



RSA

Action and Research Centre

Teenagency

Summary of workshop
findings

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November 2018

Introduction

This is a summary of findings from workshops as part of a research project by the RSA and the Centre for Real-World Learning at the University of Winchester, supported by the Templeton Religion Trust. The paper describes two workshops carried out in October 2018, concluding our enquiry into the mutually-reinforcing relationship between creative self-efficacy and youth social action¹.

These workshops were designed to test the findings of research undertaken from November 2017 to July 2018, which included the following elements:

- **Literature review:** ‘Understanding the role of creative self-efficacy in youth social action’ undertaken by Professor Bill Lucas and Dr Ellen Spencer from the Centre for Real-World Learning at the University of Winchester.
- **Polling:** online YouGov surveys of 582 young people aged 14 to 18 years and 2,013 adults, carried out between 27 April – 3 May 2018 and 26 – 27 April 2018 respectively.
- **Focus groups:** three focus groups with a total of 24 young people aged 15 to 17 years, carried out between 10 May – 7 June 2018.
- **Interviews:** conducted with social action experts from schools, the third sector and academia in May and June 2018.

In October 2018, we conducted two workshops. The first was with a group of ten social action experts, experienced in developing, implementing and evaluating youth social action programmes, and the second was with a group of ten young people aged 14 to 18 years. These were designed to explore and interrogate the key findings – outlined below – of the literature review, polling, focus groups and interviews, which were published in August 2018 in a report entitled [Teenagency: How young people can create a better world:](#)

- Young people’s participation in social action significantly outweighs adult perception.

¹ For the purposes of this study, we define social action as ‘taking part in activities such as fundraising, giving time to charity, campaigning for an issue, or taking part in mentoring or tutoring without being paid’. The study focuses on young people aged 14 to 18 years.

- Some demographic groups are more likely to participate in social action than others: young women and young people who identify as religious are somewhat more likely to participate.
- Young people today have a strong desire to help others, but many do not feel like they can make a difference.
- Creative young people feel more confident that they can make a difference in their communities than those who do not consider themselves creative.
- We need to prioritise encouraging young people who do not see themselves as creative to take part in social action as they are less likely to self-motivate than peers who consider themselves to be creative.
- Young people from less affluent backgrounds especially need the encouragement of schools to participate as they are less likely to be encouraged by parents.
- We need to provide more opportunities for young people to shape social action activities; currently, less than a quarter of young people who have ever volunteered have had the chance to select the problem they want to solve.

In this write up, we describe the structure and content of both workshops, before discussing some of the key themes to emerge out of the conversations in each.

In places, we also draw upon discussions had at the [Teenagency report launch event](#) (15 October 2018), which brought an expert panel together with a public audience to reflect on our research findings. The panel comprised of:

- Adam Ramgoolie (#iwill ambassador and founder of Get2Learn)
- Dame Julia Cleverdon (co-founder of Step Up To Serve)
- Sam Conniff Allende (co-founder and former CEO of Livity)
- Ruth Ibegbuna (founding CEO of RECLAIM)
- We were also joined on-stage by one of Ruth's young mentees, Elijah Walters Othman.

Format of workshop with social action experts

The first of our two workshops to interrogate the findings of our research was led by Professor Bill Lucas of the University of Winchester's Centre for Real-World Learning with support from the RSA team.

The 10 participants included experts who work with a range of age groups, at both local community and national levels, and across various stages of the

social action process (including funding, research, design, and implementation).

The participants were:

- Jennie Butterworth, CEO, Envision
- Natalie Clark, Project Lead, Youth Theatre Makers, London Bubble Theatre Company
- Clare Delargy, Senior Advisor, Behavioural Insights Team
- Fiona Ellison, #iwill Fund Development Manager, Step Up To Serve at Big Lottery Fund
- Russeni Fisher, Freelancer, London Bubble Theatre Company
- Lizzie Green, Youth Advocacy Officer, Girlguiding
- Alan Hands, Strategy and Change Manager, Scouts
- Ben Hartridge, Lab Researcher, Dartington Service Design Lab
- Chris Lawton, Senior Lecturer, Nottingham Trent University
- Andrea Van-Sittart, Head of Outreach Development, Royal Horticultural Society

We began by introducing the group to the Creativity in Adolescence project, presenting an overview of our research activities and summarising the key findings of the resulting report.

