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Youth work and political education: Maximising opportunities to support young people's political socialisation.

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Introduction: Youth work and political socialisation

My research successfully shows that to effectively support the enfranchisement of 16-year-olds, voting rights must be accompanied by political education. While many of the 'Votes at 16' campaigns emerged from the youth work sector, current policy [focuses predominantly on school based citizenship education](#), thus overlooking the significant contribution of youth work. Around [4.4 million UK young people](#) regularly engage in youth work. Many come from [under resourced areas](#), are less likely to vote, and often disengage from with formal citizenship education. [To utilise the opportunity this policy presents to strengthen democracy](#), my research underlines a need for an integrated approach that values youth work's unique ability to support political socialisation alongside formal citizenship education.

My research has sought to explore the ways that youth work helps equip young people for political citizenship. It highlights that youth work's capacity to support comprehensive political education as young people grow up is currently restricted by a lack of clear policy guidance and support for youth work practitioners. Finally, it identifies the barriers that youth work currently faces in effectively engaging with political discussions and outlines practical steps that can be taken to address these weaknesses. The following findings are based on research took place across four youth work projects in a small northern city in England between 2020 and 2022. It involved participant observation of 56 youth work sessions alongside focus groups with 89 young people (aged 10-24) and 21 youth workers.

Findings

Young people's broad understanding of political citizenship

You people viewed political citizenship as involving a range of areas: formal politics (knowledge of political systems, parties and politicians), opportunities to get involved through engaging in their communities, engagement with a wider range of issues, ideas about legal and national citizenship, involvement in campaigns and protest, and enactment of rights, respect and responsibilities. Political education needs to engage across the full range of political citizenship that young people are engaged with to effectively support their political socialisation.

Youth work supports political socialisation

Young people said they value the opportunities that youth work provides not only to gain knowledge about political systems, but also to engage in experiences where they gain citizenship skills which enable them to feel like full citizens - able to take responsibility, use their rights and be respected and respectful. Examples found in the research include frequent opportunities to get involved in local communities, regular issues-based discussions, and experiences of informal democratic systems (using voting and discussion to make decisions for themselves). Some youth projects provided opportunities to meet with local and national politicians and increased young people's knowledge of political systems. Some youth projects also provided opportunities to campaign, however campaigning activities tended to be limited to awareness raising or acting themselves.

Barriers facing youth work

Youth work continues to face barriers to discussing some aspects of political education, particularly where they relate to political issues that involve making connections between issues or ideas and actions taken by the state. Youth workers were not sure that youth work has a remit to address politics, and felt they lacked the knowledge and skills to facilitate these conversations. Consequently, they avoided conversations about political parties and values, and contentious political issues, including discussions around immigration and national citizenship. Conflation of ideas about being nonpartisan, non-political, apolitical, and unbiased informed youth worker cautious approach.

Youth workers did not discuss protest with youth people, as they felt these conversations were not allowed, although restricting conversations about protest does not appear to reduce young people's participation, and potentially means they are less well equipped to critically evaluate their decision about engagement. Both young people and youth workers felt that restricting conversations about political issues impeded youth work's capacity to support political socialisation.

Summary

- My research demonstrates that young people gain essential political knowledge and citizenship experiences through informal settings, especially young people disengaged from formal education.
- Youth work is a critical but overlooked space for political socialisation. It is vital that youth work is integrated into democratic education policy.
- Young people view political citizenship as encompassing more than knowledge of political systems or voting. It includes protest and campaigning, community involvement, rights, responsibilities and respect and involves creating opportunities where young people feel like they are treated as full democratic citizens.
- Structural and organisational barriers limit youth work's democratic potential. Despite its value youth work is constrained by unclear remits, lack of training and fears about overstepping perceived boundaries. This leads to avoidance of complex or contentious political issues - leaving young people underprepared to engage critically in democratic life.

Policy recommendations

- Recognise and embed youth work's role in democratic education policy. Youth work plays a significant role in young people's political socialisation, particularly in reaching marginalised groups. Integrating formal and informal approaches in democratic education policy to accompany the enfranchisement of 16-17 year-olds is essential.
- Provide clear national guidance for youth work, like the guidance available for schools ([Department for Education, 2022](#)). Consideration should be given to how protest is discussed with young people to provide opportunities for them to think critically about the political engagement opportunities available to them.
- Support youth organisations to adapt curricula to reflect revised guidance. The gap in national policy guidance around addressing politics was replicated in organisational policies. Once a national policy position is established, support should be given to youth organisations to develop policy and provision.
- Expand CPD and resources to help youth workers handle political discussions effectively. Most youth workers were not confident that they had the knowledge or skills to effectively facilitate conversations about political citizenship. Equipping young people for political citizenship should be included in all initial youth work education and training. CPD packages that address youth work approaches to supporting political socialisation need to be made available.

Further information

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This research was undertaken as a PhD completed at the University of Huddersfield.

