

Building Social Capital & Promoting an Active & Engaged
Citizenry In the wake of Neoliberalism: Perspectives of Youth
Practitioners

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Contents

Contents	2
Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
Introduction	6
Methodology	18
Results	20
Discussion	33
References	40

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Abstract

The neoliberal project has eroded civil society and championed the cause of corporations and the individual since its inception in the 70s. We have become less trustful not only of each other but also of our governments. There has been a marked decline in political participation and community involvement. As a response to this atrophy we have been given the ideas of social capital, active citizenship and a renewed idea of civil society; which have in many circles been viewed as a further extension of the neoliberal project and a further depoliticisation of society. Experiential education, outdoor education and service learning seem to be the ways to infer these skills to the populace, the way to build social capital and promote an active and politically engaged citizenry. This study looks at practitioner's views on; the decline of civil society, current debate on active citizenship and on projects with the aims of the study at their core. It points to a lack of provision in the area, but draws on and analyses the perspectives of the practitioners with a view to constructing a picture of what a project with the aims of building social capital and promoting a more socio-politically engaged populace might look like.

At the heart of the democratic faith is an idea that reaches beyond equality. It is the idea that every person has unique skills, capacities, and gifts and that a good society provides an opportunity for those gifts to be given and shared. This can be achieved within an associational community, where citizens go beyond voting and create a new form of relationships to make power and create a society from their own vision and work, a society where health, wisdom, justice, knowledge, economic well being and community prevail. (McKnight, 2003)

Introduction

Alongside the rise of neoliberalism as the prevailing economic orthodoxy of our time and the individualism that goes with it, we have seen a slump in civic and democratic participation. People are not as organised socially as they were thirty or forty years ago. Robert D Putnam the author of a highly influential book (*Bowling Alone; The Collapse and Revival Of American Community*) informs us that for the first two thirds of the twentieth century Americans witnessed a dramatic increase in community and civic engagement. However he continues by stating that this increase in community participation decreased rapidly towards the close of the millennium. “Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century (p. 27).” It is of no coincidence that Putnam takes the last thirty or so years to highlight the decline in societal organisation and community life. We need only to look at what forces have shaped the world we live in over that time.

There is no such thing as society;

From the 70's on there was a dramatic restructuring of the world, which was led by the United States of America under the leadership of actor turned politician Ronald Reagan and in Britain by the infamous Margret Thatcher. What they did was implement a set of economic ideals propagated by Milton Friedman, which called for unregulated markets and the subservience of the state to the market. This set of ideals has been pushed on the world through the dominance of the United States. What began in the enlightenment as a quest for individual liberties and freedom of oppression has ended up in freedom for corporations and the oppression of humankind. According to Fredrik Powell (2007), we inhabit a world where conservatism has been restored through a return to the self-regulating market, and the neoliberal model of economic progress shapes the world in which we live. The author goes on

to tell us that the world we inhabit now is a long way from the post-war consensus, when social Keynesianism shaped public policy and where a minimum standard of living, economic welfare and social security underpinned citizenship. Across the globe there has been a dramatic increase in private corporations taking on roles which used to be served by the state for the benefit of all those citizens who reside within its boundaries. Now we see health education and social security roles being filled by corporations, who's only legal motive is profit for shareholders, or by the voluntary acts of an apolitical civil society who increasingly fills the gaps left by the vanishing welfare state.

The editors to a collection entitled (Social Capital; Critical perspectives on Community and 'Bowling Alone') open by making the point that civic responsibility will have to contend with a larger political and cultural system that promotes the pursuit of self-interest and political indifference. For these reasons among others, many of the traditional modes of democratic participation - voting, campaigning, attending meetings, and even talking about politics have declined. There has also been a congruent decrease in the level of trust afforded to governmental organisations. The diminishing role of an active and engaged citizenship does not bode well for democracy. In Ireland, trends in electoral turnout over the last two decades show an increasing level of voter abstention. Over a period of four general elections (1969, 1973, 1977 and 1981), turnout was at 76 to 77 per cent steady state. Since 1981, however, all the movement that has taken place has been downward (Voter Registration and Participation Module, 2002). This reflects the U.S. data as outlined by Robert Putnam (2000), but the problems of a society disinterested in the political realm do not end with mere abstention from voting. According to Putnam, when compared to demographically matched non-voters, voters are more likely to be interested in politics, to give to charity, to volunteer, to serve on juries, to attend community school board meetings, to participate in public demonstrations, and to cooperate with their fellow citizens on community affairs. So voting

electoral turnout is just the most visible sign of the fallout in civil societal engagement. Staying with Putnam we learn that today's under thirties pay less attention to the news and know less about current events than their elders do today or than people their own age did two or three decades ago. So the rise of free market policies and a world corporatocracy has been congruent with a decline in political and civic engagement, we have through our inaction and malleability handed the governing reins of our world over to the free-marketeters.

According to Benjamin Barber (1984), thin democracy shifts power away from communities where citizens live and transfers it to far-off representative institutions. Today we have a multitude of non democratic organisations who exercise control over our daily lives. Instead of participation in decision making, we the citizens are reduced to a passive state like animals in a zoo waiting for their keepers to decide their lives for them. Strong democracy on the other hand, urges that we take ourselves as citizens seriously. The idea of strong democracy envisages the participation of all the citizenry in at least some aspects of governance at least some of the time. Civil society opens up the public realm to this possibility of participative democracy (Powell, 2007, p. 16). But how can we set about the reawakening of civil society? We live in a world where people don't trust each other, where individualism reigns supreme and our levels of social and civic engagement are on the retreat.