The workshop explored two key questions:

1. How do we make sure that the opportunities on offer are (more often) designed to have a double benefit, ie that they are beneficial to both the community and the young people taking part?
2. How do we make sure that these opportunities are taken up by significant numbers of young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds who stand to benefit most and those who are typically less likely to engage?

We did this through the following activities:

1. Introducing the concept of double-benefit social action

Our research identified four conditions that we believe need to be met for high-quality, double-benefit youth social action to take place. Young people need to:

- Identify the problem they want to address
- Come up with their own solutions

- Lead the response to the problem
- Reflect on the impact they achieved.

2. A short presentation from Jennie Butterworth, CEO of social action charity Envision

Jennie presented on the implications of the above criteria for programme design and delivery.

3. An exploration of young people’s motivations to take part in social action

This included reflecting on key findings from our polling, presented in the figures below.

Figure 28: Teenagers' motivations to get involved in volunteering or other forms of social action

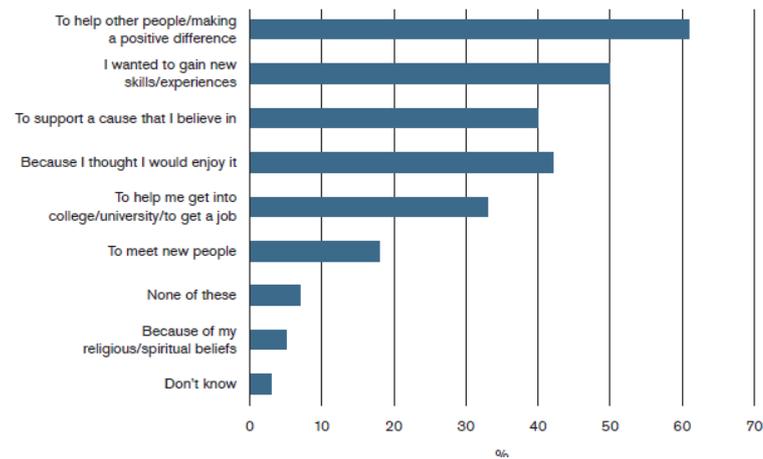
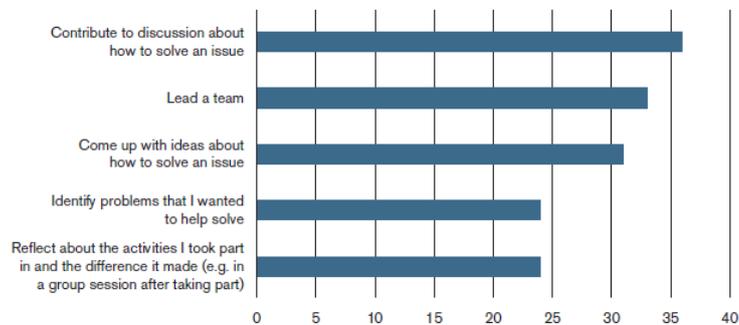


Figure 38: Percentage of young people who had opportunities to shape the social action they were involved in



4. Programme design activity

We asked workshop participants to design a hypothetical youth social action project in small groups that they felt responded to the need identified for double-benefit social action.

We provided each group with a template, asking them to detail the following:

- The purpose and mission of their project
- The recruitment strategy for getting young people involved
- The programme development process
- The programme activities for those taking part
- The benefits for the young people taking part
- The benefits for the community in which the programme takes place.

Format of workshop with young people

The second of our workshops was delivered by RSA staff. It brought together a purposive sample of ten 14 to 18-year-olds from an inner-city London school. All were familiar with social action and had varying degrees of experience of taking part in it. The workshop had four key elements:

1. Introduction to the project

We began by introducing the project and the key findings of our research, placing emphasis on the gap between how adults perceive young people's likeliness to take part in social action, and their actual levels of involvement in it.

2. Exploring participants' prior experience of social action

We explored participants' familiarity with various social action activities and asked them to share their prior experience of doing these with us.

3. Programme design activity

This element mirrored the workshop with social action experts: we asked participants to design a social action opportunity that would provide a double benefit (ie would be beneficial to both young people and their community).

Split into two groups, each participant first wrote down an issue that they would like to tackle on a post-it note, captured in the photograph below. In each group they had to choose one issue from the five discussed that they

would take forward together, and design proposals for youth social action programmes to address these issues.



