

YOUNG PEOPLE, IDENTITY AND LIVING IN A GLOBAL SOCIETY

In this article, **Douglas Bourn** aims to outline current debates, recent research and policy initiatives in the United Kingdom (UK) on young people and their identity, particularly in relation to the impact of globalisation. It acknowledges the recent shifts in UK government policy statements relating to the importance for young people to understand and engage with issues concerning the wider world. It also points out that for young people to make sense of their identity and develop a sense of belonging, establishing the relationship between global processes and local experiences is critical. The article finally poses some challenges for ‘global youth work’, especially recognition of the importance of identity and the role of the individual in making sense of the global society in which young people are living.

Introduction and context

This article takes the increasingly global nature of society in the UK as the framework for reviewing current debates and research on young people’s identities. The rationale for this is that whilst globalisation is now recognised as a key factor influencing the lives of young people, there has been little debate in development education on the relationships between identity and living in a global society.

Giddens (1991) suggests that globalisation can be defined as ‘the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa’. There is a wealth of literature on globalisation and identity, what it means and its impact on societies (Held & McGrew, 2003; Ray, 2007; Robertson, 1992; Tomlinson, 1999; Castells, 1996; Urry, 2003). However, it is suggested here, following Harvey (2003), that globalisation should primarily be regarded as being about the interdependence of societies on a world scale, about existing links and those that can be developed globally between individuals, communities, nations and organisations.

In the UK, like many western countries, globalisation is having a strong impact at social, economic and cultural levels; economic migration

for example is spurring rapid social changes. These changes are also often linked to the ambiguity about identity and sense of place in the world. Debates about identity in response to political devolution, increase in economic migration, global terrorism and the impact of the consumer culture have led to UK politicians, for example, promoting the need for a major debate on Britishness which has become linked to citizenship.

Young people are most directly affected by globalisation and therefore central to current debates on identity. They are experiencing globalisation on an everyday basis through employment patterns, the friendship groups they develop, their usage of the internet (particularly for social networking) and wider cultural influences on their lifestyles (Kenway & Bullen, 2008; Edwards & Usher, 2008; Burbules & Torres, 2000). They are surrounded by a ‘dizzying array of signs and symbolic resources dislodged from traditional moorings’, are the main targets of global consumer cultures and are increasingly targeted with messages concerning global social problems (Dolby & Rizvi, 2008).

The Ajegbo report on *Diversity and Citizenship: Curriculum Review* states that ‘everyone’s lives are shaped by the forces of globalisation, increased migration, and greater social pluralism’ (Ajegbo et al., 2007:20) and goes on to outline how schools and the curriculum need to adapt to this multicultural society. The report was prompted by growing debates in UK society about the relationships between race, religion, culture and identities. It notes that many people they talked to ‘discussed the complexity of the world’ they live in and the ‘many identities that children inhabit’ (Ajegbo, 2007:16).

A report published by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion in June 2007, *Our Shared Future*, notes that the global is now local. Policies need to recognise the complex nature of communities and the ‘influence of global affairs on local communities’ that may lead to some feeling more isolated, whilst others might be more connected. Globalisation, the report notes, adds a new ‘layer of complexity’ to ‘community cohesion’.

As Buonfino in a think piece for the Commission has commented:

“as travel becomes within the reach of most people and communication technologies enable people to be immersed in cultures located elsewhere, and to cultivate multiple identities, the question of belonging becomes more complex and more central to the debate on how we live together” (Buonfino, 2007:5).

The Commission, in recognising that the ‘global is now local’, noted three themes that reinforce this influence:

- **super diversity** - migrants are now coming from all over the world to the UK and not just from places with which it has historical links;
- **multiple identities** – drawn from across race, class, gender and generation;
- **trans-nationalism** - a particular form of multiple identities developed as a result of globalisation and easy communications. ‘Transnationalism’ means that the UK is far more plugged in to events around the world and that cohesion in local areas can be affected by events in another country - the new ‘glocalism’ (*ibid.*:34-35).

Alongside the report are a series of more in-depth pieces of academic research that have been produced to explore notions of a sense of belonging and concepts of supra-diversity. Buonfino’s paper on *Belonging in Contemporary Britain* proposes a new frame of reference that goes beyond ‘top-down concepts of Britishness, diversity or multiculturalism’. Instead she takes a wider approach aimed at ‘unlocking the need for people to find recognition, comfort and feel at home around others where they live, where they work or where they interact’ (Buonfino, 2007:5).

She suggests that a sense of ‘belonging’ involves a different language and construction of thought than identity, culture and rights. Belonging is a basic frame of reference that relates to human need. It is complex and linked to a desire to be part of a community, a family, a group or a gang. ‘Belonging can connect people to others around them, as well as leading to a sense of being valued, recognised and listened to’ (*ibid.*:6).