Oscar Wilde once remarked that the problem with socialism is that it would take up too many evenings. We can draw similar parallels to the current question of how to reinvigorate civil society. As mentioned in the previous section we have through neoliberalism become a society of self serving individuals, who have low levels of trust for each other and low levels of community and political engagement. Many people simply don't have the time to invest in community projects or even keep abreast of political goings on, and this poses a serious problem to our future as a democracy.

What is Social Capital and why?

The current literature on the subject points to the role that social capital can play in strengthening our communities. Sillence (2003) tells us that social capital offers communities a means of social exchange which can improve personal happiness, increase democracy within the locality, lower crime rates, enable economic development and provide new dynamic solutions to problems, through varying forms of collective action. In Putnam's (2000) view social networks are important across all our lives, often for finding jobs, more often for finding a helping hand or companionship. He gives us the example that a well connected individual in a poorly connected society is not as productive as a well-connected individual in well connected society and he goes on to say that even a poorly connected individual may derive some benefits from living in a well connected community. We are social creatures who work better in a world dominated by trust and positive interaction. According to Putnam social capital is in essence the norms and networks of civil society that lubricate cooperative action among both citizens and their institutions. This is echoed by Anthony Giddens (2000) where he posits that social capital is seen as a means of support for individuals who are living in a community, which not only offers them a social opportunity but can also empower them as being part of a network or group and offer them a better quality of life. Giddens also points out that the maintenance of social capital within a community requires that individuals establish trust through the development of shared norms and values. Networks of community engagement foster sturdy norms of reciprocity; in Putnam's example, I'll do this for you know in the expectation that you or someone else may return the favour. A society such as this is more efficient than a distrustful society. If we feel more at ease with those around us we will be more willing to offer up our time or expertise to help our community. We won't feel the need to passively rely on a state which has no interest in helping us (and perhaps is powerless to do so) or throwing money into the hands of

corporations. Social capital is about human interaction free from the constraints of the market. There are many theoretical musings on social capital at the moment stemming from the highly context specific nature of the subject and the complexity of its conceptualization and operationalization, however the common ground of most definitions of social capital is that they focus on social relations that have productive benefits for the development of the group (Claridge, 2004).

Is Social Capital a Neoliberal Trojan horse?

Social capital has received much attention in the last ten years, and Robert Putnam has had a lot to do with this. However social capital theory as promulgated by Putnam is not without its critics. Butcher (2002) claims that social capital developed primarily as a solution to debates within rational choice theory, i.e. all action is fundamentally 'rational' in character and people calculate the likely costs and benefits of any action before deciding what to do. Butcher continues by saying that these rational choice debates were intimately linked to an anti-state ideology. Today social capital has become synonymous with community development and volunteerism but less so with political activism. As was dealt with earlier, neoliberal policies have made civil society subservient to the state ergo the market and now according to some commentators, social capital is being used to further depoliticise the citizenry. Kirby & Murphy (2009), show us a picture of an economic sphere dominated by market values, and a social world defined by depoliticised ideas, such as building social capital, in a post-socialist world order. Alex Law and Gerry Mooney (2006) support this idea with their argument that social capital constructs a new political and social conformism with the aim of demobilizing working class organisations and activities. They also state that whilst confining notions of volunteerism to safe de-politicised channels they are completely

neglecting the basis of the social disintegration that we are witnessing under neoliberal capitalism.

In Ireland the ideas of social capital were brought to the fore by ex-Taoiseach Bertie Ahern who described Putnam as ‘an extraordinary genius’ (Irish Times) and in return Putnam noted that ‘there is no political leader anywhere in the world who has had the sustained interest in the issue of social capital as the Taoiseach’ (Irish Times). In 2006 (the year after these mutual pats on the back) the taskforce for active citizenship (an initiative devised by the Taoiseach) was launched and both the concepts of social capital and active citizenship became intertwined. Niamh Gaynor (2011), argues that the active citizenship project constitutes a mechanism through which the state, facing challenges to the legitimacy of its role in maintaining existing levels of social protection, attempts to rebuild public legitimacy and support by utilizing the active citizenship project through the aegis of community development. Under the contemporaneous definition of active citizenship, as employed in the report of the taskforce on active citizenship (2007), active citizenship is narrowly equated with volunteering and ‘helping out’ in communities. Gaynor continues by saying that the current concept does not aim at mobilizing the populace to query, question and analyse why this is necessary. It instead substitutes self-help for redistribution, self-reliance for state-accountability and as I mentioned earlier it contributes to the further depoliticisation of civil society under the neoliberal project.

2011 is the European Year of voluntary activities promoting active citizenship (EU, 2010). I think that says a lot about what the EU think an active citizen is. From a further reading of the official EU summary we are told that ‘Volunteering is one of the central elements of active citizenship’, in fact volunteering and voluntary activities seem to be the sine qua non of active citizenship. In Ireland to promote active citizenship a drive was launched entitled fifty ways to be an active citizen. And once again active citizenship is

equated with volunteering. ‘A survey conducted by JCI Ireland shows that 16% of Irish people believe that volunteering is a more representative act of active citizenship as opposed to joining a political party, where 0% voted in favour (2011).’ Volunteering has become intrinsically linked with the idea of being an active citizen, and political involvement is actually being distanced from the realm. Kirby & Murphy (2009) agree that the state is seen as subjugating civil society. The authors view the state as being ever more determined to use its power (of influence, of funding) to constitute a role for civil society that makes it subservient to the state, providing voluntary services to some of the most needy in Irish society, but never daring to raise a critical voice about the glaring and scandalous injustices which exist in our society. The authors go on to inform us that in doing so, the states priority is, to make Ireland safe for investment by multinational companies and to play down or deafen any debate about the negative social impacts of the highly dependent model of development promoted by the Irish state. In their analysis of how funding is granted to voluntary organisations the authors contend that civil society organisations need to enhance their ability to resist the implicit and explicit threats to funding that do indeed occur when groups vocalise counter hegemonic discourse. A civil society funded by a state which lauds the virtue of free market neoliberal policies will not be a source of political dissent, merely another mouth piece for a populist and clientelist state. Civil society needs to organise itself in free space that is designed for and by civil society. The authors infer to us a belief that the opportunity is ripe for a new left social movement to rise to the challenge of being a natural counter weight to the current political status quo that has generated such inequality, risk and vulnerability in all our lives.

