Civic Participation and the Common Good

A Background Paper[1]

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Introduction & Context

This paper seeks to outline the essence of what civic participation is, to demonstrate how it can be framed within a 21st century understanding of the common good, and to show how it is relevant to youth work values, philosophy and practice. In addition, this paper will include reference to 'civic youth work' as an area of practice that offers a way of supporting young people to become active in the civic lives of their communities and more broadly in society. A core notion that informs this paper is the idea of young people as agents of social transformation in the here and now, which creates a platform for young people to play an active and integral role in shaping society for the good of all.

In a time of increasing political polarisation, intense debate and turbulence on key issues such as Brexit, the rise of far-right nationalism in various parts of the world, heightened geopolitical tensions along with rising wealth inequalities, and serious impacts on public services such as housing, health and education as a result of austerity policies in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, we are in as much need of a common good *"based upon mutual trust, overcoming societal divides and working towards equality"* (Pimlott 2015:140) as ever before.

However, it is also clear to see that the energy behind movements such as the global #MeToo movement against sexual violence and harassment, various #SchoolStrike4Climate and #FridaysforFuture climate activist strikes and protests, and the US-based #MarchForOurLives student movement seeking to strengthen gun control and prevent gun violence, shows just how much passion and dedication exist to act collectively in the public domain towards social change and pursuing the common good. Ginwright *et al* (2006: xiii) note how *"youth activism has always played a central role in the democratic process and continues to forge new ground for social change"* and this is no less apparent in 2019.

In Northern Ireland/the north of Ireland the peace process has been stuttering and often stagnating yet widespread revulsion following the killing of journalist Lyra McKee on the streets of Derry/Londonderry before Easter 2019 provides an indication of the desire for a peaceful and inclusive society that builds on commitments expressed within the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Furthermore, an envisioning exercise[2] carried out by Youth Link with almost 200 young people from 5 different towns and cities across the region in 2018 highlights a range of desires and concerns with the desire for greater equality (across class, gender, race and religious lines) emerging as a dominant theme (Bollaert 2018c). Within this

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[2] An initiative that is part of Youth Link's 'Remembering the Past, Shaping the Future' project.

there was a recognition that sectarianism and other forms of discrimination are impeding the pursuit of a society in which all can flourish.

The Common Good in a 'Contested Space'

Underpinning the pursuit of the common good is the question 'what kind of society do we want'? As noted in the other papers in this series, four key principles inform current understandings of the common good: human dignity, interconnectedness/interdependence, solidarity, and civic participation, and all are highly relevant to a deeply divided and contested society such as Northern Ireland/ the north of Ireland. The meaning of the 'common good' in seeking to answer the above question is both place- and time-bound and requires a contextual grounding in order to be understood and pursued.

Smyth pointed out in 2001 (pg. 14) that there is always a danger of the citizenry drawing back to a more passive role as *"consumers of politics, expecting others to solve our problems, even though we are deeply cynical of their ability to do so"* rather than seeking to examine actions we can all take to build a shared society. In this sense civic participation holds the potential to open up space for people to get involved in addressing issues of common concern and to do so in a way that is cognisant of the needs of all citizens regardless of their differences in political aspiration, religion, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, class or age.

Integral to building a society based on the common good is understanding the interconnectedness within and between communities (even among those whom we might perceive as our 'enemies'). As previously outlined by Bollaert (2018a) there are strong parallels between current understandings of the common good and the African philosophy of *ubuntu* in terms of mutuality and interdependence. A public lecture by Julia Unwin (2011), former CEO of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, emphasised how *"a good society that recognizes that what we hold in common is both important and valuable, and that jeopardizing the common good for individual gain, diminishes us all"*. In this sense we cannot stand for 'ourselves alone', and if we do, it is more than likely that we will not be the only ones losing out. This interconnectedness is reflected in a sense of citizenship that *"invokes bonds uniting citizens amongst themselves and to their society"* (Storrie in Roche *et al* 2004:57). It points back to 19th century observations of democratic participation such as that of Alexis de Tocqueville where *"involvement in public affairs is the best antidote to the pernicious effects of individualistic isolation"* (Bellah et al 2008:38).

