

Servants or Shapers?

Young People, Volunteering and Community

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November 2007

First published November 2007 by the:

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ISBN 9780 7340 3897 5

Pictures from the Darebin Schools Network,
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A version of this paper was originally presented at the 11th National Conference on Volunteering; Carlton Crest Hotel, Melbourne: 7-10 March 2006.

The **Longitudinal Study of Participants in Youth Development Programs** was carried out by the Australian Youth Research Centre in 2002-2004 and was commissioned by the Youth Bureau in the Australian Government's Department of Family and Community Services.

The study of **Student Action Teams** was initially carried out by the Australian Youth Research Centre between 1999 and 2002 and was commissioned by the Victorian Department of Education.



Executive Summary

Various school and community programs seek to enhance the role of young people as volunteers within our communities. However, the nature of the opportunities for young people to play valued roles within those communities varies considerably.

This paper draws on two recent studies to examine the ways in which young people are situated as volunteers and as members of communities. The **Longitudinal Study of Participants in Youth Development Programs** tracked a group of young people in school-based Youth Development Programs in three Australian states for three years, looking at their perceptions of outcomes, participation and community involvement. At much the same time, an evaluation of two phases of the **Student Action Team** program in Victoria, raised practical understandings of ways in which students were researching and changing their communities.

Within a consistently emerging framework that defines factors that build strong and resilient learners, the outcomes of these two studies have much to tell us about approaches to young people, volunteering and community - and the importance of seeing young people as **'shapers rather than servants'** of community.



Civic Service: Young People as Volunteers?

We are currently faced with calls for some form of civic service for young people – whether it’s compulsory, ‘expected’ or voluntary in its nature.

These programs are seen as ones “through which young people can develop their skills and, through the culture of service, become more active citizens”

(Fox and Besselink, 2004: 1).

The calls for such service frequently arise from academic or populist perceptions of the civic disengagement of young people, or from deficit-based judgements around young people’s citizenship. We see this particularly in press speculation about young people’s alleged hedonism and withdrawal from political involvement (eg Norman, J. in *The Age*, 23/2/06 and Letters, 28/2/06).

By looking at lessons from two recent studies of young people’s participation in community-based programs, I want to argue that we need to re-assess our expectations of the role of young people as volunteers, in community service and in service learning to ensure that they are actively engaged in creating and developing those forms of action and community. I will also argue that many young people **are** already actively

engaged in community creation and volunteering in ways that are invisible to others.

Recent Australian calls for a ‘youth civic service’ echo those expressed elsewhere in recent years. In Britain, for example, there have been proposals for a ‘national volunteering strategy’ (Williamson, 2004), for a ‘youth community service scheme’ (Fox and Besselink, 2004) and for a ‘national youth action programme’ (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2004; National Youth Agency, 2004). In the USA and elsewhere internationally, there have been similar initiatives within schools and systems for many years under the heading of ‘service learning’ (Ausyouth, 2000; McBride *et al*, 2003). Recently, the suggestions in Australia – for example from Young Labor – have argued for some form of civic service or volunteering to be built into school programs, including

suggestions that minimum levels of community service **must** be completed before students can graduate. It should be noted in this regard that youth development programs have operated in schools in at least four Australian states since the mid-1990s and these already include, to varying degrees, elements of community service work.

However, such talk of volunteering and community service has largely ignored the perspectives of young people, particularly about how they see their roles within their communities. When we talk about volunteering, service and community within education, we strangely omit consideration of the voices of young people or their roles as active participants in decision-making about that service. These initiatives remain different ways of doing things **to**

TWO STUDIES

young people, not partnerships **with** young people. Without understanding how young people see such programs – and perceive themselves in relation to service and community – we cannot understand what program elements will engage and ‘hold’ young people within inclusive and reciprocal communities.

In recognising the importance of everyday voluntary commitments as the basis for building inclusive communities, we must then explicitly see these approaches as supporting young people as full and active members in the determination of those communities.

This paper draws on two recent studies by the Australian Youth Research Centre to examine ways in which they position young people as volunteers and community members.

The first study was carried out between 2002 and 2004 for the then Australian Government Youth Bureau, Department of Family and Community Services into ‘Outcomes for Participants in Youth Development Programs’. These state-based programs operate through or in association with schools. They emphasise skill development of young people in community settings, partnerships with community organisations (ranging from Australian Defence Force Cadets through national service organisations such as Red Cross to national, state or local environmental organisations), and (to varying degrees) forms of community service. The study followed a cohort of young people who took part in such three state-based programs (in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia), for three years and listened to their voices about what they did, how they viewed program elements and what they achieved. The report of this study has been released (Holdsworth, Lake, Stacey and Stafford, 2005) (also available at: [www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/youth_development_programs/\\$file/doing_positive_things1.pdf](http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/youth_development_programs/$file/doing_positive_things1.pdf)).

