



Manchester  
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# Young Heritage Detectives Who are you?



Report of the ESRC Voucher between  
Manchester Metropolitan University  
and The Children's Society, Rochdale

Carried out by Circle Steele,  
The Children's Society

# Executive Summary

This research was the last of a series of research placements, vouchers and Post Doctoral Case Studentships carried out by the ESRC funded Capacity Building Cluster (CBC) Taking Part? based at Lincoln, Goldsmiths and Manchester Metropolitan University (2008-2013).

The main themes of the Cluster have been active citizenship and community empowerment. This voucher was, therefore, important in contributing to several themes that had previously been explored within the Manchester teams' research: identity, what helps and hinders community engagement and active citizenship, the effectiveness of particular research approaches, and how to engage excluded and marginalised groups.

This specific CBC research study provided the opportunity to explore the effectiveness of a programme which had been undertaken between 2010 and 2011 entitled: 'The Young Heritage Detective's Project', which had taken as its starting point the importance of working in facilitated groups, exploring and sharing the participants' cultural and personal identities. The group who participated in the original programme were happy to be part of the follow-up project, which aimed to explore the impact and sustainability of the work of the original Young Heritage detectives' project.

The fact that all participants were willing to come together for this follow up, in itself, shows the impact of the initial YHD project, and the importance of the relationships that had been built within the group through the work, and with the project facilitator who co-ordinated both the Capacity Building Cluster research and the original YHD project.

The findings showed the importance of creating and working in 'culturally sensitive spaces', the importance of positive self identity to help confidence and community engagement, and the importance of volunteering to generate a feeling of citizenship, even for those who do not possess this legal status.

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# Introduction

This study aimed to investigate the impact of a specific activity, The Young Heritage Detectives project, co-ordinated by The Children's Society, Rochdale with a group of disadvantaged young people within the UK North West region. The ESRC CBC voucher allowed The Children's Society researcher to follow up a year after the initial Young Heritage Detectives (YHD) project had been completed, with a group of 12, young refugees and asylum seekers in the Rochdale area of Lancashire.

Although the project had previously won a 'Developing Community Voice' Highly Commended award, (North West Together We Can Empowerment Awards 2012), it had not been possible to fully evaluate the initial YHD programme, or to evaluate the impact of the work carried out. Therefore, a research study was designed in order to assess its long-term impact and sustainability; with a particular focus on the importance of cultural identity on young people's level of engagement with active citizenship.

The importance of cultural identity is recognised by Soni (2011) who states:

Our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes, which provides us as one people, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history (Woodward in Soni, 2011:5).

The research aimed to evaluate if the young people's sense of cultural identity that had been developed by the YHD project had resulted in an increased and sustained sense of active citizenship; a concept adopted from the Home Office Active Learning for Active Citizenship programme (2004-11) which states:

Citizens should be given more opportunity and support to become actively involved in defining and tackling the problems in their communities and improving their quality of life. (Home Office, in Packham, 2012:30).

Recent events have shown that young people are often willing to go to extreme lengths to force change in the face of perceived injustices e.g. Tiananmen Square (1989), Paris (2006), London (2010). Youthful idealism and energy can be a potent mix and as educators, we need to help young people challenge this energy in appropriate and productive ways. The YHD project aimed to enable change with a group of alienated young people, by supporting them in constructive active citizenship.

# Background to the Study

## Their stories in today's world...

The purpose of the CBC research was to investigate, and evaluate, the importance of cultural identity in the development of young people's citizenship awareness and positive sense of self. The research explored the impact of The Young Heritage Detectives (YHD) project with young refugees and asylum seekers aged 10-19 years of African and Asian Heritage.

The YHD project enabled a group of young people and adults from a specific community to come together in order to reflect and share their experiences and memories to help them develop a greater awareness of cultural identity and sense of belonging. Originally initiated in February 2010, these young people collated information about their heritage and communities within Rochdale through oral history interviews with their parents, guardians and elder members. It drew on the young people's stories and experiences of their immigration journeys and ultimately attempted to challenge prejudice and promote community cohesion.

