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"True stories from bare times on road": Developing empowerment, identity and social capital among urban minority ethnic young people in London, U.K.

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Abstract

This paper is based on evaluative research in an inner-London borough on a programme designed to raise self esteem and deter minority ethnic young people from involvement in crime and participation in gangs. The aim of the programme was to work with young people 'at risk' or involved with gangs, violent crime and who may use weapons and to divert them from this behaviour. Essentially, the paper explores the way in which minority ethnic young people can be equipped to develop social capital. The paper firstly, applies a brief contextual understanding of urban minority ethnic young peoples experiences of school and 'street life'; secondly, it will describe the background and aims of the programme and; thirdly will discuss whether and how the programme contributed to developing trust; to notions of awareness and empowerment; self-esteem and identity, and how it impacted on their social and family relationships.

Key words:

Social capital, empowerment, identity, minority ethnic, street life, crime

Introduction

This paper is based on ethnographic findings from an evaluation of a charity-funded programme for minority ethnic young people in a disadvantaged area of north London. Data was gathered from observation sessions during programme and one-to-one interviews with participants once the programme had finished. The programme aimed to work with young people at risk or involved with gangs, violent crime and who may carry/use weapons.

The paper addresses four areas: firstly, it will set the theoretical backdrop for the article; secondly, will describe the background and aims of the programme; thirdly, it will apply a brief contextual understanding of urban minority ethnic young peoples experiences of school and 'street life'; and, finally will discuss, through the narratives of those who participated, whether and how the programme contributed to developing trust; to notions of awareness and empowerment; self-esteem and identity, and how it impacted on their social and family relationships.

The key question will be whether urban minority ethnic young people can develop social capital to counter the powerful social and structural forces which expose them to 'street life', involvement in crime and gangs. Therefore for the purpose of this paper, the concept of social capital will be used. Social capital is useful concept of analysis in this context because it is able to capture the essence of networks, trust exchanges, social support, social relations and social interactions (Putnam, 1993). This definition will thus form the theoretical framework for the paper. The paper will begin with a brief

examination of social capital, to frame the findings of the study, before discussing the social, cultural and structural conditions of these young people's lives, the methodological approach, and the programme and its impact, and.

Social capital

The foundations of social capital have traditionally examined dominant classes (Bourdieu, 1986; Brown, 1994; Franklin, 2004; Gatti and Tremblay, 2007). Such groups are considered to have 'greater social capital' (Lomas, 1998). This is particularly apparent in industrialised countries, where socio-economic inequalities have been found to reduce social cohesion and integration while increasing social isolation (Kawachi and Kennedy, 1997; Molyneux. 2001): the more socio-economically deprived an area, the poorer access is to 'social capital' (Hefferman, 2002). Others, however, indicate that it is entirely relevant for describing social relations among those with limited economic and cultural resources (Stephenson, 2001).

While social capital has been linked with increased community cohesion and increased community action for common problem-solving (Narayan and Pritchett, 1997), at the same time, it is also linked with the increased availability of social capital to offenders (Browning et al., 2004). Social capital analyses have traditionally sidelined these groups who may, for example, be involved in or 'at risk' of involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour. It is also evident that social capital has also predominantly explored adults and the

communities in which they live: rarely is it used as a tool of analysis for examining young people and youth crime (Helve and Brynner, 2007).

However, in her longitudinal Timescape studies, which explored how personal and family relationships develop and change over time, Janet Holland noted how *"poverty, illness, and bereavement, unemployment, drugs, crime, gangs, and violence were endemic on the estate"* in a rural deprived community experienced. This, she suggested, was *"integral to the young peoples lives"* in that a 'way out' for young people was largely *"beset with setbacks"* and generally considered to be impossible, and even for those who did manage to 'escape the bubble', the pathway was often complex and difficult (Holland, 2007: 18-19). Those that did manage to increase their career and life prospects relied heavily on notions of social capital. There appears to be little evidence to suggest whether urban minority ethnic young people, when faced with similar structural and social barriers, can prevail by developing social capital.

In addition, it has been argued, that the relationship between social capital and ethnicity also remains underdeveloped (Goulbourne and Solomos, 2003). Indeed, the same authors have noted how ethnicity is *"a currency of a social capital nature which may be nurtured and invested, squandered, lost, or shared, mixed and utterly changed as a result of meetings at boundary points"* (2002: 4). Generally, when ethnicity is mentioned, it seems to be in relation to the lack of social capital of inner city ethnic minorities (Putnam et al. 1993).

