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'Education and Enterprise' Village: supporting visually impaired (VI) learners locally, nationally and internationally through 'values' education and service-learning

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Abstract

This paper explores the reciprocal value between school communities of learning and student teachers engaged in collaborative, project-based learning. Case studies, focused upon Liverpool Hope University students working alongside visually impaired (VI) students at St. Vincent's school for sensory impairment Liverpool, are investigated through a 'service-learning' lens. Specific reference is made to students from the Wider Perspectives module choosing to undertake Schools Intergenerational Nurturing and Learning (SIGNAL) projects within St Vincent's 'educational and enterprise' village: a concept underpinned by social capital theory and 'reverse inclusion'. Impact is reflected against new 'Education Health and Care Plans (EHC) VI outcomes, and acquisition of the knowledge, skills and understanding surrounding Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) 'Standards'. Simultaneously, 'soft' outcomes surrounding the teaching and learning of entrepreneurial learning, Social Moral Spiritual and Cultural (SMSC) and the PREVENT agenda, are highlighted as positive 'outcomes' emerging from a learning community engaged with social capital. Specific reference is made to the sharing of best practices locally and nationally in challenge to the 85% VI unemployment rates, and internationally to VI schools in Ethiopia and Nepal twinned with St Vincent's.

Keywords: Collaboration, social capital, visual impairment, 'values'.

Introduction

Engaged civic participation has been declining (Putnam, 2000), and schools and universities contribute to the problem by functioning in 'silos' detached from 'the

real world' or to the solution by collaborating with local schools, agencies and organizations to enhance social capital. Disengagement from communal life has negative consequences for individuals, institutions and society such as increases in school drop-out, delinquency, crimes, depression, anxiety and lost learning opportunities (Brodsky et al., 1999). Education is a viable way to deal with the problem of decreased participation, but education without actual civic collaboration is incomplete, so service-learning (SL) approaches have been implemented in many countries, with varying models and successes. These important efforts always occur within a historical and political context. *The Schools' Intergenerational Nurturing and Learning project (SIGNAL)* serves as a case example of a SL focused partnership among Liverpool Hope University (UK), student teacher volunteers, Merseyside Police and Primary School clusters, delivered over ten years, that illustrates ways SL partnerships are a cornerstone through which collaborations and collaborative learning experiences can be promoted and realised. Central to any value emerging from the SIGNAL partnership and its collaborations is the role of engaged, volunteer student teachers. Holding to a belief in the popular education theory of Gramsci (1971) and Freire (1972), we present their active and truly voluntary participation in community collaborations as an area worthy of investigation and development. In this paper we chart developments in educational policy and practice in the UK during the past two decades, which appear to indicate a progressive desire to move community partnership work into the deeper learning experiences afforded by collaborative projects, briefly critique earlier forms of SL practices, and highlight how a values-based SL model implemented by SIGNAL has facilitated collaborations in project based work.

Government Interventions

Over the last decade, much of government education policy has set out to facilitate a greater engagement by schools in civic society beyond the prescribed curriculum. The developing role of Citizenship Education (CE) and calls for partnership activities to achieve civic engagement were first outlined in the Crick Report (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 1998), heralding a raft of changes in primary and secondary schooling towards this end. From 2015, CE has itself taken an even wider remit within the curriculum, falling under Social, Moral, Spiritual and Cultural (SMSC) education, and, moreover, new OFSTED inspection criteria with links to entrepreneurial learning and, as we suggest here, the PREVENT agenda. These will be discussed in more detail presently. The introduction of Every Child Matters (Department for Education and Skills [DfE], 2003a), not dissimilar to No Child Left Behind in the USA, and the primary curriculum Excellence and Enjoyment (DfE, 2003b) somewhat revealed the 'New Labour' government's intended direction. Partnered, community cohesive, innovative and creative learning experiences interwoven with signposts towards

employment were to be sought. Central to the governmental changes in policy was the significance placed on social capital theory in drawing together networks of neighbourhoods, community groups, religious organisations and businesses in a complete moral and social reconstruction of the perceived 'torn' communities (Commission on Social Justice [CSJ], 1994).

