Community Alliances and Participatory Action Research as a mechanism for re-politicising social action for students in Higher Education

ABSTRACT

Evidence from the UN World Youth Report (2015) suggests that young people, while increasingly disengaged with formal political processes, are motivated by cause-related social action. Higher Education (HE), through research and partnership, provides ideal learning spaces to explore cause-related social action. However, as HE partnership opportunities continue to be reframed under a narrative of employability and one-off participation, there is a risk that these experiences miss an opportunity to critically engage young people with issues at a socio-political level. This research paper considers the potential of participatory action research (PAR) as a pedagogical mechanism for re-politicising social action for students in a UK HE context. The project explores the experiences of 160 undergraduate students, working in partnership with 400 young children, aged 2-10 years, to investigate and co-construct their views and action concerning causes represented by local community organisations. Findings suggest that using participatory, youth-action approaches students shifted their self-identified positions from a non-social orientated approach to establishing them as advocates for causes and children's voices.

We argue that PAR, as a learning experience, and service-learning pedagogy open up an alternative experience of social action through an educational context with engagement and consideration of social issues. In conclusion, we call for new alliances between HE, young people, and community organisations, to produce, through enquiry, critical knowledge aimed at social transformation, which can open-up authentic democratic spaces within the learning communities in HE and its networks.

INTRODUCTION

This article considers the role of participatory action research (PAR), as a mechanism for reconceptualising and re-politicising social action within UK Higher Education (HE) institutions. There has been growing concern that volunteering, and in particular youth social action and citizenship, have become de-politicised and thus operate outside the political sphere (Eliasoph, 2006, Mills & Waite, 2013). In the UK this comes at a time of political crisis, with Britain's intended departure from the EU and social divides around issues such as immigration, welfare and economics causing political turmoil. With young people taking to the streets across the world to protest causes such as climate change, the actions of young demonstrators such as Greta Thurnberg, and the so-called 'Greta effect' act as a catalyst mobilising action, thus young people's democratic education is seemingly more important than ever In this paper we utilise the UN definition of youth (2013), as those persons between the ages of 15-24.

This article explores the experiences of 160 undergraduate Early Childhood Studies students, working in partnership with 400 young children, aged 2 – 10 years, to investigate and co-construct their views and actions concerning causes represented by local community organisations. The introduction discusses how young people are engaging with causes and political processes alongside how the role of universities in creating spaces for social action has changed following a period of marketisation. Next, the article examines how PAR within the field of action research is often regarded as a mechanism for raising awareness of social issues and driving forward social change, (Foster-Fishmann et al, 2010). The article then introduces the research project, as an example of a new space for social action embedded within teaching, introducing how PAR and service-learning pedagogy were used to reposition and re-politicise the learning experience. The article concludes with suggestions for embedding social action within HE using PAR and service-learning pedagogy, with a call for alliances between HE, local organisations and communities.

Youth Civic Action

The drive to re-politicise social action for young people (that is the desire to connect social action to politics) comes amid a perceived global decline in the levels of youth civic and political engagement and a sense that young people are politically apathetic (Cammaerts et al, 2014; Henn & Foard, 2012; O'Toole, 2015; Pontes, Henn & Griffiths, 2017). Research highlights that over the last forty years there has been a steady decline in political participation across all age groups, based on factors such as electoral turnout and party membership (EACEA, 2013). However, whilst young people's participation in institutional political processes and policymaking remains low, recent research suggest that young people are increasingly using forms of activism, including street protests, informal groups and online campaigning groups to represent themselves, as well as joining social movements (Cha et al, 2018). A joint study of young people in Europe carried out in 2013 by the London School of Economics (LSE), and the Education, Audio-visual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) of the European Commission, alongside other studies, challenged the popular belief and overly simplistic notion of apathy in young people (Wattenberg, 2006). Cammaerts et al's. (2014) research across six European countries shows that rather than apathy, there are barriers for young people within the mainstream political systems and discourse. By identifying the more complex reasons for a lack of youth engagement in political processes, this European study concluded that there is no crisis of democratic participation in youth, but "*a clear and growing dissatisfaction with the way politics is conducted and with 'politicians' in general*" (2014:6). This study also points to a divide between national European level organisations that are positioned as advocates of young people's voices, and grassroots organisations that arguably are closer to young people and more capable of representing them. Without a bridge between the two, those advocating are actually perceived to be distant from the true realities of youth voice (Cammaerts et al., 2013:6). Henn et al. (2016) note similar findings when examining young people's political participation in the UK. When

