refugee and asylum seeker families and a participatory exercise with 5 of the children. The case studies were reinforced by re-interviews or informal discussions with key informants to achieve some dialogue between children's and key informant's perspectives.

The Wyke/Buttershaw area of Bradford was chosen for a case study because it is predominantly white but has high levels of people with no formal qualifications, high levels of youth unemployment and low levels of economic activity (City of Bradford MDC, 2003). Delph Hill is a housing estate that was negatively perceived by surrounding residents. The young people here were seen by local practitioners as being particularly "*hard to reach and disengaged from any local youth activities*". A focus group was also conducted with four young mothers who visited a local morning group held at a local school.

The Bradford and Keighley Youth Parliament is facilitated by Bradford MDC Youth Service and is comprised of elected youth representatives from constituencies across the district. The focus group of Youth Parliament members was facilitated by Youth Workers. Most of the youth members could be classed as 'super-participants', and most were Bradford- born Asian young people.

The Asylum Seekers and Refugee children were engaged in the research through the voluntary organisation Bradford Action for Refugees (BAFR). The focus for data collection was the 'Welcome Group' run by BAFR every Monday evening for children, located in a community centre in inner city Bradford where many of the children are housed. The children ranged in age from 3-12, some had no memory of living anywhere else whilst others had been in Britain for less than a year.

Wellbeing Outcomes in the UK

There are no simple relationships here – whilst some indicators of children’s wellbeing in society are improving (overall wealth, survival, school attainment), areas of serious concern remain (the numbers of children still living in poverty, restrictions on their use of public space, increased exclusion from school). Studies track and analyse these trends in different ways with Bradshaw and Mayhew (2005) enumerating 12 domains of children’s wellbeing: demography, child poverty, health, lifestyle, mental health, children’s time and space, child maltreatment, children in and leaving care, childcare, children and crime, education and housing. Significantly they distinguish between *wellbeing* (how children are doing now) *and wellbecoming* (how they will do in adulthood). The societal trade-offs inherent to achievement of wellbeing become obvious here. For example the preparation for adulthood (through education) may well be in conflict with a young person’s current wellbeing (the need to play or have more free time.)

In this research we draw again on social capital thinking to focus on outcomes of children’s association as they relate to political voice, access to services and amenities, livelihoods and economic activity, social inclusion and feeling good. Positive experience of association may well generate the habits and confidence of political engagement, as well illustrated by the super-participants of the BKYP.

Whilst the focus of some thinking about wellbeing is on the kind of economic development we think desirable (National Economics Foundation, 2004), wellbeing is clearly not only about wealth creation. At a national economy level there is a clear wellbeing threshold – a point where increasing GDP and wellbeing start to diverge. A UNICEF report on child wellbeing in rich countries found no clear correlation between GDP and Child Poverty Ranking. Indeed, the UK and US were ranked in the bottom third for five out of six of the dimensions of wellbeing studied (the dimensions being material, health and safety, education, family and peer relationships, behaviour and risks, subjective wellbeing). Significantly for this research, the study found UK at the bottom of the tables for family and peer relationships and for children’s subjective ranking of their own wellbeing (UNICEF, 2007).

Poverty stunts associational life, social capital and wellbeing. Evidence from international development illustrates the multiple and interlocking ways in which the threadbare social networks of poor people, and their ‘poverty of representation’ interact with physical and material disadvantage to reproduce poor wellbeing outcomes over generations (Cleaver, 2004). A study of families and neighbourhoods in the UK (James and Grimson, 2007) shows how deeply socio-economic inequality undermines children’s life chances; poorer families in the study were less likely than others to feel that their neighbours would help them out, and less likely to see their local neighbourhood as offering adequate

opportunities for their families. Such families themselves had very low levels of civic association, compared to others.

The links however between social inclusion and attaining wellbeing are complicated. An NEF study for the UK for instance found that whilst social isolation usually equates with a low sense of wellbeing there is no necessary correlation between 'pro-social' behaviour and sense of personal wellbeing. Personal wellbeing and high self-esteem can be linked to very prejudicial attitudes towards others, particularly those of different identities. The experience of the Schools Linking Project, Bradford, shows how children need help in overcoming social divisions – in creating 'bridging' social capital through facilitated friendships with children not like them (Raw, 2005).