"If people are educated, it stops them being prejudiced..." (RHDP, p3)

People often participate in activities, whether it is volunteering or direct action, in order to change things for the better based on their values, experiences and worldview (Beyond the Big Society, Torbert 2012). The YHD project enabled young people to tell their own stories; this made them feel they were more than just another 'immigrant'.

Cultural identity is important for people's sense of self and often how they relate to others. How people in society perceive them can affect both their self-image and their self-esteem – how they see and value themselves.

The borough of Rochdale has seen the size of the ethnic minority population double in 20 years to 33,650, including more than 27,000 people who originate from Pakistan and Bangladesh. Within 10 years, it is estimated, that one fifth of Rochdale's population will have come from immigrant communities (The Telegraph, 2010). Currently over 21.4% of residents are non-white (2011 Census) with the local MP, Simon Danczuk, warning that Rochdale has become a 'magnet for the dispossessed' and suggesting that the number of refugees in the town could affect Rochdale's economic development (Manchester Evening News, 12 October 2011).

Some residents also believe immigration is to blame for the loss of local jobs and availability of affordable housing. Negative perceptions of new and young immigrant groups from both the community and the media is likely to impact adversely on the self worth of, in this case, young refugees, and their willingness to engage beyond their own communities. Consequently, this may impact significantly on their level of participation in society as a whole, and/or engagement with active citizenship activities.

Through my work with The Children's Society, an initial consultation with a group of young refugees in Rochdale had already raised a number of questions around how they hold onto their cultural sense of identity and heritage within a different, and often, alien culture and environment. We wanted to explore what mechanisms were in place to enable them to share experiences and record them for future generations.

Through the YHD project we held focus group discussions with elders from refugee communities and organisations, and visited primary and secondary schools to discuss the project and how people could get involved. Early discussions with these groups had shown that there was a clear willingness to participate (both on the part of the young people and adults) to ensure this project was a real success and that it left a clear legacy:

The need for the YHD project became more apparent as we helped young refugees to attend conferences and events about anti-bullying work. They realised that their experiences and cultural traditions were not being recorded or preserved. As a result, they began to ask for greater support in establishing lasting resources that present and preserve their experiences and cultural traditions. Older members of the community also gave their support to this process and were anxious about what has already been lost or not recorded.

There was a real probability that the opportunity of capturing the heritage of young refugees and asylum seekers from their point of view would be lost. The YHD project helped to conserve the cultural traditions and heritage of the young people for future generations through the production of a DVD and a published storybook.

As a Youth and Community Practitioner, it was part of my role as facilitator to adopt a participatory research approach, which ensured the participants' engagement with the project at every stage from design to dissemination. Therefore, it was the young people who identified the themes and questions which they wanted to address in a format they felt was right for them.

The funding from MMU enabled us to take the research a stage further allowing us to reflect on the importance of cultural identity for these young people in developing their sense of active citizenship.

## Aims and objectives

The aims of the YHD project were:

- To record, catalogue and archive the cultural traditions of refugees and asylum seeking children, young people and their families from four communities in Rochdale
- To increase the understanding of young refugees and asylum seekers' own heritage
- To increase the awareness of the heritage of refugees and asylum seekers to the wider public and to challenge negative stereotypes
- To encourage asylum seeking and refugee children and young people to use their local arts and heritage service

The aims of the CBC research were to measure the impact of the original HYD project with particular reference to:

- Identifying the importance of cultural identity
- Identifying the importance of, and enhanced sense, of cultural identity on active citizenship
- Identifying the most effective methods of practice in order to achieve this

# The YHD follow up research project (2012-2013)

## Research methodology

The MMU research was based around the principles of participatory action research (Alinsky 1971), the person-centred approach (Rogers, 1902-1987) and the Freirian (1970) views of anti-oppressive practice.

Saul Alinsky was an American community organiser and activist. His books, such as *Rules for Radicals* (1971), were highly influential and his work has important implications for both informal education, and managing change in the community.

Carl Rogers also contributed to the theory of informal education and group work. This evolved from his work around client-centred therapy and his development of counselling: 'Rogers believed that human beings become increasingly trustworthy once they feel at a deep level that their subjective experience is both respected and progressively understood' (Thorne, 1992: 26).