looking outside formal political activities, O'Toole (2015) found that young people are interested and engaged in informal modes and styles of participating in political life, which are also influenced by their interactions with the media, family, peers, voluntary organisations and particularly, education, schools and universities (Kisby & Sloam, 2014).

There is a clear prominence among researchers to understand these perceptions of declining levels of civic participation (for example see Bastedo, 2015; Cammaerts et al, 2014; Staeheli, 2018), rooted in the links between youth civic participation and a growing public awareness to recognise the rights of children and young people to be heard as active contributors to society (UN Report, 2015:15). This represents a shift in thinking of children and young people as future citizens to current deliberators (Nishiyama, 2017) and a growing understanding of the marginalisation of youth voice in political institutions and policy-making (Henn et al., 2016). Low electoral activity means that as a group, young people are not adequately represented, and globally this marginalisation is compounded by a lack of regulatory mechanisms facilitating youth participation. Since the late 1990s government agencies, voluntary organisations and local authorities have aligned work with young people within a framework of participation (Harris et al, 2010), yet young people often report feeling that consultations they are invited to are tokenistic and disempowering (O'Donoghue et al, 2003). The UN report suggests that while young people can be instrumental in bringing about change across the world during periods of civil unrest, they are rarely then involved in the rebuilding of the political structures and processes (2015:65). As a result, this lack of representation within formalised political institutions is destabilising and concerning leading to increased frustrations and feeling of powerlessness among young people.

Consequently, over the past few decades there has been a shift away from "*institutionalized electoral processes to greater involvement in cause-oriented activism"* (United Nations, 2015:73), suggesting young people often engage with politics on a 'case-by-case' process, identifying with issue-based politics and causes, and alternative solutions. They often remain

disengaged and even intimidated by more formal processes and structures, disillusioned by how it represents them, however often seek to engage in more confrontational ways, such as online activism (Grasso, 2018). This perspective exposes a gap between how young people engage and how their voices are represented and requires government to find better ways of communicating with young citizens (Cammaerts et al, 2014). This call for better communication mirrors the recommendations of the EU report looking at more spaces for young people and decision-makers to come together, recommending a better understanding of online civic and political engagement and closer work with educational institutions (Chwalisz, 2017). Volunteering and community partnerships within schools and universities are identified as an example of youth civic and political engagement (Goddard & Kempton, 2016; Temple et al, 2014), while community engagement is seen as a way of ensuring young people develop both a connection to their community and a social awareness of social issues (#iwill, 2019; Body & Hogg, 2019). This forms the precursor to their motivations to become involved in civic and political participation.

Student Volunteering and Employability

Rooted in the tradition of the civic universities (a number of UK universities originally instituted as a higher education college serving a particular city), HE institutions have traditionally been believed to have a broader impact on citizenship beyond teaching, with the potential to act as spaces for critical thinking, and as 'cultural custodians', "*maintaining and continuously revitalising cultural inheritances which are significant in a general way for citizenship*" (Annette, 2010: 451). Yet, over the last decade these arguments have been tested by changes to HE, particularly since 2012 and the changes to higher fees in the UK. HE is now directed by performance and competition (Teixeira, et al, 2014, Temple et al, 2014), and these shifts have impacted on every element of student life, on campus, as well as teaching and research. Goddard & Kempton (2016) have reinvestigated the definition of the civic university and whether universities can still play a role in the 'public good' (2016: 4). They

conclude by acknowledging the different role the university can play and its relationship with civil society; they propose using teaching and research as a space to embed civic learning:

> "*Embedding engagement in teaching could imply degree programmes or modules that equip students for both global and local citizenship*" (2016:5)

Across universities in the UK commitments to their communities and localities are often presented through partnership work, research collaboration and student volunteering, with university-community partnerships written into university mission statements (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). In 2014 a study by the National Union of Students (NUS), found that over a third of students had volunteered and while this often was through student union programmes or fundraising events, a growing number of students highlighted the opportunity had been linked to their course or learning and this is something they would like to see more of within their degree studies (NUS, 2014). Cuthill et al, (2014) has argued that student volunteering is part of the 'third role' of universities, to foster university – community collaboration and that it can go further by involving students in research and inform teaching). While the majority of the research has focused on the ways student experience can be enhanced through these experiences working and learning within community organisations and partners (Thorley, 2014), others such as Gazley et al, (2010) have looked at the impact on university third sector partners. Their research highlighted the huge variations in the way students were working within the community with university partners and that impact on third sector partners was dependent on the nature of student engagement. Students can be positively involved in research and evaluation or can be valuable to organisational capacity and skills building (Gazley et al.,2010). At other times students may only visit organisations on a one-off or infrequent basis, with less impact and more resource required from the partner. In this way it is important to distinguish between the different ways these university-community partnerships are operationalised.

The current context is also important. A drive to write university-community partnerships into mission statements has coincided with the changing landscape for HE. Universities in the UK are simultaneously responding to lower numbers of students, changing expectations of their student population and the challenges of ensuring financial sustainability into the future. The commodification of HE means that universities are expected to achieve economic as well as social objectives (Temple, 2015), with a focus on both impact in the wider community, but also for the economy, a drive to do 'new things' to fundamentally support a knowledge economy (Temple, 2015). Many university-community partnerships are cited as evidence of building employability for students with opportunities to explore careers and develop skills to ensure students are work ready as well as academically successful (Thompson et al, 2013). Yet, while employability rests on the development of key social and emotional skills competencies within young peoplethere is less space for young people to engage with causes and long-term understanding of the partnership organisation, (Gazley, 2010), leading to a critique that employability initiatives are poorly constructed as 'a necessary add-on', rather than learning that runs throughout HE courses (Frankham, 2016). Critiques of university employability interventions have focused on the inconsistency across these partner initiatives, showing how interventions can range from short-term interactions with partner organisations to long-term sustained relationship building. Frankham argues that employability within HE courses is problematic, that there is a lack of definition and consensus around what employability both means and should look like within HE (Frankham, 2016; Tymon, 2011). Analysing case study examples, Farenga & Quinlan (2016) summarise that longer-term programmes embedded within modules and learning have a more meaningful impact, yet their research suggests often university employability schemes can promote one-off opportunities, with limited impact on students and communities.

Participatory Action Research

Action research in universities has attracted increasing interest over recent years (Gibbs et al., 2017; Santos, 2016). PAR, as a distinct model within action research focuses on research where the purpose is to enable action, (Baum et al, 2006. It is, as Healy (2001) points out aligned with modern ecological and feminist social movements, srongly influenced by Lewin's 1948 theory of action. The application of it within youth movements is to challenge power relations and deliberately share power among the researcher and the researched, (Baum et al, 2006). With young people projects use PAR in order to move from 'voice' to 'agency', to involve young people in every stage of the research in order that they will shape the outcomes and responses (Foster-Fishmann et al, 2010). Anderson has argued that '*PAR, with its focus on democratic participation, action orientation, and critical consciousness, has the potential to disrupt New Public Management in both universities and schools'* (Anderson, 2017:434).

