Localise
youth volunteering

Perspectives on Localise

How youth volunteerism benefits the community.

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2021

Abstract

This report gives some overview of how Localise fits into the community from the perspective of those who have been involved with the programmes. Due to the enthusiasm of the interviewees, this report represents a biased view, as much of the public is unaware of these programmes, and perhaps would not see their benefits as clearly. This report aims to expand upon what those who have experience with Localise value the most about the organisation as a concept, and how this fills a need in society. Firstly, the key issues of "social awareness" and "empowerment" are covered relatively objectively, mainly resting on the wisdom of the interviewees. Some reasons to get involved from the perspectives of young people and those facilitating these programmes follow. Then this report becomes a more subjective discussion of informal education, servant leadership, and some reference to phases of social development in youth. Lastly, the conclusions I have drawn from the above are stated.

CONTENTS

Introduction

This report is the product of 11 qualitative interviews conducted with young adult leaders, educators, and staff of Localise, who have all experienced Localise programmes in their different capacities. The aim of the research was to find the common themes between the comments made by the different stakeholders in Localise, who have different backgrounds and priorities that affect their perspective on what these programmes offer. These interviews were held remotely over Zoom in June and July 2021, and were recorded to ensure fidelity – they were informal and conversational, and in analysis, most comments have been paraphrased and synthesised into generalised thoughts and opinions. As the interviewer, and someone outside the organisation with little experience in this field, I have objectively compiled all the relevant insights. The most significant theme to emerge from a first reading was the way that social awareness and empowerment come together to make Localise graduates more likely to maintain a service leadership role in their lives, which is beneficial to them as well as their communities. Another emerging theme is how taking responsibility and learning to go outside one's comfort zone can benefit these young people in a variety of ways.

Literature Review

Some background reading relevant to Localise's role in Irish society included research from UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUIG, on civic engagement in youth. While volunteering is just one facet of civic engagement, it does not have an age limit to get involved, unlike voting, and may be linked to the social awareness and responsibility in young people that leads to a healthy democracy. A study detailing how volunteering with young people can improve inexperienced teachers' skills in the classroom might prove the benefit of becoming an adult leader with Localise as a new teacher, and how some of the facilitation skills are relevant within formal education as well as informal.

As Localise operates on a service-learning model, the initial concept of servant leadership, introduced by Robert Greenleaf and further refined by Larry Spears, helped to illuminate the way the charity facilitates this in young people. Educational theorist Gert Biesta was relevant to exploring the role of "informal" education in the lives of young people. In conjunction with educational theory, the work of Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Lev Vygotsky was briefly surveyed, as this provides a backdrop to how instrumental acts of service may be in developing a sense of "ego" or identity in the growing adolescent.

Methodology

Prior to our meeting, interviewees were categorised as adult leaders, educators, staff, and/or Localise board members so that the questions were tailored to their experiences, to try and get the most out of each person's time. The educators interviewed were asked for their perspective on how Localise fits into existing structures of education, thus, for such insights, I must especially thank Dr. Aideen Cassidy, who is the principal of a North Dublin School, as well as Jane Barry, and Niamh Dornan, who are both teachers. Harry Keogh is the education co-ordinator with Localise, so his perspective on education and Localise underpinned what the other educators said in their interviews.

These interviewees were also interviewed on their roles as adult leaders with Localise, so their experiences in that capacity are also included, as well as those of Leo Gibson, Hannah Leonard, and Sister Philomena Neary. Both Leo Gibson and Sister Philomena Neary have seen many young people through these programmes over the years, and each had valuable critique as observers of the programmes' effects on the youth, as well perspectives on other religious and secular youth organisations. Sister Philomena works as a pastoral worker, and is very aware of

the way that Localise reflects and complements the values that are focused on by the sacraments of Confirmation, especially as it is open to all young people, regardless of their religious beliefs. Hannah Leonard is a graduate of a Localise programme and has been a lifelong volunteer in many organisations since; her experience as both an adult leader and a young person involved with Localise was discussed.