The second study involved an evaluation of the operation and outcomes of Student Action Teams in Victoria through two phases between 1999 and 2003. In these programs, school students in primary and secondary schools investigated and developed action around community issues such as community safety. The initial program was statewide, initiated and supported by the Department of Justice, and operated through the Department of Education and Training in 20 secondary schools (Phase 1), then in 36 primary and secondary schools (Phase 2). Reports of this study are available in reports from the Australian Youth Research Centre (Holdsworth, Stafford, Stokes and Tyler, 2001; Holdsworth, Cahill and Smith, 2003). Subsequently, similar programs have operated at a local level around many community issues such as traffic safety, environment, young people and the law, values and so on. Further documentation of such approaches is forthcoming (Holdsworth, 2006). Common to all of these Student Action Teams is a decision by groups of students to undertake voluntary research and action work within their communities.

These two studies provide very different pictures of educational programs that support young people as volunteers within their communities, and illuminate assumptions about roles that young people are encouraged or allowed to take. They also raise important questions about community involvement and citizenship.

THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Before looking at outcomes of these studies, it is useful to have a context for examining the development of their approaches.

Various citizenship studies, including the Australian work of Suzanne Mellor (Mellor, 1998), have indicated the powerlessness felt by young people in being able to influence their world. This is expressed through the phrase used by Mellor to title her report: *“What’s the point?”*. We hear similar strong expression in various research studies, in the voices of marginalised young people who are alienated from their schools, their communities, and their learning:

“If you don’t do as they say you are out, you are over a barrel even though they present this image of ‘it is up to you, we respect your decision...’; we have no real power.” (16 yo female student, Tasmanian rural)

“The teachers, and the freedom thing; how are we supposed to learn how to be responsible if you are never given any responsibility?” (18 yo male student, Tasmanian metro) (quoted in ACEE and AYRC, 2001)

Others talk more positively of being in different or ‘alternative’ programs and say what they value about how they were treated in these:

“The workers treat us like adults. They do not put us under pressure to do things; they let us make our own decisions.” (16 yo male, WA metro)

“He talks to you as a person - it is more like a job and he is the boss. I like the way I am treated. We build stuff that is useful ...” (16 yo male, SA regional centre) (ibid)

These voices may merely illustrate the tip of an iceberg, with larger numbers of young people alienated and distanced from engagement as active shapers of their futures or of the contexts and communities that influence those futures, but also more passive and withdrawn from expressing anger and resentment (Holdsworth, 2000). These and other studies have also asked young people about the communities to which they belong, and there has been concern that young people appear not to be significantly engaged in these either.

What is the response to these findings? The national *Discovering Democracy* program, for example, sought to address issues of civic knowledge, but also to encourage active citizenship through school programs. Other initiatives, such as those being considered in this paper, are also developed in response to those issues of alienation and engagement (see also ACSA, 1996). Clearly, these initiatives say that this is not a situation with which we can be content.

There is, however, considerable debate about the characteristics of educational programs that address these concerns. I am particularly interested in encouraging, supporting and documenting

approaches in schools that enhance the role of young people in constructing and determining their personal and social futures – providing young people with **roles of value** within the communities in which they live.

Such ideas go beyond schools of course. Johanna Wyn specifically links such categorisation and marginalisation of young people’s participation – the **deferral of roles of value** to an uncertain future - to ways in which we regard their citizenship:

One of the central features of a categorical concept of youth is its positioning of youth in relation to the future. However the ‘future’ for which youth are positioned from a categorical perspective is an ahistorical, static notion of adulthood, based on a supposed dichotomy between the categories of adulthood and youth rather than on an understanding of the complex continuities through the life cycle. Conceptually, the positioning of youth in this way obscures the experiences of young people by relegating them to a less significant realm than those who have reached ‘adult’ life. Young people are seen as ‘non-adults’, a group who are in deficit. They are citizens of the future, rather than citizens in the present. (Wyn, 1995: 52)

But schools in particular play a strong role in shaping young people’s perception of self in relation to others and in relation to civic institutions. Hannam

succinctly characterises such approaches, in reflecting on the nature of much 'citizenship education':

Learning about democracy and citizenship when I was at school was a bit like reading holiday brochures in prison. Unless you were about to be let out or escape, it was quite frustrating and seemed pointless... To be effectively educated for democracy means being able to BE a democratic citizen. It means ... knowing how to DO democracy and not just knowing about it... (Hannam, 2000: 24)

What are we really teaching young people by the way in which we treat them? When we hold them in passive roles, in which they are perceived (by themselves and others) to have **no value except in terms of what they will become**, then they learn powerful messages about their on-going self worth and about their contributions – voluntary or otherwise - to

collective roles within society (Holdsworth, 2000).

A FRAMEWORK

Over the last 10 to 15 years, there have been reasonably consistent proposals about a framework that would guide the construction of a new role for young people through schools.