Setting the context for this study, students were facilitated to engage in PAR project within a HE environment, engaging with alliances of organisations to recreate a space where young people began to build that critical consciousness, where they could engage with the issues and start to think about solutions. The key PAR principles that underpinning this study consisted of co-production, reflection and social action. For example, research is co-produced by researchers and students through ensuring the research is inquiry-based and that students are involved from the development of the question (Rodigriez & Brown, 2009). PAR, as a pedagogical approach, recognises participants as experts of their own experiences, and thus within this research, students are positioned to be able to advise their tutors, by acting as consultants about how their experience should develop (Bryson, 2014). Academics are then responsible for supporting the crafting of those experiences and ideas through intellectuality and knowledge (Hall & Winn, 2017), to fully develop student partnerships. This supports Cook-Sather et al's (2014) view of student partnerships as collaborative, reciprocal process, through which all individuals 'can contribute equally but not necessarily in the same ways'

(p.6). Therefore, as a result, as Rodigriez & Brown (2009) identify, learning starts from a point of enquiry, students and academics collaboratively posing single or multiple questions which together they respond to via examination of literature, action research, discussion, debate, and investigation.

This is underpinned by a sense of critical reflection, which has long been understood as problem solving or investigation (Dewey, 1933). Rather than recreate knowledge and practice, it seeks to move beyond reproduction of accepted social processes and practices (Habermas, 1978; Kolb, 1984). Drawing on young people's participative approaches as central to this research, results in a perspective which understands students as experts of their own lives and experiences, and therefore positions them pivotal to the research process (Barber 2009; Hart 1992; Shier 2001; Treseder 1997). However, as Bleakley (1999) identifies there is a risk that student reflection becomes limited to their personal actions rather than wider, holistic critique. It is, with this in mind, that we seek to examine participatory action research models, within a social justice discourse by asking students to investigate and reflect on the issues of several community organisations, the issues the organisations face and the challenges of the current context.

The final principle guiding this project was social action. As Healy, 2001 describes:

> " PAR is intended to empower participants to take control of the political and economic forces that shape their lives. This involves well-recognised social action strategies such as consciousness raising and collective action" (Healy, 2001).

The PAR approach as outlined in the rest of this paper visited and reflected on the work of a community organisation at every stage and looked at the ways volunteering and social action supported and advocated for that organisation. In this way the final principle of our approach linked to service-learning pedagogies, which show how by stepping out of the classroom and

into the organisation students develop in their ability to understand complex social problems, (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

METHODS

Drawing on the literature, this paper responds to the following research question: '*Can participatory action research, in partnership with community organisations and children, help students meaningfully engage in social action?*'

In responding to this research question, we worked in partnership with 160 students and community-based organisations to deliver five experimental PAR projectsin the academic year of 2017/18. Whilst we acknowledge the importance and relevance of the findings of each of these individual projects for the participating organisations, our write up here specifically focuses on the impact these projects had on the students involved and the potential of Higher Education to facilitate these changes.

The Projects

160 students in their final year of study for their BA degree in Early Childhood at a UK HE institution, had the opportunity to take part in a community action project as part of a validated taught module. Five local community organisations were approached pre-project delivery and consented to be part of this experimental project. Each of these community organisations highlighted a range of sub-projects that required investigation in terms of the social issue(s) which they represented. Students then opted into the sub-project with whom they would like to co-research, and thus chose a charity to co-research with. Alternatively, students could opt to carry out an independent piece of work outside of these projects – whilst no students took this option, it was important to ensure students had choice in the process. As the degree course was particularly focused upon children and childhood, all the community

organisations, and issues identified, were related to this area of activity. Student groups then met with the community based organisation and a lead academic(s) to discuss the potential issue(s) that required further investigation. Informed by children's participatory literature, students identified the need to work in partnership with children, and where appropriate also their families, to collaboratively co-research the identified topic areas. The different project areas were identified as follows:

TABLE 1 HERE

After being granted ethical approval by the University's ethics committee, students sought to work collaboratively with the community organisation, academics and young children (all aged 2-10 years old) to explore the above research projects.

