

THE EFFECTS OF YOUTH VOLUNTEERING:

AN OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

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1. INTRODUCTION

Youth volunteering¹ has received increasing attention among policymakers, practitioners and researchers across the youth sector over the last decade (Hill & Stevens, 2010). In 2005 the report of the Russell Commission outlined a national framework for youth action and engagement which would “deliver a step change in the diversity, quality and quantity of young people’s volunteering” (Hill & Russell, 2009: 1). Based on this v, the youth volunteering charity, was developed and launched in March 2006. While Youth Music has supported youth volunteering since its inception, since 2008 it has been responsible for the delivery of the v-funded Voltage programme - the national music volunteering programme for young people aged 16-25.

It has been argued that youth volunteering is often promoted as a ‘magic bullet’ for addressing all sorts of problems, for example that it increases youth citizenship, develops young people’s skills and employability, reduces anti-social behaviour and rehabilitates young offenders (Hill & Russell, 2009; Hill & Stevens, 2010). But what is the evidence base for such claims? To answer this, Youth Music commissioned a review of the evidence available on the effects of volunteering, the findings of which are presented in this paper. It explores the evidence on the effects youth volunteering can have for three groups:

- the individual volunteers;
- the organisations with whom young people volunteer;
- and, the wider community, including the users or beneficiaries of the volunteering activity.

The purpose of this document is to provide an overview of the effects of youth volunteering to support Youth Music’s work and that of its colleagues in the sector. It is intended that this resource will evolve as more evidence becomes available. It is important to note that it focuses on the effects volunteering can have and it is not suggested that all volunteering opportunities will produce these outcomes. Indeed it is expected that only high quality, structured, sustained and supported opportunities with appropriate funding would produce the full range of effects. Also it is beyond the scope of this overview to assess which kinds of volunteering opportunities produce which effects and at what financial costs - readers are referred to the full reports (see bibliography) for more information on this, although analysis of financial costs are limited (see NatCen et al, 2011).

¹ Volunteering is generally agreed to have three core elements: it is unpaid, involves non-compulsory activity and is of benefit to others in the volunteer’s community (excluding their relatives) or, the environment (Gaskin, 2004; Hill & Russell, 2009). These activities can be either formal or informal- the former being carried out as part of an organisation and the latter without organisational affiliation (Gaskin, 2004).

2. THE APPROACH

The initial brief for this review was to focus on the evidence available from the music and arts sector. However a systematic search of the Social Sciences Index and Google Scholar did not produce any results. Therefore this paper draws on literature on the effects of youth volunteering more generally. It does not purport to be a systematic review of the literature in this field and focuses on a limited number of key reports and reviews. It draws on two existing literature reviews; evaluations of v and Voltage; a scoping study for longitudinal research into the impact of volunteering; and a selection of self-evaluation reports from Youth Music funded partners (see bibliography below for all references).

3. WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS VOLUNTEERING CAN HAVE ON THE YOUNG VOLUNTEER?

Research into youth volunteering has had a heavy focus on its impact for the individual volunteer. While studies vary in the 'measures' and terminology they use, broadly speaking the possible benefits for the individual volunteer fall into four often inter-related categories:

I. SKILLS AND EMPLOYABILITY

Across the literature it has been found that being a young volunteer can provide an opportunity to develop new skills, gain qualifications and is perceived to increase the young person's employability. While in the broader literature these are considered to be important benefits among volunteers of all ages, they are most highly valued among young volunteers (Gaskin & Davis Smith, 1995; Davis Smith, 1998 both in Gaskin, 2004a). Volunteering can provide young people with their first experience of a structured working environment, their first opportunity to take on a role of responsibility (NC 2011), and can operate as a form of 'apprenticeship' (Thomas et al., 1999; Gaskin, 2004b, both in Gaskin, 2004a). This is a particularly important opportunity for those who are most disadvantaged in the labour market (Hirst, 2001; Gaskin, 2004b, both in Gaskin, 2004a).