Association shapes wellbeing outcomes in unexpected ways. The UNICEF report shows an increase in 'risky' health behaviours (smoking, drinking, unprotected sex) of children in Northern Europe and links this to larger quantities of time Northern European children spend with their peers as opposed to their families. Further, a WHO study on young people's health explicitly links wellbeing and social relations to risky health behaviours in children in Europe - Britain scores particularly badly on health risk behaviour of young people (WHO, 2004). This study notes the links between gender differentiated ways of associating and health outcomes, and links positive experience of school to a greater sense of wellbeing and less risky behaviours. It notes the continuing need for children aged 15 plus for adult support and yet their increased difficulty in communicating with significant adults. It also acknowledges the positive value of peer groups to children. The tension between the need of individuals for autonomy and recognition of their interdependence is a recurring theme in wellbeing studies (Devine et al, 2006).

Investigations into what children want emphasise the desire for more spaces to play (NCB, 2006) and 'informal' space for older children (Elesley, 2004), both safe and free of adult supervision. There are strong perceived links between spaces to play, association and 'feeling good' for example through the development of child friendly 'formal' built environments (NCB, 2006a). NEF (2004) note the importance of the development of curiosity and creativity and also friendship/peer groups as social activities begin to move outside the home when children become teenagers. However this is balanced against parent's perceptions (particularly in poor areas) that teenagers hanging out on the streets is strongly associated with crime and anti-social behaviour and that tackling this would be the best thing to improve their neighbourhoods (James and Grimson, 2007). There is therefore a perceived need to negotiate children's safety in open spaces – that is individual adult /child negotiations about where it is safe to play and associate as well as a societal level negotiation (Valentine, 1996).

Attachment to place, to a locality, with particular social networks may be seen as positive in supporting a sense of identity, responsibility and relatedness. In this

sense association linked to place may generate social inclusion as an outcome. However such attachment may also be restrictive of young people's aspirations and opportunities; 'Patterns of behaviours and of social opportunity, that confine people to their immediate neighbourhoods may also restrict their vision, and sense of community spirit' (Matthews, 2003). A JRF study shows how place shapes outlook; for young people in deprived areas attachment to place family and friends can provide them with social support and encouragement but also can act as a 'brake' on their seeking out or taking up opportunities outside the locality (JRF, 2007). Another JRF study found that children from poorer areas spent more time on 'street play' (Sutton, 2007), unaccompanied by adults on the streets and in open spaces. By contrast children attending a private school participated in more (costly) clubs and organised activities and spent time at friends' houses. In this study asylum seeker and refugee children were often not allowed to play outside because of their parent's fears about the areas in which they were housed, so restricting their association to school and refugee support group activity. Strong association with localities also leads to territorialism, this sense of territory was noted by the young people in Delph Hill, who identified localities with the operation of violent gangs. This is reflected in other studies, for instance, Henderson et al note in their study of youth transitions in four contrasting neighbourhoods:

"Violence seems more likely in localities where individuals have a strong investment in place. It is less likely in areas that are more individualised and where space is not contested, such as our rural area and the affluent commuter site. In two other research sites ... the use of space and place was central to young people's biographies, and there was a pervasive 'culture of violence' (Henderson et al, 2007, p.71)."

This brief consideration of some of the possible outcomes of association well illustrates the complexity of processes involved in generating young people's wellbeing. Processes of association in specific places may both enable and constrain their wider engagement in society – outcomes (say for 'feeling good' or relatedness and social inclusion) may be experienced differentially by children of different identities in varying contexts. In the next section we draw on the 'resources' element of our framework to consider the wider patternings of society which shape processes, mechanisms and outcomes of association.

How Societal Resources Shape Association

In our conceptual framework the general patterns and structures of society shape mechanisms of association into particular context specific forms. Here we are particularly interested in the ways in which societal resources or structures shape association in exclusionary ways

A concern with social exclusion includes generic poverty issues, but also those of ethnicity, gender, (dis)ability amongst others. These issues are usually closely

inter-related, for instance national statistics show that 86% of Pakistani/Bangladeshi children were in the bottom 40% of household and 18% of boys in households with a gross weekly income of less than £100 per week, had a mental disorder (National Statistics, 2007). Furthermore, this has an impact on associating and formal participation, with those from families earning more than £75,000 per year being twice as likely to volunteer as those from families earning less than £10,000 (Office for National Statistics, 2004). Poverty and other forms of social exclusion have been associated with lower levels of trust and people feeling that they cannot influence decision and have a weaker sense of 'collective efficacy' (Kitchen et al, 2006). Poorer people spend more time and energy simply trying to secure adequate services and striving for a comfortable standard of living.