Adopting a pedagogical approach within the project which was heavily informed by a children's participation and rights agenda as protected by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the collaborative partnership between the student, child(ren), community organization and academic(s) sought to ensure that children were active co-researchers within this process, rather than being 'researched' on (Barber 2009; Shier, 2001). Furthermore, throughout the project students and academics were asked to reflect continuously through informal conversations and group discussions on their learning experiences and consider any alterations collaboratively which needed to be made. Whilst much of this activity took place within the university setting, students engaged with children in different contexts depending upon the project. For example, projects 2 and 4 saw students engage collectively with the organisation, at their setting, with children, academics, teachers, parents and practitionerscontributing collaboratively to the topic. Whilst projects 1, 3, and 5 saw students engage children in small groups or even individually and bring their discussion back to theproject group.

Whilst the methods for engaging children's voices varied considerably across the project overall, due to being child-led and child-directed, all took inspiration from Clark's (2004) Mosaic Approach, to ensure the children were able to fully engage and share their views throughout. Methods included, map making with children, participant observation, child-led tours, art and drawing exercises, focus groups, photography and visual research methods. The priority focus when working with the children, was researching the topic 'with' children, rather than research 'on' children, this resulted in a flexible approach to methodologies guided by the child(ren) engaged. Students assumed positions of power as advocates of children's rights within this projects – this proved an important aspect of the work as we discuss later in the findings.

Within this paper we specifically focus upon the reflections of the students involved in the project and their conceptualization of themselves as social actors. Inspired by Kolb's experiential cycle (1984) the multi-layer methodological approach sought to build individual and group critical reflection at all levels of the project. Thus, at the start of the project students and representatives from the community organisation met to discuss the key topics up for debate, and together design research methodology. Throughout the project the organisation was engaged in the ongoing progress and development, with students formally presenting their findings and implications for practice back to the community organisation at the end of the project period.

As part of the data collection Students were asked to complete a pre, and then post, project survey which allowed them to self-assess their skills in terms of their community participation, volunteering, social and political action. These surveys consisted of a series of statements which the students rated on a Likert scale of 1 – 5 in terms of how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement. Statements covered topics such as student's perceptions about their ability to influence others or drive change. In addition to this, students were asked to complete pre, and then post, project positioning statements, which

sought to examine how they viewed social action, children's participation and their future goals.

At the end of the project, in small project sub-groups, students presented their findings firstly to the peers, inviting critical debate, and then to the representatives from the community organisation. At this point students and community organisation debated about what the best next steps would be.

Table 2 below outlines the different data collection processes used at each stage of the project and at each group level of reflection.

TABLE 2 HERE

FINDINGS

Students perceptions pre and during project

Whilst the baseline data revealed that this group of students reported to be quite politically engaged with 95% of the student participants registered to vote, and 84% reporting having voted in the 2017 general election; social engagement, in terms of social and voluntary action was less prevalent. For example, less than 40% felt they could contribute positively to their local community. In breaking this down, this group of students were on average lower in their civic participation than Charity Aid Foundation's (CAF)'s most recent UK giving survey, (looking at UK fundraised monies and donations), (2018) suggests is average for their age group. For example, only 17% of the participants in this research engaged in any form of volunteering in the last year, compared to 27% of fulltime students nationally, and less than 4% had taken part in any form of local, regional, national or international campaign rallies or protest events, compared to 11% of students nationally (CAF, 2018).

Additionally, analysis of the pre-project positioning statements, which were completed by students in both cohorts prior to project commencement, indicated that majority of the students positioned social action as something which 'other people' did. For example, one student reflected, '*social action is when some people change things for the better'*, whilst another commented that, '*social action is society trying to change things'*, and another added, '*to me social action is when good people, do good things'*. Whilst clearly we can see here each of the students recognised the desire of social action to produce positive change, each positioned the drive of this change with a force outside of themselves, 'the other', rather than identifying themselves as a social actor who could achieve change. Again, the baseline survey supported this assertion, however perhaps more positively, with around a third of the students, 33%, reportedg that they felt like a positive member of their local community, and 44% of students feeling they had the potential to be a 'positive force for social change'.