What is Civic Participation?
The term 'civic participation' is often used interchangeably with 'civic engagement' and broadly refers to *"activities that strengthen social ties, build collective responsibility, and benefit society as a whole"* (Ginwright *et al.* 2006: 267) - effectively it is about intentional actions that further the common good. While people can take action as individuals, it is often the case they are thinking not just on behalf of themselves but also for the good of others. It, therefore, offers the possibility for everyone to be involved in the betterment of society but ultimately leans towards a vision of doing this work together alongside others.

Another key aspect of civic participation is its location in the public arena in addressing issues of concern to the wider 'public' and for this reason such engagement reflects the political dimension of civic activity. While many people would not necessarily describe themselves as 'political', working with others to respond to community or societal issues is essentially about being political because actions are focused on addressing problems (VeLure Roholt & Baizerman 2013).

Examples of civic participation range from getting involved in party-based and electoral politics; lobbying and campaigning; carrying out community clean-ups; being part of protests, demonstrations or vigils; volunteering through charity-based activities; actions emanating from civil society organisations; advocacy on behalf of individuals or groups; and developing action projects with others to address issues, raise awareness or seek accountability from community leaders or elected representatives.

On 'being' and 'doing' citizen/citizenship

Getting to grips with ideas about the common good and how it can be pursued through civic participation requires wrestling with key questions such as, what does it means to be human, what is our vocation, how are we to relate to one another, what rights do we have, what values should guide us, how are we to organise society for the good of everyone? A key value for this exploration is democracy, which is not merely descriptive of a system for government, but is also a value arising from our interconnectedness: *"a quality that runs through the whole of life, to the relationships between us"* (Jeffs & Smith 1999: 39). It is not just a lofty or noble, if important, concept but requires hard graft, intentional labour, robust dialogue, and ongoing nurture in order to navigate the difficult terrain that inevitably arises where there are competing interests, differences and conflicts between people, tensions between rights and responsibilities, and disparities in the resources shared by different groups of people or with regard to their wellbeing. Consequently Jeffs & Smith argue that if we want to bring about the flourishing advocated by common good-focused thinking, then we must *"actively engage with, and seek to strengthen, those situations and movements that embody democratic values and draw people together"* (ibid).

John Dewey was an influential thinker on education as well as a philosopher and psychologist. In 1937 he wrote, *"The very idea of democracy, the meaning of democracy, must be continually explored afresh; it has to be constantly discovered, and rediscovered, remade and reorganized"* (Boydston 2008: 182). This highlights how we have to continually re-invent democracy for the times we live in. Such work is certainly not going to happen by itself but requires people to come together proactively to figure out how we can share in a common life in a way that addresses inequalities and displays *"mutual respect, a concern for others' needs, and a belief in community"* (Jeffs & Smith 1999:46).

Concomitant with this conceptualisation of democracy is an embodied approach to 'citizenship', where concerted action is taken to participate in a lived sense of citizenship borne out of real-life experiences. This kind of citizenship cannot be nurtured simply through education in civics that detail the technicalities of various parliamentary systems and governance structures. By contrast, as VeLure Roholt and Baizerman (2013:34) outline:

"We become citizens by engaging in public work, not by knowing particular knowledge, mastering specific skills, or embodying definitive dispositions. Citizenship is far too dynamic. By locating citizenship in the everyday work done 'by the people, for the people', it follows that each new generation will have to learn and know different knowledge and skills because these are needed to confront each (new) problem. Citizenship, in this view, is continually developed over time and requires practice."

Civic participation provides an avenue to embody the inherent citizenship that each of us possess as human beings beyond whatever it says on our passports or other forms of ID. When we engage in the examples described above, we are reaching out beyond ourselves, problem solving, seeking accountability of those in positions of power or with decision-making capacity and acting towards change for the better. In so doing we can attain what VeLure Roholt & Baizerman (ibid) describe as 'civic literacy'.