More recently, the Prime Minster, Mr. Cameron, launched 'Big Society' in Liverpool, followed by the hosting of the International Business Festival in 2014. A refreshed focus has fallen on social capital, and how we can collaborate in communities of learning linking to 'outcomes' such as employment generation. The need to collaborate has been acutely highlighted by the need for new 'Education Health and Care Plans' (EHC) replacing Statements of Special Educational Needs and Learning Difficulty Assessments from September 2014. An EHC plan is to draw together what a child or young person (up to the age of 25) wants to achieve and the support needed. It means the different agencies providing education, health and social care support will need to work more closely together to help achieve and support an individual towards their goals. Interestingly for student teachers in this ever more connecting arena, the 'Standards' they need to evidence so as to qualify (DfE, 2011) now make direct reference to the PREVENT agenda. PREVENT is one of the four strands making up the Government's counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST). With the overall aim of stopping people being or supporting terrorism, PREVENT aims at working with a wide range of sectors including education, criminal justice, faith, charities, the internet and health, providing people with appropriate advice and support. From July 2015, it is a legal duty for schools and Universities to prevent students being radicalised; this has implications for SMSC. From November 2014, all schools must promote 'British Values'; the DfE advice is to do so through SMSC. How well Universities and schools achieve this will be part of OFSTED inspections.

If we expect students to grasp the value of social capital, PREVENT , SMSC and 'British Values' pre- service so as to provide the greatest impact, where and how are we providing the knowledge, skills and understanding and making the 'links' between SMSC 'British Values' and PREVENT aims (and EHC funding collaborations) in the classroom? In the next section we reflect more on social capital in building a picture of SIGNAL as a curriculum intervention and reciprocal value learning tool connecting Higher Education (HE) with the school communities it serves, via student volunteerism.

As a sociological concept relating to the connections within and between social networks, attention to the worth of social capital amongst social scientists, policy makers and researchers has gained pace since the work of Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1989). Placing a similar emphasis on the functional value of social relations as an educational resource, their work linked educational achievement to

social inequality, where the individual is seen as not solely a product of their own talents. In England, reflections on the use of social capital saw calls for wide partnerships to achieve the 'added-value' for communities (Dhillon, 2009). It is the work of Putnam, however, in 'Bowling Alone' (2000), which placed social capital as central to an argument for reclaiming public life in linking it with civic engagement.

Putnam (2000) makes reference to two forms of social capital, bonding capital and bridging capital. Bonding relates to where value is assigned to social networks between homogeneous groups, whereas bridging relates to where value is assigned to social networks between socially heterogeneous groups. Bridging capital is characterised as outward looking and inclusive, contrasted to bonding capital characterised as inward looking and exclusive. Where social capital was perceived by some as a cure for all social problems (Groutaert and Van Bastelaer, 2002), and high social capital engagement in schools was linked to lower crime, better health and higher educational achievement (Halpern, 2009), education and training in the UK was placed as central to its development (Hodgson and Spours, 1999). In England, the significance placed upon social capital by the last government may be seen as championed by the Excellence in Schools Whitepaper (1997) and the introduction of its Excellence in Cities programme (EiC) of 1999. Encouraged to actively engage local partnerships in education, EiC was a multi-strand approach aimed at raising standards in the most deprived areas of England by offering a diversity of provision. Seen as a 'coherent framework' by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER, 2001, p.1), the EiC policy included a Gifted and Talented Programme, Learning Mentors, Learning Support Units, City Learning Centres, Action Zones, Specialist Schools in Action Zones and Beacon Schools. Extended in 2003 to cover all primary schools with more than 35% of pupils on free school meals, it peaked in 2004 where it covered 1,400 schools in urban areas. Research from the first ten inspections of EiC however suggested failures in the connection and embedding of partnerships into school communities (Excellence Clusters, 2003). Furthermore, activity in some areas was seen as generating distinct tensions across the groups EiC was designed to connect and assist (Lister, 2001; Shah, 2004). Emerging from what may be viewed as a large scale social capital experiment, the Russell Commission (2005) called for an increase in the amount and quality of partnership volunteering into school communities. It is within this backdrop and across EiC zones in Liverpool, England, the SIGNAL project was developed between the main partners of Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool Football Club and Merseyside Police.