Furthermore, and based on the reflections of the academics leading the projects, the students highlighted a sense of anxiety about the projects they were being 'asked' to take forwards. A key feature of the projects was to attempt to produce research to achieve real change in the partner organisations positively impacting on the children they supported. During the first four weeks of the project, a small number of the students raised concerns about their capabilities to take forth this responsibility. During a focus group in week 4 of the activities, students raised concerns such as '*why do they [community organisation] want to know what I think'* (participant, female, aged 20), whilst another highlighted that she felt '*what if our view is wrong'* (participant, female, aged 22), and another suggested '*we're just students, we're not experts yet'* (t, male, aged 22). In order to address these concerns students were supported to both actively engage in literature around their chosen issue topic, whilst also engaging in wider literature about participatory action research.

However other reflections highlighted the increasing perception of university as a transactional, consumptive process. For example, in one scenario, a student (female, aged 22)

asked one of the lead academics, '*but you will tell us what to do, won't you*?', to which the academic replied, '*it's not my role to tell you what to do, it's our role to decide and explore this together'*, to which the student responded, '*but why am I at University and paying my fees if you're not going to tell me the answer*?'. This mini vignette highlights an ongoing struggle experienced within the project, wherein whilst most students embrace the notion a redistribution and sharing of power, a minority of the students found this an uncomfortable and 'disruptive' process, which took them outside of their comfort zone. This perhaps stresses that the transactional approach to learning currently purveying over education presents both barriers for academics to engage in more relational and critical models of teaching, and also barriers to students who have perhaps been co-opted into performativity style of assessing success (Ball, 2003).

Finally, within the pre-project positioning statements, students were asked specifically about their views relating to children's voices. Whilst, unsurprisingly given all these students were in third year of their degree programme exploring early childhood, majority of the students recognised the importance and value of listening to children, there was less clarity around the concept of co-researching with children. Particular concerns were highlighted around the idea that the children, *'may go off topic'*, or perhaps *'would not understand the topic enough'* to meaningfully contribute. As the project progressed, students increasingly engaged with academic literature which highlighted models for collaborative co-researching relationships. Furthermore, as students, in their groups began to co-research with children, they continuously reflected on their experiences with other students on the project, increasing the overall confidence.

Student perceptions post-project

Within the project period academic leads witnessed some significant changes in student's self-perceptions and definitions of themselves as social actors, with the baseline surveys

revealing a strong shift in attitudes towards themselves as social actors. Whilst, around a third of the students felt like a positive member of their local community pre project, post project this increased to three quarters (75%) post project. Additionally, 44% of students felt they had the potential to be a 'positive force for social change' pre project, post project this increased to 95% of the participating students. Additionally, through engagement with a range of different community organisations in the project, 11% of the previously non-volunteering students, took up volunteering opportunities, increasing the volunteering within the last year rate within the group from 17% to 28% by the end of the project.

This shift in positioning was further evident in the reflections students offered in their written reports of the research. Reflecting on the meaning of social action one student showed a significant change in her thinking pre and post project. Whereas in the pre-project positioning statements her definition of social action, as reported above, had focused on social action being done by the other, as reported above; *"Social action is when people try to change the things around them",* however post project her response was much personal and action-driven;

> *"I know I can, and I have the power to, influence policy and practice in the world around me, I am not a passive participant, but I am an active investigator, championing work relating to children and young people, standing up for what I, and most importantly they, the children themselves, believe in" (Female, aged 21).*

While not all 160 participants reported a belief in social action to this extent, in a third of the final reflections students directly reflected on their own role and feelings about social injustices and social action on completion of the module. Supporting this shift away from a detached perspective and to a personal response, some examples included;