For example, Walker and Kelly (2002) suggest that student motivation to learn depends on three key student needs:

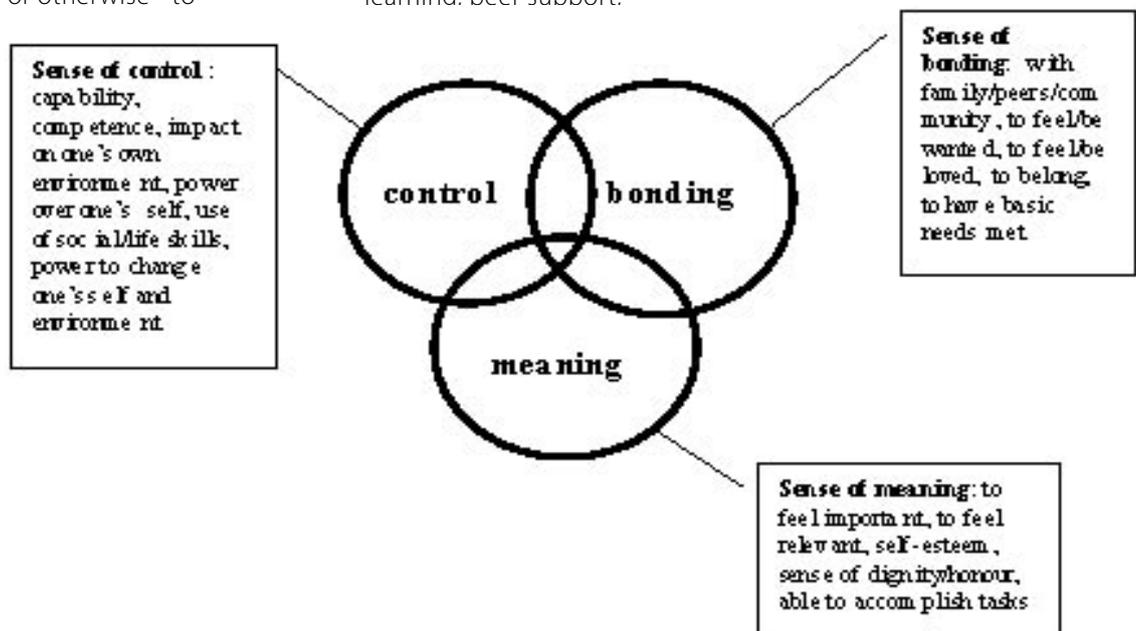
- to feel in **control** of their learning (significant input to rules and procedures, establish learning goals and tasks, decide how to work);
- to feel **competent** (investigating and responding to issues of survival and quality of life, solving real problems, creating real products); and
- to feel **connected** with others (cooperative and collaborative learning, peer support.

community linkages, mutual respect).

Earlier, Newmann, Wehlage and Lamborn (1992) said that learners need to have a **clear purpose**, be **valued** and be treated with **respect and fairness**.

And similarly, Nancy Phillips in 1990, in summarising research about the development of strong self-concept in people, pointed to three central and inter-related factors (see diagram below).

Each of these statements or models points out that active participation in decision-making is vital within the development processes for us all – as individuals, and as a society. But they also point out the critical nature of working collaboratively with others (not alone or as isolated individuals) and, most importantly to me, of focusing on the content and application of that involvement – on establishing publicly useful roles for young people.



Youth Development and Community Linkages

In the first of the two studies, the youth development programs that we examined build in explicit requirements for the participants to link with their communities, and we will shortly examine how both programs and young people see such links. What is anticipated as outcomes from such linkages?

In the report on the longitudinal youth development study, we identified three broad areas of outcomes from good community-based practice in youth development:

First, community linkages have benefits for young people's **skill development**:

- They provide young people with opportunities and experiences that develop knowledge and skills from sources other than the classroom.
- They provide young people with opportunities to test their own knowledge and skills in real-life situations.

Secondly, community linkages have benefits for young people's **personal, social and civic development**:

- They develop young people's awareness of individual and community responsibility and the benefits to be derived from active participation.
- They provide young people with opportunities and experiences that strengthen and enhance their connection with their communities.
- They give young people a stake in their communities as well as fostering an optimistic outlook for their futures.

Thirdly, community linkages have benefits for the development of **inclusive communities**:

- They provide opportunities for young people and adults to develop positive relationships that might not otherwise exist, as they get to know, respect and learn from each other through their common interest.

- They provide community recognition of young people as valued contributors in and to their communities, and encourage active citizenship and social inclusion.
- They support the engagement of young people in their communities as a vital and necessary condition for the ongoing evolution and advancement of those communities. (Holdsworth *et al*, 2005: 96)

And, more pragmatically, such programs are seen by some community organisations as encouraging continued involvement of young people as volunteers or paid members.

When we asked young people why these programs existed, they identified both 'personal' reasons (in terms of their own learning and

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skill development) and 'altruistic' reasons (involved with helping others). Reflecting program publicity, young people gave more weight to the personal reasons (Holdsworth *et al*, 2005: 43). As has been noted in an international study of civic service:

The institution of service provides incentives for participation. Participation may be compulsory, whereby punishment may serve as a negative incentive. Positive incentives of both compulsory and voluntary programs may include awards, educational credits or scholarships, and increased skills and knowledge.
(McBride *et al*, 2003: 2)

The advocacy for and implementation of various community-based programs in schools, in which young people are volunteers, sees them primarily as effective approaches to learning. But many programs also have objectives beyond the individualised functional outcomes, and identify the program's potential for the development of young people as effective, committed and active members of their multiple communities.