While the skills gained by volunteers vary depending on the nature of the volunteering opportunity, some are described in the literature as 'transferable' to the workplace (Hall, 2011). Those reported on a recurring basis include: team working skills; communication and interpersonal skills; problem-solving skills; and, planning and organisational skills (Gaskin, 2004a). For example in the formative evaluation of v, volunteers discussed developing communication and interpersonal skills, in their interactions with other volunteers, staff and service users. They also reported gaining skills in delivering presentations and public speaking, problem solving and negotiation, creativity, team working, leadership and time management (NatCen et al., 2011). As well as work-related skills, volunteers can also develop other more specific skills related to the volunteering opportunity. For example, volunteers on the Voltage programme were found to have improved their musical skills (Hall, 2011).

Alongside skill development, awards and opportunities for accreditation or qualifications are also reported as benefitting volunteers. Where achieved they were perceived to build confidence and self-esteem, and improve young people's CVs (Gaskin, 2004a; Hall, 2011). However, it was also found that these could have a negative impact on young people. For example, where a young person was nominated for an award but did not get it this could be discouraging (NatCen et al., 2011).

Volunteering also offers young people an opportunity to reflect on their career direction and develop career paths. It has been found to raise their aspirations and become better informed about the opportunities available to them (NatCen et al., 2011; DFES, 2003, in Gaskin, 2004a; Hall, 2011; OP 2608). For example, in the evaluation of Voltage, Hall (2011) found that pathways into education,

employment and training both within and beyond the arts had been made more visible and accessible to young volunteers. They became more aware of the opportunities available in their area and developed the skills to be able to access them.

The combination of getting experience of a workplace, improving skills and gaining qualifications or accreditation has been found to improve young volunteers' perceived employability (Hirst, 2001 in Gaskin, 2004a; Hall, 2011). For example about two thirds of those in the Millennium Volunteer programme reported that their volunteering had increased their chances of employment (Davis-Smith et al, 2002 in Gaskin, 2004a). Indeed there are some reports of volunteering leading directly to employment or returns to education. In some Youth Music projects young volunteers have progressed into paid employment within their host organisations. Research elsewhere has reported a reduction in the NEET status of young volunteers after a period of volunteering (Prince's Trust, 1999; CSV, 2000, both in Gaskin, 2004a). However, NatCen et al. (2011) raises concerns about attribution and argues that, without a comparison group, claims that youth volunteering leads directly to employment cannot necessarily be sustained.

In assessing the actual impact of volunteering on employability, rather than a perceived one, it has also been noted that there is relatively little research on the views of employers and what value they attach to voluntary experience (Hill & Russell, 2009). While there is evidence that they report valuing some of the skills, it is also reported that a great number of employers only recognise volunteering as valuable if it relates directly to the position being applied for (Hill & Russell, 2009).

Overall the evidence suggests that youth volunteering provides a valuable opportunity for young people to gain work experience, skills, qualifications and, at least, a perceived improvement in their employability.



II. PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Volunteering can have benefits for young people's personal development. Building self-esteem and confidence are frequently referred to in the literature, as are experiencing a sense of achievement and personal satisfaction from being a part of something meaningful, helping others, and seeing the positive results of the work carried out (Gaskin and Davis Smith, 1995; Davis Smith, 1998; Eley, 2003; Gerlach, 2003; all in Gaskin, 2004a; NatCen et al., 2011; Hall, 2011). In their evaluation of v, NatCen et al. (2011) conceptualised these and related benefits, such as having a meaningful purpose to their day-to-day activities and finding a place where they 'fit', as building a young person's 'ontological capital'. This term is used to describe how volunteering can support a young person's 'ontological security', which is essentially how secure they feel about their own skills and capabilities. This is important as it is thought that ontological security can be a crucial element in making and maintaining positive life transitions (McNaughton, 2008, cited in NatCen et al., 2011: 93).