The challenge with seeking to nurture the above notions of democracy in the contested space of Northern Ireland/the north of Ireland is that we seem to – as Wilson (2016) has observed – get bogged down in 'entanglement' because of our differences, rigid stereotypes, the (perceived) threat posed by those different to us, the dehumanisation of 'the other' rather than feeling at ease with the potential for 'association' with one another that has space for openness, curiosity, learning, fluidity and a sense that we have more in common than that which separates us.

It is here that the principle of human dignity – so vital in underpinning the vision of the common good, and which acknowledges the equality of all humans – comes to the fore. When we treat each other as equal – if different – citizens, then there is room for different voices as well as difficult stories to be heard, for constructive partnerships to emerge, for the barriers that separate to be transcended, and for everyone to play their part in making society better for everyone else (ibid.). Moreover, it is possible for this respect for dignity and equality to include space for celebrating diversity without the dilution of identity or culture.

The Common Good, Civic Participation and Youth Work

Most of the values and principles underpinning the concept of the common good noted above are likely to be very familiar to most youth workers as they regularly appear in much of the language of youth work and informal education – particularly in terms of values such as respect for persons, promotion of wellbeing, democracy, fairness and equality (Jeffs & Smith 1999), equity, diversity, interdependence (CDU 2003), association, and justice (Young 1999).

In 1980 (second edition 1982) Mark Smith's booklet entitled, "Creators not consumers", advocated for youth work practice that enables young people to engage with community and associational life. He argued for a 'critical social education' that sustains a way of working with young people more interested in the process than results or outputs and valuing what they gain through 'learning by doing'. Furthermore, he rejected notions of young people as passive consumers of youth work 'interventions' or as spectators of life more broadly, and instead emphasized the potential offered by seeing young people as

active creators and participants within youth work initiatives and relationships. It is here that we see the beginnings of an understanding of the co-creative potential of young people to effect change for themselves and others.

Another seminal text, 'The Art of Youth Work' (Young 1999: 1) advocates for a conceptualisation of youth work as,

> *"enabling and supporting young people, at a critical moment in their lives, to learn and develop the capacities to reflect, to reason and to act as social beings in the social world…in accordance with the state of 'good faith' to which all human beings aspire."*

Young's writing locates youth work as an 'ethical practice' that acknowledges young people as social beings and that supports them to engage in moral deliberations and 'philosophizing', to figure out what makes for 'the good life', and to identify guiding values for their lives. Again, this is in sync with the roots and more recent ideas about the pursuit of the common good.

Jeffs and Smith's writing (1999) promotes fostering democracy as a central task for informal educators. They note that having the skill to facilitate dialogue supports young people to navigate difference and disagreement as they encounter the challenges of being with and engaging with each other and sharing in making decisions. Furthermore, they give moral weight to *"the cultivation of the knowledge, skills and virtues necessary for political participation"* as a key educational purpose (1999: 46). Doing this work with young people is vital if we are to help them try out ways of working that create the kind of society they want to live in, one that is of benefit to them and others and not just a privileged few.

Emerging in the last ten years, the 'In Defence of Youth Work' campaign based in the English youth work context, argues for state provision for open access youth work and regards one of the strands of its vision for youth work as, *"the nurturing of a self-conscious democratic practice, tipping balances of power in young people's favour"* (In Defence of Youth Work 2017). Honouring Young, Jeffs and Smith, this is also allusive of Freirian ideas around *conscientisation,* where young people are supported to develop a 'critical consciousness' by reflecting on the situations they find themselves in and becoming aware of power imbalances and structural factors that serve to diminish their dignity and sense of agency within these situations. This links with the capacity of groups of young people to develop *"collective efficacy"* through active participation in working towards the common good (Ginwright *et al* 2006: xvii).

Where do young people fit in?
The above understandings of youth work philosophy and values lead us to consider how we think about young people, and this is absolutely critical to our practice if we wish to engage in youth work that contributes to the pursuit of the common good and that supports young people to engage in civic participation as a means of working towards the good of all thus contributing to their vision of society.

