

MOVING BEYOND FUNDRAISING AND INTO ... WHAT? YOUTH TRANSITIONS INTO HIGHER EDUCATION AND CITIZENSHIP IDENTITY FORMATION.

Rachel Tallon, Andrea Milligan and Bronwyn Wood

Abstract: In the structured environment of secondary school, young people are often supported by teachers to get involved in causes relating to international aid and development. Beyond school there is often less structural support for such involvement, and new environments may result in their reassessment of personal and collective social action. This article reports on a pilot study that explored how young people conceptualised social action as they moved into higher education. This transition led to a heightened reflexivity about their own and other young people's citizenship identities, now that they had to craft these by themselves, and often involved more critical and reflective citizenship actions. What is salient for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) interested in maintaining relationships with young people is that as they mature beyond school, young people may be rethinking their role within the development sector. Social action may start to mean more than fundraising and short-term projects and may include a deeper and more holistic approach to being a global citizen.

Key words: Young people; change; social action; transition.

Across our university campus in Aotearoa (New Zealand) we often come across students wearing clothing that bears Mahatma Gandhi's dictum to 'be the change'. They are likely to have been involved in social action in primary and secondary school and have an ongoing passion. It is also likely that they have joined one of the many social movements on campus. Our curiosity concerns their perception of enacting change in the twenty-first century, particularly as they move on from school. Leaving school is a recognised significant life transition for many adolescents, and entails considerable disruption to the identities of young people. There is increasing interest in sociology, education and citizenship education about how this time

may affect global citizenship identities and dispositions. This includes the issues that concern young people, how they perceive the nature of change, and what their role could be in that process, particularly their relationships to advocacy organisations.

As young people leave the structures of formal schooling, continued interest or growth in social justice action is often assumed. However, more recently there have been calls for greater understanding about how young people in late modernity encounter times of transition (see Aaltonen, 2013, for discussion on generational changes in civic involvement; Finlay, 2011; Hall, Coffey and Lashua, 2009; Isin, 2009; Davies et al., 2013; Jerome, 2012). These ‘times of transition’ refer to both moving between life stages and the impact of social change on the means and methods of social justice action (Jennings and Stoker, 2004). With regard to the latter, many argue that the nature of their interest and participation has changed in contemporary times (Hustinx et al., 2012; Manning, 2013). A greater understanding of how young people identify themselves as global citizens in times of personal and societal transition is important for those in the development education sector who seek to shape life-long attitudes, but may have less influence beyond secondary schools.

Upon leaving the school environment, there is a period of change which allows for some reflection on processes and ideologies that have shaped their actions to date. The nature of transition is also changing. Young people in postmodern societies face increasing uncertainty and have less known markers by which to identify themselves and move through life (such as getting a job, leaving home etc.). Youth sociologists are mapping the nature of this fluid modernity and the resultant effects it has on civic engagement and the politicisation of young people (Häkli and Kallio, 2014; Percy-Smith, 2015; Shaw et al., 2014; Wood, 2013). Rather than neglecting life transitions, they are often delayed, with young people living at home longer and marrying later (if at all). Added to this are new ways of socialising and different conceptions of solidarity and community.

This article draws on a small pilot project, in which we sought to understand how transition into higher education resulted in various and emerging pathways of citizenship identity for young adults. The project, carried out at Victoria University of Wellington in 2015 involved a semi structured focus group interview of 75 minutes with five students – three first-years and two third-years, one male and four females. All five students had been the service leader at high school which involved liaising with both national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to raise awareness, fundraise and take part in projects. They had been successful in these roles, often raising significant amounts of money and initiating new projects.

The young people were asked how they viewed the transition from school to university with regards to both global and local issues, civil society organisations and their own social action. We used thematic and biographical analyses to identify key life-course events that led to a re-working of their citizenship identities and pathways. Ethical permission was gained from Victoria University and all names of participants and identifying features have been altered to maintain their confidentiality.