This is where an examination into minority ethnic young people in deprived urban landscapes becomes important because, broadly speaking, such groups remain at the centre of government, media and community attention: in particular, given that, for a significant number, victimisation, street crime and involvement with gangs form some part of their lives at some stage (Briggs et al., 2007). The term 'gang', however, still appears to be ambiguously understood. It can be a disorganised transient congregation of young people with a common history and biography (Hallsworth and Young, 2005) as well as a more organised with more criminal and anti-social intent (Pitts, 2007). Nevertheless, exposure to influential peers 'on the streets', in some form, involvement in anti-social behaviour and/or crime, difficult family relationships, often hinders their life chances and, as a consequence, it becomes difficult to make the most out of education, training, employment and health (Collinson, 1996).

Participation in such urban social networks is not always, however, associated with negative results. 'Gangs' or street groups, as Stephenson (2001) notes, can have beneficial consequences. In an analysis of how Russian street children access important resources and networks through social capital, she suggests that children's background plays an important role in their life trajectory in urbanized areas. She found that the street children of Moscow were resourceful and made use of ad-hoc memberships. That: *"they are capable of developing sophisticated social networks which serve their immediate survival needs and can also relate to long-term life plans"* (2001: 532).

Conversely, and this is perhaps the more hegemonic perspective in the UK, the negative social consequences of these youth networks in urban deprived areas do not always reap such positive results. As Sabates writes, *"one may expect that peers are a protective factor against criminal behaviour but they can also promote anti-social and criminal behaviours"* (2007: 138). This is often manifested in the form of gangs, victimisation, anti-social behaviour and youth crime. Gangs, as Portes and Landolt (1996) suggest, are also social networks that provide access to resources and enforce conformity. In the long-term, they conclude, these groups may 'hold people back' rather than 'raising each other up'.

This is set against a structural backdrop of increasing autonomy in the lives of young people, which involves them negotiating a series of complex decisions, while simultaneously placing increasing allegiance with their peer social networks. Helve and Bynner note that this increasing autonomy *"supplies the means of resolving identity conflicts and coping with uncertainties on the route to adulthood"* (2007: 1). Young people are increasingly required to construct their biographies, take responsibility for their lives, and make a series of individual decisions, which are often less clear-cut, because they are set within these peer social networks (Raffo and Reeves, 2000).

This is important because this not only has implications for how identities are nurtured, and how relations are established, but ultimately how the trajectories of young people are shaped. In the context of this paper, this is largely done

in the absence of parental supervision and increasingly within the framework of an urban 'street culture'. Therefore these social and cultural conditions play an important part in shaping their attitudes and expectations, their perceptions of the social world, and, more importantly, what it can offer them. Their experiences at home, at school, 'on road' or on 'the streets', in particular, play a significant role in shaping their lives and have a more or less direct effect on their motivation to engage in crime and gangs.

Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, such discourses of 'the streets' or 'on road', which have inductively surfaced from this ethnographic research, come to represent the norms, values, conduct and behaviour of young people involved in, or on the fringes of, street crime and gangs. A brief description the programme and its aims will now precede the methodological approach and the findings section of the paper.

The programme and its aims

The aim of the programme was to work with young people 'at risk' or involved with gangs, violent crime and who may use weapons and to divert them from this behaviour.[i] The programme deals with a target group living in a disadvantaged community; this population are predominantly minority ethnic young people. The sessions also aimed to help young people examine themselves, raise awareness of who they are (their identity), improve their family and social relations and explore how society perceives them. The programme involves young people and facilitators sitting in a circle, discussing personal issues. The programme served to complement other

youth-orientated programmes in the area by offering a 'hands-on' approach with the local youth population on two deprived estates.

Over eight weeks from June to August 2008, the programme explored young peoples' issues and helped them identify their goals. Programme sessions took place each Wednesday and Friday from 6pm to 9pm. The programme concluded with a 'residential' which was a four-day excursion in the country. More in-depth sessions were undertaken at this stage. The programme developers, In-volve commissioned the Families and Social Capital Group at London South Bank University to evaluate the programme. The following section describes the methods used in the evaluation.

Methodology

The research used ethnographic methods including observing sessions and open-ended qualitative interviews.[1] This method was used to gain some practical 'experience' of the programme, observe how young people were affected by the approach of the facilitators, develop rapport with the young people to enable more fruitful one-to-one interviews at the end of the programme. Over the course of programme, three observation sessions were undertaken with young people and facilitators. Detailed notes were taken and informal conversations were undertaken with young people and facilitators about their experiences. One-to-one interviews were undertaken with fourteen young people who participated in the programme. Interviews were anonymous and confidential. A similar form of ethical commitment was made

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[1] Desk-based research methods using various academic research and use of data collected by facilitators were also used during the eight-week programme.

to observations in the session. Interviews were also undertaken with the facilitators of the programme.