Those are the hopes and intentions. How do they match with outcomes and, in particular, with young people's perceptions of what is delivered?

In the *Youth Development* and *Student Action Teams* studies (and also in an earlier study on young people and the environmental movement: Wilson *et al*, 1991; plus broader studies of the views of young people on school, families and community: ACEE and AYRC, 2001), we have been talking with young people about the nature of their involvement with communities. We have been talking both implicitly and sometimes explicitly about their work as volunteers. We have particularly been interested to understand how young people see their continuing roles as volunteers and community members and what shapes this.

In interviews within the *Youth Development* study, many young people had a generalised but positive and inclusive sense of community as a good place to be, something to which they belonged and, perhaps because of that, something that needed to be looked after. As one student noted:

"The community is a place you feel comfortable to live in and if it's in trouble you want to help out – like a friend you help out so they are happier and feeling better, you want to do that with the community too." (quoted in Holdsworth *et al*, 2005: 44)

Based on the responses from young people, the following four aspects of 'community involvement' were defined (and we acknowledge that we were drawing also here on concepts around environmental education):

- a) **about the community**, in which students learn of their existing communities through observational studies or with information provided by local government, community groups and so on. This may take place in 'civics' classes or other curriculum areas. At a 'passive' level, many local groups and Councils have information pamphlets, some targeted to young people; at a more 'active' level, some Councils have recruited and trained students as Student Information Officers to convey such information through peer linkages.
- b) **in the community** through which students learn in and from community settings: resources (buildings, personnel) and learning institutions (eg community library). Some Councils have encouraged students to use Council Chambers for meetings or training events.
- c) **for the community** in which students learn through carrying out projects that can contribute to or enhance existing community services. This can include human service or community resource production (see, for example: www.servicelearning.org/). We observed that youth development programs in various states have a strong service learning component in which students work with 'Meals on Wheels', environmental

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groups and other services, visit senior citizen centres to present activities or entertainment, produce resource directories for other young people, help at special education settings, taken part in 'Clean Up' Days and so on.

- d) **with the community:** in which students learn through carrying out local investigations, making proposals and taking action as citizens and members of their communities as part of their curriculum - interacting with the community, as community members. This includes the development of roles for young people as researchers, activists, lobbyists and decision-makers. Students (and schools generally) learn through work in partnership with community groups and local government. Students have been involved in studies and action around important local issues – environment, safety, recreation, resource development and so on. (ibid)

The most frequent response from schools and system programs to community involvement, and this was particularly evident in the youth development programs, has been the establishment of **community service models.**

Such initiatives were also reflected in young people's descriptions of 'helping others', 'being a volunteer' or 'doing community service'.

They saw this work as:

"Something that benefits the community, not one or two people." (quoted in Holdsworth et al, 2005: 44)

but only two young people from the sample of 147 saw it explicitly as a reciprocal arrangement about community, as distinct from a 'one-way-street' that involved them in 'helping' others or from which they gained personal skills or increased esteem:

"You help out with the community and give your knowledge to people that others might not have – you can add your knowledge to theirs and they can pass on things to you." (quoted in Holdsworth et al, 2005: 44)

"We are part of the community and young people don't have a lot of say and if we do then it is usually put out as negative, so this rectifies myths about us – it's going to be our community so we can start looking after it." (ibid: 72)

For some young people, the language of 'community service' had a further meaning associated with compulsion or punishment:

"I think with hearing 'community service' about being punished: 'Sentenced to 100 hours community service.'"

"We cleaned up the edge of the bypass. We liked it even though it's a bit of a dirty job. We wouldn't like it if we had to do it at school because that's different. It's not fun and you can't muck around and it's a type of punishment." (ibid: 44)

When we asked young people about the nature of the activities that were organised for them through such school programs, we were concerned, however, that a severely limited picture of what 'community service' or volunteering meant. They mentioned things like:

- **Maintaining community facilities:** working bees at the tennis club; cleaning at the primary school; tidying the drill hall.
- **Helping at community events:** ANZAC day, Poppy Day, the Royal Show; taking part in special parades and events.
- **Helping in local sports activities:** the canteen at the footy club or the pigeon racing; giving out water at the fun run; joining clubs - Fishing and Surf;
- **Serving community safety:** doing life-saving courses 'in case people may need us'; learning how to swim and rescue others; CFA junior volunteer; helping with first aid at the festival.