As argued by Patterson and Loomis (2007), Patterson and Patterson (2010) and Patterson (2011, 2013) what marks SIGNAL as distinct from other educational interventions, is the positive engagement of student teacher volunteers in diverse

school communities within the flexible framework of the SIGNAL process. It is this framework which allows for local meaning and thus reciprocal value for school communities and student volunteers to be 'built in' to each locally relevant and individual SIGNAL project. This vibrant and creative platform has been researched for over ten years engaging student teacher (action) research, using both 'soft' and ' hard' outcomes measured against student teacher acquisition of the 'Standards' required to qualify as a teacher. The role of 'soft outcomes' in research has grown in importance since the works of Dewson et al., (2000) and Farrer (2007). They identified 'soft outcomes' as changes resulting from project-based work which are not directly measurable. Such changes are discussed in terms of the 'distance travelled' in the voluntary sector seeking to generate employment. Although requiring 'indicators' for achievement and record keeping, Farrer (2007) and Dewson et al. (2000) agree that working towards the capturing of soft (quantitative) data enables hard (qualitative) data to be secured. We suggest in this paper that student teachers engaged in the SIGNAL process taking 'soft' outcomes (action) research across learning communities has longitudinal 'hard' outcome data gathering opportunities across their future careers. Although the thinking behind 'New Labour' social capital may be seen as praiseworthy, studies into the raising of standards by Black et al. (2001: 7) proposed that 'the sum of these reforms has not added up to an effective policy because something is missing'. We suggest here that part of what is missing is 'long sight' attached to the teaching and learning of new generations of teachers, the longer term solutions to the issues society faces now, and will face in the future. Pivotal to the SIGNAL process and part of a solution is the role of volunteering within teacher training as a distinct, voluntary and 'value added' opportunity; a creative yet civically focussed experience, both replicable and scalable as it engages student teachers year on year.

The Role of Volunteerism.

More recently, under the coalition Government, calls for partnership and volunteering have given way to those emphasising the need for collaborations. Whilst the Cambridge Review of Primary Education (2009, p.362) suggested a long way to go in re-conceptualising the school as a 'collaborative, inclusive community for learning', the Department for Education and Skills (DfE, 2001) called for consideration to be given to the individuality of schools and classrooms as collaborative communities of learning. Collaborative practices are 'highly complex' and impacted by 'an ensemble of policy approaches' adopted by the Government (Higham and Yeomans, 2010, p.382). Within this paradigm, important contributions were made by cross-curricular activity and values education (Gearon, 2003; Halstead and Taylor, 2000; Kerr, 2008, 2009) – a stance reinforced at the Ninth and Tenth Annual Citizenship and Values Conferences (Kerr, 2008, 2009). As reflected on by Patterson and Hamill (2013), within the context of University and school community collaborations, the need to provide young people with

meaningful opportunities and responsibilities related to 'values' has been clearly underlined.