The staff of Localise were very generous with their time and each person had a different area of expertise, as well as years of experience and great enthusiasm for the way that young people can be encouraged to be more active in the community and youth work – I must thank Deborah Reid, particularly for her background in psychology, Harry Keogh, for his focus on educational theory, and Sean McEwen, who both supervised and informed much of this research, and who was focused on youth work. Derek Cleary, the director of Localise, was inspiring with his perspective on how servant leadership and youth work merge, and the value of Localise over time, as an organisation that adapts to the changing needs of young people and the community.

Social Awareness

Findings

All the interviewees think that young people gain social awareness through interacting with the programmes, and many think that this helps them to develop empathy. Some think that the experience is more of an eye-opener for middle-class students, as opposed to those young people with socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The programmes are also transformational in young people who have already experienced challenges in their lives; some have said it is even more important in such cases, where there are fewer resources in schools that focus on developing community spirit, which make the Localise programmes stand out as one of the best ways to help young people develop their sense of self and become community leaders. One person interviewed thinks that disadvantaged communities are often more multicultural and have a stronger sense of community due to greater needs within it - the young people are often very engaged with the idea of creating an ideal community, and they debate with intensity and reach compromises with effort, as they really care about what is at stake. These young people often focus on the elderly and the homeless as those with the most pressing needs in their communities.

Deborah Reid was particularly focussed on the mental health of the young people engaging with the programmes and noted the dramatic increase in social anxiety and depression in young people in wider society in the last decade or so. This is likely linked to an increasingly online sense of "community" – to the extent that some young people coming into Localise programmes need the adult leaders to explain what they mean by an actual, physical community. The pressures of this detached society they are growing up in has led to a lot of the young people feeling apathetic and unempowered, before they are given a chance to give back to society by Localise. She thinks that this was even more pronounced during Covid, when young people were subjected to a constant stream of bad news and being told to do nothing – one community group tried harder than ever to do something positive for their community, even though they no longer had the incentive of in-person socialising. Deborah also mentioned that a mother of one of the participants had said that Localise was important because it had given young people "a reason to look out of their windows" – they were empowered to see themselves as active

members of their community.

Many interviewees shared anecdotes of moments when they were touched by spontaneous displays of empathy, particularly when shown by young people often perceived negatively by society or as emotionally detached by their peers. As one person put it, these young people go outside of their comfort zones, because they realise that "unless they step up to the challenge, someone else will go without" - their awareness of the needs of others helps them to develop a new way of processing the world around them. One interviewee thinks that Localise is unique in focusing on the local area, something which gives ownership to young people as well direct engagement with those they are helping, making it more impactful. As teachers can confirm, an average secondary school student will drop most extra-curricular activities once they reach Senior Cycle, and so short projects done in Transition Year and Junior Cycle tend to lack the lasting impact that Localise aims to have.

Empowerment

Empowerment is the product of giving these young people the responsibility of caring for others – this seems to be a general insight from all those interviewed. Young people are a lot more capable than they are generally given credit for by their teachers and society, particularly when they come from disadvantaged backgrounds or exhibit behavioural issues in the classroom. The teachers interviewed have grown used to expecting great things from young people when they engage with Localise, but they say their colleagues are often surprised by how their students' characters suddenly develop – and for teachers who have no prior interest in youth volunteering, this is what convinces them the most of its value.

Aideen Cassidy was particularly interested in the fact that students can be grades behind where they should be in terms of their self-confidence, as well as in their academics, which are more measurable and therefore more widely understood. These problems tend to go hand in hand, as those students who are below average in their age group in terms of their reading or maths ability are often the ones who lack the confidence they should have gained through their school career up to that point. This can have a large effect on their futures, as they may need to take time outside the educational system to grow confidence in themselves to re-enter it at a later stage, if at all, at tertiary level. Aideen thinks that engaging with Localise is one way to increase these young

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people's confidence levels earlier in their school career and is extremely beneficial to those who are behind. If done early enough, particularly during the Junior Cycle, the knock-on effect of their renewed self-confidence may help the young people to invest in their own future by putting more effort into their academics, which can completely reshape their expectations of themselves, in turn, effecting their life choices and educational outcomes.