- **Cleaning or maintaining the environment:** taking part in Clean Up Australia; picking up litter to make coasts look more beautiful; recycling; tidying in the national park; tree planting; doing 'stuff' at an environment centre.
- **Providing intergenerational support:** helping old people generally, including getting firewood; helping or performing or playing music at a hospital.
- **Fundraising:** helping to raise money for charity through fetes and tin-rattles. (ibid: 45)

We were struck here by the 'distance' or separation of these young people from the communities they served – the sense of 'otherness' of those communities. The activities involved young people in being instructed what to do, but not encouraged to determine directions or analyse the nature of community arrangements.

Some young people started to draw distinctions between working as volunteers in approaches that were 'service-oriented' and those that were 'change-oriented':

***"We did something for them, but not with them. We would have liked to do something with the community."** (ibid; emphasis in the original)*

In another discussion, the contrast was made with an approach based on an active role for young people in deciding about their involvement:

Teacher: "You need to make sure you find an appropriate community group to do this with if you want it to work."

Student: "And young people need to pick it so they really want to participate." (quoted in Holdsworth et al, 2005: 99)

The reflection on characteristics of the experiences of young people highlights elements that are important to maintain motivation, but also to have a broader impact on young people's 'agency' within their communities. Ausyouth suggests, in its guide to **Good practice in youth development** (Ausyouth, 2001: 7) that engagement with forms of volunteerism and community service 'that are meaningful for both the young people and the community' are necessary. Such an orientation provides one possible opportunity to transform the relationship of young people to community service, as young people move into a more active participatory role around questions of **what service is important, why it is carried out, and what ends may be achieved.**

When such discussions and decision-making did not happen within the programs we surveyed, we noted that young people had **low expectations of outcomes** in community service, **weren't clear about program intentions** in this area and rated outcomes in the area as the **lowest of all outcomes** identified – even lower than their initial expectations.

Similarly, in reflecting on the relative importance and occurrence of outcomes, the young people rated 'joining community groups' at the **bottom** of their lists (Holdsworth et al, 2005: 46). However, where community connections were planned as a program component, and where young people were engaged in that planning, there were stronger and more positive outcomes. We noted:

When young people were involved in some form of community action, whether it be service-oriented or change-oriented, they reported a sense of belonging or inclusion – and an appreciation of respect from those outside their normal cohort of school contacts. (ibid)

One group of young people said strongly:

"Kids have to want to help the community. They have to see that they will also get something out of it." (quoted in Holdsworth et al, 2005: 39)

CONTINUED INVOLVEMENT AS VOLUNTEERS

The Youth Development study followed up a sub-sample of 30 young people (approximately 50% of the original cohort) approximately a year after they had concluded their Youth Development program. These young people were generally still at school, and this may influence the amount of time they had to play broader community roles.

While they saw that there had been substantial learning outcomes for them as individuals (skills, knowledge and attitudes), few commented on any community-related outcomes beyond the program. None of the 30 reported any active involvement with the community organisation with which they had been linked and only two had had any contact at all. (However we know from one program – a State Emergency

Service – that, in a longer-term context, continued membership has come through its Cadet program.) Six students had joined some form of community group, and eight had carried out some form of volunteer work, mainly through school-based initiatives.

A teacher expressed hopes for future involvement:

“It introduces the students to volunteer work that may carry over when they are adults. In other words, it may help breed another generation of volunteers. As a result, more future volunteers, more responsible citizens in the future.” (quoted in Holdsworth et al, 2005: 72)

While we recognised that there was no significant continuing volunteer work within the sample after one year, we concluded:

Youth development programs provided many young people with their first experiences of volunteering or community service. Provider organisations were confident that there were potential long-term benefits likely to arise from these initial experiences. Their hope was that, while only a relatively small number of young people continued to participate in voluntary activities, some would re-establish their commitment to voluntary service once study or family commitments were less or, in the case of the armed services, embark on a career with the respective services. (Holdsworth et al, 2005: 58)



Student Action Teams

The concerns expressed above about the nature of the community service or volunteering experience for young people are also thrown into sharp contrast by our experience with another model of community volunteering, learning and action: that of Student Action Teams. Here, the ideas of community are more contentious, and young people are encouraged to play roles in investigating, proposing and acting around the nature of the community they desire.

The **Student Action Team** approaches unite ideas of working and learning **with** community groups, with opportunities to learn **about** (and **from**) the community. They also unite program ideas of youth participation (extending this meaning from program decision-making to community decision-making) with community connections. They directly address an approach to the role of 'empowered volunteers' who are 'change-oriented' rather than simply 'service-oriented'. (This is not to say that such Student Action Team approaches cannot also be used to direct, contain and control young people, but the principles that underlie them appear to be more 'resilient' in creating new relationships of young people with their communities.)

The **definition** of Student Action Teams is relatively simple: ***Student Action Teams involve a group of students who work on a real, identified issue of community interest. The students carry out research on the problem and develop solutions – either proposals for others or action they then take.*** (Holdsworth *et al*, 2001)

In addition, Student Action Teams are defined as working around the following **principles**:

- an active role for young people as part of their community;
- young people as community investigators;
- young people doing something that makes a difference or brings about change; and
- programs that involve learning and that meet academic goals.