4. Presentation and reflections

Finally, their ideas were presented to the group for feedback, and participants discussed what they liked about the other's programme, how they might work in practice, and how they could be improved upon.

Findings of the workshops

In this section, we outline three key themes that emerged out of our workshops. These can be summarised as follows:

1. **Where social action takes place matters** – in particular, we explored the role of schools and communities in providing opportunities to participate, and found that both have complementary roles to play.
2. **The language we use around double benefit is important** – organisations and individuals involved in social action aim to achieve a range of different benefits for the young people participating, and the communities they serve. The language we use to describe benefits must match the motivations that drive young people to get involved, and must avoid hyperbole as this can be off-putting to some less confident young people.
3. **Young people need to identify the issues they want to address and lead the response** – this is crucial both for attracting young people to participate and for ensuring the best outcomes. Young people are expert at identifying issues that need addressing within their own (geographical and social) communities.

Our intention is not to draw conclusions based on the workshops, but that they should open a discussion around these themes, in which youth voices have parity with adult voices.

1. Where social action takes place matters

Our polling asked young people who had encouraged them to participate in social action. We found that 59 percent of young people who have participated in social action were encouraged by their school. This is compared with 36 percent who were encouraged by their parents or guardians, 22 percent who were encouraged by organisers of social action projects, and 20 percent who were encouraged by friends. Although our polling shows that a majority of young people become involved with social action through school, in both of our October 2018 workshops, participants debated whether this was, in fact, the most effective way to engage young people.

Where social action should take place is a topic that divides opinion. This was reflected in the social action programmes designed by young people and the discussions that were had about them. One group's social action project, a campaign to educate students about feminism and provide a safe space to debate ideas, was largely embedded within the school, involving teachers and school staff, and even aiming to place the topic within the curriculum.

By contrast, the other group's social action programme was designed to operate predominantly outside of a school setting, taking place in the wider community, with a focus on local London boroughs. Participants spoke about often being asked to get involved through school assemblies. Some noted that this wasn't the best way to engage other young people; as one participant put it, this would make it feel "like something you have to do". The same participant, commenting on the other group's programme proposal, felt that:

"Engaging children through schools isn't actually engaging at all. I think you should try and think of a way to engage children outside of school".

This was a sentiment shared by several other young people at the workshop, and was also echoed at the workshop with social action experts. As Russeni Fisher, London Bubble Theatre Company, described:

"The association with school may put people off. It can be more beneficial to be something outside of school".

But as Andrea Van-Sittart from the Royal Horticultural Society stressed:

“Schools play a really important role, especially for disadvantaged young people... they can provide a safe space to experience an opportunity and engage”.

The role played by schools in providing opportunities for young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds is a key finding from our report: young people from social grades C2DE are less likely to report having been encouraged by their parents to take part in social action, therefore the encouragement of school becomes particularly important.

We believe that schools must continue to drive the youth social action agenda. However, we also encourage community-based efforts that might reach young people who do not currently take part in social action, and for whom school is not the right setting through which to engage. It is also important to acknowledge that cuts to youth services funding and increasing workload for teachers and school staff make providing high-quality social action opportunities increasingly challenging. Therefore, it is vital that businesses and foundations step in to support youth social action by providing practical and financial support and that movements – such as the RSA Fellowship – mobilise to create more high-quality social action opportunities for young people.

2. The language we use around double benefit is important

As described, participants of the adult workshop supported the idea that, in order to be meaningful, social action needs to provide a double benefit – allowing young people to develop important skills and character traits while making a difference in their communities. But as was noted by Fiona Ellison, Big Lottery Fund, ‘benefit’ to young people can mean many different things to different people, whether it’s building new friendships, learning a new skill or simply feeling happier.

Jennie Butterworth, CEO of Envision, described how discussion around the benefits of young people taking part in social action tend to major around employability. It was noted by Alan Hands of the Scouts, that parents, too, are often most focused on their children’s CVs; “being able to evidence what they’ve done for the future”. Our polling found that 33 percent of young people got involved in social action to help them get into university or college, or to get a job.

While a number of young people were motivated by these instrumental concerns, a far greater number of young people were interested in the skills

they could develop that would support them in the future, rather than a simple tick-box exercise. Fifty percent of young people who reported having taken part in social action did so to gain new skills and experiences (and the interest in this was even greater for young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds). This echoes Envision’s mission to provide social action opportunities that help young people gain skills and confidence. Jennie Butterworth described the role of social action in providing young people with the chance to develop self-efficacy, or the belief in their ability to succeed:

“At Envision we believe that personal efficacy is the greatest unlocked resource. We all need to get behind self-efficacy, or confidence as some people call it, and then combine that with whatever skill you’re interested in developing”.

