

# Meaningful social action - adding value to the curriculum

## An Ofsted perspective

*Tony Gallagher HMI National Lead (Youth Strategy)*



empowering more  
young people to  
play their part



**Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, has supported 'Step up to Serve' from the outset and Ofsted is keen to promote the value of social action in supporting young people's learning. This piece takes a look back to what Ofsted has reported in this area in the recent past and looks forward to how schools, colleges, and other learning providers can provide evidence to inspectors of social action as a valid and relevant aspect of the curriculum.**

### **What do we know?**

Ofsted has not sought to define social action within its inspection frameworks. In school settings it may be 'active citizenship' with the activities that students engage in part of the citizenship curriculum in whichever form a school chooses to provide it. Students who engage in visible social action are often seen as positive role models for younger pupils to aspire to. This is particularly evident where students act as peer mentors or buddies to younger students or act as subject ambassadors, planning and teaching lessons alongside teachers. In college and FE settings, an important measure of the impact of social and personal development is employability skills.

Communities too can benefit from young people engaging in social action by breaking down views about stereotypes, particularly inter-generationally. Good examples of this include where young people engage in project work with elderly people such as teaching them to use mobile phones or entertaining them with music and dance performances. Helping out in special schools for those with learning difficulties or disabilities by organising play activities or being an extra pair of hands on a day trip is yet another.

Recent inspection evidence shows that opportunities in primary schools for pupils to engage in some form of social action in school are extensive. Activities range across representation on school councils, planning fund-raising events, leading on eco or Fair Trade projects, providing peer support and leading playground activities for younger pupils. In outstanding schools Key Stage 2 pupils were seen to engage in local community roles such as trained junior wardens working alongside community wardens and the police, or representing the pupil voice at local parish or council meetings.

Examples of social action within school for older students are also wide and varied. Taking responsibility for younger students is one of the most popular and can take many forms such as reading partners, anti-bullying ambassadors, sports coaching and counselling. Others develop leadership and organisational skills through running clubs and societies or fund-raising for local, national or international charities.

Campaigning is common, a good example of which is a school where sixth formers took the initiative and campaigned vigorously for improved safety measures by a local river following the tragic death of a former student.

Almost all schools have an active student council although the extent to which they are representative of the school, particularly of those with disabilities or those who have special educational needs can be questionable. The student voice is strongest where there are numerous forums and opportunities for students to engage in decision-making that affects the life of the school. This may include sports and curriculum councils, questionnaires and surveys, interview panels and focus groups.

Ofsted carried out a national survey in 2012 on the impact on young people of volunteering <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/choosing-volunteer>. The report presented some interesting findings. It was clear for instance that many school and college leaders had not realised the extent of volunteering activity taking place within their institution – they were pleasantly surprised. It was also evident that many students were involved in activities beyond school or college and within their communities. In one instance, a young woman worked every weekend to support the elders at the local mosque with their English. Arguably her involvement bore no relationship with her time at college, but she was learning much about herself and her community. From a social perspective she had certainly ‘taken ownership’!

The same report noted the challenge in ensuring that social action and volunteering activities engages those whose circumstances make them vulnerable. To be successful, schools, colleges and youth organisations needed to remove barriers to participation. For some young people the barriers were related to their disability or special educational need, for others their financial, home or personal circumstances. We noted that rates of participation for disabled young people were particularly low, although the benefits of such engagement were often very high. Low participation rates were sometimes linked to low expectations of young disabled people by themselves and those around them. Examples of successful projects included a group of disabled youth organising and running a regional disability hate-crime conference and a group providing disability rights training for other youth organisations. Through these activities they developed political awareness, confidence and self-worth. One young disabled volunteer said, ‘you want people to know that you too have skills just like anyone else and you can make a difference too’.

Young people are also made vulnerable by their sexuality or gender identity. A group of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) young people had engaged very successfully in a campaign to combat the homophobia and transphobia they have experienced in schools by making myth-busting videos, preparing lesson plans and training teachers.

During the survey they spoke about volunteering improving and developing their self-esteem, growing their sense of personal and social responsibility, motivation, resilience, political awareness, leadership and employment skills. But young people often chose to volunteer to ‘give something back’ - because it felt right. Such attitudes are impressive.

## Inspection- a role for social action

In addition to other key judgements, school inspections consider the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC) of pupils. Engaging in social action can impact positively on SMSC which, among other things, requires that pupils:

- investigate and offer reasoned views about moral and ethical issues, and are able to understand and appreciate the viewpoints of others on these issues
- work and socialise with pupils from different religious, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds
- participate in a variety of communities and social settings, including by volunteering, cooperating well with others and being able to resolve conflicts effectively
- have a knowledge of Britain's democratic parliamentary system and its central role in shaping our history and values, and in continuing to develop Britain
- participate in and respond positively to artistic, sporting and cultural opportunities.

Ofsted is firm in its views that well-managed, meaningful social action has a very positive impact on children and young people. Teachers and lecturers often ask for hints and tips in preparing the right evidence of social action for inspectors. There is no 'check list' but here are a few observations;

- get the culture right. Where personal development is high on the agenda and social action is embedded, staff and young people talk about it and do it. Inspectors soon notice where some staff and managers pay only 'lip service'
- assimilate the inspection guidance on social, moral, spiritual and cultural development
- it's the learning which young people accrue as a result of social action that makes the difference. Think about impact and the teacher expertise needed to promote meaningful social action. Consider an assessment model – best practice in citizenship education can point the way
- avoid creating long lists of 'good things' that students do, instead, be analytical. An audit can be a bureaucratic tool and Ofsted is certainly not calling for one, but have an accurate overview of which students are, and which are not benefitting from social action activities. The latter might need it most
- a strategy and an overall direction of travel for social action help give it visibility and merit. The best strategies are linked to achievement
- be creative and fresh in your social action ideas; social media, campaigning, employment and enterprise skills. Avoid the trap of doing 'what we did last year'

- identify and then nurture the skills which young people need to shape and take forward their own social action projects. Spoon-feeding young people undersells their capabilities
- communicate the benefits for students of social action through displays, parent newsletters and the website
- within self-assessment documents, at institutional or departmental level, present the impact on young people of personal development activities as well as academic achievement.

Despite the pressure and tension which inspection can bring, inspectors are keen to hear about the added value which social action can bring to the curriculum.

View inspection as an opportunity not a threat!

**Tony Gallagher HMI (National Lead Youth Strategy)**