The reworking of citizenship identities and pathways

The students reported that their experiences of service and social action at school were often limited to feasible short term projects, and often under the umbrella of fundraising. Although rewarding at the time, they reflected that these activities were often very time consuming and it was difficult to balance their projects alongside their studies. Questioning how things had always been done was not always encouraged, and structural issues were rarely the focus, with the primary aim being raising awareness or fundraising for specific causes. Looking back on their social action at school, ‘doing service’ carried with it connotations of continuing and improving what had gone before, gaining from the leadership experience and promoting the status of the school in the community rather than active social change agendas. In contrast, their arrival at university caused them to rethink these roles, often challenging the way they had previously conducted social action. We

identified that this reconceptualisation consisted of four citizenship identities and pathways. The first three – a deeper level of criticality, finding their passion, and merging a consumer-oriented approach with social justice action – opened a wider realm of possibilities for engagement. Conversely, and fourthly, the lessening of structure and support experienced at high school, had resulted in levels of disengagement and disempowerment that they observed among their peers, and this caused greater reflection on the nature of both service and social action.

First, and for all, the transition to higher education led to a deepened criticality of structures and systems related to social justice action, whether on a local or international scale. They became aware that what had been acceptable in one context was no longer suitable in another, causing them to rethink both the nature of the causes and their actions to reduce social injustice and inequality. One participant, Lincoln, described the ‘cookie-cutter’ approach that he had been used to at school, where all the forms and collection buckets had been ‘done for you’. With greater freedom to take some initiative, he was aware that he had now moved beyond a formulaic approach. Further, a new and less teacher-structured environment called upon different skills. Now they needed initiative and courage to take risks and to think beyond fundraising, something they were less prepared for. Higher risk notions of social action, such as protest, were located as ‘something a third year Arts student might do’. In some cases, they realised there was simply less money available in the student community and so things had to be done differently and this also entailed a rethinking of the *raison d’être* of social justice action. Together this meant that they had a deepening criticality of the processes behind social action. The participants reflected that ‘robbing the rich to pay the poor’ was now difficult as the rich were no longer so close and their immediate community much poorer, more diverse and less captive or receptive as an audience.

Second, they were deeply reflexive about how service and social action was an intrinsic part of their personality and identity. Perhaps this had not been so apparent to them beforehand, but now, in this time of change, and

articulating this as such during the focus group, they realised that serving others and pushing for justice in some form was part of their identity, as this participant expresses:

“Well, I do think that people who were involved in leadership in school, it’s part of your character, you want to get involved in helping others and whether it’s the way you were brought up or born, you have this tendency and that does tend to follow you throughout your life and you can’t really escape from it. Like my first year I was working like two jobs, one at Subway and one in some kitchen, like I was ‘I’m taking a break from service!’ and it only lasted much less than six months, may be four months” (Rihanna, third year student).

In addition to reflecting on their own dispositions, they mentioned a growing awareness of justice and development action occurring within their professions, such as law or education. This enables them to align several dimensions of their life in a ‘win-win’ situation: meet new friends, network with professionals in their chosen field, and find something to be involved in that they can be passionate about and that helps them with their career prospects. In the following extract, the participant highlights that she chose to be involved in an area that she herself was passionate about and aligned with her interest in education:

“what I’ve been passionate about which is refugees and teaching second languages and stuff like that, so over time I kind of had to find... cause I can’t give time to everything, ’cus I tried to in second year pick something that I was passionate about and follow that through...”

Later on she reflects that passion is key to people being involved:

“And it’s what they’re passionate about, not just what someone tells them to agree to, or give money to. It’s like they genuinely want to help this cause or believe in this cause and that’s why they get

involved, not just because they want to do something” (Tanya, third year student).

This newfound critical orientation to social justice action meant that they had also started to question the nature of their actions and their relationship to civil society and international development in a new environment. Having been heavily involved in service leadership at their schools, they were struggling to reform their identity as activists or as those involved in service, a less political term and one that they were more comfortable using.

Third, neoliberal and entrepreneurial notions of service, in line with observations by Bryan (2013) and Chouliaraki (2013) were mentioned in a favourable light. These notions were likely to have followed them from their fundraising focus in high school, but were also encouraged by a university reward system for students who demonstrated leadership in fundraising and service-related avenues. The participants were comfortable using marketing terminology to sell a service or product that benefitted the consumer as well as the recipient of the goods or money. Tailoring to the needs of the consumer and marketing a story reflects the trend of consumer-based individual action being twinned with benefits as opposed to sacrifice or action from a sense of moral duty.