Localise programmes vary in the degree of investment they require, and correspondingly, the young people are affected by their involvement to varying degrees. It was commonly brought up by those interviewed that while they would like to see Localise programmes being offered to more young people, they did not want to see it made compulsory, as to do so would remove the agency of the young people - they choose to be a part of it, so feel they are empowered and have made a difference by their own volition. It is often mentioned that each young person has a moment where they "buy in" and fully immerse themselves into the programme, often after they realise they are being treated as an individual, with their own strengths and weaknesses, and that they are valued by those around them for what they can do to help. Once they have invested themselves, they can be impressively committed to the outcome of each project, as they are willing to go above and beyond to make sure that it will be a success.

As Derek Cleary put it, a good leader is the person who is there at the end of the day, cleaning up and willing to work behind the scenes. This is the kind of "servant leadership" that Localise promotes, and in many of the anecdotes recorded, young people had impressed those around them because they were so committed to their projects that they made sacrifices or did things they would never normally do, to ensure they had a positive impact on those they were helping.

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Motivations to Be Involved with Localise

For Young People

The attraction of Localise programmes to young people may simply be that their friends are doing it or that they would like a new social group. They may not fit into any particular category in school (not being athletic/academic/musical, etc) and this is an opportunity for them to do something without needing to be competitive or have a particular talent to get involved. Before the programme, they may not care if it will develop their social skills, but they generally see it as a good thing to do because they want to be of service and improve their environment.

Hannah says that she partly wanted to be involved because she was attracted to the challenge posed by Localise and the chance to show leadership that volunteering offered. She stayed involved as an adult leader because she had enjoyed the programme so much that she wanted to continue doing these projects. Mentoring other young people helped her to consolidate her own personal growth. Hannah thinks that she still learns through interacting with these young people and she has become more assertive in reaching out to people due to her experiences with Localise, which has served her well when organising other charitable events and in many aspects of her professional life. She believes the confidence in public speaking gained by young people is unmatched by other youth work – they get used to presenting ideas to their peers, and eventually, are able to present to larger audiences, even sometimes going as far as managing to speak in front of celebrities and members of government.

For Adult Leaders

Some of the adult leaders are also teachers, and they say that this experience of facilitating young people was good experience. Through facilitating these groups, they can promote a different model of leadership to the one generally used in class, which has encouraged them to expect more from their class groups, as they know what the same age group in Localise could achieve. Due to constraints of the

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syllabus and class time, they see the value of these different approaches to teaching young people, which means that they value informal education as complementary to formal education. For the adult leaders who just enjoy facilitating young people in the effort to give back to their communities, they spoke of things like "staying mentally young" or "liking the ethos" of Localise. They were attracted to the role because they see the value in these programmes - both to the community and for the positive effect on the young people.

For the Community

It is beneficial to the community to harness young people's energy for the good of those in need - they can and will do something, if given the opportunity. Young people have the time, the energy, and the willingness to achieve great things, but on the other hand, if they are not given any positive outlet they may develop antisocial behaviours. The more that their self-image of being disapproved of by society develops, the less likely these young people will be able to realise the positive things about themselves on their own. Localise is a kind of early intervention, as whatever the young person's background or circumstance, they are valued as someone who can do good things if they set their minds to it.

There is also a benefit to fostering communication between people with vast gaps in their experiences of life, because this helps to develop empathy and humanises those who young people do not instinctively relate to. Some of the interviewees think that the interaction with the elderly is very important in groups who may not be used to dealing with older relatives, but others think that humanising the homeless is really important to people who may become detached because of seeing them and not helping in everyday life. The benefit to the community of having the next generation engaging with others in a positive way is obvious - after all, they are the future of their community.