Young people’s response to the challenges of living in a global society

Beck discusses the issue of young people living and growing up in a world of risk and uncertainty (Beck, 1992:2000). For example, the workplace is no longer a place of permanence with bonds of identity and loyalty and sense of purpose. This uncertainty varies according to cultural and social contexts, leading to the question of whether many young people have the cultural and financial resources to offset the risks associated with these shifts towards a lack of stability in the workplace (Harvey, 2003).

Ray (2007) points out that globalisation creates increased hybridism and differentiation, and overall a more complex and fluid world. Living in a globalised world, he suggests, does not create homogeneity and polarisation

but rather a creative and eclectic mix of identities. In the context of such a rapidly changing world, young people can find it difficult to construct social identities, particularly with regard to the nature of education, cultural influences and the needs of the labour market (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007).

The integration of global cultural influences into local identities can be seen within the UK, particularly through consumer culture. Consumption is a major force that socialises children and young people, with, for example, 75 per cent of 9-19 year olds having access to the internet and 80 per cent having use of a mobile phone (DCSF, 2007:29). Globalisation has also contributed to the expansion of the choices available to young people. But on what criteria and with what knowledge, skills and values base do young people make these choices?

There is a tendency, often re-enforced through opinion surveys involving young people, that considers the effects of globalisation to be unstoppable, and that it is a process young people react to rather than actively negotiate (Harvey, 2003; MORI, 1998). Linked to this is an assumption that young people are merely the passive recipients or vulnerable victims of global change. As Harvey (2003) has stated, 'Young people cannot control the speed or direction of social change, but they can and do have a say in the effect such change has on their lives'.

Although young people are not powerless in respect to global change, their economic position is such that they are more vulnerable than many other social groups to the uncertainties and risks associated with economic and cultural globalisation. Conversely, as already mentioned, young people are often at the forefront of technological and cultural changes that might be associated with globalisation. Not surprisingly they are using the wide span of global media to express themselves.

Many young people have adopted a worldview in which the whole globe represents the key arena for social action (Mayo, 2005). They are frequently seen as being at the heart of campaigns such as Make Poverty History and that on climate change (Darnton, 2006; Micklem, 2006). However, as Ang (1990) argues, being active is not necessarily the same as being powerful, and this is particularly true in the context of globalisation. The rhetoric that might be associated with young people's citizenship in a global community generally does not match the reality. Young people are in one sense citizens of a global culture but at the same time struggle for a sense of acceptance in the local societies in which they live. For youth, this is the ultimate paradox of globalisation.

In recognition of these debates, the aim now is to look specifically at research and policy initiatives in the UK that forge connections between globalisation, identity, belonging and citizenship.

Young people and identity

Globalisation impacts upon young people in complex ways and forces them to constantly re-think and revise their sense of identity and place within society. Young people's lives are constantly being influenced by new trends, be they cultural, technological or social.

In this context within the UK, the Ajebo report is of considerable importance. The report notes:

“We all have a multiplicity of identities which may jostle with each other but which ultimately unite to make us individual – for example, a woman might see herself as ‘daughter’, ‘mother’, ‘Geordie’, ‘northerner’, ‘English’, ‘British’, ‘European’, ‘global’” (Ajebo, 2007:29).

Key therefore to taking forward the debates, Ajebo suggests, is the need for children and young people to:

“...understand their identities and feel a sense of belonging – as important for an indigenous white pupil as a newly arrived immigrant...Exploring and understanding their own and others' identities is fundamental to education for diversity, essential as pupils construct their own interpretations of the world around them and their place within that world” (Ajebo, 2007:25, 29).

They above all need to feel engaged and part of a wider multiethnic society.

What the Ajebo report notes, is that identities are not only linked to cultural heritage, but also to where people work, to their leisure activities and consumption patterns. This is particularly important for young people whose consumer behaviour is strongly linked to their self-perception. Social identity and individual confidence (as well as social acceptability) is often gained, for example, through wearing popular brand names or ‘class’ items of clothing (Miles, 2000).

But as mentioned already, young people are not just passive recipients of this consumer culture and globalisation. They adapt and recreate in their own image, with their peers and other cultural and geographical influences, and develop identities that reflect this complexity. The internet and use of new technologies have been a major factor in enabling young people to recreate their own identities (France, 2007).

In his work with young people in North East England, Nayak poses interesting questions regarding the impact of globalisation. Three models of unique sub-cultures are identified from his research with young people:

- real Geordies, a sub-culture of young white men descended from aspiring working class backgrounds;
- chaver kids, who are perceived as synonymous with trouble and negative images;
- white wannabies who want to be black...and are learning to be global (Nayak, 2003).

Nayak's research reflects the complexity and multi-layered ways in which different groupings of young people, depending on their social, economic and cultural location within a specific community, respond to a range of influences. Key to this research is the importance they feel of a sense of belonging; and that they must negotiate and adapt global influences and processes in order to create their own identities that have complex relationships with their own locality.