Not all their comments were about the financial rewards of their fundraising ventures. The participants reflected that one of the key benefits of their engagement in service had been the empowerment and personal rewards from seeing other people become involved in the projects they had led. Thus, the eventual recipients were not part of their close experience necessarily, but seeing their peers become interested in social action had been very rewarding. That their peers might be less interested now and that it was harder to sell an idea to them or get them involved was part of this transition.

Fourth, a lessening of structure and support appeared to result in a drop-off in engagement, which ran counter to their strong identification with social justice causes. For example, Lincoln explained that he had joined the university service programme, but felt disconnected from its mission, feeling

like a small cog in a big, impersonal fundraising machine. In addition, the formal nature of the programme did not fit with his innovative and risk-taking nature. In a sense, he had moved beyond ‘rattling the bucket’. This description of a drawing back from structured civic involvement during times of transition is described by Jennings and Stoker (2004). Young people withdraw their civic action and trust between fifteen and thirty-five years, with the lowest point at twenty-five years, increasing only once they assume adult roles and responsibilities, such as employment and home ownership. Where continuity exists, it is often through involvement in organisations – for example, religious, cultural or sporting institutions – that provide a sense of stability for these transitional times. The students observed that the university did not provide this continuity for many of their peers, who were not as persistent in pursuing social justice or service in the new environment. From their observations, many first years in particular do not actively seek to participate in social action of some description. The participants noted that different demands and less structure mean that many ‘don’t go looking for it’ as this participant explains:

“I think the only problem with that [self-organised projects in the community] is that it requires initiative to go and look for things that need to be done, like I think that’s why service can decrease when people go from school to uni because they now have to, instead of getting these opportunities handed to them, to give money or give their time or whatever it’s organised by the school, now they have to go and do it themselves and it’s not even that people can’t be bothered, it’s just that they don’t even think about it exactly” (Michelle, first year student).

While the students recalled how the loss of supporting structures and a known community presented new challenges, leaving those demands was also seen as a respite. There is almost a sense of guilt in their comments that they had wanted a break from service, as they had experienced it at school:

“Yeah, like in my first year I probably didn’t do anything, like after my Year 13 I was over it, like I was so over year 13, I was tired and just wanted to enjoy university and I had no money and no time anyway. And then in second year I went looking for it, because I missed it obviously, so I went to VicPlus [1] and that kind of stuff” (Tanya, Third year Participant).

Discussion

Hildreth (2012), describes that the reflective experience of transition is based upon *felt* difficulties – the person knows something is not quite right in the new context, and they have to diagnose what it is that is different and what needs changing. Individually and together, the students were wrestling with their identities and agency as social justice workers. In analysing this transitional phase of their lives students clearly wanted to be good citizens, to make a difference, and be recognised as active citizens. Yet they struggled to reformulate what had been a fairly formalised part of their lives at school that required little critical thinking about what they were doing but a lot of time and effort. The rewards for them had been great and they felt it was part of their nature to continue in some manner. Without financial security, in a new and unfamiliar community, where they no longer received letters from NGOs and no longer had committees to lead, it felt like an abyss, a void of some description. They could see their peers become disinterested, and yet they searched for something that they could do and become.

Conflicting tensions were held both within and across the four pathways and were the source of their felt difficulties and *ennui*. All the participants grappled with how to proceed in their new environment and displayed conflicting thoughts and frustrations as they searched for new opportunities. Volunteering their time and finding a niche that complemented their studies meant potentially less leadership and more uncertainty. There was an undercurrent of peer pressure in that many of their peers who had been keen and active at school, were no longer so involved as the structures were not there to guide them. These participants recognised that they had navigated their way through this transition by trying different ventures, still

seeking to 'be the change' in some form or another, but short term fundraising projects were no longer so applicable and even the service programme offered by the university did not fulfil their expectations. In short, they had started to question their expectations, entertain some aspects of critical thinking about fundraising and service and as a consequence, rethink their identity as citizens passionate about social justice.