Freire's work has greatly influenced informal education with its focus on the use of dialogue, which involves respect for people. He believes we should not set up processes where one person is acting over another; instead, we should facilitate processes where people are working with each other. He argued that too much conventional education is about making deposits of knowledge in people, which he called 'banking education'.

All three contributors are important to this research because the study aimed to empower and give a voice to its participants.

I was also aware however, that listening to the young people's experiences required a person-centred approach - I had to be flexible in order to weigh up their sensitivities whilst gaining information. This can cause a tension that has to be balanced as the person-centred approach focuses on feelings rather than the dialogue of communicating the central narrative.

The research was undertaken with all the original YHD participants who were contactable and who were able to attend. The group reassembled in October 2012 and comprised 12 young refugee and asylum seekers; 8 male and 4 female (aged between 12 and 19) originating from 4 different countries (Congo, Zimbabwe, Mauritius, South Africa).

The data was collected using case studies and semi-structured interviews, in an informal, friendly, and sensitive environment. The follow up telephone interviews focused around the themes of: youth empowerment, community engagement, gaining new skills and learning about active citizenship.

## Findings

### 1 Enhanced confidence and employability

100% of the young people reported that they all gained confidence, skills and knowledge, whilst having fun during their participation in the YHD project. They developed new skills e.g. using media equipment, interview techniques and because of their hard work, they were able to attain a Youth Achievement Award presented by The Children's Society.

Participants also felt this skill development would also help improve their level of employability:

"To have a good experience so it can help me get a good job that I need." (Female, 18, Congo)

"I heard my friends were involved in the project so I want to join as well and check it out good for CV." (Male, 18, Mauritius)

### 2 Cultural awareness

The young people felt the YHD experience had greatly improved their knowledge about their culture as well as helping to develop their understanding of the way of life that exists within the Rochdale community, and other cultures:

"It teach me something different, which is good for sharing." (Male, 16, Congo)

"Yes, because it is giving me more confidence and understanding myself, friendship and teamwork." (Female, 18, Congo)

"I can learn about other people's heritage." (Male, 14, Zimbabwe)

### 3 Improved community understanding

The young people also felt that it was important for community members to have an increased understanding about the cultures of other young people

“It’s good for the community to understand us.”  
(Male, 14, Zimbabwe)

### 4 Enhanced feelings of citizenship

More than 80% of young people consider themselves to be British citizens, despite the fact that they have not yet obtained the official paperwork. They felt the YHD project had given them the opportunity to engage in a range of positive activities as well as volunteering within their communities.

“Because it’s what’s happening to me, which is giving me a chance to do what I dream, with support.”  
(Female, 12, South Africa)

### 5 Increased volunteering

67% responded that they were continuing their volunteering work within other sectors such as charities, in schools and community centres. 90% of the young people thought that the most important issue for them was education, employment and their overall health and well-being. They felt volunteering was important to help them get to know their community as well as to enhance their CV and so hopefully lead to better education and employment prospects.

“The challenge is a challenge and I volunteered.”  
(Male, 16, Congo)

### 6 Sustainability

The respondents felt there should be more participation activities such as the Young Heritage Detective Project. They wanted to express their opinions and views through more drama, dance and group activities. When asked what they thought people or organisations/communities might gain from these types of activities one participant replied:

“A better life, a good feeling that they have helped someone and just the happiness of what they have done by bringing us up, as we may pay them back, by respect, for it.”  
(Female, 12, South Africa)

## Discussion/analysis

From the data analysis, the following themes were identified:

- The importance of the provision of ‘culturally sensitive spaces’ (to help improve and build confidence);
- the importance of group work for learning new skills, communication, training and information and debate;
- the YHD project had provided a unique experience for community voices to be heard and as young active citizens they can be makers and shapers of policy and practice;
- the YHD project had been important in helping to create a positive sense of identity for the young people, both culturally and personally;
- the important role of facilitators as enablers, mentors and trainers.

### Culturally sensitive environment

*In some cases, they left their country of origin on an uncertain migration to an unknown future of fear, prejudice and possible deportation...*

The initial, and follow-up, project were made possible by the provision of spaces that were appropriate and welcoming for young people, and that were sensitive to their different cultural backgrounds, what we have termed as ‘culturally sensitive spaces’.

