



Loops: Young, Connected and strong

Briefing

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In 2009 we ran our third innovation project at Participle, looking at young people and asking what a [Beveridge 4.0](#) approach to young people might look like. What capabilities do young people need in Britain in the 21st century?

The innovation project, which became known as Loops, was a partnership between the Aldridge Foundation and Brighton and Croydon Councils. Over a period of 9 months we worked with young people in these two locations.

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At Participle we have been continually asked to focus on young people and in 2008 two consecutive events spurred us into action. Firstly the United Nations published a series of statistics that placed wellbeing for young people in the UK at the bottom in the Western world.¹ Then, the Labour government responded with justifications that their Sure Start programme would make a difference and announcing a £73 million plan to build and re-furbish youth centres. It prompted us to ask several questions: do young people really need youth centres; is the wellbeing of young people a service challenge or a broader social challenge and, what is a good adolescence in this century?

It did not take a United Nations report to make many people aware that young people in Britain are not thriving. This sense that something is amiss has spawned a huge number of public services, from those designed to address NEETs (young people not in education, employment or training) to youth offending teams, drug and alcohol services, teenage pregnancy initiatives and so on. As so often with any area of public service, each of these services has their own targets and approaches but they share a common concern: managing risk.

Despite this service landscape, older people continually tell pollsters and focus groups that they see young people hanging around as a top safety concern. Younger people say they want somewhere to go and there is a general sense that young people must be managed somehow.

In this context a government announcement of youth centres appears on the surface to be an entirely common sense response to a problem. In reality, as we were to learn, the government's response was an example of the dangers of shallow consultation whereby myths and partial understandings often originally promulgated by those in power, are repeated back to power in exercises that do not constitute a conversation or any real furthering of understanding on either side. The result is a continuous circle of misplaced activity, based on a lack of understanding of the real problem.

Academic research on young people from around the world argues that youth-only spaces have a limited role to play. Academics have focused on what makes young

¹ http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc11_eng.pdf

people thrive and in particular how to foster resilience. Resilience is a concept much talked about by psychologists, but it has its origins in physics and engineering. If buildings are to stay up against the elements, physics shows that two things count: internal strength and external support. In one of the largest longitudinal studies conducted over 26 countries, Professor Michael Resnick of the University of Minnesota has concluded that similar internal and external factors are what matter to young people.

Professor Resnick, who visited Participle, concludes that connectedness – to parents, to family and to adults outside of the family – is the key to resilience. Family structure does not matter much but having a connection to an adult who is deeply interested in you does: it provides the external support and develops the inner strength. The implications of Resnick’s work seemed to us to be profound. The research shows that we all have a role to play, as parents, friends, as human beings that can just make a big difference by showing a constant interest in another person, by forming relationships.

The challenge as seen through the lens of Resnick’s writing is not the lack of a youth space or youth services, rather it is the “them and us” culture that is fostered by these services. In fact, the more we thought about it, the more it seemed to us that all those well-meaning services were actually part of the problem, breaking the links between generations and within communities that might actually encourage young people to thrive.

We wrote about these ideas and this drew our partners towards us. The ideas resonated with Sir Rod Aldridge of the Aldridge Foundation. Funding a new Academy in a deprived part of Brighton, he was questioning whether school would be enough and what could be seeded in the surrounding community to create a different context in which to grow up. Aldridge persuaded Brighton Council to join him in part funding and participating in the project. Our third partner was Croydon Council. Croydon have one of the biggest youth populations in the UK, many of whom have arrived as refugees or are first generation immigrants. The incoming Chief Executive Jon Rouse was convinced that a re-organisation of existing services was not enough to meet the needs of his population and was looking for something new.

The Innovation Process

We started by spending time with young people between the ages of twelve and twenty-four. The Participle team hung out on street corners during the day and after school we rented a bus, which was parked on estates in the evening, offering pizza, conversation and various dynamic participatory exercises.

Our starting question was how we could support young people to thrive. We observed of course through our initial conversations and exercises that few young people are problem-free. We also met young people who were thriving despite very difficult family

and social circumstances. Most strikingly, despite the fact that all services are built around managing risk we learnt, in an echo of [our family work](#) that it is often far from obvious who is really at risk.

