Fixers – written evidence (CCE0191)

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Introduction

The purpose of this submission is to offer insight and evidence to the Select Committee by providing a perspective on ‘voice’ as the agent of social change, integration and civic engagement. Of interest will be how ‘left behind’ groups, especially young people and ethnic minority communities, can be integrated into the wider civic culture through empowering them to articulate their voices – not merely as a form of communication but also as a tool of positive social change and civic engagement. This submission will first introduce Fixers as an organisation before proceeding to address each of the three subject areas while answering questions where applicable. Due to our unique approach to youth participation this submission will focus on our experience of enabling social integration as a youth social action charity.

As a UK-wide not-for-profit charity, Fixers works with a range of organisations and social groups in 86% of local authority areas across the UK. Since it was established in 2008, there have been over 20,000 young people who have become ‘Fixers’, 44% from the ‘top’ 20% of areas of multiple deprivation across the UK. (What is Fixers?) This speaks to Fixers’ commitment to working with young people in the 16-25 age range, from a range of backgrounds, providing they want to improve people’s lives and are committed to social change for the better.

The core to Fixers’ philosophy is our ‘Voice as Value’ approach to engaging with young people, especially socially isolated and underrepresented groups. Fixers’ mission as a charity is to help these young people get their voices heard by the key individuals, institutions and organisations who can help make change happen and society at large to change attitudes – thereby instituting change when their voices are valued. As our Voice as Value (2015) report indicates, there is a positive outcome for both audience and communicators in the articulation of voice – both benefit from young people obtaining recognition of their lived experience and point of view. For the audience (often practitioners/policy makers) there are benefits in listening and learning from young peoples’ perspectives articulated from the lived experiences (of migrant and/or service user). Fixers helps young people communicate their voices free from any organisational agenda or pre-conceived notions of what young people think. We are only interested in getting young people’s voices heard and valued by those who make decisions effecting their lives; because we believe that the real experts are those that know the most about the lives of young people – the young people themselves.

Communicating Citizenship: Voice as a Tool for Integration

As stated above, the ‘voice as value’ approach to youth and civic engagement focuses upon placing marginalised voices at the forefront of integration by creating the space for hitherto ‘left behind’ groups or individuals to articulate their voices to an institutional audience thereby creating better understanding, improved self-confidence amongst participants and higher levels of
trust – all essential for overcoming the social capital deficit within such groups and enabling both the ‘left behind’ and the ‘institutions’ to come together around a shared understanding of the others’ lives and respect. This is important because of the well documented declining levels of trust amongst ‘left behind’ groups – and society more widely – of institutions and the much derided, but nebulous, ‘Establishment’.

The process of articulating voice and, more importantly, receiving recognition from the wider society, builds social capital (defined here as increased trust levels, greater self-confidence and empathy between participant and audience) that is essential for any individual or community to thrive in society. As Fixers’ own research demonstrates, experiencing voice as value changes the way young people ‘think about their own identity, the way they think about others and the way they feel they are perceived and understood’ (Voice as Value, 2015). Indeed, research has shown that social action has many positive outcomes for young people who participate, including empathy, cooperation and a sense of community. (Birdwell et al. 2015) The establishing of empathy and trust between participants and decision-makers is an essential part of building relationships and effecting social change through collective action – all of which helps integrate ‘left behind’ groups into a larger sense of belonging. As Marshall Ganz has observed, the communication of young people’s voices and stories (or ‘narrative’) can engender ‘empathetic experience’ between participants in social action and those in positions of authority. (Ganz, 2017) Fixers’ voice-led approach to social action creates the social space in which empathy can emerge between participants and this lays the foundations for the effective creation of social cohesiveness and

**Evidence of the Impact of Voice on Citizenship, Integration and Civic Engagement**

**Social Integration**

Fixers acts on behalf of 16-25 year olds, often from marginalised or ignored groups in society, by helping them to communicate their voices across a wide range of platforms aiming to achieve new levels of understanding and empathy, increase our understanding of others’ lives and create positive social change.

As a charity, we offer a unique approach to social integration through empowering young people to overcome disadvantage, inequalities and ensuring society responds to what young people are saying; through communicating the voices of young people, to better inform the public’s understanding of the lived experiences of young people, we increase institutional knowledge and awareness about issues they are facing and we communicate alternative viewpoints to a wide array of audiences across all parts of the UK and all demographics. This allows groups of young people – whether they come from an ethnic minority community or a disadvantaged social grouping – to engage with wider society and provides a means for achieving integration through the articulation of voice.

Our culture is based on listening and telling stories, unlocking real life expertise of the young people we support. Several aspects of the Fixers programme justify the word ‘unique’: Fixers does
not turn away, or filter, anyone; the young people lead and choose their own issues; Fixers highly skilled staff turn their ideas into powerful, high-quality authentic content which is delivered to key audiences; we take the content to where people are rather than expecting them to come to us which guarantees delivery and we are not restricted by issue: we work on every subject as identified by the people living through them stimulating understanding around cultural and heritage issues, issues of stigma, community and identity, diversity and alternative viewpoints, reflecting diversity.