Kerr (2009, p.12) called for wider research into 'what works' in communities, the place of 'values' in education, and clarity on the role of student teachers in disseminating the outcomes. The teaching of CE has been nurtured to have a clear focus on 'reconciling social cohesion with economic success' (OECD, 1998, p.34) whilst generating 'higher order critical and creative learning skills within the process of learning itself' (EPPI, 2004, p.3). The EPPI (2005) added further considerations for educationalists in calling for CE to be reflected upon within a local and global vision of learning and achievement and from a more holistic perspective, where different kinds or categories of learning are viewed as complimentary, not separate' (EPPI, 2005, p.5).Encouraging the participation of student teachers in such activity is being undertaken more readily in Scotland (Donaldson, 2011), and beginning to become part of the student experience in other parts of the UK. Similarly, the explicit use of SL has been identified globally as important part of civic education curricula (Pritzker and McBride, 2006). Understanding SL as a means to empower students and institutions to become aware of the needs of the communities they are part of and to 'become engaged and civically active in mutually beneficial ways' with them is growing within research circles (Mc Knight et al., 2005, p.xi). We believe SL to be of particular importance to those institutions involved in the education of teachers and the broader inclusive agenda for HE. Simultaneously, the SIGNAL model of SL offers scope as something which 'works', to reflect against its impact on issues important to us all as collaborative communities, such as our 'values', the employment of our children and indeed, the PREVENT agenda.

Service-learning exists in many forms. In the past, SL has been implemented as a component of a course that mandated volunteerism in a local school; historically the primary beneficiary of this arrangement has been for a university student to have an applied learning experience. Both positive and negative effects have been observed as a result of this type of SL, with some students learning the value of providing service to their community through volunteer work beyond when it is mandatory, and others further entrenching negative stereotypes such as those who are poor students are lazy. One explanation for variable outcomes may be the various ways in which SL is implemented. A problem with many SL courses is that the result is volunteerism without learning (Eyler and Giles, 1999). Another limitation is that collaboration is often between individuals or a faculty and an organization. Addressing this limitation, some places of learning have made agreements at the institutional level. This approach has been successful in increasing the number of placements available to university students. These agreements, however, often take the form of legal contracts, with a goal of

protection from lawsuits, omitting the importance of shared values. Building on earlier forms of SL, SIGNAL has institutional collaboration revolving around values, education, and mentoring.

In describing the SIGNAL project we maintain that the effectively project based delivery afforded by an adherence to a SL strategy has a part to play in the collation of local curricular and local (action) research. Furthermore, the use of any such research is valuable in enhancing communities of learning by generating more meaningful collaborations within individual classrooms. The specific use of student teachers in SL action, underpinned by a values formula where students see themselves and those they engage with as equals in teaching and learning, (Gramsci, 1971) is central to the success of SIGNAL itself. The student teachers' generation and use of cross-curricular lessons in non-formal settings sit in sympathy with the popular education theory of Freire (1972). It presents an opportunity whereby students themselves may actively participate in innovative local research alongside their peers and tutors. The question is, however, whose values should we use where institutional values are different from those of the community? In the following section we describe how the SL focus of SIGNAL and its core value messages have facilitated collaborations in project-based work.

As a model of SL, SIGNAL follows the significant components of SL: active participation, thoughtfully organized experiences focused on the community needs, school and community coordination, academic curriculum integration, structured time for reflection, opportunities for application of skills and knowledge and the extension of learning opportunities (Billig, 2000). These components are reflected in the SIGNAL three-stage model – engage, educate, celebrate – and generate local, project and values-based curricula that incorporate community collaborations (Patterson, 2011). Current 'Snapshot' examples of SIGNAL projects can be observed in St. Vincent's school for sensory impairment (Twitter@StvincentsL12). The school has an ongoing collaboration with volunteer students from Liverpool Hope University, including students from the Wider Perspectives module and from the new Schools Direct pathway towards qualified teacher status. More recently, collaboration has grown with student engineers from Liverpool John Moores University in developing some more ambitious access and supportive (sports) technologies for visually impaired (VI) pupils. The connection between student teachers and student engineers within SL projects is producing some exciting results, not least of which being a start-up design company from newly qualified students to take VI ideas forwards (Juvo Designs Ltd). The focus for the school moving forwards in 2016 is the generation of a website to connect photographic images with key areas such as knife crime and cyber bullying, through which to generate SMSC lessons aimed at opening up 'difficult discussions.' Simultaneously, a range of access technologies are being developed by engaging