The result of greater fluidity and diversity in life is that young people in late modern societies are often much freer and possibly more compelled to craft their own identities and this means they often transform the nature of action. It is this notion that they can be agents of change rather than just cogs in a wheel that is one characteristic of neoliberal times that stresses the entrepreneurial individual. This has its advantages, but also a cost. The burden of change is rethought in terms of economic or technological advancement, with social or political movements marginalised as inferior. 'Be the change' might mean something closer to 'invent something new' rather than 'apply pressure on leaders to change a law or policy'. This individual and agential power was illustrated by one of the participants who, while volunteering in Africa as part of her gap year, had posted on Facebook a story about someone in her village seeking a scholarship for their studies. The power of the story on social media meant that she was able to raise funds for this person from people globally, bypassing the older, more formal channels of aid. In effect, she became the NGO for this person, and although the means by which aid was conducted had changed slightly, structurally, not much was different to the older more formal channels. The notion of development was still immediate financial aid, rather than long term systemic change. Returning to home, ordinary forms of fundraising may have seemed less fulfilling causing more reflection on her part as to how to proceed in social justice.

The drop-off by their peers, observed by these participants was also a driver for their own reflections. They could articulate that narrow options and the burden of social justice meant that university provided their peers with a good excuse to leave those activities behind, if not permanently. They

themselves indicated that they had experienced some fatigue of the processes involved (Wilson, 2010), but they had remained passionate, and this was in a large part due to their temperament. In their reflections during the focus group, the participants remained positive about social justice action and considered their new environment challenging and wider than the narrow confines of school. What they collectively expressed was a lack of direction and support about how to proceed.

Conclusion

This time of transition is a clear moment of citizenship identity formation and yet there is little research into how this affects attitudes towards development initiatives. For the participants in this study, social justice action had empowered them and they looked for this reward in their new environment. They recognised that this transition time had caused them to reflect on what action they could reasonably take – action that served society and met their passions, but most likely, an individual action for incremental benefits that would not ‘rock the system’, and could be beneficial to their careers. This state of affairs Vogelgesang and Rhoads (2003) note as being a way of conceptualising global citizenship that privileges individual acts of compassion over uncomfortable and collective based action. Individual acts are quickly rewarding and provide those with initiative leadership opportunities. They should not be discounted, but at the same time they are limited to certain contexts. They note that the situation can arise whereby political activism is actively discouraged by some universities in their service programmes, creating a de-politicisation of social justice action. Service or any form of social action can become limited to safe acts that are approved by the system.

Within the school environment, some NGOs encourage collective action that is more overtly political, while others favour a softly, softly approach that concentrates on raising funds and the feel good factor. The literature concerning young people and their civic and political engagement has raised concerns of the de-politicisation of social justice action and Westheimer and Kahne (2004) warned of service or civic education at school

creating compliant, do-good citizens locked into a formulaic citizenship that denies them agency. Is this true for development education? Young people shown methods of action that fit a certain set of citizenship values are unlikely to question the status quo, including NGOs themselves. This echoes concerns that others have had concerning the narrow focus of development education. What methods of social justice action are they modelling, what kinds of global citizens are they encouraging? What is salient for development educators is that times of transition in people's lives can cause a reflection on their engagement with the development sector. If feel good actions empower people, what happens when the action requires difficult sacrifice, possibly jeopardising one's career? If prior engagement has been surface deep on a predictable fundraising cycle with no questions asked, then new contexts and new distractions will break any linkages. Instead, a deeper understanding of social justice as an act of solidarity and a long term view will enable people to strive collectively for justice in whatever context they are in. In her New Zealand study, Lewthwaite (2015) found that university students who had studied development issues with a critical lens at school were more likely to engage in social action with a long-term collective perspective.

There are many avenues of social justice action beyond fundraising and for these participants they had to find new ways themselves, almost groping along in the dark to find their fit. It is due to their tenacity and nature that they persevered. For many others, this transition is not a time to reflect and reinvent, it is a time to 'put away those childish fundraisers', a comment sometimes expressed by students as they dismiss social action (which is narrowly conceived) as being ineffective or nice, but not for them right now. Development education needs to ensure a deep and critical engagement that moves beyond the '*fun, fasting and fundraising*' elements (Bryan, 2011). If the activists by nature who have also had parental role models find it difficult to make the transition, then those not so inclined are much less likely to pursue social justice causes and raise the difficult questions about how we live in such an unequal world. Social justice action runs the risk of being an optional extra that serves the interest of the

benefactor, ‘nice to do, if you have the resources’. Action may be packaged up to avoid the difficult questions and continue the systems that paper over the cracks. Being empowered through doing good is a beginning and a place to start. People mature and begin to recognise that being a good citizen can also mean being a ‘pain in the butt’. Perhaps encouraging young people at school to critique and to question can better prepare them to not just ‘be the change’, but also cause the change in the twenty-first century.

