

# The Contribution of Non-formal Learning to Young People's Life Chances

**Learning from the Evidence**

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### 1. Background

Youth work's core goals and purpose lie in young people's social and informal education (HSBO 1960). Youth work promotes young people's personal and social development, helping them learn about themselves, others and society, through non-formal educational activities which combine enjoyment, challenge and learning. By working from the interests of young people, and supporting and broadening young people's learning experiences in a range of contexts and through diverse practices, youth work seeks to affirm identity and enhance personal and social development (HMSO 1982; Merton *et al.* 2004).

Its methods are embedded in personal relationships and experiential learning, and include a range of practice, from individual counselling and support to developmental group work, project-based work in a residential setting, focusing on particular issues such as health, to detached and outreach work. As such, youth work takes place in a range of contexts and locations, including open access youth clubs, residential centres, a setting within the school, or street work (Wylie 2004).

At the heart of youth work practice is the building of a trusting and credible relationship between young person and youth worker, which due to its voluntary nature is qualitatively different from relationships within 'more coercive or structured environments, such as teaching, the workplace or the youth justice system' (Williamson 2006, p.6).

Non-formal learning relates to sports, leisure, arts projects and other recreational activities. These take place in a range of settings, be it school, community or youth centre, sports club etc., and are variously provided by the statutory sector, voluntary and community organisations or the private sector. The non-formal sector is capable of delivering clear and tangible educational outcomes and includes, for example, recorded and accredited learning in both the statutory and voluntary sectors. Non-formal education, predominantly carried out through youth work approaches, has made a significant contribution to the 14–19 agenda and it is recognised as a form of "learning outside the classroom":

This paper reviews the contribution of non-formal learning, and the distinctive contribution of youth work, to young people's personal, social and emotional development and to their future life chances. It is part of a wider education project conducted by the Fabian Society, investigating ways of narrowing the gaps in educational experiences and outcomes between children from different social and family backgrounds.<sup>1</sup>

The Fabian Life Chances Commission<sup>2</sup> identified the following dimensions of life chances:

- health and well-being;
- education;
- autonomy;
- social relationships and networks;
- income and employment;
- and the safety and quality of local environments.

This analysis draws on interviews with youth work practitioners and managers. It also draws on the evidence base that comes from the wider research literature on non-formal learning activities, examining the impact of participation in general activities and highlighting the specific contribution of youth work where possible. Evidence drawn upon includes

- Merton *et al.*'s (2004) systematic review of the impact of youth work
- The National Youth Agency's annual audits of youth work provision
- Ofsted inspections
- quantitative longitudinal studies,
- qualitative longitudinal studies

This paper also illustrates practice using examples from The NYA's good practice database.

#### Notes

1 The full paper, written by Louise Bamfield, is available on The NYA website. This summary paper was written by The NYA.

2 The final report of the Fabian Life Chances Commission, *Narrowing the Gap*, was published in March 2006.

## 2. Primary and Positional changes

To help explore the contribution of participation in non-formal learning activities participation on young people's life chances, it is useful to make a distinction between 'primary' and 'positional' changes, where:

- **primary changes** are defined as changes in an individual's dispositions and capacities; their attitudes, feelings and behaviour, and
- **positional changes** are defined as changes to a young person's situation or position (such as entering employment or a training scheme, or re-engaging with school), which come about as a consequence of that primary development.

In general terms, participation in educational leisure activities is widely associated with a range of benefits for the young person involved. These primary changes include raised self-esteem, strengthened relationships with peers and adults, and the acquisition of a range of skills and attributes. As such, participation contributes to individuals' personal, social and emotional development, and also to the acquisition of forms of human and social capital (Merton et al. 2004). As well as 'hard', practical or technical skills (such as sporting or artistic abilities which are generally specific to an activity) participation is strongly associated with the development of a wider range of competences and capacities, such as interpersonal and team-working skills. In theory, these 'softer' skills are more readily transferable to other domains and contexts, though the extent to which capacities are actually transferred will vary in practice.

The key questions are therefore whether and how these *primary* changes in attitudes, feelings, skills and behaviour impact on young people's situation or *position* in other spheres of life – in education, employment and the domestic sphere. In addition, what evidence exists of the *long-term* consequences for individuals' situation or position in relation to each of the life chances dimensions – health, autonomy, social relationships and networks, education, employment and income and the quality and safety of the local environment?