Sample

Overall, 34 young people attended the programme and numbers differed from week to week. They were all from minority ethnic backgrounds and were aged between 12 and 24. Slightly more young women (n=19) attended the programme than young men (n=15). The sample of fourteen young people who were interviewed were aged between 12 and 22. Four young people considered themselves to be Black African, five Black British and five Mixed Race. Seven of the young people were in school/college and five had some form of employment at the time of interview. Two were unemployed but looking for work.

Validity

Transcripts and field notes were revisited and participants were approached for clarification. This promoted a continual validation of the data which gradually started to 'sort' out some basic themes of which were, at first, descriptive in nature. The final report was shown to three participants for their feedback. Fetterman (1989) has noted that verbatim quotes assist in the process in presenting validity and credibility; this has been also provided throughout. In this opening section, the circumstances of this group of minority ethnic young people in a disadvantaged urban area of north London is contextualised.

Findings

<u>'The streets': A contextual understanding</u>

Evidence from interviews suggests that many urban minority ethnic young people involved in 'the streets' are experiencing what we might call a 'crisis of confidence' and the erosion of their sense of 'self worth'. Borne, in many cases, of the experience of childhood poverty and troubled family relationships, many had experienced separation and loss, and have no consistent father figure in the family home. This is, however, not the whole story and some of those involved in 'the streets' appear to have experienced none of these disadvantages. Furthermore, to consolidate, and often compensate for the absence of parents or extensive family networks, allegiance is pledged to 'the streets' as young people refer to each other as 'fam' (family). This is evident in their day-to-day discourses of growing up and developing peer relationships:

> **Hustler**: *We used to be geeky, like stand outside and play action men and stuff, we were like 10 and 11 then we saw all the olders in the ends* [older gang members] *and they used to beat people up so we thought 'lets start doing that' and we started to bully people, kids younger than us, grab hold of them, have a laugh about it and then it got to a point when we started doing it more often and from there it was we were robbing because when I asked my mum for tracksuits, she couldn't do it so I had to keep up and be proper raw* [appear 'fresh']*. I started robbing loads and beating people up.*
> **Dan:** *Where was your ends* [where did you hang out]?
> **Hustler:** [Place] *was where I am from in the blocks. It started to move out to* [place] *and we met the next lot of boys, start to get to know them and move out and go on days out in other area and used to keep meeting new people "where you from, fam?"* "[place] *in* [place]" *and everyone got to know each other.*

The experience of school was described by most as 'frustrating' and boring. Indeed, for some time, since the 1990s it has been shown that young minority

ethnic groups were showing evidence of considerable variation in educational achievement (Modood 2004). This has been linked with the fear of 'acting white' which may lead to academically successful black students being disparaged and/or reducing their effort in order to avoid taunts (Cook and Ludwig, 1998). Modood (2003) has also indicated that confrontational relationships with teachers, discipline problems and high exclusion rates, plus racial bias in setting (ability grouping) practice as being part explanation for the underachievement of Caribbean male students. Poor facility in English, cultural adaptation, racism and poorly resourced schools have also been associated with the reasons why some minority ethnic groups do less well than national averages (Dwyer et al., 2006). Importantly, however, Modood (2003) states that no one explanation is entirely convincing, but some or all of these issues may account for part of the achievement gap.

Such findings appear to be apparent from this research because and few reflected positively on the experience of school; most became victims of crime, and experienced demonisation by peers and teachers. Their difficult relationship with school was also associated with a belief that institutional routes to success was unavailable to them. Thus, a culture in which 'avoiding school', 'dropping out' or being excluded appeared to become the option and 'going solo' and being self sufficient came to be viewed as the only way to retain self-respect and the respect of others. This is a very individualistic world and these beliefs and attitudes can often deter long-term friendships:

> *"When I started reaching secondary school, when I started to see boys get robbed, boys like me, black boys, get robbed. I was like eleven or*

twelve, bigger boys spitting in other boys faces. It was nice in primary school but it suddenly got worse and then the years after it got worse, people start dying. This is why people are dying – everyone is for their self, they don't care about this and that so I don't trust no one. I trust myself and my mum and my freedom." [Younger Dred]

This individualism notwithstanding, there are immense pressures to conform to the code of 'the streets'. Some authors point out that Black Caribbean boys experience considerable pressure by their peers to adopt the norms of an 'urban' or 'street' subculture (Sewell, 1997) which is often augmented by the prestige given to unruly and antagonistic behaviour (Strand, 2007). This may be, for example, in the use of slang terminology used by young black males which, it has been argued, is socially acceptable and is widely used by White and Asian counterparts. Similarly, it could also be the low hung jeans which derive from the days when prisoners wore their trousers low as belts were forbidden; a look is now considered to be 'cool' among urban youth groups (Okoronkwo, 2008).