Young people are often portrayed in a number of negative ways – disengaged, disaffected, marginalised, troublemakers, incomplete, vulnerable, out of control and so on in addition to

experiencing ageist discrimination. The reality is that young people are not homogenous and are influenced significantly by the contexts and conditions that shape their lives and experiences. Moreover, they are often deliberately blocked from processes or participative structures where they could play an active role and as Ginwright *et al* (2006: xix) point out, they participate by merit of having to chart a path through the laws and policies made by adults. The fact that young people have been and continue to be active players in key movements for social change as noted already demonstrates just how much they care about key issues that don't only impact them but also others in their communities. Similar to adults, young people can be both perpetrators and victims of terrible crimes, but this does not speak to pathological factors related to their age or physical development. As for being seen as not yet fully formed until they reach adulthood at the age of 18, it is difficult to comprehend how adults can claim to be human beings who have reached a fixed destination of maturation when all of us are in a (hopefully) continual state of growth.

Hart (2009: 654) notes that with regard to citizenship, young people have been seen as requiring "responsibilisation" i.e. needing to acquire particular sets of compliant behaviours and that this perspective only serves to deny them exercising their voice along with other citizens. She goes on to write that,

> *"If young people are not respected as equal members of the community*
> *and society in which they live, it is difficult to imagine how a sense of*
> *mutuality and/or active engagement, essential for the successful*
> *development of their citizenship, may be fostered and sustained" (ibid).*

What Hart points to here is the necessity of regarding young people through the lens of equality with other human beings – they are neither more important nor lesser than other groupings of people, they are simply people who are young in a time of key transitions.

In the world of community relations work in Northern Ireland/the north of Ireland, funding structures often have the effect of 'problematizing' and scapegoating young people. For example, many good relations initiatives are predicated on the idea of bringing young people from different community backgrounds together to reduce sectarianism. This sectarianism, apparent in attitudes and behaviours, is broadly understood as an individualised issue rather than being framed within the context of life in a highly divided and contested society that has a profound impact on young people's experiences. The consequence of this strategy reduces good relations work with young people to cross-community encounters that offer minimal opportunities for young people to both grasp and challenge the structures giving rise to sectarianism and division, and ultimately it serves to undermine the common good because young people are denied a meaningful role and voice that arises from their experiences. It would be much more constructive to develop cross-community initiatives – in partnership with young people – that enable them to enter into robust discussion about how society is structured in discriminatory ways that exacerbate divisions and to explore ways to subvert those divisions and work towards a shared future together.

Such an approach goes beyond some of the conventional conceptions of active citizenship work that seeks to educate young people so that they vote when they come of age or that encourage young people to get involved in volunteering or social action projects. Such

activities in themselves are of course valuable, beneficial and have their place but do not necessarily serve as meaningful civic participation opportunities if there is no recognition of young people as 'citizens now' (VeLure Roholt and Baizerman 2013, VeLure Roholt, Baizerman and Hildreth 2013, IDYW 2017) or as *"political beings who right now can, indeed must, be brought into the civic realm, for without their current involvement, the realm could again shrink"* (Baizerman in Smyth 2000: 4). Indeed, Ginwright *et al* (2006:xix)affirm Baizerman's assertion of civic participation as a *"conserving activity"* of democracy when they state that *"the only chance for democracy to expand in the next generation is for young people to be perceived of and treated as vital agents of social transformation"*.

If young people are to meaningfully contribute to and benefit from the common good through getting involved in the civic lives of their communities and beyond it is essential that as youth workers we get our starting point – how we see young people and what VeLure Roholt & Baizerman (2013) refer to as our 'orientation' – right. Furthermore, because *"young people have the best vantage point for understanding what they need for securing a healthy, safe, and productive existence"* (Ginwright *et al* 2006:xx), it is possible to focus on getting to the heart of who young people are, find out what they care about and use those insights as the starting point for meaningful youth work. As a result, encouraging young people to become civically active is always grounded to the context of their lives and what it means to be a young person in the current time and space.

Civic Youth Work

Building on the orientations described above, 'civic youth work' is an area of youth work practice that promotes an understanding of young people as 'citizens now' and can be found in a variety of forms including youth-led 'community organizing' or activism, youth-led evaluation, and youth participatory action research. While described as a complex practice, civic youth work's essence is captured simply in VeLure Roholt and Baizerman's (2013:12) definition as *"good work with young people in small groups on issues which matter to them about which they want to 'do something'"*.