From Theory to Practise;

Whilst commentators across the spectrum share conflicting and somewhat passionate views on these issues of social capital, civil society and active citizenship, mere social

scientific theoretical debate is going to do nothing to address the problems we face today. We need to harness the best from all these concepts and ideals without buying into a narrow one sided view, left or right view. Most authors on social capital agree on the basic premise that social relations have productive benefits, and that an active engaged populace can only be of benefit to a thriving more egalitarian democracy. These are the ideals we need to champion in order to build a better society and it will be true constant engagement with the issue that it can remain a positive driving force. It is Brenda Morrison's (2001) belief that if we think of individuals as being motivated by the need for affirming social relationships, then our institutions should carry the responsibility of building these positive relationships. She points us to the school system as providing a solid base from which to develop an education for citizenship. Theories on how to build social capital and reengage civil society have focussed on many different and diffuse methods but an ethos of experiential education underlies them all. Experiential education is an educational philosophy that infuses direct experience with the learning environment together with focussed reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills and clarify issues (Itin, 1999). John Dewey (1997), an eminent educational reformer, believed that education should provide a good model for life in a democratic society. Dewey proposed that education should be based around a theory of experience which rested on two central tenets, that of continuity and that of interaction. The former refers to the notion that humans are sensitive to experience and the latter to how those past experiences influence our present situation. The following section will discuss methods of building social capital and promoting an active and socio-politically engaged citizenry, which utilise Dewey's theory of experience. Those methods are service learning and outdoor education.

Service Learning;

Service learning has been defined as 'a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning

experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities (NSLC).’ Many scholars have contributed to the area of utilizing community based service learning to enhance democratic citizenship, political engagement and generate social capital. Battistoni (1997) informs us that when we hold democratic citizenship at the core of community based service learning experiences, we will find that students come away with a more critical understanding of their communities and the role which they can play within them. We learn that service learning should be valued as a method of fostering an ‘other-regarding’ ethic in students which is appropriate to democratic citizenship. Battistoni posits the idea that free democratic societies depend on mutual responsibility and continues by adding that, within a just democratic society, rights without obligations are not sustainable. Community service learning does not just exist for the better off in society to give something back to the less fortunate, the ideals should entail that all facets of society work together continuously to produce a better understanding, and a more egalitarian society.

Partnership underscores mutual interdependence and helps create an understanding of community – not as those with problems but as the group to which we all belong (1997).

John Annette (Community, Politics and Citizenship education) informs us of the importance of service or active learning in the community which is based upon the aforementioned principles of experiential education. He sees this kind of learning as based upon student’s reflection on volunteering or civic engagement activities. Further in citing Barber (1984) we learn that he (Barber) also advocates citizenship education through community service learning, with a focus on critical thinking about politics and civil society. From a reading of, *Building social capital for civic and political engagement* (Chi, Middaugh, & Kahne, 2006), we learn that you find a more active, engaged and effective citizenry in communities that share sturdy norms of civic and political commitment along with engagement and knowledge

of relevant civic, political and social networks. Service learning in the community can bolster this process; participation in such service learning projects can increase the stock of social capital which in turn can increase civic engagement (Campbell, 2000). A more trusting society is a more equal society and the benefits of a more equal society are felt by all, not just the worse off in society (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2010). Steps towards a more just and egalitarian society can be laid through service learning in the community that places a strong focus on generating social capital and on facilitating an active, politically engaged citizenry.

Service learning can not only help build a type of ‘bridging’ as well as bonding social capital, it may also develop the capacity for democratic citizenship within civil society (Annette, 2005)

Whereas Campbell believes that even participation in non-political activities (within a service learning remit) can have significant consequences for political participation, we learn in *Educating Citizens* (2010), that when service learning is based solely on volunteering and does not address policy issues it is not seen as providing the type of experiential learning through political engagement which is, according to the authors, necessary for an education for citizenship. We must relate this back to the contemporaneous definition of active citizenship as mentioned earlier. For a project of community based service learning to be effective, not only at generating social capital within and between communities, but also at building and buttressing civil society and reinserting power and politics into the spirit and practise of our society, the project needs to be permeated with political engagement.