Meanwhile, these young people tend to be stigmatised for 'hanging around in groups or 'gangs', in the media and this serves to compound their values and attitudes. For many of these young people, life revolves around creating, establishing and maintaining 'rep' (reputation) among peers and the opposite sex. In this world, money and style are central to the maintenance of 'rep' and young people require material goods to present 'rep', to appear 'fresh' and maintain a lifestyle far beyond what they can actually afford as individuals.

Many cannot or do not rely on money from their parent/s and prefer to 'make it themselves', turning to gangs and street crime not only to sustain their lifestyle but also to increase their rep by demonstrating a willingness to go up against potentially dangerous adversaries:

> *Everyone wants to be the biggest, baddest and the most untouchable but if you get robbed people are going to say 'you got robbed by so and so' so you are a victim and no one will take you seriously.* [Tyson]

This attitude is not limited to boys, for in the narratives of girls, it is also evident that the macho world of the streets has implications for the young women who also participate. For them, this means not only adopting the clothes or the language, but also violence:

> "*More girls are becoming man-dem* [like men]…*back in the day I couldn't wait for them to come to my school so we could roll* [go on the streets]…*I feel like I'm getting mad old for what these girls are doing. Some boys hate it…*[asking] *why is she acting like a man for?*" [Miss Bruv]

> "*They're doing what they're doing* [the boys] *so why can't we too? You join them or you fight them…you fight it if you act like a brer* [boy]…" [HipChick]

In some urban neighbourhoods, the influence of 'the streets' is there from an early age but actual involvement in this lifestyle normally presents itself as a choice when young people start secondary school. Some young people flirt with 'the streets', adopting only the style of dress and the language. For them, it is just a 'phase', but nonetheless a phase which can carry many dangers. Others, however, become more heavily involved. Those that do soon grow accustomed to making quick and easy money, contributing to a lifestyle of 'valueless cash', 'easy-come - easy-go'. The more deeply a young person

becomes involved in street culture, the greater their financial needs become because, having status on the streets means being seen to have money and being seen to spend it on 'your people' and/or your family. Thus, the deeper their involvement in 'the streets' becomes, the less likely they are to be attracted to the modest rewards from the limited range of legitimate job opportunities available to them:

> *£10 cannot last me an hour now, bruv. The way it is, man is getting older, man's needs are becoming more defined and man needs to start earning serious money.* [The Prince]

Furthermore, 'the streets' are a powerful influence, but not only upon young people with troubled backgrounds and few prospects. Some participants who were heavily involved in 'the streets' came from stable families and had achieved academic success. One young man indicated how having GCSE's meant very little as the risk and appeal for the streets was still present: *"It is the area you are brought up in – quite a lot of people go with their environment more than anything else. I know people with GCSEs that are still doing what they are doing* [crime] *and are influenced about the streets".* Covert Mover, who started out doing street robberies and moved on, via a gang, to more serious forms of crime, has eleven GCSEs, three A levels and had started at university, but also ran a crack-dealing business which yields £1500 a week:

> *"It is something that I didn't expect, like once you do something, you get deeper and deeper into things. It is fast cash, easy money, tax free."* (Covert Mover)

Moreover, victimisation is always a danger and both male and female participants recognised that at 'some stage', 'what goes around will come around'. While research has suggested that this is especially apparent in schools in the form of bullying (Smith, 2006), it is also apparent in the context of the streets. This attitude was also apparent in the findings as this young girl indicated: *"On the streets anything could happen, anytime so not a new thing – not surprised if people shot or shanked* [stabbed]. *You can't go through the street life without being stabbed or beaten. Something will eventually happen to you"* [Hipchick]. If, having been victimised, one decides to get 'payback' by fighting one's attackers and/or get back the money or goods, or their equivalent this may well increase one's 'rep' among peers, showing potential adversaries that this not a person who should be challenged lightly. Indeed, Hallsworth and Young (2005)[2] aptly state that:

> *"Men who will retaliate at the slightest provocation. A cycle of retaliation is often inevitable… 'Feminine' values such as forgiveness, care and compassion are rejected in favour of masculine ideals of strength and power… Mundane arguments are 'reconstructed… into the stuff of legend".*

This can, however, also create a ripple effect, resulting in 'beef' or a vendetta and a sequence of 'comeback' attacks, involving ever-larger groups of young people. The notion of 'beef' and potential adversaries is further complicated by the level of suspicion and paranoia about other young peoples 'connections'. Although research has confirmed that same ethnic friendship networks are important in identity construction (Reynolds, 2007), for a number of young people in these disadvantaged urban environments, such networks,

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[2] Cited in Firmin et al. (2007: 28).

despite having positive values, are often demarcated by postcode boundaries, suspicion of the 'rival other' who may be affiliated with a gang, and general mistrust. These are the often situational and unpredictable day-to-day life contexts that many of these young people face. This next section will examine the programme and its impact across the strands of developing trust; awareness and empowerment; identity and self-esteem; and social and family relationships.