"I was just left angry, when you really look at the issues and why people are homeless, there is a lot to get cross about. We need widespread social change. XXX (the child, aged 7) was even more cross than I was – but she got it, she totally got it",

"I think what surprised me most about this project was the fact I still feel uncomfortable…. It's like, well, I've always seen homelessness and felt sorry for them, but I suddenly feel like this is OUR problem now, and I want to shout to everyone else, this is your problem to,"

Responses to this project also followed a particular pattern among students. In the first part of the project to week 4, as discussed above, this project was the source of worry and uncertainty, however, in the last weeks of the module, opinion changed and feedback received showed high levels of student satisfaction at 98%, with over 80% of students reporting it as the module they most enjoyed within their degree. Reasons for this were located in the 'real experiences' of the module and the opportunity to contribute and make a difference to both community organisations and the lives of children.

"This module has allowed us to learn valuable content in an innovative way. Working alongside children and representing their voice permitted us to learn the significance of individual children's opinions on different issues that they may not usually be included within. This module has been thoroughly engaging and has promoted our understanding and confidence, especially when co-researching with children and other professionals. This module has provided very different opportunities to our other modules." (Female, aged 22t)

A central theme that emerged from this research was the depth of the learning journey that working with a child offered. Despite the nature of their studies and their dedication to children, at the beginning of the module, as seen above, many students still reported a belief that children would not understand or engage with the complexities of the research. This

challenging of their expectations of and belief in children was the factor that acted as the most disruptive and challenging part of their learning experiences. Analysis showed how the students participating in the module reflected on a reconceptualization of the child as a capable social and political actor:

> *"I was amazed about how much she knew when I actually stopped to listen, I thought I was supposed to teach her, but instead we asked and answered questions together" (Student).*

For many students who participated there is an acknowledgement that not only do children engage with the issue to a degree they were not expecting them to be capable of, they also engaged with the issues in a way that students themselves were not doing. In this way, looking at social issues and social justice through the children's eyes served as a way of re-politicising them with the issues and inequalities behind it, one particular student offered the following reflection demonstrating this finding:

> *"Researching with children has helped me form a more inclusive idea of charity and social action, and the importance of children in social movements. Thus it inspired me to think about charity as part of my own personal life. The collaborative research has encouraged me to draw on my own values and beliefs and allowed me to explore charity from a child's perspective."*

Therefore one of the key findings of this data is that by asking students to advocate on behalf of children and use their own work to present their voice, students engaged in the issues and research at a level that was both new and disruptive, and this led them to draw on the experiences of children and make connections to the wider world, social issues and the work of charities.

DISCUSSION

The findings in this research showed the potential of a HE project to open up new spaces and re-politicise social action for young people; by immersing them in a 'real experience of the social issue' and focusing them on a cause and a social issue set by the partner organisation. Asking them to advocate on behalf of children added the responsibility of representation and advocacy to their learning experience. In response to the decline in spaces for young people to participate socially and politically within a formal structure, this type of learning experience within a HE institution offers an example of a more sustained civic engagement project with the potential for longer-term participation beyond the learning journey. Using participatory, youth-action approaches the module moved students beyond their student identity re-establishing them as researchers and advocates for children's voices. Findings suggest that the PAR approach enabled students to understand the social and political landscape they would be navigating as early year's practitioners and created a lens in which they saw the issues through the experience of a child. The experience led students to a questioning and a repositioning of their own values and a deeper engagement in the learning experience and its connections and value to the world outside the classroom.