In the original project a young people’s steering group was formed which met in The Children’s Society office in Rochdale, where the weekly YHD sessions were held. This was an inclusive, child friendly and safe environment designed to encourage them to voice their views, to learn new skills, and to discuss issues related to them. This gave the young people the opportunity to discuss their experiences and influence and review the progress of the project and ensure all members were happy with any subsequent decisions.

Around 20-25 young people attended the different sessions. Within each session an activity was arranged for each young person to help them talk about what they thought heritage was, and about the heritage of their country of origin e.g. languages spoken; tribal histories; food and dance etc. They then presented this information back to the whole group. Through the research interviews, we confirmed that young people

used the opportunity within a 'culturally safe space' to bring issues to the table and engage in discussion. The YHD initiative was very successful in promoting dialogue and greater citizen awareness. To encourage a child-centred approach, we had to provide a safe and welcoming space for them to meet together, but also had to involve them in deciding where was the most comfortable and accessible place for them to meet. We had meetings with the young people in different public places as well as child-friendly environments.

The CBC research also showed the importance of culturally sensitive safe spaces to enable discussion, and enable them to reflect on the impact of the initial project.

### Supporting young people to engage in the meaningful way

*YHD legacy inspires them to learn, do and become more*

The significance of the 'culturally sensitive spaces' is deeper than merely just an environment in which young people meet and engage. Their behaviour within these 'culturally sensitive spaces' and the skills they learn there are highly important. These included the ability to lead, work in teams, and communicate as well as receiving vital training and information.

All of the young people reported that they all gained confidence, skills and knowledge, whilst having fun. The outcome of the Young Heritage Detective Project improved their knowledge about their culture immensely, as well as helping to develop their understanding of the way of life that exists within the Rochdale community.

During the CBC semi-structured interviews, young people indicated that after participating in the YHD project, they aspired to be a Model, Dancer, Actor, Businessman, Researcher, Social Worker, Detective, Police, Games Designer and Teacher. Before the project, they had no such aspirations. It would seem then that participation is a central tenet to developing young people's sense of engagement and active citizenship.

These results support Freire's ideas of developing consciousness. The young people gained knowledge and understanding of the world on their terms, and in their own terminology; a consciousness, and a voice, that has the power to transform reality. This project has inspired the young people to learn and to do more with their lives.

### A unique experience for community voices to be heard

*How do you see others...yourself, and how do you think others see you?*

One challenge the YHD group had to tackle was the idea of engaging more in the community by participating in both formal and informal events – such as presentations in the public library/community/schools. They felt this was important in order to help others in the community to hear their 'voices' and their experiences. A group of homeless men, from another community project, attended a presentation and although it was initially anticipated they might have prejudices against refugees, they were extremely impressed by the DVD produced by the young people. One homeless person said that it was "very uplifting". It was clear by the question and answer session that the homeless people had listened carefully to what the young refugees had said and had respected their views.

Freire's concern with experience was also important. The young people's personal experiences were essential to what they had to say, and no one else, not even the facilitators, could have described them so well:

The chance to meet new people in different occasions, during the project, made me be more open and generous because I got the opportunity to share some of my personal experiences with different people I met... Before the group, I didn't know anything about my culture and heritage. Then when I joined the young heritage group, I began interviewing people, going on trips and meeting new people, which helped me to learn about myself and my culture and heritage. In the future, to help others learn about their heritage and culture, I could explain and help others to find out their heritage and cultural information. (YP aged 16).

Having an opportunity to have their voices heard is a way of helping develop citizenship rights, social justice, equality, and youth identity. The right to participation is integral to the principle and understanding of a child's welfare and happiness and it is recognised in UK law (Crawley, 2012: 35). By enabling young people and communities to have their voices heard, they are more likely to feel able to challenge the prejudices that exist in society today, as well as promote community cohesion.