The programme and its impact

The programme sphere: Developing trust with adults and peers

The programme took place in a youth club on a deprived urban estate yet the context and social arena for the programme sessions was respected by all. Facilitators had few problems with young people arriving late or drifting in and out to make or take mobile phone calls. They reflected positively on this freedom; to enter and leave the programme as they pleased and this helped lay the foundations of trust and respect for facilitators. The facilitators were able to 'connect' with young people by using their own experiences as troubled young people also growing up in difficult social conditions. They demonstrated a thorough understanding of the difficulties that minority ethnic young people faced in urban settings and talked openly about their difficult life experiences:

> *"Marlow* [a facilitator]*, he is your dawg – when he talks, he does make people click and when he tells you about his stuff and it makes you think 'a life on streets is not for me'. They are genuine people – they are people who did wrong in the past and they are doing good now so Marlow is a good guy, he is talking about how he did wrong in the past*

and now he works hard for everything which encourages me to put a spring in my step. He is an inspirational." [The Prince]

The facilitators' extensive experience of working with marginalised young people was evident in how they managed the challenging social dynamics of the sessions. One young man, who had been to other youth-orientated programmes, said how it was *"interesting and unique".* He continued:

> *"In the first session, it was like a general conversation and it was like no one was really talking, but then like Peaches and Marlow started talking about all they had been through and then let us express stuff. They didn't cut us short, like it happens in school because they cut you off, bruv, but there were no boundaries for what you thought or said."*
> [Bravo]

The facilitators were also skilled in assuring confidentiality but also applying support when necessary, since many were not used to releasing information about themselves. This was made more challenging as some young people had 'beef' with each other. Therefore trust had been something difficult for many to employ. Over time, however, a foundation of trust was built through within this open forum. This was augmented by 'the residential' which provided a peaceful break from the daily distractions of London life and enabled the expert team 'to deepen the experience' for young people. This was considered to be the most integral part of the programme as it drew on the eight-week experience which highlighted new levels of trust with peers, but also adults. So much so, new concepts of 'family' appeared in narratives:

> *"On the residential man, they took us out of the area. There was no TV. The routine is different in the country, nice breakfast lunch and dinner, we did the normal raw sessions, and developed into a family You can go out there sit on grass, go and see cows and horses, to be real, to do*

whatever, do your thing, some did that, some went to check the wilderness." [Younger Dred]

The Rock commented that through *"group activities and individual activities"*, they *"went deep"* and *"asked questions which wouldn't be asked so it left us something to think about on a deeper level"*. He felt as if he had *"a new family"*. Shy H, for example, said that *"everyone was like one big family"* and that it was *"like being at home with different people"*. She added that had *"we been in the ends* [where we hang around on the streets] *then none of us would have really knew each other or learn to help each other"*. Renegade reflected how it was *"good to learn about each other"* and was grateful for the opportunity to go because it kept him *"focussed"*. The Stacker said he *"bonded with some boys"* and, more importantly, found the confidence to *"speak on stage"* despite having a *"speech problem"*: *"it has really held me back in the past"*, he concluded.

The euphoria of the event, however, could not last and most were disappointed to arrive back to London where *"the old life was waiting"* [True Stories]. *"It was depressing coming back",* said Younger Dred: *"when we went off in the coach, we was away from police and dumb people and now you're back it feels like your starting from first."* As relations grew, trust and emotional attachment became stronger, a few admitted they would find it difficult to continue each week without seeing facilitators. For example, The Stacker reflected how he was *"tight with Peaches"* and that he would *"miss her."* This prompted some to keep in contact.