The lives of Mo and Melvin, two nineteen year olds we got to know over the summer illustrate the challenges at the heart of work with young people, that is based on risk. Mo was studying engineering when we met him. Mo was often monosyllabic and hard to engage with but we learnt that he goes to the mosque every Friday, has a close-knit family and a group of close friends with whom he goes clubbing every weekend. Mo had always found school hard and we observed that he still struggled to read and write, something he hides at college, supported by his friends.

Melvin was a more open character and able to tell us an articulate story about his recent past. Until three years ago Melvin and his friends had been involved in gangs, criminal activity and anti-social behaviour. When one of Melvin's friends was beaten to death with a hammer at a barbeque, Melvin and his friends started to plot revenge. This was when the father of the murdered friend stepped in. To start with he sat with them in McDonalds after school, just listening and giving a bit of support with schoolwork. Later he encouraged them to set up a youth mentoring project called Potential. By the time we got to know Melvin that summer he was at university, had a summer job in a gift card shop and was running a range of community activities.

Three years ago Melvin was on the radar of the police and the authorities: he was risky and 'at risk'. Three years ago Mo was in the same place he is now: below the radar, getting by, taking little, contributing little, anticipating with little enthusiasm or emotion that in the end he will work in his father's fast food outlet. Time has proven that it is Melvin who is resilient. With the support of a concerned adult he has built networks, turned his life around and is now playing a pivotal role in the support of other young people in his East London community.

Mo's own future is less rosy. A vision of public service that is judged financially does not see Mo as a problem. Mo is 'cheap' or cost effective from a service standpoint since he is neither using services nor causing trouble. However, looking at Mo's life through a developmental lens we can see that Mo has little opportunity to grow or to contribute to society either socially or financially. The lack of developmental opportunities has a high cost for Mo personally, he has already turned inwards frustrated and depressed by his lot. The cost is also high for society where Mo may be costing little to the public purse but neither is he flourishing and contributing what he could.

It is hard to tell who is at risk - in other words, who should be "targeted" by existing services. Who is around the young person matters as much as what is happening to the young person. As we continued our work we met a significant number of young people who really needed support but who had become stuck, habitual users of services, managed by those services rather than supported to grow.

Rose, who loved to share pictures of her smiling younger sisters, has attended a special primary and secondary school and spent three years at college. When we met Rose she was receiving Jobseekers Allowance. She had a job as a cleaner for a bit and now she cares for the sisters, who smiled out at us from her photographs, and for her mother who suffers from debilitating mental illness. Rose loved college and wants to use the skills she learnt. She would like to go back to college, or to work, somehow to move out of the rut she is in. This makes sense for Rose and for society, given that Rose's education to date has been a considerable investment. But Rose can't see a way to make this happen, and the Jobseeker's Allowance which barely keeps Rose's family afloat makes her plan only from day to day and doesn't enable her to think beyond the present.

We met Rose in a youth centre where she goes when she has some spare time. She is known by all the staff there who offer cups of tea and sympathy. They also can't see a way to make a change for Rose – or at least they are not engaged in this conversation. For Rose, just like Megan, in the same youth centre and describing herself as 'a drop out', the youth services they are known by are places to hide: their problems at home and at school, evading the need to make other friends, face challenges or grow in independence.

The Good Adolescence

What is a good adolescence? The young people we worked with showed us that a good adolescence is one that is rich in opportunities and support for the often difficult transitions. A good adolescence is not about avoiding risk, it is about knowing how to engage with risk and through this to grow and develop. And a good adolescence is not just about young people, it is about the relationships between young people and the worlds around them.

The good adolescence puts these relationships and capabilities into a bigger frame. At Participle we came to understand – informed by our practice and academic research – about the importance of stories that young people can tell about themselves, about challenges and about where they are going. In other words a good adolescence is about having capabilities and connections but also the sense of a personal journey.