The opening up of spaces through real experiences links to literature looking at the value of service-learning in teaching pedagogies. As student engagement becomes a dominant theme within recent literature (see Gibbs et al, 2016), research has highlighted how engaging students as partners in learning has the potential to transform higher education (Healey et al, 2017). Service-learning approaches are highlighted as having a positive effect on student's enjoyment of courses and retention to courses (Gray et al 1998), as well as their ability to understand complex social problems (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Evidence also indicates that good quality service learning has positive impacts on the communities they partner with (Driscoll et al, 1996). While limited longitudinal evidence is available, short term studies such as the Habit of Service Report, 2017 carried by the Jubilee Centresuggests that young people

involved in service-learning are more likely to volunteer once their course is finished and be involved in community development either in their professional or personal life.). The PAR model of learning in this study follows many of the principles of service-learning, and the model we employed uses principles of reflection and co-constructing the issues with the organisation students are involved in. Service-learning leads to greater awareness and confidence in how to tackle problems and can be instrumental in creating a sense of social responsibility and self-awareness of the role one can play in society, (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

The mechanism for challenging student's positioning and values was created within the modelof action research and its potential to transform students from passive to active learners by involving them actively and experientially in the learning process, (Bonwell & Elison, 1991, Weltman & Whitehouse, 2010). Gibbs et al's (2016) useful literature review, highlights a rise in popularity regarding action research, with literature predominantly influencing two areas of higher education; academic teaching practice and student engagement. Whilst action research acknowledges the benefits of academics and non-academics collaboratively working together to investigate shared concerns, participatory action research poses a particular critique which challenges the researcher-researched relationship, emphasising the politics of the participation of this relationship (Jordan and Kapoor, 2016). As a subset of action research, participatory action research (PAR) is the '*systematic collection and analysis of data for the purpose of taking action and making change'* through the generation of practical knowledge (Gillis & Jackson, 2002, p.264). By asking our students to answer the question asked by the organisation and present the findings back, students were exploring a new space through different perspectives. It was clear that the partner organisations would act on the research they collected. In this way students were not able to take only a passive response to the learning they acquired, they had to respond with decisions and actions about which data to include and the responses they presented to the partner organisation. From initially talking

about social action as something others did, in this project they became the protagonists leading the research.

Finally, students had a responsibility as advocates presenting the child's voice, this meant they engaged with recent literature looking at the recognition of children's ability to engage in social action and to ensure children have agency on important social and political issues, (Mason & Hood, 2011). Students became passionate believers in children's roles in research. Also, students identified with a growing recognition the ability of children to engage with important social and political questions with an awareness of the need to capture these questions as children's political orientations are forming; and the point that this is a critical time to build on their citizenship and democratic participation. The students referred to van Deth's (2011) research that has identified how young children are politically engaged and possess social and political awareness, knowledge, and attitudes and how primary aged children have formed political opinions and understand basic political concepts forming the basis of adulthood political orientation. The students saw their research very much as co-constructed and identified with the children as a marginalised group whose voice needed to be heard.

CONCLUSION

We argue that PAR, as a learning experience, opens up an alternative experience of social action through an educational context with engagement and consideration of social issues. As a means of supporting young people's civic engagement the space offered by this learning model repoliticises student action in three ways. First, by providing real experiences of charity and social issues and by asking them to directly respond; second, by adopting an action research approach, and third, by asking them to both co-construct research and advocate on behalf of children. This model of learning shows evidence of greater

engagement, a shift in thinking and a repositioning of themselves as both learners and citizens, as well as a connection between the research and wider social and political processes through an identification with children's agency and rights. At a time where research is suggesting a decline in the numbers of young people engaging in more formalised social and political processes, this module reflects the potential of the university and higher education, as a sector, to offer young people the space to explore social and political issues. In conclusion, we call for new alliances between HE, children, young people, communities and community organisations, to produce, through enquiry, critical knowledge aimed at social transformation, which can open-up authentic democratic spaces within the learning communities in HE and its networks. The partnership between university and third sector organisations needs to build on longer-term models such as PAR, which offer more sustained and greater in-depth learning between students and organisations markedly different to one-off employability options that can often lie at the heart of this work. As well as offering opportunities for young people to better understand the social and political arena they will be navigating, this module presented young people with spaces to reflect about their own roles and positions. This learning model allows educators and researchers to listen to the voices of young people and a place to explore and understand the way they are engaging with socio-political processes in an ever-changing world.

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