<u>Awareness and empowerment</u>

The programme also appeared to promote notions of awareness and empowerment: 'awareness' of current life trajectories and the importance of education and 'empowerment' to feel able to rise above their current social and structural positions to succeed. This was seen particularly important to how their ethnic disposition was generally perceived - as 'deviant' - which, a few admitted, had often superseded the possibility to 'do other things' or 'lead a better life'. Positive reflections were made about understanding other people's perceptions, perspectives and values. The youngest participant in the sessions described the first moments of her participation: *"we are like in a circle and you talk about stuff that's happened. Like, it is good because you sort of get to understand adults because* [adults and young people] *they don't understand each other and you learn from doing wrong"* [The Queen]. For some, to be able to empathise with other people was advantageous:

> [The sessions were] *"good, like it is something to do. Find out things about things and people your never knew, like I don't remember all of it but you interact with people, seeing some of the older and different people there. They are different to on the streets."* [Tyson]

Young people were also positive about understanding more about aspects of their daily lifestyle which may have impeded their progress towards life goals. Younger Dred reflected on how he *"learnt new things"* about himself: *"how I carry myself, how I am perceived, init. How to be a young man growing up in cruel society and how to get money up legit way"* [Younger Dred]. An increased awareness of themselves, led to them feeling more empowered about their actions. For one young man, in particular, who only attended *"four*

or five sessions", the sessions *"changes your way of thinking"*, so you *"can understand the consequences of your actions"*. He continued by reflecting quite personally on how one session had helped him understand some aspects of his past behaviour:

> *"Basically one of the session was about how you feel, about sleeping around with lots of girls, but if a girl does it they get called names, then thought of perspective of the girls and how they come to their point of view – I respect women more, like me I always used to I think different but that day was a realisation."* [Bravo]

Discussions were carefully managed by facilitators who carefully helped to point out areas of young people's lives which could be doing more harm than good. In the next field note excerpt, Peaches manages to 'prize open' some of True Stories' dilemmas. While in the circle, she makes a careful dissection of his weed-smoking routines:

> 7.31pm: A key highlight was listening to True Stories realise how much weed he was smoking when he couldn't afford it (he is on Job Seekers Allowance). He admits that he has stopped smoking weed over the last three weeks because he gets hallucinations and paranoid feelings. This was initiated by Peaches who first of all asks him how much he smokes per day. She then broke it down to how much it costs him per day before summing up how much it costs him per week and per year. In the end, she points out that he smokes £5,000 of weed a year. True Stories cannot believe it and says *"I've never thought of it like that"*. There are a few surprised faces around the room and it is obvious that this resonates with a number of the young people. [8.8.08]

This learning from each session was linked to the open nature of the discussions which acted as a channel for young people to talk openly about their life experiences and problems. One young woman was positive that it kept her *"off the streets"* and the sessions had become somewhere where

"you can talk about your problems". She added that *"some people don't know how to talk but it helps you come out of your shell and talk about openly"* [Shy H]. Even when it appeared that some of the young people appeared to feel restless throughout the sessions, they did not leave the sessions. On several occasions throughout the duration of the sessions, some moments were clearly testing the attention levels of some young people; yet they stayed. Fieldwork notes recorded one such example of The Rock:

> The most poignant moment was watching The Rock, a hardened but shy serious young man, say he could stay only 10 minutes but ended up staying 40 minutes. He was mesmerised by Peaches speeches, and he tried hard not to show he was enjoying himself. He was persuaded to play a game which was about being open about feelings. At the end of the game he couldn't necessarily see the fun side of it and reacted like he should punish himself because he didn't win. Later it transpired that he is an artist and poet and has been recovering from the first anniversary of his brother's death. [18.7.08]

In fact these moments were aptly summarised in his own words, as he reflected on that first session:

> *"I loved it* [the programme]. *I like the fact, when we step into the room, there was a positive vibe, different emotions, a certain level a foundation of trust, not being judged, main key factors. See I came in at the end, two weeks before the residential, just to see what it was all about, and it just continued from there but at first I was cautious. I knew someone who was going to start with and we decided whether we would go in and we went in and they was just expressing themselves and they weren't holding back and it gave me a chance to talk about what is going on in my life and my heart it is always good to make things known if there is a certain agreement about how the information must stay."* [The Rock]

In particular, the 'free and open space' which cultivated personal feelings was augmented by the use of the 'truth chair'. The 'chair' was used to 'channel'

and disaggregate the emotions and experiences of young people so they could openly connect, understand and share their experiences. With one person sitting in the centre of the group circle, it represented a core feature of the programme which focuses on listening and discussion:

> *"The truth chair is very good, because it like gives you more confidence, I can't explain it, but to talk openly about yourself and share personal things with other people but before I wasn't doing this sort of thing."* [The stacker]

Another young man said the programme was useful in that it allowed him to *"release anger"* instead of it *"being on the streets"*. A few young people, however, found it difficult to sit in the truth chair and talk openly about their feelings and experiences. Shy H, for example, got *"emotional"* when it came to *"families and relationships"*. Despite feeling more comfortable with people as a result of the programme, she was still reluctant to talk in public: *"I don't know how to talk in front of people, like if I am not comfortable with you, then I can't talk so nothing will come out"* [Shy H].

