

JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH  
SUMMARY



# Exploring Youths' Perceptions of the Hidden Practice of Youth Work in Increasing Social Capital with Young People Considered NEET in Scotland

## Key Details

### KEY WORDS

Young People; Youth Work;  
Social Capital; Transitions; Biographies

### POPULATION GROUPS

All Youth; Youth Workers

### STEPPING UP THEMES

Education, Training & Apprenticeships;  
Employment & Entrepreneurship;  
Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety;  
Coordinated & Youth-Friendly  
Communities

### RESEARCH ORIGIN

International

### SOURCE

Academic

**“...youth work acts as a site of capital building, where cultural and social bonds are formed. We found that youth work, not the type or area of engagement, empowered the young people and helped to redress the inequalities that they experienced” (p. 477-478).**

## 1. What is the research about?

This small-scale study explored the impact of community-based youth programs on creating social capital among marginalized youth, specifically youth that can be categorized as NEET, or not in education, employment or training. The researchers also wanted to understand if the building of social capital was influenced by the type of youth program or its geographic context.

**Social capital** is defined as social connections that can be converted into economic capital, an important consideration when working with NEET youth. For the purposes of this study, the researchers used a theory of social capital as “a collective asset with a common good” (p. 470), a framework developed by Robert Putnam in 2001. Putnam’s theory is that social capital “fosters positive outcomes for both the individual and community, generating both public and private returns” (p. 470).

## 2. Where did the research take place?

This research took place in Scotland. The researchers described that the unemployment and underemployment of youth is “a large-scale problem in Britain today” (p. 469), and that there has been “increasing recognition of the need to draw upon the potential of community education, in particular youth work, to re-engage disaffected youth and improve engagement with young people, families, and communities” (p. 469).

The study was conducted at two youth centres in two communities in the west of Scotland: an urban community within Glasgow and a rural community on the west coast. The program in the urban community was arts-based; the program in the rural community was sports-based.

## 3. Who is this research about?

This research is about young people, aged 16 and over, who had dropped out of formal education and were taking part in an informal education program run by a not-for-profit youth centre that had existed for five or more years within their community. The four youth workers who coordinated the two programs also participated (two at each site).

## 4. How was the research done?

Twelve young people were interviewed across the two youth centres: six young people were interviewed at the urban youth centre (five male and one female; one Black and five White), and six young people were interviewed at the rural youth centre (all White males). Interviews were conducted once at the start of each program and once towards the end; the first interview explored the young people’s transitions and histories, with a focus on their perceptions of community and future expectations, and the second interview returned to their perceptions and expectations in order to determine how the programs may have impacted their sense of belonging and hope for the future.

The interviews covered a number of themes based on indicators of social capital, including:

- perceptions about community structures and characteristics
- civic participation, control, and self-efficacy
- social interaction, networks, and support
- trust, reciprocity, and social cohesion
- the extent to which the program generated social capital

Data from these interviews was coded manually and the researchers conducted a thematic analysis to determine if there were differences in responses based on the type of program (arts-based versus sports-based) or on the geographic context (urban versus rural).

### 5. What are the key findings?

There were no significant differences in the responses of youth; regardless of the type of program or geographic context, the researchers found that youth work “gave the young people a **sense of empowerment**, and created spaces to allow them to **create relationships** through positive engagement with other members of their communities” (p. 473).

The youth interviewed experienced “overwhelming feelings of negativity that was directed at them from more formal and traditional structures within the community” (p. 473), including schools, libraries, local stores, and the police. These interactions and experiences influenced and constrained their belief systems, motivations, and expectations of themselves and others. The researchers learned that youth pushed to the margins endure isolation and resentment, and will either push back against or “lose faith” (p. 473) in these structures, primarily due to feelings of prejudice and surveillance as a result of stereotyping. These youth, therefore, “found it difficult to pinpoint fixed goals or see a way forward towards meaningful employment” (p. 477). Although the young people interviewed did cite some positive social interactions, these were through their own networks and were often “very small and limited to friends and family” (p. 477).

The researchers found that both youth programs “helped the young people who had participated in them develop social capital and raised their employment chances” (p. 477). The youth **developed supportive relationships with the youth workers and their peers**, which facilitated “opportunities to become more empowered, and to accrue the type of social support needed to enable local participation and self-efficacy” (p. 477). The young people described their connections to youth workers in positive terms, prompting the researchers to suggest that youth work “is a site that allows for **reciprocity, cooperation, and tolerance**” (p. 479), **based on trust and respect**. These connections encouraged the youth to then **engage with their wider communities**, nurturing “a sense of collective worth, leading to shared beliefs that results can be achieved when people work together” (p. 478). Youth workers were able to “open up previously closed spaces” (p. 479), allowing the youth to **access networks and opportunities**, and **breaking down perceived barriers**.

### 6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This research not only indicates the potential for youth programs to mitigate the barriers faced by youth not in education, employment or training by building social capital, but also demonstrates **the critical ways in which this type of work advances the wellbeing of youth**. As the researchers describe, the youth programs were successful, “not because of the activities or the settings, but because of what the youth work relationship imbued [the youth participants] with” (p. 482) – the types of connections that foster “social responsibility and cohesion, trust, and reciprocity” (p. 482).



Miller, J., McAuliffe, L., Riaza, N., & Deuchar, R. (2015). Exploring youths' perceptions of the hidden practice of youth work in increasing social capital with young people considered NEET in Scotland. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(4), 468-484.