

Educational relationships outside school

Findings
Informing change

September 2007

This study examines the role of educational relationships in out-of-school activities. It compares the experiences of young people who live in impoverished circumstances and their more affluent peers to explore the implications for educational achievement.

Key points

- Young people gain a variety of skills and understandings from organised out-of-school activities.
- Those from families in poverty participate in fewer organised out-of-school activities than their more affluent peers.
- Through their lack of participation in out-of-school activities, young people in poverty are denied important learning experiences which may affect their engagement in the more formal learning in school.
- From their participation in out-of-school activities, young people gain a more sophisticated knowledge of themselves as learners through understanding:
 - that learning is active;
 - the importance of rules and roles in learning;
 - that skills and knowledge can be transferred across different contexts of learning; and
 - the benefits of greater self-control and confidence.
- Young people also:
 - Gain wider experiences from an expanded peer group.
 - Learn how to develop and sustain supportive educational relationships through working with others and building on others' expertise.
- Out-of-school activities are vital and distinctive in conferring learning capacity because:
 - they are founded on meaningful learning, shared with adults in a way that is not possible in classrooms;
 - adults are perceived as co-participants and co-learners;
 - through their educational relationships with adults the young people gain a clear understanding of the need to conform to rules if goals are to be achieved;
 - the adults are not there to control, but to clarify the rule-governed activities; and
 - young people learn the role of an authority legitimised through knowledge of, and passion for, the activity itself.

The research

By a team at the University of Bath.

Background

The study is based on the premise that a key factor in improving the educational attainment and subsequent life chances of young people in poverty is their confidence in, and understanding of, educational relationships with adults. Consequently, it looks beyond school-based and home-based experiences to how and why young people engage in learning through organised activities outside school. The study addresses three questions:

- What do young people gain from engagement in out-of-school activities that involve learning?
- Do young people from low-income families participate less in these activities than those from more affluent homes?
- If so, what can be done to redress the added disadvantage that this creates for young people in low-income families?

Participation in out-of-school activities

The diversity and number of spontaneous activities reported was similar for children from both more and less affluent backgrounds. However, the research found that those from families in receipt of free school meals (and particularly those in rural areas) participate in fewer organised out-of-school activities than their more affluent peers. The reasons for their non-participation were complex but the key factors were:

- costs relating to both the activities themselves and to access;
- limited knowledge about how to get access or confidence in doing so; and
- young people's perceptions of themselves as participants in such activities.

Young people gain a variety of skills and understandings from organised out-of-school activities. The analysis highlighted the learning denied to those young people unable to take part.

What young people learn in out-of-school activities

Two striking aspects of young people's engagement with out-of-school activities were the ways in which they made genuine contributions to the activities through the responsibilities they undertook, and their level of understanding and articulation of what they had learned. They had developed specialist vocabularies and skills and had been rewarded through publicly-recognised awards, prizes and performances. They understood that learning is active and were able to justify their own contributions to the learning processes.

The stages of progression were well marked. Assessments and events were further confirmation of the young person's involvement within groups and showed the importance of explicit goals, rewards and responsibility for working towards something. These steps seemed to be motivating rather than threatening. Failures were acknowledged and plans to overcome them were made.

"I wasn't picked [for the performance] last time, but I'm speaking louder now."
(11-year old girl)

The links with adult clubs, real theatres, and national associations provided the opportunity for young people to contribute to the activity at a level very difficult to achieve in the day-to-day activities of a school.

At a personal level the young people had gained a more sophisticated understanding and articulation of themselves as learners through:

- breadth of experiences from an expanded peer group;
- improved self-control and confidence;
- awareness of the need to assume responsibility for performances and team work; and
- understanding of the transferability of skills and knowledge into different contexts of learning.

The importance of the adults in the more organised activities was also clear. Key issues were the adults' status as:

- role models;
- co-learners; and
- leaders.

It was clear that knowing how to develop and sustain supportive educational relationships, through working with others and building on others' expertise, was learned through these activities. The out-of-school activities were distinctive and beneficial because the adults' voluntary involvement connected the young people with the real adult world. Choice was an important element in this. Free choice for both adults and young people in terms of involvement and contribution is essential if successful educational relationships are to be created.

All social activities operate with commonly accepted rules and successful engagement requires a clear understanding of their purpose. In the out-of-school activities, the adults were the keepers of the rules. They were not there purely to control, but to clarify the rule-governed activities. It was this that enabled young people to gain a positive understanding of the need to conform to rules if goals are to be achieved, and the role of authority in this. All members of the group, adults and young people, were seen to make a real contribution to the learning of the whole group. Conversely, this is not how most young people engage with in-school activities.

"Some teachers wind me up, I know they're older and they have the right to shout at us because they're teachers, but they just take advantage of us."

(14-year-old girl)

The above quote typifies the view of many students that the authority of school teachers is only seen as legitimate in terms of the teachers' power, not their subject-specific expertise. Conversely, the authority held by the adults in the out-of-school activities is perceived to be legitimate because of their interest in, and knowledge of, the activity itself. For some young people, a more sophisticated discernment of the educational relationship between adults and young people involved in the activities was emerging.

If the relationship between teachers and students in schools is to facilitate young people's learning, the students need a clear understanding of how they are disadvantaged (rather than punished) if they do not subscribe to the rules of the activity. The skills, efforts and motivation of committed adults are what enthused and transformed young people participating in out-of-school activities. These adults were valued by the young people because they, too, were participating for recreation and enjoyment. The adults were not part of 'the establishment', nor did they have an ulterior motive beyond the successful outcomes of the group or club. Passion for the activity was the common ground in these out-of-school educational relationships, but it was the personal understanding gained from the relationships that then helped young people to engage better with school learning. Where out-of-school learning had impacted on learning in school, it was because young people's relationship with teachers had been changed to a more equal interaction and the young people understood themselves to be active participants in learning rather than passive recipients of the curriculum.

Conclusion

The study does not argue for schools to change, as they work within particular parameters to provide a major – but not sole – contribution to the effective life chances of young people. Young people learn in a variety of contexts including at home, at school and outside school. This study has highlighted the benefits gained by young people from participating in out-of-school activities, and the positive effects this can have for them both in and outside school.

This study suggests that out-of-school activities can have a fundamental and valuable part to play in improving learning capacity for all young people. However, the value of the out-of-school activities lies in their difference from school activities. A key factor in facilitating this is the students' perceptions of the adults in the out-of-school activities as co-learners. Consequently, helping young people develop self-belief in their own learning may be better done through educational relationships developed in out-of-school activities.

About the project

The study interviewed 55 young people attending schools in both rural and urban areas in the south west of England. Twenty-five were in receipt of free school meals and they were matched by 30 of their peers from the same schools, but living in more affluent circumstances. Twenty-six of the young people were eleven years old (Year 6) and 29 were 14 years old (Year 9). The young people were asked to map how they spent their time when not in school and two activities were chosen for more in-depth exploration. The interview explored:

- the reasons for the child's participation;
- the extent of his or her engagement;
- the relationship with the adults involved and with the other participants;
- what the young person felt they learned from the activity and how this happened; and
- any connections they made with learning in school.

For further information

Further information about the study can be obtained from:

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The full report, **Educational relationships outside school: why access is important** by Felicity Wikeley, Kate Bullock, Yolande Muschamp and Tess Ridge, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk.

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