Self-esteem and identity

> *"For me everything was it was good. I think when we had to talk about identity – coz like because it was good, I enjoyed it because talking about identity because you don't think about it and where you go and when you done it and you think who I want to be and how people want to see me, then you feel more confidence about it."* [Shy H]

Indeed, before the sessions, Shy H was *"not really focused"* on what she wanted to do. *"Really"*, she said: *"I was with my friends and it was another story"*. She summarised powerfully: *"if you don't believe in yourself then you aren't going to get it* [what you want from life]*"*. This is just one of the many

examples which reflected the overwhelming increase in a greater sense of identity and enhanced self-confidence among participants. This is suitably summarised by Younger Dred who, aside from attaining a deeper understanding of himself, reflects on how 'the streets' had been a key influencing factor on his 'sense of identity':

> *"I see myself a lot more because even though we are on the road* [on the streets] *and my trouser hang low, it is the environment that I grew up, and I have to recognise that really I am a king, I am an African king, I am going to be on my way up and be successful and not be a jailcell."* [Younger Dred]

Here, however, a realisation process has enabled Younger Dred to positively connect with his ethnic disposition and counter negative notions of how his identity had been shaped by his 'environment'. In addition, here negative notions of social capital (being 'on road', involved in gangs and crime) are countered by positive notions of social capital (developing trust and peer relationships) at this seemingly important 'boundary point' (see Goulbourne and Solomos, 2002).

In another example, The Rock reflected on how the *"questions of the group"* affected him when he was sitting in the 'truth chair'. *"Even when I was hearing what people say when they are sitting on the 'chair' it moved me,"* he said. He concluded that young people were *"smiling but deep down they are hurting"* because they were *"harbouring so much sorrow".* Another young man eloquently said that young people *"walk in masquerading without knowing who they are"* but over time with the help of the 'truth chair', he had noted how *"the image collapses and the mask drops off and you know other people"* [The

Prince]. While this helped young people see how understand aspects of their identity, the sessions also fostered empathy. This, in turn, helped others step forward to talk about their lives and experiences. Bravo, for example, who thought of himself as someone who was *"stubborn and always right"* said he was now more *"dedicated to listening"* and *"viewing people differently"*. This 'inner understanding' was linked to time spent talking, both collectively and individually about personal dilemmas.

The deep and discussional nature of the sessions also gave young people the confidence to speak out and express their opinion diplomatically. Bravo, who didn't like *"telling people opinions or views"* before the sessions because he was *"cautious of them"* said he was able to *"speak out more"* and be *"freer"* with what he said. Renegade said he was *"all quiet before the sessions"*: *"and then you learn how to interact and it made me realise the more open you are the more confident you are"*. Increased levels of self-esteem, confidence and greater sense of identity also impacted on behaviour and other aspects of young peoples lives. For The Prince, this was helping him to 'kerb his anger':

> *"Like now I am kerbing my temper, I do have a short fuse and it only takes one person for me to erupt, something as simple as 'hello' can get me going now but now I can control it a bit more."* [The Prince]

A few young people did not benefit so much from the sessions but this was partly linked to the amount of time they dedicated to the sessions. Nevertheless, for them, they still enjoyed the sessions and were positive about its purpose. For example, Tyson, who *"wasn't there much"* said it didn't *"do much"* for him but that it was *"interesting, something to do and somewhere*

to go". The Queen said she had benefited *"a bit"* from the sessions but because she didn't *"go a lot"* she didn't *"understand the whole thing".*

<u>Social and family relationships</u>

The sessions, while focusing on elements of young peoples' development of trust, awareness and empowerment, self-esteem and identity, also drew on elements of their involvement with their family and peer relationships. For this group of young people, the sessions appeared to be more beneficial to their social peer relationships than family relationships. In a few cases, however, family relations were strengthened. Bravo said his family relations *"had always been tight"* but now they were *"tighter"*. Younger Dred, who had *"always been a family man"* said the sessions had affected him so much that he now sits with his *"family and cousins"* and does *"a few small sessions".*

More widely affected by the sessions were peer relationships. This was more closely felt when in the sessions, as a few young people reflected that relations with others attending at the beginning of the programme were negative. Over the course of the programme, however, they had come to respect each other and this had reduced the social pressure between them. In these cases, while they did not become close friends, the sessions helped them accept their opposites or adversaries:

> *"Whatever is spoken, it is between us and the people involved in the programme will experience this power because it does erase certain negative barriers on my part and there was somebody who I knew there* [in the sessions], *and there was a beef ting* [vendetta] *with him, but we have to apply things to ourselves too, and now I see him* [on the streets] *and we are smiling."* [The Rock]

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There was also acknowledgment that the sessions had impacted on relationships on the street with some young people who attended *"looking out for each other"* to *"try to help each other"* [Bravo]. *"By being together and sharing concern, we get tougher as the day goes by,"* reflected The Prince.