Some estimates calculate that the lives of 3.8 million children in the UK – 1 in 3 – are blighted by poverty (Sharma, 2007). One recent study has found that although 600,000 children have been raised out of poverty since 1997, these are children from families without work. There remain 1.4 million children from working poor households who remain trapped in poverty (Cooke and Lawton, 2008). Furthermore, the rate of child poverty in the UK has risen for the second year running in June of 2008. Jonathan Bradshaw's work on poverty in the 'EU15' found the UK record of child poverty hovering around the bottom. The UK has the highest proportion of children in lone parent families who are not in employment; the highest proportion of children living in workless families; the third highest child poverty risk and the highest movement into and out of poverty (Bradshaw, 2006). The issue of poverty and social exclusion is especially pertinent to children and young people who are asylum seekers as they often have to live in damp and unsafe housing, and suffer racial abuse and problems accessing education (Barnardos, 2008).

There are a number of barriers to children and young people's association reflecting inequalities in society, the particular focus of projects or policy initiatives, the exigencies of everyday life and the lack of perceived links between involvement and beneficial outcomes. Many attempts at engaging with children and young people are from 'top down' initiatives, concerned with children and young people as 'citizens in waiting', rather than with their activities in the here and now. Top down approaches are normally met with a lack of enthusiasm by young people themselves, yet the blame remains with young people as 'failing' to take advantage of opportunities.

One of the primary forms of exclusion from children and young people's association are based around broader patterns of social exclusion, such as poverty, unemployment, literacy problems, language barriers and disabilities. The Institute for Volunteering Research noted that BME groups and disabled people were put off from volunteering for the following reasons:

- BME people undertook more informal volunteering;
- Disabled people rejected 'traditional' models of volunteering based on the

- 'helper and helped' power relationship;
- Perceived or anticipated prejudices of other staff, other volunteers or service users;
- Over formal recruitment selection procedures that alienated those whose first language was not English, people with visual impairments and those with low levels of literacy;
- Physically inaccessible environments for those with mobility-related impairments;
- Failure of organisations to fully reimburse expenses, that means people are out of pocket (Institute for Volunteering Research, 2007).

Hickey and Mohan (2004) have noted the importance of the spatial now entering into political theory, the importance of space is an important element found in our research. There are three ways in which spaces are an important component of analysis. *Firstly*, participation and associational life is *situated in practice*. Often in policies and practice spaces are romanticised and homogenised through self-evident evocations of 'the local community'. Who forms this local community and who 'speaks for' the community is a complex process that is simplified through representational structures. Instead, local communities consist of complicated social worlds where social identities are shaped by local dynamics, constructions of space/place, as well as being shaped by wider social forces. In this sense, children and young people can be silenced in social constructions of 'the local community' and often local young people are constructed as problems by the 'voice' of local communities.

Secondly, places are shaped by market forces and material wellbeing. This has implications for how a geographical space is shaped in relation to other adjoining spaces that may be richer and poorer. For instance, the Delph Hill district was relatively poorer than surrounding areas; richer adjoining districts understood the poverty in the area negatively. However, even the Delph Hill area must not be understood as homogeneously poor but consisted of a complex series of relationships of identity formation that drew distinctions between people.

Finally, it is important to focus analytic attention to how participatory or associational spaces are presented. For instance, 'provided' spaces, such as council meetings, are often disempowering to local people. Those subject to discrimination and exclusion entering these spaces can find them intimidating. How they talk and what they talk about may be seen as incoherent, irrelevant or even disruptive. Provided spaces are contrasted with 'claimed' spaces where association occur in a more 'organic' process. As we will see this has ramifications to the young people of Delph Hill and the young mothers in Reevy Hill who feel distant from local authorities and services, yet feel comfortable with those who come from within their own communities. Marian Barnes has described how young people were coached by youth workers to present versions of their concerns that were seen to be 'acceptable', rather than if they were

expressed in their own language (Barnes, 2007). The ownership of these spaces is a crucial element in our analysis.

There is an underlying belief in the assumption that children and young people will be willing and able to share their wishes, beliefs and views with bureaucrats if they are offered specific structures and spaces to do this. However, it is important to pay attention to the specific spaces to which children and young people are invited and ask questions about whose terms are defining these spaces. As Cornwall and Schattan have pointed out these spaces need to include: “involvement by a wide spectrum of ..., committed bureaucrats, and inclusive institutional designs that address exclusionary practices and embedded bias (2007, p.9).”