This issue of place and identity has been a source of debate and dialogue in many communities in the UK in recent years. For example, the emergence of a postcode mentality as a way of defining who you are alongside other identities:

“I'm black, I live in London – that's my home. My parents are from the Caribbean but I'm really African. I'm a Christian, but I'm E7 – that's where I hang, they're my people. That's who I am” - Year 9 pupil, London (Ajegbo, 2007:32).

Linked to this creation of specific spatial identities is the need to have roots and a location because, as Ajegbo has stated, reinforcing much of the recent literature, many indigenous white pupils have negative perceptions of their own identity. One white British pupil, after hearing a class discussion about where everyone came from around the world, said she ‘came from nowhere and was bored with an English identity’:

“I'm from nowhere like that, I'm just plain British. I just want to be like from a different “race”, or a quarter something” - white female (Ajegbo, 2007:31).

This re-enforces Nayak's research, where white young boys have taken on black cultural forms because to them, white identities are seen as negative or boring, and linked to the past and unemployment. Maylor and Read (2007) have noted how these multiple and complex identities, notions of hybridism, can represent as much a sense of positive reclamation as well as a sense of exclusion.

These complex notions of identity and place contrast with notions of fragmentation of communities that resulted in racial and cultural tensions in the 1980s and 1990s. It is not suggested here that these tensions have disappeared, more that communities and cultures are now much more multi-layered than they were in the past.

Young people in the UK cannot be reduced to a series of types of identity that are locally, culturally, economically or socially defined. Young people reproduce their own identities, influenced by an array of factors, in part as a defence mechanism to the rapidly changing world in which they are living but also as a way of making statements about who they are and how they perceive themselves within their peer groups and communities. This reveals that the UK is more than a multicultural society but rather needs to be recognised as a society that is diverse, complex and open to a wide range of global influences and processes that will impact upon young people in many ways and forms.

Young people and global citizenship

Taking into account this multi-layered and complex sense of identities how do young people relate to and engage within the wider world? This question has been reflected in academic debates regarding how young people see themselves in the context of globalisation - as cosmopolitan or as global citizens.

As April Carter has stated, ‘the idea of world citizenship is fashionable again’ (Carter, 2001) although the terms global or cosmopolitan citizenship are more frequently used within the academic discourse on the subject. The debate within academia has tended to summarise the various approaches to include a form of global social activism; a revival of interest in global governance; a recognition of social mobility and complex cultural identities; and a response to globalisation or more instrumentally within education, inclusion of citizenship within the curriculum (Carter, 2001; Heater, 2002; Cogan & Derricott, 2000; Mayo, 2005; Osler & Starkey, 2005).

A key starting point is the work of Osler and Starkey who summarise the issues and debates regarding identity and citizenship in the context of a rapidly changing world. They suggest that citizenship involves making connections between ‘status and identities as individuals’ with the ‘lives and concerns of others with whom they share a sense of community’. They see citizenship as being about status, feelings and practice. Key to their perspective is a combination of recognition of identities at local, national and global levels and a commitment to humanist principles of equality

(Osler & Starkey, 2005:24). From empirical research conducted with young people in Leicester, Osler and Starkey found that school students saw their identity as being local, as part of a community but not necessarily of a city. Moreover, families and friendships were seen as equally important in terms of developing a sense of identity (Osler & Starkey, 2005:99).

Weller, in her book *Teenagers' Citizenship*, refers to the need to challenge the dominant conceptualisation of citizenship. Her research suggests that the local to global interrelationship is key together with location in the development of young people's identities, but contradicting this view is the ever growing influence of the internet and cyberspace. Weller suggests that these have opened up new spaces and forms of identity that take no account of the nation state:

“You know there's young people halfway across the world...who are probably saying exactly the same thing as I am whereas they have got the money and everything...and they've got the things that I want around them but they want more. It would be quite interesting to see what they have and what we have in comparison” (Weller, 2007:130).

Kenway and Bullen also refer to the influence of cyberspace and the importance of young people being not only observers, but also critical engagers in understanding the wider world. Adapting the term 'flaneur' which means 'a person who saunters or strolls about', they propose the concept of 'youthful cyberflaneurs', defining young people as global citizens who are more than observers, but rather critics and cultural producers. The object of the young cyberflaneur's enquiry is the global cultural economy, using new technologies as tools for enquiry:

“Tracing the travels of things across time and space, watching to see who used what and with what effects, self-conscious adolescents become conscious of the self and the other on a global scale” (Kenway & Bullen, 2008:27).