This developmental journey takes time and we worked with young people aged from 14 to 24. This approach is again informed by practice and research – particularly developments in the field of neurology, which show that in late adolescence there is a huge opportunity for change and growth. Such an approach however is in contravention of current service boundaries where many young people find that they can no longer connect to the services they need after the age of 18.

Figure 1: the Good Adolescence

	Adolescence now	Good adolescence
Place	Separate Adolescence occurs in youth-only institutions: schools, families, youth centres.	Collective Adolescence occurs in integrated, inter-generational communities: neighbourhoods, social organizations, places of faith, etc.
Shape	Narrowing of Possibility Adolescence is about closing doors, specialising, and selecting competencies	Widening of Possibility Adolescence is about opening doors, generalising, and exploring capabilities
Sequence	Linear Adolescence happens only once.	Dynamic Adolescence can be experienced at any age.
Goal	Individualistic A job /financial security as the endpoint of adolescence. Defined in relation to self.	Relational A sense of place in the world as the endpoint of adolescence. Defined in relation to others.

Loops: how it works and why it's different

Through a series of iterative cycles of engagement, reflection and prototyping with young people, the adults in their lives, our partners and members of the wider community we started to prototype an alternative to existing youth services: Loops. Loops supports the development of young people through their shared participation in experiences within the wider community. Young people have the chance to choose an opportunity that interests them, do it and then reflect on the experience with a trained community reflector. They can then repeat the loop again: choose; do; reflect.

Loops is not a service in any traditional sense. Loops is a process of community development in which young people have a stake and ownership. This was an approach which resonated with young people and with those within the community who we asked to provide the experiences or to be reflectors. Over the summer months in 2009 we were able to catalyse one hundred and fifty experiences in the community in just four weeks. Experiences ranged from working front of house in a hotel to writing horror film scripts. Almost everyone we asked said yes and expressed pleasure and surprise at being asked. Learning how to set up the experiences so that everyone benefited was a tough process that needed continued prototyping.

Loops has a different culture and ethos to most statutory youth services. This shift in culture and the fact that Loops could not be seen as a traditional service puzzled more traditional third sector organisations and many at the front line in existing services, as we were to learn. Whilst almost all our community experiences were provided pro bono we wanted to draw in those already providing youth services. We set aside a small amount of funding which could be used by these organisations to grow their own developmental

experiences. Mission-driven organisations brought rich experiences to the network but most of the traditional youth oriented organisations struggled and made bids that could not be considered developmental. They could not see for example the difference between a music opportunity hosted by professionals and a fun activity delivered by youth workers. Clearly both have their place but our focus was on modelling developmental behaviours as part of a structured framework for the development of young people's capabilities.

Watching young people at play, at school, within a wide range of settings during the innovation phase of our work, we had been struck by how little feedback they received. Most of the young people we met did not know what they were good at: their only feedback was when they were doing something wrong and they were reprimanded. Obvious strengths such as being a great dancer or sports player might be noted and reinforced but underlying strengths such as collaboration or critical thinking were not often named or promoted.

Capabilities are the unifying concept behind all of Participle's work and also sit at the heart of Loops. Capabilities are different to competencies, which are set or imposed by institutions and can be achieved rather like passing an exam. Capabilities need to be internally developed. Capabilities are different too to well-being indicators (despite the initial spur which Unicef's well-being indicators gave to our work). Well-being is above all about the mental state of happiness. Development and growth however is a process that is not always a happy one and involves grappling with real and negative emotions, in the same way it involves grappling with risk. Capabilities, coupled with the right resources enable people to lead a life that they value. This is why our work emphasises this approach and why Loops like [Life](#) and later [Backr](#) and [Wellogram](#), emphasise the role of reflection.

The reflector role within Loops is critical. To be effective projects cannot just be about consuming activity – keeping busy – they must include an element of reflection through which learning is internalised. The reflector facilitates this process. We described the reflector as a person who lives their life according to the Loops principles.