Notes

(1) VicPlus is the leadership reward programme of the university which encourages students to participate in activities of service.

References

Aaltonen, S (2013) “‘Trying to push things through’”: Forms and bounds of agency in transitions of school-age young people’, *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 16, pp. 375-390.

Bryan, A (2011) ‘Another cog in the anti-politics machine? The “de-clawing” of development education’, *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, Vol. 12, Spring, pp. 1-14.

Bryan, A (2013) “‘The impulse to help’”: (Post)humanitarianism in an era of the “new” development advocacy’, *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 5-29.

Chouliaraki, L (2013) *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the age of post-humanitarianism*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Davies, I, Hampden-Thompson, G, Calhoun, J, Bramley, G, Tsouroufli, M, Sundaram, V, Lord, P and Jeffes, J (2013) ‘Young people’s community engagement: What does research-based and other literature tell us about young people’s perspectives and the impact of schools’ contributions?’, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 3, pp. 327-343.

Finlay, A (2011) ‘Civic learning and democratic engagements: A review of the literature on civic engagement in post-secondary education’ (paper prepared for the

United States Department of Education, Association of American Colleges and Universities, Washington, DC, May 24, 2011).

Häkli, J and Kallio, K P, (2014) 'Subject, action and polis: Theorizing political agency', *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 181-200.

Hall, T, Coffey, A and Lashua, B (2009) 'Steps and stages: Rethinking transitions in youth and place', *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 5, pp. 547-561.

Hildreth, R W (2012) 'John Dewey on experience: A critical resource for the theory and practice of youth civic engagement', *Citizenship Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 7, pp. 919-935.

Hustinx, L, Meijjs, L C, Handy, F and Cnaan, R A (2012) 'Monitorial citizens or civic omnivores? Repertoires of civic participation among university students', *Youth & Society*, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 95-117.

Isin, E F (2009) 'Citizenship in flux: The figure of the activist citizen', *Subjectivity*, Vol. 29, pp. 367-388.

Jennings, M K and Stoker L (2004) 'Social trust and civic engagement across time and generations', *Acta Politica*, Vol. 39, No. 4, pp. 342-379.

Jerome, L (2012) 'Service learning and active citizenship education in England', *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 59-70.

Lewthwaite, D (2015) *Global conscience, local action*, Masters of Arts thesis, University of Auckland.

Manning, N (2013) "'I mainly look at things on an issue by issue basis": Reflexivity and phronêsis in young people's political engagements', *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 17-33.

Percy-Smith, B (2015) 'Negotiating active citizenship: Young people's participation in everyday spaces' in KP Kallio and S Mills (eds.) *Politics, Citizenship and Rights*, Berlin: Springer Major Reference Work.

Shaw, A, Brady, B, McGrath, B, Brennan, M A and Dolan, P (2014) 'Understanding youth civic engagement: Debates, discourses, and lessons from practice', *Community Development*, Vol. 45, No. 4, pp. 300-316.

Vogelgesang, L and Rhoads, R (2003) 'Advancing a broad notion of public engagement: The limitations of contemporary service', *Journal of College and Character*, Vol. 4, No. 1.

Westheimer, J and Kahne, J (2004) 'What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy', *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 2, pp. 237-269.

Wilson, E K (2010) 'From apathy to action: Promoting active citizenship and global responsibility amongst populations in the global north', *Global Society*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 275-296.

Wood, B E (2013) 'Young people's emotional geographies of citizenship participation: Spatial and relational insights', *Emotion, Space and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 50-58.

Andrea Milligan lectures in Social Science and Environmental Education in Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

Rachel Tallon is a former geography teacher who completed a doctorate thesis in development studies in 2013. Currently an education researcher at Victoria University of Wellington, she is interested in the intersection of youth, development and global citizenship.

Bronwyn Wood is senior lecturer in Social Science and Citizenship Education, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.