III. SOCIAL CAPITAL

Young volunteers value meeting people and making friends through their volunteering (for example, Gaskin & Davis Smith, 1995; Davis Smith 1998, both in Gaskin, 2004a; Hall, 2011). Throughout the literature volunteering has been found to provide young people with opportunities to develop new social networks and relationships with people from: similar situations or backgrounds to theirs ('bonding' social capital); and different backgrounds who they would not normally have the opportunity to get to know ('bridging' social capital). The evaluation of v frames these benefits specifically within the context of building social capital (NatCen et al., 2011). Where young people in v had experienced challenges in making new friendships the opportunity to develop new 'bonding' social networks were particularly welcomed. For example among disabled young people who spent the majority of their time with parents or carers, as well as young people who had experienced social isolation as a result of being out of work or education for a time (NatCen et al., 2011).

As in other studies (for example Evans et al., 2002 in Gaskin, 2004a) bridging social capital had been welcomed as an opportunity to make friends with people from different backgrounds and cultures and helped to build understanding and community cohesion (see also section 5 below). The opportunity to develop a relationship with a 'trusted' adult is also found to be beneficial. Building bridging capital of this kind can open up new horizons for young people as they become more aware of the opportunities available to them, in particular in relation to education and employment opportunities (NatCen et al., 2011; OP2608).

The overall importance of social capital has been evidenced elsewhere- for example; increased social capital in children and young people has been shown to improve physical and mental health, behavioural outcomes, and community cohesion (Ferguson, 2006 in Lonie 2009).

IV. CITIZENSHIP

Closely linked to the benefits of building young people's social capital are those related to what can broadly be termed their 'citizenship'. This category of benefits relates to changes in young volunteers' awareness of their community, their ability to engage with it and feel part of it. By bringing young people together with people from other parts of their community, volunteering has been found to bring about a greater awareness among young people of the issues faced by their community or society more generally, and develop a greater sense of belonging (Eley, 2003; Evans et al, 2002 both in Gaskin, 2004a; NatCen et al., 2011). It has also been found to have increased their motivation to get involved in helping to alleviate the challenges facing their communities through further volunteering or other activities (for example, CSV, 2000 in Gaskin, 2004a; Hall, 2011). Roker and Eden (2002 in Gaskin, 2004a) found that volunteering "impacts on young people's socio-political views, developing identities and understanding of citizenship and related concepts".

Overall, the evidence base appears to support the argument that youth volunteering can have a

range of benefits for the individual volunteer. Indeed research that has compared young people's motivations for volunteering on the one hand, with their perceptions of its benefits on the other suggests support for the potentially 'transformational' impact of doing voluntary work. While their motivations for volunteering may be focussed on developing skills and qualifications, its perceived benefits have been found to be more focussed on the altruistic, social and community benefits experienced from volunteering (Gaskin, 1996; Rochester 2000, Eley 2001 & 2003, all in Gaskin, 2004a).

4. WHAT CAN BE THE EFFECTS ON THE HOST ORGANISATION?

While the Morgan Inquiry found that young volunteers are particularly vital to the success of organisations that work specifically with or for children and young people (Morgan Inquiry, 2008, in Hill & Russell, 2009), the effects on an organisation of having young volunteers was not a focus of research covered in either of the literature reviews consulted (Gaskin, 2004a; Hill & Russell, 2009). However, more recently the evaluations of **v** and Voltage, and self-evaluation reports from Youth Music funded partners have identified a range of organisational benefits, including:

- Having young volunteers increases an organisation's capacity to deliver services, either by developing new services or extending existing ones (NatCen et al., 2011; OP 1802).
- Young volunteers can go on to become employees within their host organisation. This builds the capacity of the organisation and has the advantage for the organisation that they know their new employee has the skills necessary to do the job and a good understanding of the way they work (GMMAZ 2498; More Music 2500; Rhythmix 2510;).
- Having young volunteers can improve the image of the organisation among young people in the community and they can act as advocates for their work (NC 2011; ENYAN 2608; YMM 2037).
- Young volunteers bring an 'energy' and 'vibrancy' into the organisation and its way of working, and make a valuable contribution to the development of new programmes/projects (NatCen et al., 2011; YMAZ 2262; YMAZ 2255).
- Young volunteers have helped raise funds for the work of their host organisations (ENYAN 2608; YMM 2037).
- Having a young volunteers programme can provide opportunities to develop new partnerships and networks with other local and national organisations (Hall, 2011).