The Young Heritage Project enabled the children and young people to become more actively engaged in the community, and show that they are as integrated, involved and committed to society as any other individual. It also gave them the opportunity and confidence to speak up and have their voices heard, and ensured they did not feel as oppressed by the anxiety and fear that their uncertain future may bring. This is vital in challenging the prejudice, conflict and alienation they often face in their community, and allowing them to have the freedom to be heard as individuals:

“For me, my heritage plays an important role in my life as it allows me to make the decisions to some of the challenges I may face.”  
(YP aged 15).

The CBC research also showed that the YHD project's impacts continued in relation to the participants' greater involvement in volunteering and working with the community - for example being more proactive and visible e.g. one young woman is now involved in community based health promotion, another young male has become involved in environmental work.

### The development of positive identity

The research showed that the YHD project had provided a unique opportunity to hear community voices, which had helped develop the young people's confidence and sense of identity. It had been important in encouraging young people to embrace a positive attitude, their identity as young people, their sense of belonging, and ultimately a responsibility and respect for others. In addition, self-image and cultural identity clearly affects levels of engagement with active citizenship; often a sense of self-worth is influenced by the perception of others.

### The role of facilitator

*Can they fly... cocoon to caterpillar, then a butterfly?*

The role of the facilitators was to enable, mentor, and train the young people at the Young Heritage Detective Project. It was their role to create a culturally sensitive environment where the young people could feel comfortable and confident as this would help them to share their views without fear. Creating a sense of safety was also vital for this, as it encouraged the young people to share their memories and to celebrate their heritage. Furthermore, it was the facilitators' role to empower the young people to take control of the activities and

enable full involvement of all the heritage 'detectives' present. The facilitators also mentored them, helping them to shape and recognise their identity and build up their confidence in themselves. The facilitators also had the role of developing the skill sets of the young people by providing them with training in the use of media, interview techniques and research design.

By interacting with the young people, the facilitators created a community where they could learn and experience a culture of education, and feel proud of their achievements. Additionally, the project was sensitive to the individual, and it was the task of the facilitators to adopt a person-centred approach, as advocated by Carl Rogers, which meant that the project was focussed on the needs, views and wishes of the participants.

The CBC research study was such a success partly to the relationships which had already been formed between the researcher and the young people. The researcher used Youth and Community work, Freirian and person centered approaches to continue to re-engage the group and draw out further findings to help assess the impact of the initial project.

## Recommendations

From this research study, a model of good practice has emerged for organising similar projects in future. This includes: involving local people within the community more to ensure that they all take ownership of the process in order to achieve greater sustainability; recognising the high value of listening to vulnerable children and young people's voices; influencing central and local government to take more responsibility for building the confidence, resilience and well-being of children and young people, particularly those have been excluded from their homes and legal processes such as refugees and asylum seekers.

1 In order to sustain community action in the long-run, we should involve the resources of the local people, by engaging them in the planning and design of the projects and process. The young people and the community should take ownership over the project and overall process in order to achieve a greater level of sustainability.

# Conclusion

- 2 Creating a safe space for the young people to gain knowledge and understanding is vital. It gives them a voice and a sense of involvement, and the power to transform themselves.
- 3 We should recognise the high value of listening to community voices. We must acknowledge the fact that young people, as active citizens, are more than capable of organising and leading social change in their own communities without the interference of the government. If we can recognise and respect this, then we will be able to be more open to working with them on their terms, rather than just working with them on an arranged short-term project.
- 4 Government and other bodies should take responsibility in building the confidence, resilience, and well-being of children and young people, by exploring strategies that will encourage participation, empowerment and active citizenship. This work could involve young refugees and asylum seekers in projects that celebrate how they have managed to overcome a particular adversity.
- 5 The Young Heritage Detective Project has demonstrated that there is a continuing role for youth and community practitioners, as informal educators and facilitators to help encourage greater participation and involvement within communities. The original and innovative perspective of the young refugees and asylum seekers is invaluable, and therefore they should be encouraged to be involved in local and national consultations.

This reflective research study confirms the success of the original YHD project and demonstrates a number of key areas which can positively impact upon an individual's engagement in the local community and beyond. It also shows the importance of professional practitioners creating a safe, and in this case, culturally specific space for critical dialogue, and by facilitating participation of oppressed and marginalised groups in society. There is a particularly distinctive and important role for practitioners to work as informal educators to build inclusive social capital.

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