Initially the reflector role did not work. We started by recruiting reflectors from schools and from youth workers engaged in front line work. We found teachers and youth workers reluctant to take part and often not open to working in a different way. In practice what should have been an equal interaction between reflector and young person too easily reverted to interactions where the reflector as a professional held all the power. Our two day training explored the concepts behind the reflector role but we realised it was too theoretical and divorced from real life experiences. We changed tack and asked reflectors to choose and go on our in-community experiences: we found this experiential way of developing reflectors to be more effective and minimised the power differences.

Young people appreciated the chance to get feedback through the reflection process and they embraced the Self Shape, one of our early measurement tools. The Self Shape provided immediate and very visual feedback, whilst embedding capabilities at the heart of the work in a way that was real to young people. In much of Participle’s work we see that people like data if it is presented in a useful way and gives them concrete challenges to work on. A tool that is used for accounting is greeted in a very different way.

Figure 2: Excerpt from the Self Shape worksheet



Technology

We designed a web-based technology platform which co-ordinated opportunities and reflection sessions and which would enable scale. A set of simple tools to stimulate the choice of activity and to support the young person and the host to get off on the right foot was linked to this platform. A set of training tools and reflector guides completed

the infrastructure necessary to support Loops. Our technology and the suite of tools we developed meant that Loops was potentially designed for scale.

Loops: the Future

Loops was developed in partnership with young people and is rooted in longitudinal academic research. It responds to the still pressing need to support young people in the UK with developmental opportunities. At the time of writing over 13 percent of young people aged 16 to 24 are still classified as being outside of work, training or education. This is not only a tremendous waste of a generation's potential, but also adds an estimated cost to the state of £22 billion in additional public spending.

Loops is however our only project to date that has not moved beyond prototyping to implementation at scale. Perhaps Loops is challenging on too many levels for comfort: it confronts not only the practice of service provision, but the assumptions and mindsets behind this practice. For example, Loops is a universal service, in keeping with the principles of Beveridge 4.0. This principle, which seemed theoretically to be the least contentious of our proposals, has in practice drawn the greatest opposition from those in statutory organisations. Mixing 12 year olds with 24 year olds made our statutory partners extremely anxious. Discussions over implementation continually circled back to demands that we ran Loops for a more limited group, but this would curtail the possibility of experience and developmental learning that were brought by the wider community and sat at the heart of Loops.

Loops also confronts the logic behind existing public service provision, questioning expensive government inputs include buildings and professional time, all considered to be necessary to divert young people from negative behaviour. In contrast the Loops model builds on people already within the community and strengthens social bonds to support new activity and developmental reflection.

The community is the new youth centre. Such a model implies a profound re-organisation and move away from statutory provision towards an eco-system of local sub units supported by technology, community generated opportunities and volunteer reflectors. The Loops prototype demonstrated the community would generate opportunities and reflectors would step forward.

The vision was supported by all our partners but in the short term the depth of change we were proposing for services which were at the front line of cuts was too counter cultural, too great a leap. Croydon have taken elements from their learning as partners and adapted some services. In Brighton there was more resistance to the model generally and frustration from the Aldridge Foundation who had part funded the project in the expectation that implementation would follow.

Loops was hindered by an additional challenge: short run times. Loops was a nine month innovation project. In that time we were able to support the full running of the final prototype for four weeks. Hundreds of young people benefited during the course of the project and we observed something that we have seen again in more recent work. Towards the end of the funded project those who had been hardest to engage, the “stuck” were drawn into Loops by other young people who had participated and told their peers about the experience.

The time it takes to build a community that can attract and support those with the deepest challenges - whether it is the frail elderly within Circle or the most stuck young person in the case of Loops – has been consistently underestimated by us and by our funders who frequently expect us to start in this place. The learning from Loops however was invaluable, not only to Croydon, but also to Participle and has strongly influenced our unemployment work, [Backr](#).

At Participle we believe Loops remains a valid model, perhaps never more so, given the cuts in statutory services that have taken place since the original work in 2009.

Further Reading

[Beveridge 4.0](#) – Our mission statement

[Relational Welfare - Essay](#)

[Relational Welfare - Blog](#)

Participle would be happy to share a more in depth report on Loops with any partners genuinely seeking to adopt the approach. Contact us at hello@participle.net.