## 3. Evidence of primary changes in capacities and dispositions

### 3.1 Self Efficacy

In their comprehensive study of the impact of youth work, Merton et al. (2004) observe that the building of confidence was a feature of nearly all the case studies and projects visited as part of the research.

#### CASE STUDY

*Hartlepool based RESPECT (Reaching Every Social and Personal Effect Concerning Teenagers) provides a mentoring and befriending service with professional counselling support for young people aged 11-19. It operates a four tier support service – including counselling and referral to external services – enabling young people to access the appropriate level of support. The project aims to offer a nurturing, welcoming environment where young people feel cared for, listened to and respected.*

*Each young person has a designated mentor, also a young person, and can also access counselling, befriending, specialist services, and issue based workshops as needed. A typical package of support might involve a counsellor providing intense support, a named mentor providing social and personal development opportunities and the group support of peers through the befriending service under the supervision of the mentor.*

*Mentors report increased self esteem and confidence through their involvement with the project. Many go on to work and study in social care and youth work and continue to volunteer at the project even when they are in paid employment. They are seen by mentees as role models.*

*Mentees develop social skills and personal confidence and self-esteem. They learn to integrate more with their peer group and are able to re-engage with other providers of services for young people.*

Attitudinal surveys provide further evidence in this regard: among a total of 909 young people surveyed as part of the research of the Neighbourhood Support Fund (NSF) programme undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research

(NFER) 87 per cent of participants reported feeling more or much more confident as a result of their engagement with the NSF projects (Golden et al, 2004). High figures were also reported in Merton et al's (2004, p.47) survey of young people: of 630 young participants, 72 per cent asserted that they felt 'quite a lot' or 'very much more confident' as a result of their engagement in youth work.

Even more profound than increased confidence in a specific task or activity is the recognition participation affords to young people, which can help to generate a deeper sense of self-confidence, transforming the young person's sense of their own value and worth.

### 3.2 Motivation and Inspiration

Evidence from case study evaluations suggests that a young person's growing sense of self-belief can have motivational benefits, contributing to an enhanced sense of enthusiasm and inspiration, encouraging a greater sense of application, determination, or commitment to a task, as well as willingness to practice, which may in turn have positive consequences for the development of cognitive abilities and capacities in the classroom.

#### CASE STUDY

*The Learning and Developing Skills (LADS) Project offers an accredited personal development programme to disengaged or disaffected young men aged 13-19 in the Prescott and Whiston areas of Knowsley, Merseyside. The project aims to help young people overcome barriers to their participation in education, training or employment by engaging them in activities that develop their confidence, self esteem and motivation and equip them with practical/vocational skills.*

*The project adopts a youth work approach to recruitment, delivery and evaluation. It uses a combination of formal/informal methods of educating young people and seeks to involve them in the design, delivery and implementation of the project. The programme includes motivational activities in the form of short training programmes around basic mechanics, health and fitness, video production and issue based workshops that focus on young men's sexual health and drug and alcohol awareness. Careers advice is accessed through the Connexions Partnership. One to one mentoring support is also built into the programme.*

*The flexible personal development programme develops young people's confidence, self esteem and motivation whilst equipping them with*

*practical and employability skills. Issue based workshops raise the young people's awareness and knowledge and facilitates their engagement with services aimed at young people. Many young people have moved towards positive destinations including Lifeskills programmes, volunteering, Raleigh International Youth at Risk programmes etc. One young person became a volunteer with the project and is now employed as a youth worker within the project.*

### 3.3 Autonomy and self-determination

Participation in non-formal learning may also empower young people to make decisions and to take control of their lives. Evidence suggests that the imposition of structure and boundaries to youth activities can help build young people's capacity for self-determination. For example, the negotiation of ground rules and boundaries can help develop individuals' ability to organise their time or money, especially where such rules had previously been absent or had been imposed arbitrarily. As one member of a street-based youth project describes:

*"Youth workers set boundaries, especially when we go on trips.... Since getting involved with the project I've learned about boundaries and now I can be bothered to turn up for things like youth club or the trips out. Before I didn't turn up and I had no respect for the leaders" (Merton et al. 2004, p. 46).*

Relationships with peers and adults built on recognition and respect therefore have a crucial role to play in fostering an individual young person's sense of self-worth. As a consequence of growing self-confidence and respect, young people may be less inclined to engage in 'risky' behaviours, potentially reducing the risk of young people experiencing poor health outcomes, or of offending. Some evidence of this potential effect comes from participants' personal testimonies, as in this example from a Positive Activities for Young People programme:

*"I've definitely achieved something. You don't need to offend for people to notice you. There are other ways like building confidence, meeting the mayor, team work and getting certificates" (Merton et al. 2004 ).*

#### CASE STUDY

*At Eastleigh Youth Crime Prevention, the youth service acted as the leading agency in the local community safety strategy, offering a range of programmes and activities to engage young*

people and provide alternatives to anti-social behaviour. It aimed to reduce first time and repeat offending by five per cent between 2002 and 2005, reduce school exclusion by a similar percentage, and see a reduction in vandalism and graffiti across the borough. The initiative was based on principles of participation and consultation, in order to encourage young people to identify the main issues affecting them, how the area could be improved and what they would like to happen. The project then worked with young people to help develop provision in response to these identified needs and interests, such as skateparks and youth shelters. Young people were encouraged to get involved in community safety meetings and discussions with elected members and other decision-makers to raise issues that concerned them.

Through these projects young people have become politically aware about local democratic processes. They have grown in self-worth and confidence through knowing that their ideas have been listened to. They have also gained public speaking skills. There are tangible results: £15,000 has been earmarked for new discounted travel scheme, giving young people a number of free trips with local bus company to enable them to access leisure facilities in Southampton and Winchester. The borough council has needed to spend less money on cleaning up graffiti and repairing damage caused by vandalism. There has also been a lower level of school exclusion and youth offending.

In terms of young people's long-term outcomes, analysis shows that people who display a high 'locus of control' in their youth achieve better outcomes in relation to health and education outcomes. 'Locus of control', or the sense of having control over one's life, is also positively associated with participation in a range of leisure activities during adolescence, suggesting both that young people who feel more in control of their lives have the confidence to engage in multiple activities at the same time, and that engagement in multiple activities helps build and reinforce that confidence (Robson and Feinstein 2007, p. 4).

While leisure or recreational pastimes such as sports activities will confer certain, important benefits, especially in terms of enjoyment and physical activity, it is also important for young people to have the opportunity to progress from engagement in a more passive sense to deeper and more meaningful forms of participation, such as being involved in the organisation of the activity (NYA 2007, p. 7). Participation in governance and decision-making confers more far-reaching benefits, in terms of the development of skills, knowledge and capacities

such as time and resource management, which can be more readily transferred to other spheres.

Involving young people in shaping services, alongside listening to their views, is inherent in good youth work. In its overview of services inspected in 2005-6, Ofsted (2007) reports that youth workers have made a strong contribution to the ECM outcome, *Making a positive contribution*, while a large minority of services have excelled in this area: 'Youth services have engaged young people well through youth councils, forums and community action. They enjoyed participating and developed political literacy skills, as well as the more practical and essential skills of communication. They also enjoyed volunteering opportunities and peer mentoring' (Ofsted 2007, p. 5). In addition, voluntary and third sector organisations provide a wide variety of opportunities of this kind; though again, inequalities in access remain, since young people from less advantaged backgrounds are least likely to be able to access this type of opportunity (O'Donnell et al. 2006; NYA 2007; Wikeley et al. 2007).

The NYA 'What's Changed' website provides numerous examples of the successes of young people's participation.

#### CASE STUDY

Young people who attended a popular club night run by Racial Equality Newham wanted a more permanent place to go. Funding was secured to develop a purpose built centre. Young people were involved in the design and development of the new centre which opened March 2007. As well as providing many needed facilities identified by the young people it also provides a space for young people with shared interest to meet crossing racial divides.

"We've been involved in every stage of the process...talking to funders, working with architects and builders, deciding on the décor, recruitment of centre manager, deciding the name of steering group, fact finding missions with the directors and designing the mosaic. This is a club designed by young people for young people." Young person.

### 3.4 Social confidence and interpersonal skills

Alongside self-confidence, motivation and self-determination, participation in educational leisure activities helps to build young people's confidence in social interaction and to improve their understanding of social relationships. One of the strengths of youth

work is that it fosters young people's engagement with peers and their communities (Russell Commission 2005). Indeed, Merton et al. (2004, p. 129) conclude that the essential contribution of youth work to young people's personal and social development is through building and facilitating relationships based on trust, reciprocity and mutual regard.

Evidence shows that young people who experience a diverse range of educational relationships in different contexts develop a stronger sense of confidence in social interaction, and a better understanding of how relationships work (Wikely et al. 2007). As we explore below, this confidence and understanding may have positive consequences for young people's educational engagement in the classroom, as young people 'will be in a better position to use that understanding to negotiate the educational relationships that they have with teachers in school' (Wikely et al. 2007).