Conclusion

This paper has served to build on our understanding of social capital in the context or young people, youth crime (see Helve and Brynner, 2007) and ethnicity (see Goulbourne and Solomos, 2003). It began by providing an insight into 'the streets', its associated pressures and risks which urban minority ethnic young people are exposed to and the kind of tactics which they may employ to 'survive'. Similarly, for many, it summarised difficult experiences with educational institutions, with their families and the increased allegiance to peer networks resulting in increased exposure to 'street life'. Very often, however, involvement in 'the streets' only serves to truncate pathways and limit young peoples' horizons leaving them increasingly likely to participate in 'gangs' or in street crime. As it has been noted, ways out for deprived young people are often beset with barriers (see Holland, 2007). In addition, the fact that they are increasingly required to shape their own biography (Raffo and Reeves, 2000) also often leaves them at the mercy of 'street culture' and peer influences. This makes their pathway even more precarious and uncertain and has important implications for their sense of identity.

While it has been suggested that more socio-economically deprived areas have poorer access is to 'social capital' (Hefferman, 2002), we can see here that social capital can be developed in such circumstances (also see Stephenson, 2001). This programme, though short in duration, however, has helped minority ethnic young people learn some valuable life lessons at key and pivotal stages in their lives when it is important to lay the foundations for

their future, especially set within restrictive social, cultural and structural conditions. As it has been evident, however, participating in the programme sessions can help repair trust, and build bridging trust relationships (Putnam, 1993) between young people and their peers, but also adults.

Similarly, through the sessions, young people have learned about the culture of 'the streets', have learned about their positions of risk and how it has impacted on their lives. They can understand why they participate, how they participate and learn ways to disassociate themselves from these pressures. They are now wiser to potentially damaging daily lifestyles and routines, which, for many, involve heavy affiliation to 'the streets' and have 'held them back in the past' (see Portes and Landolt, 1996). The advantage of this newfound awareness is evident through discourses of empowerment and an understanding of empathy, gained through the 'open' nature the sessions. While not all benefit in the same way, it is clear that some participation had some positive result – even for those who rarely attended.

Given that this population are often bereft of opportunity and often influenced by the powerful socio-economic and cultural circumstances of their environment (Briggs et al., 2007), some foundations for trust, awareness and empowerment were gained use of the 'truth chair' which helped young people locate deep and troublesome feelings and was managed by skilful facilitators who draw on their experiences of 'the streets', crime and violence. Facilitators helped young people 'look within themselves' – at their inner core – to better understand their identity. They can now have some view into how their

identities have been constructed and the powerful forces which have shaped their life trajectories to date. The culmination of this process is achieved in the 'residential' where young people learn about the intimate areas of their identity and further develop strong notions of trust. Group discussions not only help develop trust, empowerment and awareness also strengthen peer and family networks but also help them reassign positive values to negative peer relationships and develop a sense of social cohesion and social capital (Narayan and Pritchett, 1997). As Holland (2007) has suggested, developing social capital can benefit disadvantaged young people. This new form of trust and trust exchange has proven to counter previous conflicts between young people and this transmitted on 'the streets' where these young people had started to 'look out for each other'.

Importantly, where 'ethnicity' has been mentioned it has been in the context of a lack of social capital (Putnam, 1993), however, this research has proved that such connections can not only counter powerful social and structural forces but also raise awareness of individual identities and negative constructions of minority ethnic young people. The real test of their newfound trust and improved relations, however, will rest in the crucial period which follows as they attempt to use these new tools in everyday life. While the programme, however, has helped these young people understand their position and possible new directions in their life, it is difficult to determine what may be the outcome or how they might initiate these newfound 'tools' for their lives. Improved understandings of this area ultimately rest on longer programmes and longitudinal evaluations which continue post-programme.

Unfortunately, such funding is rarely considered 'useful' in determining the long-term success of a programme (see Matthews et al., 2007) in favour of short term, reactive programmes which will often only go some way to resolving what are often, complex social problems.

Acknowledgements

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[i] This did not exclude other groups of young people who may suffer social exclusion, homelessness, foster care, mental health problems, substance problems, family issues or who come from abused or dysfunctional families.