In response to concerns about divergent practices calling themselves Student Action Teams, further **criteria** were suggested (Holdsworth *et al*, 2003):

- student engagement with the project focus or topic: either student choice of this, or substantial student decision-making on how to approach it;
- student engagement with project decision-making and implementation;
- a focus within the community (geographic, social or cultural) - preferably beyond the school;
- identification and formation of a student team or teams; and
- processes of research and action by students that intend to make a differences around the chosen focus/topic within the community.

The initial statewide program of Student Actions Teams began in 1999 and involved teams of students in 20 Victorian secondary schools, commissioned by the Department of Justice (with support and management through the Department of Education and Training) to define, investigate and propose or take action around **community safety**. The student teams initially met to discuss and accept the challenge and to receive training. They then worked (in various ways) within the schools to understand what 'community safety' meant, to research local issues associated with it, to investigate what was needed, and to design and implement appropriate local programs. In the second phase of this State Program, 36 Student Action Teams were supported in primary and secondary schools with similar intentions.

In some cases, the students worked in their Student Action Teams within existing classes (so a whole class group was involved, and sent a few representatives to the initial training sessions), or the school formed new electives. In other cases, teams were formed outside the formal curriculum (sometimes small teams of four to eight students), and the students were withdrawn from classes or met at lunchtimes, after school or in 'free classes'.

Since the original statewide program, various forms of the Student Action Teams concept have been developed in local

areas. Some have involved local Councils or community groups who have approached schools and then provided support for groups of students to investigate, and report or act on issues of mutual interest such as traffic safety, the environment, youth and law, or values education. In South Australia, schools statewide have been encouraged and supported to develop a Student Action Team approach to community linkages, through the SA Office for Youth.

Almost any school or community issue is seen as appropriate to the formation of a Student Action Team. One teacher said:

"If there's a community issue to be tackled, our normal approach is now to set up a Student Action Team to deal with it." (in Victorian Department of Education and Training, 2001-2003)

Some schools have developed these Teams around in-school teaching and learning approaches or about student wellbeing issues. For example, Student Action Teams have researched and developed action on bullying, on truancy (with regular truants forming the Student Action Team), on grading policies and so on. While this is immensely valuable and addresses issues within school communities, there is broader value in those Student Action Teams that have investigated and acted on wider community issues.

The choice of the focus for the Student Action Team – either by students who feel strongly

about an issue, or by local groups in 'commissioning' students to tackle an issue (and then being an audience for their outcomes and proposals) – is very important. It must be an issue that is real, that motivates students, be one on which students can have an impact and which is achievable within schools' time constraints (eg a term, a unit, or acknowledging student travel on buses etc), and which meets schools' learning objectives. A crucial aspect is the choice of such a **powerful topic**.

Some powerful local topics have been found to be:

- **safety**, including traffic safety;
- the **environment**;
- **recreation facilities** and use of **public space**;
- **transport**;
- **relationships** including issues of violence, racism, physical safety, friendship, bullying, values etc;
- **school transitions** – from primary to secondary, from school to work etc.

But there are many others that teachers and students will be able to suggest from their local knowledge – issues that are contentious and open to investigation and action.

The Student Action Teams program produced two evaluation reports by the Australian Youth Research Centre (Holdsworth *et al*, 2001; Holdsworth *et al*, 2003) as well as a '**How To**' **manual** that is available online from

the Victorian Department of Education and Training (at www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/curricman/middleyear/StudentActionTeamsManual2003.pdf) and from the South Australian Office for Youth.

Recently, I've been working with a group of 14 primary and secondary schools in Melbourne's northern suburbs using similar Student Action Teams approaches around **traffic safety, environmental education** and **values education**.

Here, we set up an initial challenge to an inter-school student forum, in the first example, about the death and injury rates of young people on suburban roads, and asked students if they were interested to investigate what the local traffic safety issues were: where people in the schools felt safe and unsafe, and what created these feelings.

Students met in three inter-school student forms during a year, accepted the challenge and began to research the issues within their own schools and neighbourhoods. Later in the year, they shared their research results and developed some proposals for action – around concepts of 'education', 'enforcement' and 'engineering'. Late in the year, they came together again to share information about the action they'd been taking and the outcomes for their communities. They worked with others within their schools and communities – parents, the local Council, police and so on – as partners in challenging and developing their safer communities.

This project was the topic of a special issue of *Connect* magazine (*Connect*, 1979-), and you can read about similar projects in various states in different issues. These local examples have been substantially documented in a book about this approach (Holdsworth, 2006).

In Student Action Teams, young people are, within the context of their studies, engaged as volunteers in contentious and uncertain communities. They are regarding themselves as having important roles to investigate, propose and take action to improve those communities. Their decision-making role is important, both for their immediate work, and also in leading to recognition of longer-term community involvement.