By fostering a stronger sense of belonging and an enhanced capacity for social engagement and personal interaction, these relationships and interactions contribute towards the development of social capital. Depending on the participants involved, this may be 'bonding' social capital, which brings together people of similar attitudes and dispositions, or from similar backgrounds and social positions, sometimes to the exclusion of others, or it may be 'bridging' social capital, which brings together people of outwardly different attitudes, dispositions and backgrounds (Putnam 1993). As we explore further below, the especial value of bridging social capital is that it offers opportunities to encounter a wider range of views, attitudes and experiences than those usually encountered. In this way, participation may have consequences for young people's education and career development, broadening horizons and extending mobility by transforming dispositions towards continued learning and employment in different sectors.

#### CASE STUDY

*Fitzrovia Youth in Action is a community based youth action project using sports and youth work to engage young people and support them in developing projects which benefit the community and improve relationships between people from different ethnic and age groups throughout the London Borough of Camden. Set up in 1997, its motto is 'young people creating a better community'. The projects include a community football programme, the Unity Cup anti-racist football tournament, a drug peer research project, a young residents' association, and a range of intergenerational and environmental activities. By bringing different groups together,*

*FYA has restored pride and ownership of the local environment and helped generate a sense of community among residents.*

*Young people take responsibility and gain experience and skills to help with their education and employment. Outcomes include:*

- *Skills which are transferable to the job market, such as teamwork, research skills, peer facilitation and project management.*
- *Increased sense of belonging and participation in community life.*
- *Development of youth leadership and positive role models.*
- *Increased self-confidence and social awareness.*
- *Improvement in health through health and drugs awareness and increased participation in sport.*

## 4. Evidence of positional change

Clearly then, evidence demonstrates the impact that youth work can have on primary changes; the dispositions and capacities of young people. However what evidence exists to show these changes lead to improvements in tangible and concrete outcomes, in particular the dimensions of life chances previously outlined, namely education, employment and income, health and well being, and the safety and quality of the physical environment?

### 4.1 Education

There is evidence that learning experiences outside the classroom can promote engagement and achievement in school settings. The effect can be seen in increased motivation in the classroom (Merton et al. 2004; Ofsted 2007); and pupil attendance, behaviour and attainment (Wiggins et al. 2006; Crimmens et al. 2004). Effects can also be seen on further educational pathways; for example the Neighbourhood Support Fund initiative resulted in 71 per cent of participants moving onto full-time study, training, employment or a Connexions referral (Bailey et al. 2006)

## CASE STUDY

*A two year action research project looking at the accreditation of non-formal learning as part of the delivery of Entry to Employment (e2e) looked specifically at the role of non-formal awards. These awards (e.g. Duke of Edinburgh's Award, ASDAN, Youth Achievement Awards) are typically used in the non-formal sector to accredit personal and social development.*

*E2E practitioners used the awards as a tool to deliver basic, key and vocational skills as well as personal development. Overall, those e2e learners who were part of the pilot scheme were more likely to move onto a 'positive destination' of further education or employment. (NYA 2006)*

## CASE STUDY

*The British Cohort Study 1970 (BSC70) reveals that soft skills such as motivation, self-esteem and concentration help young people make the most of their cognitive abilities, accounting for a third of the impact on O-level attainment at 16 and post-16 educational achievement (Blanden et al. 2006b).*

Research by Feinstein et al into the BSC70 data set suggests that attendance at youth clubs in isolation can negatively affect young people's later life outcomes, in particular formal educational outcomes. However when taking into account youth club attendance *in combination* with other leisure activities, this negative relationship disappears, or is substantially reduced. The study also finds that young people who attended 'structured' activities – defined according to regular participation, rule-guided engagement, direction by adult leaders, an emphasis on skill development at increasing levels of complexity, and clear feedback on performance (Mahoney 2000, p. 115) – were less at risk of experiencing poor adult outcomes. Importantly, young people who attended structured youth club activities did not just have a lower risk than those who attended 'unstructured' activities, but a lower than average risk of experiencing poor educational outcomes.

Non-formal learning can also act as a bridge for those experiencing forms of social or educational exclusion. Youth workers in particular have an important role to play in providing support and in opening doors to learning experiences and opportunities in alternative provision outside of mainstream education (Ofsted 2007). In combination with other agencies and organisations, youth workers help to provide alternative routes to

training, qualifications and employment than those conventionally provided within education. In addition, they can also act to open up opportunities in the mainstream education sector. Projects which use local schools as the base for their work, or where youth workers are linked to projects based in school and outside, are often well-placed to foster links with the school (Merton et al. 2004; Home Office 2005).