Outdoor Education;

The next facet of experiential education I will look at is outdoor adventure based education, which encompasses the use of the outdoor environment, whether natural or manmade, to promote learning from experience (Boss, 1999). Many scholars have outlined

the significant role that outdoor education can play in the development of social relations that are both beneficial to individuals and their broader communities (Maeda, 2005) (McKenzie & Blenkinsop, 2006). Fiona Stoddart (2004), tells us that the social opportunities which are available during outdoor education programs have the potential to aid the development of social capital. Findings from her research revealed instances where Putnam's concepts of thick trust and thin trust developed alongside a norm of reciprocity. She explains this by outlining how the intensity of a residential outdoor adventure programme which demands that the participants live together, do risk taking activities together, and socialise together, offers a unique opportunity for those involved to garner an in-depth understanding of each other. Stoddart points out that a positive attitude towards supporting one another evolved amongst the group as their friendships developed over the course of the project. She draws our attention to the many instances whereby the group encouraged, supported and helped each other, all without any expectation of any immediate payback for those offering the support. This supports Putnam's view of generalised reciprocity. Outdoor education programmes, according to Judith Boss (1999), can stimulate the development of interpersonal competencies, enhance leadership skills, and have positive effects on adolescents senses of empowerment, self control, independence, self understanding, assertiveness, and decision making skills.

As spoken about earlier we have become passively reliant on the state, and increasingly allowed the market to take up where the state has abandoned us. We have felt ourselves to be powerless in the face of these changes and our communities have given way to the power of neoliberalism and its individualising nature. For young people growing up today they know of no other world than this. Norms of trust, reciprocity, community and political engagement have been lost. However we are presented with some form of a remedy. The alternative nature of experiential education allows participants in socio-political projects

the freedom to query, question and analyse what is happening around them; to manufacture dissent. Projects such as these can help foster an 'other regarding' ethic and a sense of mutual responsibility within our society. Experiential education in all its guises provides us with a new set of problem solving skills, with a new way of thinking. Also, when it is combined with ideas of active citizenship, and social capital, it helps create a vision of people pursuing aims which will have the betterment of the community at their core.

Methodology

Apparatus

A small Dictaphone was used to record the interviews. It was placed on the table out of the line of sight of the interviewees so as to make the process as informal as possible. A notepad and pen were used to jot down ideas etc. The interviews were uploaded to sound editing software (Audacity) where the tempo was reduced which facilitated the transcription process. NVivo 9 was then used to analyse the data.

Participants

Due to the diverse nature of the study, the researcher needed to elicit the opinions of professionals from across the spectrum of, outdoor education, service learning, community development and experiential education. The researcher believes that this range of participants lent itself to the rich data which was collected.

Research Design

The research design employed was a data led qualitative analysis. This design was chosen as qualitative research provides a flexible approach in which to analyse what meaning and values individuals give to social problems (Cresswell, 2009). Qualitative analysis has an invariably unstructured quality, wherein the possibility of getting at the interviewees meanings and emerging concepts is greatly enhanced. This approach provided the researcher with a framework in which to explore practitioner's views on the decline of civil society and how to address said decline. Thematic analysis was used to draw out themes from the data. This meant the researcher immersing themselves in the data, picking out emerging themes and linking them into groups.

Procedure

Participants were interviewed on a one to one basis in a location of their choosing, so as to maximise their level of comfort. A semi structured interview was utilised with each interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. The researcher kept a list of questions or areas of interest close at hand should there be a lull in the conversation. However, the researcher found that treating the interview as a conversation facilitated the collection of data. Allowing the interviewee the freedom to speak made for unexpected themes to emerge.

Results

The researcher approached the interviewees with a view to extrapolating their opinions on the decline of civil society and engaging them in a discussion about what a project on building social capital and empowering civil society might look like. The researcher found that projects with the aim of building social capital or promoting an active politically engaged citizenship were virtually nonexistent. The interviewees were in agreement over the decline in civic participation and through focussing on youth projects, the interviewees gave a picture of what approach you could take in building a project with these aims. The interviewees voiced scepticism of current debate on active citizenship and its focus on volunteerism.

The decline of civil society

Most participants agreed that there had been a marked decline in civil society and community involvement, and that people were generally less trusting than they were.

‘Where I’m living now the only time you communicate with the neighbours is when you’re walking out to your car, and at that its only a nod’ (Mick)

‘...people are too busy now, they work all the time. I noticed a huge difference when I came back from the states. Were like over there now.’ (Eugene)

‘...we don’t know everyone in our society now; there is an ignorance of other cultures of immigrants. We don’t trust them cause we don’t know them.’ (Peter)

Three strong themes emerged surrounding how to engage young people in such a project; Empowerment, Challenge, Alternative & Fun

Empowerment;

For a programme to be effective in promoting trust and reciprocity, and developing a sense of community it must hold the participants at the core of its undertaking, and they must have a sense of ownership with the project. Derek Cleary (Localise) tells us that the young people are central to the entire process.

'It is what we call a student centred learning process ... they are all the time being empowered, giving their ideas and coming forward'.

'It is the young people who devise the projects under the guidance of their facilitators.'

This sense of ownership of a student centred challenge is also echoed by Mick Byrne,

'If you can encourage the participant to take ownership of it they feel a responsibility towards that challenge, then they will be much more motivated and much more focussed in getting it done.'

The young people learn that they are responsible for the outcomes, it lies in their hands. Niamh Carton spoke of the excitement generated within her group of young councillors when they were given the reigns of their community project,

'They are actually working on one massive programme its county wide they have designed the poster the competition they have done everything they went at it full force, they are in charge of it.'

The practitioners all echoed this ideal of ownership and empowerment of every participant within their respective projects, Peter Lane spoke of getting everyone involved so as to foster this sense of ownership,

'...when you have people coming together on a large project like that then everyone has the opportunity to use their abilities in some aspect of the project it's a broad range of a challenge it's not just a one focus thing.'

Challenge;

Whether on an outdoor adventure weekend looking to foster norms of trust and reciprocity between participants, undertaking a service learning project to raise awareness of community or political issues, or sitting on a youth council, all the participants within these projects need to undertake a challenge in order to benefit.