Other social action experts placed emphasis on benefits like the opportunity to work with people they wouldn’t normally and being encouraged to act outside of their comfort zones. Natalie Clark comments:

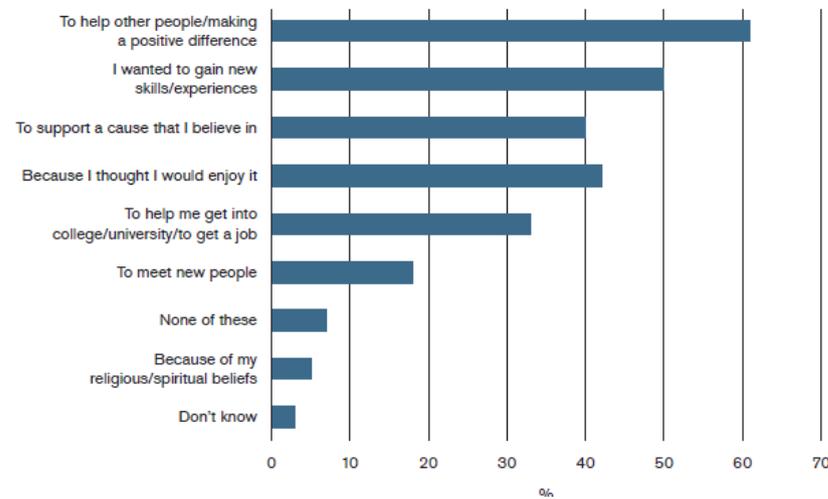
“At London Bubble, young theatre makers take part in placements which offer an opportunity for them to work with people they wouldn’t normally for 5-6 weeks. This could be on a project in an assisted living facility or working with young children who need additional support with their communication skills. We advocate that it’s a double benefit to have opportunities to learn and to engage with other people they wouldn’t usually”.

And Alan Hands, Scouts notes that:

“Taking young children out of their comfort zones and allowing them to tackle big issues is beneficial to them”.

But while developing skills and experience is clearly important for – and to – young people, the most common motivation to take part in social action amongst the young people we surveyed, as part of the initial research, was the desire to help others and make a positive difference. As can be seen in the figure below, 61 percent of respondents identified with this.

Figure 28: Teenagers' motivations to get involved in volunteering or other forms of social action



For many young people it is the benefits to the community, rather than the benefits to themselves, that provide the most powerful motivation for getting involved with social action. With this in mind, focusing on the difference young people can make to their communities may be an effective way to encourage more young people to get involved. As one social action expert put it, however, language around ‘changing my community’ can be daunting and could put young people off. For this reason, participants suggested that it was important to think carefully about who the message comes from and how it is delivered. If young people hear about the opportunity to make a difference from their peers – or “people like me” – they may be more likely to get involved in social action.

The language we use around social action, and the benefits of taking part in it, is important. Just as social action opportunities need to take place across a range of settings, namely, inside and outside of schools, they need to be framed in a way that appeals to a range of motivations. We recommend that social action organisers involve young people in designing and delivering messaging about their programmes, but we also need ensure young people are involved in designing the programmes themselves.

3. Young people need to identify the issues they want to address and lead the response

Our research found that young people welcome the opportunity to shape the social action they participate in, but currently less than a quarter (24 percent) of young people who have ever volunteered have had the chance to select the problem they want to solve. During the workshop with social action experts,

the importance of helping young people to find what it is that they care about and want to change in the world came up. Lizzie Green from Girlguiding raised the question:

“How do we help them find out what they are passionate about?”

Lizzie went on to describe one approach taken by Girlguiding – Action for Change, a nine-month advocacy training programme where girls and young women are supported to explore issues they are passionate about. Through the programme participants are assigned a coach, directed towards online resources, and supported to plan and deliver a campaign or social action project focusing on their chosen topic. She explains that:

“It’s about providing space for young people to work through their own ideas and experiences, and then supporting them to take action”.

Such an in-depth programme can be beneficial to help young people identify the things they are passionate about, what they would like to change, and how to go about doing so.