## CASE STUDY

*Ofsted 2007 "Building the Best"*

*Youth services have taken on a key role in providing a range of activities that promote young people's personal and social development, particularly with regard to the most vulnerable and those who are hardest to reach. Youth workers continue to provide alternative educational programmes for young people who might otherwise be disengaged from school or college. Improved practice in accreditation has further sharpened the quality of this work. Young people's voluntary participation in youth work activities often strengthens the relationship between them and youth workers. In the best work seen, young people socialised and enjoyed themselves. Established youth clubs, in particular, provide regular ongoing opportunities for all young people; the contribution they make to preventative work is vital. Services continue to work well with partner organisations: more enlightened LAs understand well and plan for the complementary role of youth work and Connexions. Services are generally reviewing curriculum guidance with a view to promoting learning outcomes that meet the challenges of the ECM agenda. The better among them are giving careful consideration to specifying those learning outcomes which are age-specific and most suited to youth work approaches.*

Moreover, as well as allowing youth workers to act as a bridge to other services, the experience of participation can itself act as a bridge, breaking down barriers that exist between young people and public sector professionals, such as teachers. Participation in activities outside-the-classroom, for example, has the potential to transform the nature of teacher-pupil relations, particularly where young people have the chance to engage alongside teachers in a less formal environment. As Wikeley et al. (2007) conclude from their study of educational relationships and their impact on poverty, participation in out-of-classroom activities can enhance young people's social understanding, with the result that young people are in a better position 'to use that understanding to negotiate the educational relationships that they have with teachers in school' (p.3, emphasis added).

CASE STUDY

*Signpost is a voluntary youth organisation working in partnership with schools to engage ‘at risk’ young people to become involved in alternative personal and social education programmes including volunteering, group work, accredited training and employment opportunities. It focuses on young people in the Manor/Castle area of Sheffield who are not thriving in mainstream education, involving them in a range of activities while building up their confidence and self-esteem. There is a strong focus on involving young people in the regeneration of the local community, and on encouraging young people to attain or improve qualifications in order to boost their life chances. Most young people stay with the project for two years, and Signpost has strong links with Connexions through a personal adviser based in the youth centre – both factors are key to its long-term success.*

Non-formal learning activities and projects can also help to encourage re-engagement with mainstream education through the use of ‘hooks’ or incentives. Various projects use football activities as a device to encourage re-engagement with education, for example by making permission to play in the school team conditional on school attendance (Home Office 2005, p.115).

CASE STUDY

*Merton et al. (2004, p. 49) report how staff at a youth inclusion project negotiated an arrangement with young people and their parents whereby the project would provide opportunities for engagement in activities such as learning how to mix music, coach football etc., in return for monitoring of young people’s attendance at school and behaviour. Results of the project show that engagement led to improved pupil performance and reduced offending behaviour.*

As these projects demonstrate, re-engagement with mainstream education can be encouraged through the incentive of engaging in enjoyable leisure activities.

In some cases, the legacy of pupils’ personal experiences within the classroom will be difficult to erode: internally, individuals may need to overcome sometimes deep-rooted feelings of frustration or resentment towards schooling, or a sense of failure as a learner, due to their personal experiences within the classroom. To bring about positional change therefore, a wider range of support will be needed to address the range of factors which shape young people’s dispositions towards education in the first place.

Young people need consistency in the support they receive, rather than piecemeal forms of interaction and participation; they need time to build and sustain relationships with trusted adults; and they need holistic forms of support.

## 4.2 Employment, work and Income

As with education, the increase in human and social capital associated with participation in non-formal learning activities suggests the possibility of long-term gains for labour market outcomes and earnings in later life. NFER’s evaluation of the Neighbourhood Support Fund shows that 71 per cent of participants moved on to positive destinations in education, training or employment, with new activities and socialisation reportedly helping to retain young people’s interest and increase levels of confidence (Bailey 2006). As a result, two thirds of that group had sustained that positive outcome after six months.

There may be more than one simple causal mechanism for the positive effect of non-formal learning on employment-related outcomes. Firstly, non-formal learning may impact directly on educational attainment, through the interaction of non-cognitive and cognitive skills.