These observations suggest that seeing 'young people as global citizens' could be misinterpreted beyond the complex and multi-layered identities and forms of engagement young people have with their communities and societies. Today's young people may be more globally aware and experienced than any previous generation but that does not automatically make them global citizens. What the work of Osler and Starkey shows is that young people see their engagement in communities as 'aspiring citizens' closely linked to their identity and place within their own community.

However, Kenway and Bullen shows that young people, through their own use of ‘cyberspace’ and their increasing use of social networking, are making friendships and observing people’s lives throughout the world.

An example of these debates in practice is the work of Minorities of Europe (MOE) and its ‘Swapping Cultures’ project. MOE is a pan-European network that grew out of the ‘All Different-All Equal’ campaign in the 1990s. It currently operates a range of local, national and international projects engaging young people from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds (<http://www.moe-online.com>).

The Swapping Cultures initiative emerged as a response to the UK Home Office’s Community Cohesion report. Key to the project is moving beyond multiculturalism to an understanding and engagement with another culture from a wider community cohesion and global perspective. Using its ‘Beyond Tolerance’ model, MOE aims to develop and foster a spirit of ‘understanding, tolerance and respect in and between diverse communities, to ensure that community cohesion is embedded in the plans of stakeholders, and to encourage the support of the principal agencies involved to provide a safe and secure environment that will be conducive to the key values of equality, diversity, respect and harmony’ (MOE, 2005).

“Being same and being different are both really good, I enjoy being same and different and so should you. It’s really amazing that everyone’s different or the same. If you’re different and unique or diverse...shout out loud, so everyone can hear...Being different, is NOT a curse: I love being different!” - Callum Donnelly, Year 5, St John’s Church of England Primary School, Coventry Youth Service & Jigsaw (MOE, 2005).

Key to this example is the recognition of the need to make connections not only between the local and global, but also between identities and cultures.

Challenges for working with young people

The debates raised in this paper have specific significance to current discussions on the role of the youth service and how the informal education sector supports the needs of young people. Youth work has, as the National Youth Agency’s ‘Blackberries from Mexico’ states:

“A long tradition of supporting young people’s understanding of the world around them...Once global issues might have been seen as a separate activity, but there is a growing imperative today for these issues to be placed at the heart of it, to be woven into the fabric of youth work”

(National Youth Association, 2006).

However, much of this activity has historically been based around areas such as international exchanges, volunteering, projects linked to aid and development or inter-cultural understanding (Bourn & McCollum, 1995; Bourn, 2001). But Global Youth Work (DEA, 2004) should perhaps follow the definition noted by Burke (2005:7) as ‘informal education which starts from young people's everyday experiences, seeks to develop their understanding of the local and the global influences on their lives, and encourages positive action for change’.

The challenge, therefore, is to recognise young people’s complex relationship to, and understanding of, globalisation. To do this, policy-makers must first understand how global social, economic and cultural influences impact at a local, community level. This requires policy-makers and practitioners to give greater consideration to the relationship of globalisation to identity and a sense of belonging, and the implications this relationship has for national policies and programmes. Moreover, to enable young people to make sense of the complex nature of the world around them, they need the opportunities to learn, engage and make sense of how the global impacts upon them. As previously indicated, there is evidence to suggest that young people are not mere passive recipients of global consumerism, but astutely re-create in their image their own version of a global theme or trend, often through locally constructed identities.

Secondly, as policy-makers in the UK begin to recognise and respond to the influence of globalisation on young people’s lives, there is a need to ensure that this understanding of the wider world is linked to initiatives that enable them to engage locally. Thirdly, the whole area of identities is complex and fraught with many social, cultural and political difficulties. But if this is linked to how young people belong and engage, then youth work can be seen as playing a key role in exploring these links.

Fourthly, debates about identities and belonging cannot be divorced from discussions about the relationship between local, national and global levels. What this study has identified is that young people construct their own sense of who they are in response to all three levels, and in the UK context, perhaps the most challenging is the national identity.

Finally, what comments from young people and initiatives such as Minorities of Europe ‘Swapping Cultures’ identify is that, far from imposing identities from a national, cultural or economic form, there is a need to empower, resource and encourage activities and programmes that build on what is happening, to bring not only cultures and communities together, but to give opportunities to learn about ‘the other’.

It has been suggested that the debates on young people and identity can only be fully understood if there is recognition of the impact of globalisation and the multi-layered nature of the economic, social and cultural influences on their lives. Development education and initiatives such as global youth work perhaps need to give greater consideration as to the role identities and a sense of belonging play in enabling young people to make sense of the world in which they are living. The term global citizenship may be becoming increasingly used within development education but unless the debates, research and practices take account of the complex nature of identities and belonging, then the valuable role it can play within a young person's learning will be at least marginal and more likely irrelevant.

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Douglas Bourn is the Director of the Development Education Research Centre (DERC) at the Institute of Education (IOE) at the University of London. He can be contacted by email at: d.bourn@ioe.ac.uk