Fixers has previously worked with young people collectively on health issues such as eating disorders, mental health and gender identity. In each of these issue areas Fixers has assisted health practitioners and policy makers understand these issues through the expertise of marginalised groups and the inclusion of their voices in decision making structures has allowed them to gain a sense of empowerment and ownership as they become active participants. The benefits of the voice as value approach to participants and society is evidenced in the positive impact it has beyond the immediate participation in social action. Each young person that participates becomes better connected to the society around them, they gain a greater understanding of their obligations as citizens and the positive contributions they can continue to make to their society. (Edwards, 2015) Further to this, as recent research has demonstrated, 85% of young people that take part in Fixers social action campaigns continue to play an active role in society, campaigning on the issue they worked on with Fixers or branching out into other issue areas. (McKenna, 2016) Fixers, as a social action charity, is able to achieve this through our voice-led approach to youth participation; we are able to provide disadvantaged and socially isolated groups in society the means to participate, and those overcome their isolation, by putting them in contacts with wider social and professional networks, like-minded organisations and direct, one-to-one support from a team of Fixers personnel ranging from young people coordinators (YPCs) assisting them from the start to communications officers helping them get their voices heard by institutions and decision-makers.

Recently arrived migrants

In terms of the integration of recent migrant arrivals, Fixers has worked on numerous projects with young refugees and migrants in the 16-25 year old age bracket. From projects seeking to challenge myths about asylum seekers in the UK to Skhumbuzo Khumalo’s campaign about LGBT women refugees from Zimbabwe; each Fixers project with migrant communities or individuals provides a platform for the articulation of their voices within the process of naturalisation, settlement and integration. By allowing migrants to communicate their voices, it allows for the flow of dialogue between stakeholders, communities and the migrants themselves which in our experience forms an integral part of the process of integration of new arrivals as this serves to increase understanding and breakdown barriers to socialisation.
The success of these projects speaks to how Fixers’ ‘voice as value’ approach can serve as a means for achieving integration through communication – a key part in any process of assimilation. As previously noted, our voice as value approach has both positive impacts for both the communicator and audience – in this case, the migrant/refugee and society/service providers respectively. For the migrants, the positive outcomes stem from them having the opportunity to articulate their voices and receiving recognition of their lived experiences or point of view; for those working with migrants or for the wider community, they gain an invaluable insight into the lived experience of the communicator free from organisational agendas or pre-conceived notions. A further benefit of this approach is that recently arrived migrants can communicate their voices via a range of media platforms – ranging from social media to regional television – and directly to audiences that may not be usually receptive to a migrant’s message unfiltered by institutions or societal preconceptions. In turn, this allows the communicator to challenge stigma, preconceptions and harmful stereotypes in a way that would be difficult through institutional media. Without the support of an organisation like Fixers, such voices are left unheard and neglected from policy debates that directly affect migrants but which presently do not properly represent them. This is true for many other ‘left behind’ groups on a whole host of issues.

Settled ethnic minority communities

As with recent migrant arrivals, Fixers has worked with many young people from across a wide range of minority groupings on issues relating to discrimination, racism and social isolation. Fixer projects such as Terrain Watte-Lee’s campaign, which aimed to challenge negative stereotypes of black youths, or Lyla Asif who led a Fixers campaign challenging attitudes within the British Asian community towards people with disabilities. In particular with the latter example, Fixers have sought to provide a platform for the articulation of voices from socially isolated groups existing within ethnic or racial minority communities – arguably the least socially integrated groups due to their positions within their communities which are themselves less integrated.

As with all Fixer projects, we aim to empower unheard voices through obtaining recognition and value regarding their views and experiences. By empowering socially isolated ethnic minority groups through the articulation of voice, in our experience, this breaks down barriers to social integration by allowing certain groups to speak for themselves rather than through community or institutional voice – which often comes with its own agenda and priorities that can often be unrepresentative of those they are meant to represent. It is through the articulation of voice that minority groups can be integrated into society by giving them a sense of empowerment, engagement and buy-in to society that more traditional institutionalised integration processes often fail to provide. Indeed, our experience in helping socially isolated groups communicate their voices to institutions demonstrates that by allowing them to articulate positive narratives, based on their lived experiences, is beneficial for both them and their audience. By challenging established narratives and preconceptions, while increasing understanding and empathy, both groups benefit through open dialogue and positive communication – this is essential for any
process of integration as both need to understand, empathise and communicate as a prerequisite for social cohesion.

References


Birdwell, Scott & Reynolds, *Youth United*, 2015


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