The possession of soft skills may also boost employment prospects. Evidence from Ofsted indicates that ‘young people, working alongside youth workers, acquire and develop many of the skills and capacities required for working life’ (Ofsted, 2007, p. 5). Engagement in certain types of activity, especially when young people have the chance to participate at higher levels of responsibility, may foster work-related skills such as teamwork, decision-making, planning and project management, the possession of which will be an asset when applying for jobs and in increasing chances for occupational progression.

CASE STUDY

*E2E provider staff were asked to identify the impact that they thought non-formal awards had on the development of eleven specific personal and social skills. Over 70 per cent indicated that they had a very high or high impact on the development of ‘group working skills’. Most thought they had a high impact on ‘responsibility’, ‘identifying strengths and weaknesses’ ‘problem solving’ ‘communication skills’ and ‘motivation’.*

In addition, the vast majority of the young people who had completed an award felt it had increased their employability (NYA 2006).

In addition, increased social capital will bring benefits in the labour market, especially in terms of possibilities for work experience and job opportunities opened up through a wider network of social contacts (Merton et al. 2004, p. 129).

Youth workers can play an important role in supporting young people who are outside of mainstream education to negotiate alternative routes of entry into the labour market than those conventionally provided (Merton et al. 2004). Ofsted inspection reports confirm that youth services have been successful, especially when working with partners such as the Connexions Service, in developing preparation for working life programmes where young people were encouraged to develop the skills and confidence to move into work, training or learning.

#### CASE STUDY

*Read On – Write Away! (ROWA!) works with local partners to develop a community literacy and basic skills strategy for Derbyshire and Derby City. It aims to improve levels of literacy and basic skills – especially among disadvantaged groups, to celebrate literacy and to improve workforce skills. While it provides opportunities for people of all ages, a key strand of its work focuses on training young volunteers to support school-based learning. The Buddy Reading Project works with young adult volunteers aged 14 to 25 who are disengaged from learning. It trains them to support school children in their reading, while at the same time enhancing their own literacy skills and personal development. ROWA! also supports a Millennium Volunteers (MV) project, which provides opportunities in a variety of educational settings, through activities such as buddy reading or writing, mentoring and lesson support.*

In this way, youth work and non-formal learning have a potentially powerful role to play in broadening young people's horizons beyond the constraints of social position.

While participation in non-formal learning activities and experiences, especially at higher levels of responsibility, offers significant potential benefits for the labour market, better understanding is needed of the aspects of non-formal learning which are most likely to have this beneficial effect. Evidence suggests the need for holistic approaches, which takes into account local strategies to develop employment and education provision for this age group, while also providing individual young people with support in dealing with issues that might otherwise prevent them taking up education or employment opportunities, such as housing, caring or parenting responsibilities (Ofsted 2007; Merton et al. 2004).

### 4.3 Health

One of the strengths of youth work lies in preventing young people from falling into 'at risk' categories, by developing young people's ability to make informed choices and to engage with their peers and communities (Russell Commission 2004).

In the case of health, recent policy developments have led to a renewed focus on health promotion amongst young people. With children's and young people's services increasingly framed and assessed around their contribution to the ECM outcomes, there is renewed pressure on youth work and youth services to monitor and assess their impact on young people's health outcomes.

Ofsted inspections in 2005-6 confirm that youth services are making a positive contribution to the ECM outcome, Being Healthy, with health promotion increasingly featuring in the youth work curriculum in many areas. Health issues are addressed using sport, performing arts and outdoor activities as the medium to underpin youth work, while in a few cases, services were displaying outstanding practice in this area, by directly addressing young people's risky health behaviours in areas such as drug misuse or sexual health (Ofsted 2007).

#### CASE STUDY

*The Cupboard Project is a health project for young people aged 13 to 19 within South Leeds. It offers a range of services to improve the health and wellbeing of the most vulnerable young people, by addressing health inequalities, promoting participation in decision making and youth action, and improving services through collaboration and partnership work. Services include one-to-one support, group work, drop-ins and development work. It targets those who are most likely to face health inequalities, including young people who have recently settled in this country, travellers, young people excluded from school or at risk of exclusion, young parents and young women at risk of pregnancy. It also works with homeless young people, those with learning difficulties and young people who witness domestic violence. The 'Bling' (Broader Learning in New Groups) programme was set up as part of a national Young People's Development Programme (YPDP) aimed at addressing risk taking behaviour among young people aged 13 to 15.*

Both the nature of the relationships that youth workers develop with young people, and the informal settings in which such work takes place, lend themselves well to promoting healthy lifestyles. Youth work methods can usefully complement health

professionals in this regard, as part of effective multi-agency teams. For example, case studies reported by Merton et al. (2004) describe instances of youth workers working successfully in partnership with health professionals in a range of settings and contexts, utilising their complementary perspectives and approaches to provide support on health issues.