VI pupils. Our vision is to share these access ideas focussed on VI employment (physically and on the internet) globally with the help of Rotary International and the development of a 'sightbox'. Follow our progress on @StVincentsL12. We suggest that collaborations such as this between (cross –faculty) University students, public, private and voluntary sectors drawn together via the SIGNAL process, offers powerful learning experiences, thus aiding acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding of the links between CE, SMSC, 'British-Values' PREVENT and ultimately (EHC) employment generation. Surely, is this not something we would hope for in the teachers of *our* children in *our* communities?

Going beyond the basic principles of SL, the SIGNAL collaboration ordinarily starts with a values-based assembly (engage) delivered by Liverpool Football Club. Similar assemblies have been delivered via mediums such as cricket or martial arts. In this, school children are asked to consider a number of core-value messages including; we is better than me, show racism the red card, kick drugs into touch, more important than being a good footballer is being a good person and give bullying the boot. Student teachers are asked to work with the children (educate) and generate lesson plans to reinforce one of the messages the children find of relevance. For instance, the misuse of drugs may be relevant within their community at that time. Children may write poems, write songs or undertake artwork relating to their feelings on the issue. Student-teachers are encouraged to invite parents and community-focused groups/faith groups to participate in their activities. Research into the process has found that the combination of student-teacher and Football Club/Intermediary agency participation has facilitated opportunities for Merseyside Police to engage positively with some harder-to-reach communities (Patterson, 2013). The final stage of SIGNAL (celebrate) encourages children to celebrate all their work within a social enterprise. In this, time is given by engaged lecturers to teach the elements of enterprise. As such, children sell tickets to their celebration and devise other ways to generate funds. These funds are given to a charity decided on by the children, in keeping with the 'British values' underpinning the SIGNAL project.

Outcomes / development.

As a school, St Vincent's is developing the concept of becoming an 'education and enterprise' village. We are sharing our VI education best practices by 'twinning' with schools in Nepal, Ethiopia and across Africa. Our drive is to be the centre of excellence for teaching, learning and innovation for VI, providing thus better 'outcomes' for our pupils. Part of this involves an engagement in 'reverse inclusion' to secure collaborations. The concept of reverse inclusion is to have students without special needs attend classes with special needs to serve as social and educational models. In the UK, reverse inclusion in sports is having positive

outcomes; a VI individual reported 'it has given me social skills, self-confidence, self-esteem, opportunities for travel and the vehicle to show my ability rather than my disability' (Vickerman, Hayes and Whetherly, 2003, p.49). In addition to benefits to individuals, reverse inclusion across agencies provides additional resources to schools. Collaborations with a local university and businesses for example can enrich educational settings; this often occurs in the form of SL. The development of the 'sightbox' enables us to share physical access and supportive ideas with disabled groups across the world. Our starting point here is the development of sports access technologies and 'soft' outcomes. The engagement of teacher training and engineering students provides wide learning experiences but also a flow of innovation and ideas. We invite further collaborations in project-based learning embracing SL.

Conclusion.

We believe the SIGNAL model outlined above has two defining characteristics which distinguish it from other SL programmes. Firstly, the core set of values are used and interpreted by individual communities in different ways. Secondly, student-teachers lead the process on a purely voluntary basis. This freedom within the loose framework of the SIGNAL process, we maintain, has generated innovative, mutually beneficial and exciting learning experiences. Furthermore, and over time, this creative freedom has allowed for wider community collaborations unique to the individuality of diverse learning communities. It is here we may engage student teachers themselves in generating the research agenda for the future. The consideration of 'common sense' in collaborations, as called for by Gramsci (1971), we suggest can open doors in establishing 'what works' (Kerr, 2009) in local communities of learning now, and in the future.

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