Social Processes and Associational Mechanisms

Having considered some of the ways in which association and participation is shaped by the patterning of society, we now turn to consideration of specific ‘mechanisms of association’. One of the primary findings of this research is that most thinking to date on children’s associations has focussed on the formal elements of association to the detriment of the wide spectrum of vibrant informal association. We aim to balance this here by sketching out the importance of other forms of association to children and young people.

The thinking about association in terms of bonding, bridging and linking relationships and processes outlined in above provide us with a rough typology of children and young people’s association. Such an approach balances the excessive focus on formal mechanisms for association and recognises the possibility of children exercising active agency and generating wellbeing outcomes through other channels. In our approach we focus on the social processes and associative mechanisms of children and young people’s association. We do this by broadening the focus to less formal association looking at ‘bonding’ relationships and how these also contributes to young people’s sense of wellbeing and social identity.

The analysis then raises the issue of ‘new’ forms of association through information and communication technologies (ICTs). Although we only touch on this large and growing literature we caution that ICTs may tend to reinforce ‘bonded’ forms of association, at the expense of ‘linking’ forms of relationships.

Available literature tends to focus on the formal elements of association, in particular on ‘volunteering’. Volunteering, as volunteering has many benefits to children and young people, not least in the way it increases young people’s social capital and improves their sense of citizenship and social identity (Hall, 1999). This was certainly the case in the BKYP, with many of the members being active in other groups, churches, leisure activities and active at school or college. However, ‘formal volunteering’ we suggest forms only part of young people’s sense of citizenship. The literature also varies in the degree to which it presents

young people as alienated, apathetic or alternatively engaged in a huge amount of volunteering, campaigning in specific social spaces (Roker and Player, 2000). One recent piece of funded academic research found over a thousand youth groups dedicated to some form of 'social action', including youth wings of larger organisations, youth councils, campaigning, community-based and support groups (Roker, 2002). Our own research found 30,031 organisations interested in 'children' and 13,691 for 'young people' listed in Guidestar. However, this still did not include children's own informal groups and Roker, like us, found it impossible to clarify which were 'youth-led', 'youth managed' or 'youth involved' projects. Indeed, some organisations believed themselves to 'involve' children and young people by providing services and giving them questionnaires to fill in! It is important to also note that many projects are short term, close to collapse or have been superseded by other projects.

The broader literature reflects the interests of government, policy makers, academics, formal charities and voluntary associations and figures are highly eclectic and inconsistently defined. There are varying definitions by organisations on where 'children' become 'young people' or when young people become 'adults'. Furthermore, any statistics collected are more likely to be skewed towards white, higher social class groups. Indeed, a recent paper by the European Volunteer Centre notes: "the lack of quality evidence on volunteering, the failure to adopt consistent definitions" (2004, p.16).

Family, Friends and Bonding Relationships

We see the need to redress the excessive focus on formal institutional mechanisms for participation and understand how these relate to 'bonding' forms of association and social capital. Researchers and practitioners are beginning to realize the importance of 'the informal sector', of peers, parents, friends and less formal networks. For instance, Yuen et al (2005) note the importance of leisure activities in providing a foundation for the development of shared meanings through the familiarisation of participants in leisure into social learning that leads to the emergence of social capital. Allender et al (2006) have made similar points about engagement in sport. Helen Haste and Amy Hogan (2006) have helpfully extended the analytic focus of 'civic engagement' from the narrow confines of voting (and one can add formal 'volunteering' and associations) to include helping (in a broad sense) and struggling to make one's voice heard. Thus this section on children's association takes a broad and catholic definition of associating to include peers, friends and families. In other words a reappraisal of bonding forms of social capital is necessary, because, as Morrow (1999) noted children's associations are usually over narrowly defined. Furthermore, the opportunities and chances to associate are shaped by age and life event factors. For example, the young mothers in Reevy Hill are limited to family networks due to their small children, yet this does not stop them helping people and engaging in crucial forms of association.

The role of families in children's association is often forgotten. However, it is vital to work with families as children and young people have dual lives in public and private. Furthermore, family connections can be built upon to bring children and young people into projects but this must not be done in a way that reinforces the status quo (see Bailey and Jones, 2006).

In our findings we note the importance of family in terms of a) whether or not children and young people receive family support; b) family members serve as role models for young people, especially the importance of mothers (see also NfpSynergy, 2007); c) families form a crucial role in children's identity; and d) refugee children often mediate families and society and children serve as interpreters of wider society.

Young carers find the opportunities to associate very limited, given the enormous pressure of time and energy on their caring roles. Often these caring duties remain unnoticed by teachers (See Barnardos, 2006). However, we can re-evaluate their activities as providing an important social function.