'When challenged to service every one of them responds in their own way.' (Cleary)

Mick Byrne defines outdoor education as,

'...the use of the outdoors as a medium to provide challenge which can be used then to invoke social personal development in individuals and groups...they have to take ownership and ownership of the challenge is the most important part of outdoor education for any sort of developmental education.'

Eugene gave the researcher a great example of a challenge involving female high school students from gang backgrounds, leading to social/personal development within the outdoors,

'...so straight away they were jumping in and saying ok stop, stop, stop, don't panic ... we came in this way we had our hands on each other's shoulders let's do that the opposite way and walk out and take turns and if anybody has an idea we will stop and listen to them.'

Peter Lane also related challenge back to a sense of the personal,

'...it is something that is personal to them and that is the key; a challenge that they feel personally attached to, a responsibility towards.'

Alternative and Fun;

All the participants agreed that to engage young people in any form of experiential education for social or community developmental reasons that it must be fun. Niamh Carton tries to keep her youth council meetings light hearted.

'They are kids, we don't want to turn it into a business meeting, a fun meeting where they are enjoying themselves, that's when the good ideas come out of them ... Do as much fun things as possible initially just to keep people involved.'

Eugene gives us the example of an ice-breaker activity he uses on new groups which utilizes soft non violent batons,

'Within 25 minutes all the preconceived notions they had with about each other with themselves had vanished. I observed them sitting down just sitting down and (saying) why do I hate you, why do I call you big fat black ass bitch, why do I hate you why don't I talk with you. I have never had so much fun with somebody in my whole life that I don't know like.'

The participants all saw the alternative nature of their projects as being fundamental to engaging young people.

'They are living in a world where the bell rings they sit down they are not allowed talk they sit in lines looking at a board, all the rules are set for them. If they step outside the boundaries of that they are in trouble, they are penalised. Then they come down to us and

they are allowed run wild as they see it, where as I see it they are behaving like normal.'

(Mick)

Derek supports this assertion when discussing one of his school groups,

'Our first claim is that you will be taken from the classroom out into the community to deliver service action, and the minute you say that they are all on board.'

Personal and Social Development;

Many people feel powerless in today's democracies. They don't realise the role that they can play in bringing about change, by simply harnessing their own unique abilities and using them for collective action. The interviewees all professed to an increase within participants of their projects in; life and social skills, confidence, leadership skills, and the ability to work well as part of a team. People proved willing to help each other out and trust each other during projects. These attributes, when looked at in an experiential education remit, are mutually inclusive; a rise in one will point to the subsequent lifting of another.

Derek spoke of validating what strengths they have to offer from the start in order to give them the confidence to start believing in their own contribution,

'...some have been team captains, some participate in football and Irish dancing and we recognise that, as being very important, because you are demonstrating leadership you are demonstrating commitment...'

Eugene pointed to the emergence of natural leaders within groups, whilst on a residential,

'...and then new leaders start to emerge, natural leaders and they were really, really pulling themselves together it was quite incredible to see and that was only on the first day like.'

Niamh also highlighted the ability of participants to aid in the development of others,

'It's a learning process for them all and he is actually helping them become more confident ... he really helps the younger ones along.'

The values of teamwork are inferred to participants across the board in experiential education,

'...they will realise that by focusing and by been motivated and by working with other people they will realise that hang on I can overcome this challenge' (Mick)

'...they know they can't get through it if they don't work together' (Peter)

Ropes courses as explained by Eugene, developed a strong sense of teamwork,

'...everyone in the group has to get through the web, but each gap closes when someone uses it. You can only use it once. So they have to really sit back as a group and look at everyone's abilities before starting it, no one gets left behind.'

An increase in self confidence comes from achievements and recognising ones achievements, which in turn will propel you on with the courage and knowhow to bring about change in your society. Eugene again points to areas within experiential education where self confidence and team work can be nurtured,

'...we started to use bigger activities more problem solving you know, throw little quirks in there so that they can figure out what's going on, learn the importance of working together; and the self confidence you could see the self confidence just come up like this (raises hand up to head height), it was incredible.'

Mick is able to give us an example of how continued exposure to outdoor adventure education can have a pronounced change on the confidence of a group,

'...I have a group of 15 & 16 year olds who have been with me for two years. They have learnt together to sail 22ft boats around a course and they can do it brilliantly. And they are much different kids then they were when they came to me. Because they have been down every week they have learned to take on a pretty big challenge. They have learnt to do it together.'

Ideals such as trust can be generated during outdoor education programs,

'During rock climbing there is a perceived risk involved, you have to place a lot of faith in the person holding the rope, so yeah trust can be nurtured.' (Mick)

Participation in service learning, outdoor adventure based education and other socio-political projects have much longer term benefits than are immediately witnessed. The lessons learnt or ideals which are fostered in participants have wide reaching advantages to all aspects of their lives and to greater society. Derek argues that our current economic situation could have been avoided,

'We would not be in some of the political quagmires we were in if people had caring integrated as part of their process, I think the caring professional should be the template that we build the civil society of the future on.'

Derek elaborates by talking about having community service learning integrated as part of every one's life, so that in the future those who are at the top making decisions will be more conscious of how they affect society, and communities. Mick, agrees with this point and states that the benefits of participation in outdoor adventure education have unforeseen advantages in later life,

'... they will be much more successful in whatever they do because their brilliant in a challenging situation, no matter what comes up it doesn't faze them because they have confidence in themselves to take on dangerous and challenging situations.'