In looking at information about traffic safety in his local community, one student said:

"When I saw these figures, I was first of all surprised, then angry, then determined to do something about them!" (student, 2003; quoted in Holdsworth, 2006)

It is perhaps too early to determine the longer-term impact of such approaches. However, a US-based study in 1995 looked at school-based correlates of 'civic voluntarism' (Verba *et al*, 1995; quoted in Owen, 1996). Here it was noted:

... on the basis of some 15,000 preliminary interviews and a further 2,500 in-depth interviews that, while schools can have a very important role to play in the 'pathways' to civic participation, the provision of actual civics courses does not... Rather, the study showed that it was opportunities for participation (and therefore learning) in the processes of school governance, together with opportunities to discuss contemporary political issues of interest to students that were more important... The US study suggests, very forcibly indeed, that it is how we run our schools, rather than what we teach in them, that will determine levels of active citizenship. Changing curricula is difficult enough; developing genuinely inclusive and democratic systems of school governance is even more so... (Owen, 1996)

This gives hope that participation in initiatives such as Student Action Teams, that enable students to engage with community issues in a way that enables them to 'practise' real roles in a supportive and positive way, is likely to provide long-term outcomes for engaged and active citizens – including roles as volunteers.

New Visions of Young People, Communities and Volunteers

Traditional community-involvement programs for young people may reinforce their alienation by an emphasis on ‘community service’ that places young people outside those communities, serving them, but not being involved in their creation or development.

In these programs, the image that is presented to young people is of a community and activities that are:

- adult-determined,
- simple,
- uncontentious, and
- unchanging;

whereas we know that communities can, in reality, be:

- determined by all members,
- complex and diverse,
- contentious or problematical, and
- continually in flux and being challenged.

In fact, ‘civic service’ has traditionally been defined in terms that reflect workplace roles (and hence, I argue, workplace alienation):

The service role is similar to a job position as defined by the labor market, where there are

expectations of the worker. Service is carried out through a program or organization that has defined the service role, which an individual ‘fills.’ (McBride et al, 2003)

However, ‘community’ has (or perhaps should have) substantial differences from ‘work-place’ in terms of relationships, ownership and responsibilities. As young people develop in understanding of their roles within communities, these differences are even more important. The criticisms of traditional perceptions of young people as community volunteers and of community engagement programs, enable us to specify what might characterise successful programs that engage young people in on-going ways.

Ausyouth stressed the importance of recognising the present citizenship of young people in

communities and linked this to the control and decision-making that they can exert:

Active citizenship through participation in community life gives young people a recognised presence in the community, enabling young people to take up their rightful place as citizens. Young people’s ability to influence and take some control over the future will assist in their vision for a positive future. Having a sense of belonging and being part of a community that cares about young people is fundamental to this. (Ausyouth, 2003: 23)

Phillips (1990) suggested three important touchstones associated with control, bonding (collaboration with others) and meaning or purpose. These were reinforced through empirical evidence collected around Student

Action Teams (Holdsworth *et al*, 2003) where similar descriptors of successful programs emerged from a factor analysis of student responses, and were linked strongly with outcomes for students.

Similarly, earlier studies (Wilson *et al*, 1991: 15-16) suggested that 'positive strategies for involving young people' as volunteers in environmental projects were that they should be:

- genuinely participatory;
- locally based, but with a broad context;
- action oriented; and
- involve close involvement with schools.

Ideas of active youth and student participation have stressed that on-going roles of value must be created for young people through school- and community-based programs if we are to build an inclusive, democratic and participatory society.

There are practical implications for community-linkage and volunteer programs in schools, and these can be located within the four-way structure suggested earlier:

- **about the community:**

Simply learning about the community within a classroom can be a purposeless and boring exercise that reinforces young people's distance from a community unless it is linked with other approaches that engage students in forming and shaping their

own questions about their communities. A study of a local community could start with students (the experts) introducing the teacher (the 'outsider') to their community, either with information or by conducting a real or virtual tour of that community, with the teacher asking provocative, incisive questions about the nature of that community.

- **in the community:**

Students tell us that they value experiential learning that is located in 'real world' situations. They both learn skills through their application outside the classroom and also gain a 'hands-on' appreciation of what resources exist. But simply learning in a community location can add little to an understanding of community and a student's role within it, unless this aspect is specifically and strategically included. Such an approach can still locate the idea of community as 'other': something that is fixed, distant and 'adult'. However, opportunities may be created for the learning to develop in ways that encourage students to see these resources as 'ours', open to change and development. Programs could build in regular opportunities for student reflection about the relevance of local facilities, availability of resources, decision-making roles and future possibilities. Students

could be asked: What needs to be developed? What could be changed? Why? How?

- **for the community:**

Such activities can bring students into an active, practical and positive role as service volunteers within their communities. They can change young people's perception of community organisations, but can also change the community's perceptions of young people, as they are seen in productive, helpful roles. However, service learning roles often locate young people as **apart from** these communities: **servants**, but not **shapers** of community. The perception of community is 'distant' (or 'other'), fixed, and adult-determined. These approaches can be challenged to involve young people directly in **determining the nature** of the service activities. Where young people can see themselves as useful contributors to their communities in ways that make sense to them, there can be further opportunities to develop questions about the nature and structure of those communities, the ways in which decisions are made, social and economic futures for the community and so on.