Young people are spending an increasing amount of time with peers, rather than in family situations (Dixon et al, 2006). It is therefore important to focus on this aspect of their lives. All the research shows that friendships are important and crucial to children's wellbeing and the rejection of other children can lead to depression, aggression and anti-social behaviour (The Children's Society, 2007). The UK government recognizes how thinking and learning are inhibited by stress, anger and unhappiness, while feeling secure and valued promotes learning (HM Treasury, 2007). Young people themselves cite relationships with their peers as one of the most important aspects of their lives, especially when it goes wrong, such as bullying.

It is important to notice the importance children and young people attach to their peer networks. The urgency of a focus on this is important as some research notes that children are, in comparison to the 1980s, increasingly reporting that they have no best friends (The Children's Society, 2007). Policy needs to focus on supporting children and young people's peer networks. Learning the habits and norms of association may take place within peer groups and this also shapes future associations. Young people in the BKYP would often say how the group works *as friends*, for some friends were an important point of entry to their interest in joining in the first place. Friendship networks within the formal associational framework of the BKYP involved mutual support and socialisation.

Information and Communication Technologies

Much is claimed for the benefits to association of information and communication technologies (ICTs), but it is impossible to do justice to this thinking in this short study. The effects of telephones, mobiles and the Internet on the way children associate both quantitatively and qualitatively are profound and have been begun

to be studied elsewhere (Livingstone and Bober, 2005; Livingstone and Drotner, 2008).

The effects of ICTs include the possibility of creating bridging and linking forms of social capital and lowering barriers to association and political action. These technologies have allowed young people to become activists and campaigners for change at a local, national and international context. Associations formed out of these technologies are characterised by fluidity, they have informal structures and procedures and can create and coordinate dialogue and communication between people. New technologies have facilitated new 'communities of interest' (Cockburn, 2005) around shared interests and have lifted association beyond localities. The Internet was also a successful recruiter of children and young people, one study found that recruitment of volunteers from the Internet found that 63% of those had *never* volunteered before and approximately a third were those aged between 16 and 25.³ Yet these projects must be supported by good 'real world' management. Results from a children's IT project in Ireland (Brady, 2007) identified the need for good participatory work to be intertwined with good reflective professional practice and project management.

However, the growth of the internet makes it far easier for people to find others with the same interests. Sunstein (2007) has pointed out the dangers of niches to become 'echo chambers' in which only the views of like-minded people are heard and the internet makes it easy for people to filter information into a personalized selection. Sunstein argues that a healthy democratic society requires people to be exposed to a number of diverse and unexpected opinions they would rather avoid. This resonates with social capital thinking which emphasises the importance of 'bridging' forms of association which help to generate expectations of trust between people of *different* social identities.

The issue of the technological divide is especially pertinent to children and young people. One study noted that around half (49%) of those aged 8 – 11 owned their own mobile phone, compared with 82% of those children aged 12 to 15 (National Statistics Office, 2007).

Conclusion

We began this report with a quote from one of the interviewees, who cautioned that there is a danger that "*it all becomes about the mechanism of association*". Certainly in terms of the literature there is a plethora of commentaries about the nature, possibilities and difficulties of different mechanisms of gaining children and young people's voice. Indeed there are countless 'toolkits', reports and examples available in libraries, on the Internet and buried in Chief Executives office drawers that address issues of children and young people's participation. However, most of these focus on the immediacy of the fora (or mechanism)

³ http://www.volunteer.ie/news_interestingstatistics.htm

rather than placing this in the broader context of children and young people's association. Instead we have argued for an understanding of children's association in more informal contexts where they feel most comfort in expressing themselves and how this may interface with public formal structures. There is very little research on these more informal associations and how these experiences shape their movement and engagement into more formal association.

In turn, the expression of children and young people's voices varies according to the resources, both material and non-material that are available to them. These resources in today's society are profoundly unequal and it is perhaps unfair to rely on any mechanism to overcome this to produce wellbeing outcomes for all children and young people. These resources also shift and change over the lifecourse, as the young mothers in this research felt more able to go out meet friends, influence those in their localities and families, relate to service providers yet were constrained by the limited material resources available to them and the felt distance with policy makers. We think it is too simplistic to suggest that young people *choose* not to be engaged with policy and politics, the barriers and obstacles are too high and even the most resourceful young people struggle. Instead it is necessary for formal spaces to become more *informal* or to think of ways to go out to young people's own favoured spaces to listed and engage with. Like us, they would probably be surprised by the creativity, imagination and intelligence of what they find.

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