Experiential education is seen as crucial to developing a well rounded individual; Eugene calls them life or social skills, and Mick goes further inferring that the broad nature of experiential education is fundamental to producing an engaged citizenry,

'... if you're not developing their creative side, their ability to work with other people their ability to take on challenging situations in whatever atmosphere, then you're missing an element of your active citizenship development.'

Teacher and Facilitator;

The role of the teachers and facilitators plays an important part in the success of projects such as these. Experiential education can be viewed as offering a more informal take on mainstream education where young people are better able to express themselves free from the confines of the classroom and the associated discipline. The role played by the facilitator plays a massive part in this. To distinguish between the role of the teacher and that of the facilitator Eugene outlines the differences in technique,

'They have a different approach then I have. In the class room they are the leader you know, they stand up and they are the authority figure, the one who puts on the labels and so on. As a facilitator you are non-judgemental.'

Eugene pointed out that his role is to observe how the young people operate in situations or challenges he has orchestrated, he learns from them and tailors his approach. The mainstream teacher must be able to learn also, otherwise there is a gap or missing link in the education of the young people.

'The way they solve problems in the activities is the way they solve problems in real life and that is what you have to work with. ... Some kids might just stand there, oh I tried to do this and it didn't work so they give up, so you know that's what that kid does in real life with all problems that come his way.'

If the young participant is learning about democratic ideals, collective action and voicing your opinion, it is all to no avail if for the rest of their school time they operate in an autocracy.

'Teachers become facilitators when it comes to community service not dictators. You know, and that works.' (Derek)

Eugene gives the example of one young man whom the teacher had deemed a trouble maker, and who could disrupt her class in an instant. She was at a loss as to what to do. Regular sanctions did not deter this young man.

'If a young kid like that has the potential to go in and disrupt the class in a negative way he also has the potential to go in and be positive. Empowering him a little and giving him some leadership and he is going around trying to solve problems while helping people as well. So now we are teaching him a new skill and what's he going to do, bring it back to the class room and beyond.'

When institutions give young people the message that they don't belong or that they are problematic, pro-social attitudes and behaviours can quickly become anti-social. They will bring these feeling into greater society and into later life. The interviewees reported on negative perceptions of young people by their elders. Eugene in his dealings with educational institutions found this to be the case. In one instance, when he was dealing with a group of

‘problematic teens’, the general consensus was *‘we will lock them up’*. He described this as *‘an example of 15 girls who school and society had given up on.’*

If we view schools as a microcosm of society, we can see how attitudes adopted within that institution are the attitudes which will be displayed in greater society.

Community Participation

Community service learning projects serve as a valuable way of connecting classroom civics learning with real world experience. However for a service learning project to be of benefit, it must have real meaning. Niamh gave the example of her current Comhairle group, who in response to the current economic crisis had the idea of shopping local to stimulate growth and jobs,

‘They are looking at setting up a kind of a loyalty card for young people in the county, to get all the shops involved. You sign up through the county council or the Comhairle. You get stamps for purchases at all the local shopping centres, deals with cinema and food. They are coming up with all the ideas.’

In this way we can see young people responding to an issue which is affecting everyone and producing a community based local solution. They are exhibiting a sense of mutual responsibility.

Harry (Localise) gives us another example of young people coming up with creative community based ideas which foster an ‘other regarding’ ethic.

‘For the 50th anniversary of the Irish wheelchair association the young people came up with the idea of holding a treasure hunt but also mapping out the areas which are wheelchair accessible, so the project raised awareness of wheelchair access, integrated the young people with members of the IWA and with the rest of the community.’

When the young people can see the benefit of their actions to their communities it reinforces the aims of the project. Peter placed a focus on holding debates to discuss issues of importance to communities highlighted during community research projects,

'If you have everyone gathered together in a room to debate or just talk about a shared concern, you're going to realise that as a community you're in it together, it's going to get people talking that may not necessarily have spoken before.'

Derek spoke of another project undertaken by a north inner city school, whereby they had an intergenerational session at a local old folk's home. The young people met with the elderly, chatted, shared experiences and discussed changing times and who their heroes were. The project culminated in a photography exhibition in Collins barracks.

'That would be a way the students were not only learning about service to their community they were also learning history by connecting with the museum and they are also learning the subject of civic and social political education'.

The role of Mainstream Education;

For positive outcomes, projects aimed at generating social capital and promoting active citizenship need to permeate all aspects of life. It is not viewed as enough to carry out a junior cert project and then move on with your academic education and forget about service learning or citizenship. It needs to be infused through the whole school curriculum.

Localise have developed a national youth volunteer card which students receive after they have completed their service learning project. Derek views this as *'very important for social capital'* in that *'it demonstrates the level of work done by the students; 'it's a way of tracking the community service work undertaken over the course of their education.'*

For a change to come about in participants they need regular engrossment in the activities, all

of the respondents spoke of the benefits accrued over time, from getting to know other participants, gaining a better knowledge of the area in question and from repeated exposure to the ideals of the project in question.

'You see a change in them very quickly but they then go back to their school room and they go back to their system of rules their everyday life so you won't get an overall change in them unless they are coming to you regularly.' (Mick Byrne)

The participants viewed the role of the teacher as essential in securing outcomes, but stressed a need to train or support the teachers. They did not see it as possible to pass on information to the teachers and leave, a sense of connectivity was crucial.

'The teacher is essential and vital but the teacher needs the support, expertise and the input of the service learning worker coming from outside. We find that it does not work unless it has that, it just becomes another manual that gets half wrong and they are not really interested in making it happen.'

Mick concurred with this view of an imbalance,

'The kids can bring it back but the problem is the teachers have not been trained up so there is a missing link.'