But our experience from the workshop we carried out with young people revealed that many of them are already confident of the issues they are passionate about; most participants were able to identify a number of problems they wanted to address in their communities straight away. What is more, in just 40 minutes, participants produced two distinct and ambitious ideas for youth social action programmes. One group’s programme focused on raising awareness of the effects of littering on the environment, through a youth-led showcase of artwork and films on the topic and an interborough recycling competition. The other aimed to reduce the stigma around feminism, by creating a school society (similar in structure to a university society) that would be designed to create a safe space to share opinions and, holding debates on equality and issues facing young women, and campaigning to include the topic of feminism in the Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) school curriculum.

In line with our experience, Alan Hands from the Scouts described that young people are often already confident about what it is that they would like to change within their local community. In his experience, in fact, it is often the adults who are less certain of this:

“Young people work in partnership with adults, but we find that it can be the adults who lack confidence on tackling the big issues of the day, while the young people are often ready to take these on”.

This raises another important theme that was central both in the workshops and at our report launch event: the relative roles of adults and young people in creating social action opportunities.

During the workshop with experts, there was agreement from participants that social action needs to be led by young people if it is to provide a true double benefit. The facilitatory – rather than leadership – role played by adults is something that many participants advocated in the workshop. Natalie Clark, for instance, described how London Bubble Theatre’s forum style allows young people to guide their own work, while adults take on a support role:

“From the very get-go it’s about young people coming forward with ideas that they want to act on, and that becomes the story, the tour, the discussion, and we have no real... we can help support their ideas but we don’t direct it”.

Ultimately, as Alan Hands of the Scouts noted:

“It’s about recognising that we’re not the experts in the issues... we work hard to find the right partners who will work with our young people to ensure they are confident and ready to take action”.

In our workshop with young people, too, it was considered important for young people to take on responsibilities and adults to take on a support role. One participant told us about her role as a Youth Ambassador for a local charity, in which she is responsible for organising quarterly fundraising events in her local community and has control over the budget for these. Later, when designing their social action programmes, a younger participant expressed concern about the group’s ability able to put on an awareness-raising event:

“Wait, don’t we need an adult to do that?”

The participant reassured her that, like in her role as a Youth Ambassador, adults can take on a largely facilitatory role:

“The adults can help you by getting a venue and stuff, but then it’s young people organising the events”.

During the workshop, there was a sense that adults can unlock resources to help get things done, but that the decisions about direction and activities were the preserve of young people. In reality, young people are unlikely to have access to premises, money, or contacts, and some may need their

confidence building, eg through mentoring support. These are all things that adults can provide.

Concluding thoughts

As explored in [Teenagency: How young people can create a better world](#), our research made clear that there is a need to provide more high-quality, double-benefit social action opportunities for young people. Our workshops confirmed that there is a strong desire for this and, crucially, made clear that it is entirely possible to create such opportunities.

At the Teenagency report launch event, our panellists offered examples of practical ways in which organisations can facilitate young people: Sam Conniff Allende, founder of Livity, suggested that companies offer up their space to young people, Ruth Ibegbuna, founding CEO of RECLAIM, advocated providing funds for young people and mentoring them in their work, and Adam Ramgoolie, a 17-year-old youth activist and founder of Get2Learn, stressed the importance of giving young people places at decision-making tables, including on the boards of charities. What is important is that these actions are deliberate and well supported, and not simply tokenistic gestures. Only then will we start to see what young people are truly capable of.

Next steps

Building on the findings of this project, over the next three years, the RSA and RSA Academies are exploring how to ensure social action programmes in primary schools give opportunities for children to take leadership roles. This initiative is supported by the Pears #iwill Fund, a collaboration of Pears Foundation, Big Lottery Fund and DCMS.

We are also delighted that the young people involved in our workshop are planning to take forward the social action projects they designed over the coming school terms, with the support of a senior member of school staff. We look forward to hearing how their projects develop.

The RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce) believes that everyone should have the freedom and power to turn their ideas into reality. Through our ideas, research and 29,000-strong Fellowship, we seek to realise a society where creative power is distributed, where concentrations of power are confronted, and where creative values are nurtured.

Recent RSA studies have explored the value of mission to schools and of evidence in arts and cultural learning. In each case, we have sought to shine a light on the nuance of the debates, and canvas views from across the education sector. Our goal is to explore the big challenges facing society today.



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