#### CASE STUDY

*The Parallel is a young persons' health centre in Bolton designed by young people for young people. The project offers a range of health and well-being services for young people aged 11 to 19 through a holistic approach involving collaboration with partner organisations. The Parallel aims to work with young people in securing their right to a positive and health lifestyle through their involvement in all stages of planning for the future direction of the centre.*

*Approximately 150 young people drop in to the centre for services each week and up to 50 young people a week participate in workshops and groups both within The Parallel and in outreach settings such as schools, youth centres and pupil referral units. Drop-in's and support groups are provided for example, gay & bisexual support, midwifery & health visiting, emotional health groups, creative groups.*

The flexibility and informality of youth work methods are both important in helping workers reach out to young people on health issues, especially on sensitive areas such as sexual health or substance abuse and topical issues such as binge drinking. Importantly, rather than compartmentalising health issues, successful approaches are flexible, informal and holistic, looking at the young person in the round, reflecting their needs and interests, and helping to affect behavioural change by encouraging the development of general skills, knowledge and understanding.

#### CASE STUDY

*The Maypole Centre provides planned programmes of support to young people in the Druids Health area within a target age range of 11-25. It seeks to improve personal and social development and assist with entry into education, training, employment through programmes on sexual health, substance misuse, adventure and sports opportunities, alternative education, personal development, mentoring, peer education and arts development. The Centre's 'Innov8' programme provides in-depth support to young people at risk through a one-year development programme funded by the Department of Health.*

*An evaluation of the Sexual and Health Education (SHE) component of the Maypole Centre's 'Curriculum for Adolescence' program has found evidence of significant outcome effects for the intervention with regard to reducing teenage pregnancy rates. Contraception use the first time program participants had sexual intercourse after the intervention was reported at 92 per cent, which compares with national published figures for contraception use among adolescents at first intercourse at 50 per cent for under 16s and 66 per cent for 16 to 19-year-olds .*

Youth work at its best is therefore far more than diversionary; by helping young people to look after themselves, enjoy physical and mental health and live a healthy lifestyle by giving them opportunities to express concerns, make decisions and explore the consequences of their actions, youth work is not only diverting them from risky health behaviours but also helping to promote their wider autonomy, control and well-being (Merton et al. 2004, p. 132).

## 4.4 Improving the quality and safety of the local environment

Some types of non-formal activity or programme involving young people, such as those organised by environmental bodies, are specifically focused on improvements to the local neighbourhood or area: the environmental regeneration charity Groundwork, for example, provides funding for local community projects to regenerate local parks and open spaces, many of which create opportunities for young people to learn new skills and become more engaged in their local community. The evaluation of the Youth Works programme, a national initiative designed to get young people living in high-crime neighbourhoods involved in practical projects, has demonstrated a positive impact on levels of crime and nuisance in local areas (Webb 2004).

#### CASE STUDY

*Waltham Forest award winning Defending Da Hood (DDH) project was set up in 2004 to work with 'hard to reach' young people and address the issues which are relevant to them whilst raising awareness of employment, health, crime and community safety. The project's core aim is to improve the life chances of young people and reduce gang-related crime. It uses a programme of community events and activities to create an environment where young people can tackle issues such as gang culture, gun crime, teenage pregnancy and community tensions. Regular youth forums and consultation events provide young people with a platform to discuss issues of concern and influence local service provision.*

## CASE STUDY

*Prince's Park BMX Skate Park in Salford was formally opened in July 2005, following two years' work by young people, supported by an area youth worker, to secure this facility as part of a community initiative to improve the park. Local young people had already identified the need for a BMX skate park, and formed the BMX Bandits to achieve this. They consulted with other young people, developed funding bids, worked with Environmental Services and worked with designers and artists on the park's design and construction and additional artwork. Since its opening, the park has been used constantly. It is now the main meeting point for young people and has helped improve relationships between young people and other residents.*

Research also demonstrates that improvements in physical quality are more likely to be sustained when young people are involved in the design of public spaces. A study by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment investigated whether improving the condition, appearance, facilities and management of parks would encourage greater respect and lead to improved user behaviour. The study, which involved case studies in 20 local authorities, concluded that involving young people reduced potential for damage (CABE 2005).