This idea of a missing link or an imbalance rose up again and again when discussing experiential education within mainstream education. The participants pointed towards a more dedicated service whereby teachers received the support from dedicated workers or were themselves trained up to deliver projects dedicated to generating social capital, service learning and fostering civic ideals. Lack of training of mainstream teachers meant that alternative education suffered as they naturally stuck to the areas which they understood best,

'Where they are falling down is in the implementation. You see the thing with the new junior cert curriculum, music and dance are the ones been focussed on because teachers know it. If you're not making sure that outdoor education in general is being implemented in every strand then they are going to shy away from it.' (Mick)

Derek also pointed to the busy workload on teachers as detracting from a more dedicated involvement in these sorts of programs.

'Unfortunately due to demands teachers are looking for the shortest route rather than the longer deeper more beneficial route.'

Active Citizenship – Government strategies;

There was a degree of scepticism surrounding current government and European initiatives, on active citizenship. Some viewed it as attempting to play down the role of civil society.

'... well by having a connection with Bertie Ahern I am already worried... Being an active citizen has to involve some form of political activity (Eugene).'

'I think it is our duty as citizens to question what our politicians are doing, otherwise were not really being active are we (Mick)'

Peter thought that by linking citizenship with volunteering it created a nice ideal which clouded the fact that it was depoliticising us as a society,

'...who is going to argue with helping out old ladies or cleaning up your town? It's a nice idea and you can't really argue with it. It's kind of sneaky and it deflects from what an active citizen could be.'

Discussion

The aim of this study was to find ways to reverse the current downward trend in community and political participation. This trend was linked to the rise of free market policies and the premise that the interest of the individual should be lauded over the interests of the collective. Our communities have become passively reliant on a state which serves the interest of corporations over the citizens, and we have lost any voice of resistance. The existing literature points us to the ideas of social capital and active citizenship as a remedy to the atrophy of civil society. Also, experiential education is held as the means to infer these teachings to the populace. This study found that in Ireland there are not many projects, operating with the definitive aims of building social capital and promoting an active and engaged populace. However there are many projects, mostly youth based, which aim at developing teamwork, empowering young people, fostering an ‘other regarding’ ethic, raising awareness of social and political issues and developing communities. The focus of the primary research was to review current practise in this field with an aim to highlight what elements work in developing strategies aimed at building social capital and promoting an active engaged citizenry. Analysis of the data highlighted some practical areas of note for discussion as summarised below.

The interviewees pointed to a decline in trust and mutual responsibility among society which was in line with the existing literature. The general consensus was that we would not have found ourselves in such a bad social and economic state if we lived in a more ‘other regarding’ and caring society. Mick spoke of neighbours living behind closed doors with the only communication being a nod to say hello before getting in the car to go to work. Peter informed us of a general lack of knowledge of immigrant groups and a growth of urban myths surrounding supposed deviant behaviours. The virtues of our neoliberal society, according to Mick, were lapped up by everyone who sought to profit over the boom years. He

points out that the bankers etc, who are now being blamed for the economic mess, were only conforming to the neoliberal individualism which has shaped our society. When the topic of active citizenship, as propagated by the EU and the Irish state was raised, a general scepticism was aired by some of the interviewees. They could not see why an active citizen should be more equated with volunteering than with political activity. The practitioners all had, at their base, a desire to build a more active, inclusive and egalitarian society. The researcher sought to elicit an understanding of how to achieve these aims; to devise a project capable of building social capital and promoting an active engaged citizenry.

What emerged from the discussion was that for a project to succeed in engaging young people effectively with its aims, it needed to empower the participant. This meant instilling a sense of ownership in the young people. All the interviewees pointed to this as a prerequisite. Next the project had to challenge them. It needed to challenge them mentally, in order to give them new problem solving skills; and challenge their understanding of society, in order to bring about change. Finally, the interviewees pointed to the idea of the project being alternative and fun; by not focusing on right or wrong answers and success and failure but on engaging discussion, drawing out debate and through its use of activity based learning. The role of the facilitator plays a big role in this process. If we cross reference this with the role of the teacher and the ethos of the school in general, it makes for an interesting discussion. The participants viewed the success of their projects as stemming not only from their alternative nature, but from the approach which they as facilitators afford. They encourage the young people to think and challenge them to act; the facilitator in turn observes this action and responds accordingly. They instil democratic ideals, and are the ones who promote the ideas of teamwork and reciprocity. They aid in the personal and social development of the participants.

This idea of personal and social development, whereby confidence, teamwork and leadership are built in a spirit of shared endeavour is backed up in the current literature by looking at Putnam's norms of trust and reciprocity. All the interviewees spoke of their young people helping each other out and lending a hand, with no immediate expectation of reciprocation. Experiential education projects prove very effective at generating trust within groups as participants embark on journeys of shared endeavour. Teamwork was present across the board and fostered a sense of camaraderie; the participants were in it together. They learn that it is by focusing and working together that obstacles can be overcome. The emphasis was shifted away from the role of the individual, to the betterment of the group, a far cry from contemporaneous thinking where the individual is held above all else. As was seen from Eugene's ropes courses, no man gets left behind; this kind of thinking when translated to everyday life can help to foster norms of trust and reciprocity which Putnam (2000) sees as a central tenet to his definition of social capital. Community participation can foster a sense of mutual responsibility. Young people develop a collective response to an issue which impacts on their community as highlighted by the Localise and Comhairle projects. Service learning projects such as these can also help build bridging as well as bonding social capital (Annette, 2005).