- **with the community:**

Such partnerships provide the most exciting possibilities for students to learn and to

contribute to communities of which they are members. They also enable students to see themselves as contributors to communities that change and respond to needs. This, in turn, provides students with more relevant and realistic learning experiences that do not idealise or overly simplify communities and the processes that happen within them.

In reflecting on young people's voices about their youth development experiences, we concluded that

Ensuring that community service 'is meaningful to young people' can transform that relationship [between young people and community], as young people move into a more active participatory role around questions of what service is important, why it is carried out, and what ends may be achieved... Programs could also consider other models of community action [in schools] ... in which ideas of community are more contentious, and in which young people are encouraged to investigate, propose and act around the nature of the community they desire. These unite ideas of learning about (and from) the community, as well as working and learning with community groups. They also unite program ideas of youth participation (extending this meaning from program decision-making to community decision-

making) with community connections. (Holdsworth et al, 2005: 99)

In various ways, these initiatives focus on the idea that young people can and should share in the **tussle of community** as an intentional learning experience. They also demand that schools are not divorced from the issues facing their communities, but inherently involved in them – intellectually and practically. They recognise that there is a diversity of views about what communities are and how they are formed and maintained.

If such approaches are to be developed, there are, however, some important implications to be acknowledged. First, schools and students need to ensure that the tasks in which they are engaged are **real** ones and not hypothetical, trivial or 'make work' tasks. Secondly, schools need to recognise that they are **part** of those communities, with interests, needs and points of view that need to be negotiated with others. Thirdly, the activities in which students are engaged require **flexibility** – of movement, of timetables and of supervision. Depending on age levels, the nature of these activities may need to be focused in different ways, without losing sight of the essential elements.

Our experience in these approaches also leads us to recognise that, if we are to recognise current participation by young people, narrow definitions

of community and of what volunteers are must change. Putnam (2000, 2001) and others have pointed to a decreased incidence of people joining groups – and this concern has been particularly focused on the role of young people who are seen as 'apathetic' and 'disengaged'. It is alleged that young people are not committing to ideas of community involvement and that relatively few are volunteers. However, it has also been suggested that we (both as researchers and in public perceptions) may be blind to the more diverse meanings of community that are currently being created and structured by young people: there are new ways in which young people are taking social and political and cultural action, outside of those traditionally sanctioned.

In drawing a distinction between 'volunteer' and 'Volunteer' (ie the embedded work we all do in community participation and maintenance, as distinct from formal program involvement), we may understand that young people already play important roles within their own spheres. But we may, through these approaches, need to think of ourselves as continually re-negotiating forms of 'social contracts' with young people within which the voices of young people in defining their (and our) community are heard (and listened to) and within which we recognise all young people's roles within those communities (in making a real difference) as important (Irby *et al*,

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1998; Mohamed and Wheeler, 2001).

In doing so, we would be taking up an internationally relevant challenge:

What's needed then is a policy approach framework, which seeks to forge genuinely new links between young people and Government. A commitment to a community service framework could provide that new approach. But it will only do so if the framework reflects the language of youth and marks a genuine shift to reciprocity, if it chimes with their aspirations and interests and empowers them in a way never experienced before. (Fox and Besselink, 2004: 2)

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Australian Youth Research Centre

The Australian Youth Research Centre is located within the Faculty of Education at The University of Melbourne. It was established in 1988 in response to a recognised need by the youth affairs sector for relevant and up to date research on the issues facing young people today.

The aims of the AYRC are to:

- conduct relevant, coherent and reliable research on young people in Australia, with a state, national and international focus;
- assist with the development of policy and the implementation of initiatives based on research findings;
- develop strong links with the youth affairs sector, with particular attention to helping to identify and address the sector's research needs;
- facilitate communication between educators, researchers, policy makers and youth workers;
- support the research activities of university staff and post-graduate students who have a specific interest in youth affairs; and,
- enhance the professional development of staff and students by assisting them to be informed about the broader context of young people's lives.

Australian Youth Research Centre Activities

The AYRC has particular expertise in research on education, transition pathways, social justice, gender equity and employment issues as they affect young people.

The main AYRC activities are:

- undertaking research and publishing the outcomes in a manner accessible to policy makers and the youth sector;
- providing information and policy advice to governments and other organisations;
- assisting and encouraging individuals or groups who work with young people.

AYRC activities involve:

- undertaking small projects for groups lacking the capacity or opportunity to do so themselves;
- providing a base for post-graduate students wishing to undertake Masters or PhD research on topics related to young people and the youth sector;
- enabling academics to participate in established AYRC projects, and/or undertake their own research on youth related issues;
- maintaining a youth sector resource library;
- publishing series of *Working Papers* and *Research Reports*;
- conducting public seminars and conferences on a variety of issues relevant to those working in the youth sector.