5. WHAT CAN BE THE EFFECTS ON THE WIDER COMMUNITY?

As with the effects on the host organisation, those on the wider community have received limited attention in the published literature (Hill & Russell, 2009). While the scope of what is covered under the term 'effects on the wider community' varies, it generally includes the local communities where young people volunteer, and the users and beneficiaries of the activity. These effects have also been broadened out to be called the 'social effects' of volunteering. Those identified in the literature include:

- Communities have more of their needs met. By building the capacity of local organisations, young volunteers help them meet local needs and users or beneficiaries have enhanced access to services (Davis Smith et al., 2002 in Gaskin 2004a; NatCen et al., 2011).
- As discussed above volunteering can build young people's social capital and citizenship. It is suggested that this in turn has an effect on the community and potentially a broader societal

impact as young people will be more engaged in and committed to their communities, and are better equipped for adult life. However, in the absence of longitudinal research it is argued in ▼'s formative evaluation that this cannot be evidenced, merely inferred (NatCen et al., 2011).

- Where projects improve community cohesion this has a direct impact on the community. For example, cultural awareness days organised by volunteers as part of ▼ that helped promote tolerance and understanding between culturally diverse groups in the community (NatCen et al., 2011). Also young people volunteering and doing something positive in the community has been found to improve the image of young people among older generations (Hall, 2011; NatCen et al., 2011; BAM YMAZ 2493). Similarly 'The Commission for the Future of Volunteering' has championed the benefits of inter-generational volunteering as a key way of combating ageism and improving community cohesion (Commission on the Future of Volunteering, 2008 in Gaskin 2004a).

Attempts have been made to assess the monetary value of youth volunteering for society and the local community in which activity takes place. The Prince's Trust attached a monetary value to the work of their young volunteers, reporting that each volunteer contributed work worth nearly £1,000 to the local community (Vincent et al, 1999; Prince's Trust, 1999 both in Gaskin, 2004a). More recently ▼ undertook a Social Return on Investment calculation which suggests that youth volunteering through ▼ presents good value for money (NatCen et al., 2011).

6. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS OF THE CURRENT EVIDENCE BASE

Overall the literature would suggest that youth volunteering can have a range of positive impacts for the individual volunteer, the host organisation and the wider community. The evidence base is particularly strong in exploring the impact on the individual volunteer, which reflects policy makers' priorities for youth volunteering. However, the findings of this review would suggest that to limit research for making the case for youth volunteering to the benefits for the young person would miss out on a wider range of benefits for host organisations and the wider community. Other limitations to the current evidence base on the effects of youth volunteering, include:

- There is a lack of research that has used comparator groups which would enable a full assessment of the impact of volunteering (NatCen et al., 2011);
- Evidence of impact is often self-reported and based on anecdotal evidence (Hill & Stevens, 2010);
- There is a dearth of longitudinal research on the effects of volunteering (Hill & Stevens, 2010);
- The focus in the literature tends to be on the impact of volunteering. It is suggested that an exploration of where there was no impact or negative impact would be useful (Gaskin, 2004a; Hill & Russell, 2009).
- While much of the research on youth volunteering focuses on a limited age group (e.g. 16-24), there may be considerable variation in terms of experiences of volunteering and its effects within this age range (Gaskin, 2004a).
- While not always reflected on in the literature, effects may also vary between young people depending on factors such as: their social or cultural backgrounds; whether they are volunteering formally or informally; the intensity in terms of time of their volunteering activity (Hill & Stevens, 2010).

7 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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