Theoretical & Practical Implications

The aim of this study was to look at strategies which could redress the decline in civic participation and community life which has taken place over the last thirty or so years. A review of the contemporary literature pointed to the ideas of social capital and active citizenship as remedies to the atrophy of civil society. The research pointed to the role that experiential education could play in developing these two ideals. Whilst there are groups operating in Ireland with aims similar to those outlined in this project, they all profess to a missing link or an imbalance. The participants pointed to a need for regular engagement in

activities and projects which tried to develop social capital and promote norms of active citizenship. The outdoor educators for instance gave many examples of challenging situations where developmental learning can take place, where norms of team work and mutual responsibility can be fostered, which leads to better group dynamics and better in-group community participation. Community service learning also proved beneficial at generating teamwork whilst doing something of benefit within your community thus fostering an 'other regarding' ethic and developing shared norms and values, which Giddens (2000) sees as a necessary requirement for the maintenance of social capital. Political projects engage young people in debate on current policy issues of note to themselves and their communities and look to them for solutions. There is a missing link between all these differing projects, they need to be tied together in order to produce a more active politically engaged civil society. This was an area lacking in the current literature, which outlines the role that service learning can play in 'helping out' the vulnerable in society and that outdoor education can play in generating bridging and bonding social capital, but not tying them together cohesively with an underlying message of social or political activism.

These types of programs may help to bring about change within their respective groups but the ideals need to permeate the whole spectrum of life. The ideas of mutual responsibility, community and political engagement need to become as normalised as discussing football, celebrities or TV shows. As pointed to earlier, our schools serve as a solid base on which to build a strong civil society. However our schools may not readily foster the kinds of ideals we may want to instil in our young people. Our school system focuses on results and competition for college places, and it produces people to this effect; people who focus on individual betterment at others expense. The norms which we as a society instil in our young people are the norms which they carry on in their lives; our schools can be viewed as a microcosm of society, a breeding ground for our future. If we

create a vision of community political engagement which provides a sense of ownership, challenges, and is enjoyable to our young people, they are going to carry this into their work and their adult life. If they can learn the benefits of teamwork and mutual responsibility as part of these projects, they will use these skills throughout their adult lives. All the participants, whilst speaking highly of teachers whom they had encountered, agreed that they needed support and training in order to continue the work which was laid down by the projects. The school education system provides us with the base upon which to build social capital and promote an active and engaged citizenry; it is not however being tapped to its full potential, at the expense of our society. At the moment junior certificate students have C.S.P.E (civic, social & political education) as part of their curriculum and Localise carry out service learning projects with these students; however that's where the learning stops. There are plans to introduce a new subject to the leaving certificate syllabus, entitled *Politics and Education*. This subject would operate as a natural base from which to continue a democratic education infused with the ideals of generating social capital and active citizenry. The fear is that this curriculum could sit on the shelf and never be utilised.

The idea of residential was brought up by both Mick and Eugene. It was their belief that you can tackle more in-group problems over multiple days and it gives the group more time to bond. The opportunities for developmental learning just increase over time. This echoes the research conducted by Fiona Stoddart (2004). Eugene told us that once you break the ice with a group and they feel comfortable and safe in their surroundings, that the ideas just start flowing out of them. Niamh told us that her youth council groups needed to be engaged in a fun activity to get their ideas flowing. This all relates back to the idea that you have to create a fun and alternative situation in order to engage young people. The community service learning projects involved fantastic work by the Localise team and the school and community groups with which they worked; however they lacked cohesiveness

across society and over time. Where these ideas can progress in the future is through the combination of all three facets. Multi agency work, as indicated by the data, would normalise the ideals of an active and engaged citizenry. If a youth, school or community group, (or mixture of), were to engage in a community service project they could utilize the team building and idea generating qualities inherent in a residential outdoor education program. Niamh told us that when her new Comhairle is elected they are brought out on outdoor adventure activities in order to get to know each other. This residential could be used to brainstorm projects which may be of benefit to their community, whilst getting to know everyone else involved. They will really feel a sense of ownership with the project as they will relate the idea formation to the bonding which they experienced whilst on the residential. This will leave the group enthusiastic in their implementation of the project; it will also have had the effect of allowing natural leaders to materialise alongside the organic growth of the idea. The other benefit of organising a project in this way is that the facilitator can help imbue a sense of political or social activism into the group. Instead of a teacher putting up barriers, the facilitator will encourage them to question, query and analyse what they see and hear around them. The group after spending a number of days in the outdoors devising their project will then take it back to their community. Peter's idea of participatory debates could be utilised, to draw in respective shareholders from the entire community to encourage discussion about the aims, practicalities and usefulness of the project. In this way bridging social capital can be generated across the whole community, leading to a more inclusive and aware society.

Conclusion

The study found a lack of services with the definitive aim of building social capital and promoting an active and politically engaged society. What was discovered, was a host of community groups tackling the problems of the atrophy of civil society, by focussing on our

youth. The study highlighted a general scepticism of current debate around active citizenship and volunteering, but agreed that we need to produce a more caring society with community service at its core. The study was limited in its scope, through time constraints and access to participants and the researcher believes that future research could involve a case study of a pilot scheme, and interviews with young people to garner attitudes towards said scheme.

With the aims of the research in mind, what emerged from the interviews was a template of what such a project may look like. It must empower and challenge the participants. It must be of real benefit and it must be infused with a sense of political or social activism. Through regular engrossment in projects with these aims, ideas of mutual responsibility and civic participation are not only fostered but normalised. The vision of a society with health, wisdom, justice, knowledge, economic well being and community at its core, can be achieved. Social capital and the promotion of a socio-politically active and engaged populace can help us achieve these aims.

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