However this belies the ways in which it operates at multiple layers in terms of its emphasis on being grounded in young people's lived realities and experiences, how it is characterised by dialogical relationships and interactions – with group peers, youth workers and others, the co-creative approach of doing *with* young people rather than *to* or *for*, and the youth worker's embodiment of democratic practice as their way of showing up in the world inviting young people to participate in addressing the issues important to them. This contrasts with many examples of programme or curriculum-based work with young people common to a range of youth-focused organisations.

One of the key strategies used by civic youth workers to support young people to get involved in addressing issues that impact their lives is to engage them in a process of enquiry through questions that examine the surrounding context and challenge the status quo. For example, using questions such as:

> Is this a good place to be a young person?
> Are young people listened to or valued in this community?
> What do you have to do to fit in round here?
> What are the rules of this community?

What kinds of people are excluded from this community or marginalised?
What is normal? Who decides?
Why are things the way they are?'

Out of these questions more will emerge, and the answers will form the basis for the work the young people wish to construct together – in effect their lives serve as the curriculum. An interrogatory approach like this can open up new learning, ideas and possibilities and has been described as crucial for a functioning democracy (Neyfakh 2012).

Furthermore, civic youth work is not about play-acting, rather it is focused on young people doing 'real work on real issues. This taps into a belief in the value of 'learning by doing' and facilitates young people's active participation in responding to the things they care about. It also serves to communicate that young people matter, validating their contribution and the way in which their lives carry significance for their communities and wider society as they take action.

It is important to note that while young people who experience civic youth work reap multiple benefits such as increased confidence and self-esteem, enhanced critical thinking, collaborative and problem-solving skills, capacity to listen to those different from themselves and greater awareness of their communities and the wider world, it also holds the possibility of benefits to society more broadly beyond individual young people. Namely, *"the ongoing resuscitation of communal civic life, particularly democratic civil society – for its reproduction and its improvement"* (VeLure Roholt & Baizerman 2013:13) and this is one of the powerful ways in which civic youth work can contribute to the vision of the common good through supporting young people's civic participation and engagement.

Conclusion

In thinking about the relevance of all of these ideas around the common good, youth civic participation and young people as citizens in the context of Northern Ireland/the north of Ireland where the work of the peace process is ongoing, youth workers have a vital role in enabling young people to contribute to an inclusive and peaceful shared future. One way of acknowledging, respecting and amplifying young people's voice and agency is to adopt 'conflict-informed' practice that supports young people to recognize the systemic nature of conflict, expose where they and their peers are scapegoated and drawn into violence, and reflect critically on the dynamics of life in a 'contested society'. Such 'consciousness-raising' will also enable young people to identify how various oppressions and types of discrimination (e.g. on the basis of sexuality, disability, class, gender, race as well as religion or community background) intersect and reinforce each other.

At a more strategic level it is useful to consider three key recommendations made in the recent 'Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security'(UNFPA & PBSO 2018:117) that acknowledg the contribution young people can make in the sphere of peace and security and advocate for policy-level and systems support to facilitate the involvement of young people:

- Investment in young people, their agency and leadership including funding support, network-building, capacity-strengthening;

- Systemic transformation to tackle structural barriers that inhibit youth participation; and
- Prioritization of partnerships and collaboration where young people are considered equal partners for peace.

Strategies such as these acknowledge young people's capacity to be partners in working for the common good to bring about positive social change. If we want young people to become active in the civic lives of their communities or broader society – and thus contribute to pursuing the common good – we need to let them speak to the truth of their lives and act out of their agency. Youth workers have a tremendous privilege and responsibility to experiment with various ways of working with young people that honour them for the potential they hold, support them to figure out what they want to say and to say it – ways that start from where the young people are at, that are co-creative and that foster equity, diversity and interdependence (CDU 2003). Such practice is worth nurturing, sustaining, and celebrating as part of our own embodiment of the work towards building a good society for everyone.

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