Youth workers may have an impact directly in young people, but also create opportunities for partnership working. 'Youth workers often help other public agencies develop expertise in seeking the views of young people. Inspectors found that the most effective work tackling anti-social behaviour was carried out in conjunction with other agencies' (Ofsted 2007, p. 5).

Beyond the impact on reduced crime figures, engagement in forms of activity which allow young people to build positive relationships with peers and trusted adults can be both enabling and protecting, creating safer environments for young people to congregate in, and providing the resources individuals need to navigate complex pathways to adulthood and independence. In this sense, centre-based provision can offer a safe haven to young people who face disruptive or threatening situations in other parts of their lives, while street-based youth workers can reach out to young people in potentially challenging situations.

## CASE STUDY

*Originally an after school club, Indigos in Brixham, Devon recognised the need for an outdoor area for children and young people to play. Young people were saying that they were*

*getting into trouble playing on the local streets. A local school offered Indigos a disused plot of land that was overgrown and used as a dumping ground. The children, young people and local residents cleared the land and have developed a space for adventure play, with many facilities. Agreed ground rules keep the children and young people safe and offer a space for children and young people to 'go wild', they lead the project and evaluate it themselves. The project has won two government awards because of the positive impact on the local community.*

## Narrowing the gap

The benefits of participation are still unevenly distributed (NFER 2006 Wikeley et al. 2007). Inequalities also exist in the amount that local authorities spend on young people's leisure activities. As the National Youth Agency's annual audit reveals, glaring disparities exist in per capita funding, which arguably are 'well beyond what can be justified by local discretion' (Williamson, 2006).

## CASE STUDY

*England's Local Authority Youth Services – The Basic Facts 2005-6*

*The average share of spending on youth services from education budgets has dropped slightly from last year's 1.18 per cent to 1.12 per cent (less than in 1996-97 when it stood at 1.24 per cent). Only 3 authorities now spend more than 2 per cent, and 42 authorities less than 1 per cent.*

*The average authority spent £80 per head of its 13 to 19 population – an increase of 6.25 per cent (£5) on 2004-05 but still below the £100 proposal in the youth work standards as identified in Resourcing Excellent Youth Services (DfES 2002). The spend for 13-19s continues to vary widely with a current range of just above £200 – down to £41.*

(NYA 2007)

The government itself acknowledges that young people's participation in positive leisure-time activities is highly variable, and that less advantaged young people face greater barriers: 'Too many disadvantaged young people are unable to overcome barriers to participation such as cost and a lack of transport, and too much provision is of poor quality and is unappealing to young people'. It also recognises that barriers to access contributes to inequalities in other areas: 'The resulting lack of engagement constitutes a failure to reap health, learning and personal and social development opportunities' (DfES 2006, p. 2).

The key task for policy-makers is to promote more equitable access to youth services, leisure activities and wider learning experiences outside of formal education. Of particular importance are opportunities to be involved at higher levels of responsibility, in governance and decision-making – opportunities which depend on features of the wider social environment, including the wider policy and political framework. Recent government initiatives, including the Youth Opportunity Fund and Youth Capital Fund, have created new and valuable opportunities for young people to participate in a more intensive way, through involvement in decisions about the allocations of resources. The government's 10 Year

Youth Strategy pledges to extend these opportunities further, with a proposal to promote young people's involvement in mainstream budget processes at the local authority level.

Unless inequalities in access are addressed, the effect of non-formal learning is actually to widen the gap in life chances between children and young people from different social backgrounds. The challenge for policy is therefore to close the gap in life experiences and life outcomes by extending and broadening opportunities for engagement in enjoyable and rewarding leisure activities.

**The full paper, written by Louise Bamfield, is available on The National Youth Agency website and includes a full reference list**

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## **The National Youth Agency**

works in partnership with young people and with organisations and services to ensure better outcomes for young people. It is an independent, development organisation located between government and funding bodies on the one hand and service providers and their users on the other.


### **We strive to ensure that the work of services and organisations is:**

- relevant to the lives of young people;
  - responsive to policy;
  - effective and of a high standard;
  - efficient and provides good value; and
- successful in securing the best outcomes for young people.

### **Our five strategic aims are:**

- Participation: promoting young people's influence, voice and place in society.
- Professional practice: improving youth work practice, programmes and other services for young people.
- Policy development: influencing and shaping the youth policy of central and local government and the policies of those who plan, commission and provide services for young people.
  - Partnership: creating, supporting and developing partnerships between organisations to improve services and outcomes for young people.
  - Performance: striving for excellence in The Agency's internal workings.

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