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Discussion

Informal Education

Informal education is roughly defined in this report as what is learnt by the young people through their engagement with Localise programmes. This has no clear grading system, thus no precise metric to prove the educational effect, but there is a tangible effect on those engaging, as has been made clear in the comments of adult leaders above and in young people's self-reporting after the programmes in previous research. I have learnt that Gert Biesta speaks of qualification, socialisation, and subjectification as the three most important factors in considering the purpose of education. While qualification can be explained as the gathering of knowledge, easily encompassed by the mainly academic focus of schooling, the other two factors are not normally prioritised by formal education but are intrinsically linked to Localise's impact on young people. Socialisation can be loosely defined as learning how to live in a society and subjectification as learning to see oneself objectively and accurately, thus knowing when one has something unique to contribute to society. Engaging with a Localise programme makes each young person take responsibility as an individual for the things they have to do to further the aims of the group, and yet, this is not an environment that encourages individualistic or competitive behaviour – hence this is a case of both subjectification and socialisation at the same time.

Aideen and Sister Philomena spoke of how Localise provides "learning for life" or practical philosophy; young people will not forget the experience of seeing beyond themselves and caring for the needs of others. These young people are idealistic – their informal education comes from seeing themselves as active members of their community and knowing how much they can contribute. The teachers interviewed noted that Localise groups work together in an informal way that would not happen within the classroom, some even calling it a "productive kind of mayhem". The fact that these young people can discuss concepts in a place where there is no premium for having the "right" answer means that new ideas are shared and shy people come forward as they are not afraid of being laughed at or corrected.

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Servant Leadership Model

Localise tries to inculcate servant leadership as they seek to facilitate young people instead of instructing them. Adult leaders do not exercise much control over the groups they work with, unless it is required to get them back on track or to further the project. Even choosing the project at the start of each programme is young person centric – they get to choose which people in their community they would like to help the most, which adds to their sense of ownership when they achieve this goal as a group. Servant leadership requires people to set aside their ego - they cannot see themselves as the centre of attention, but rather the project as something greater than themselves and something they are proud to invest in. This was a common statement made by those who have come through the programme and those who facilitated it. It seems that generally, young people grow in self-confidence and lose their self-consciousness – as Aideen put it, the issue becomes what they are talking about, not their appearance. These young people benefit from being solely focused on the outcome and engaging in "solution focused" thinking - they no longer worry about how they may be perceived but rather in trying to execute a common outcome.

I came across Erik Erikson's theory that the focus of adolescence is on developing an identity, a sense of the "self", which is effectively what develops as a product of sharing beliefs with others and becoming more confident in ourselves through their encouragement. Surely, part of this process is becoming aware that other people are mainly concerned about their own lives and that the world at large is not as image conscious as the average secondary school? By engaging with a group of their peers in pursuit of an honourable goal, these young people are beginning to develop their own identity as active members of the community, who spend their mental effort on trying to help others rather than on trying to be "cool".

In fact, a few of the people interviewed mentioned that Localise is an interesting social group in which many of the roles and hierarchies established in school are reversed. Niamh Dornan has experience of facilitating a Localise community group and is also a teacher, and she noted that it is often those who are labelled as "weird" at school who thrive in Localise programmes. She also thinks the biggest change in young people happened when there was a varied mix of older and younger people within the group, say 12 and 15 year olds, working side by side, rather than when they were all roughly the same age. This might

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have something to do with previously established social dynamics coming into play when they are all within the same age range that would interact in school. Due to my background in Classics, it struck me that in an ancient Roman classroom there would generally be different age groups mixing in a semi-informal setting, because the focus was on their level of education rather than age. Perhaps this variance in age was beneficial to the class dynamic, with the young people keeping themselves in line with an internal hierarchy, something which is no longer tried in formal education. In fact, a few of those interviewed thought that having young people acting as "mentors" to even younger cohorts was an added benefit to all involved – the mentors feel honoured to be trusted with the role, and give the younger cohort something to emulate.

Hannah noted that while many adult leaders mention shy young people learning to contribute through Localise programmes, the inverse also occurs – when young people who are used to taking charge and speaking more than others learn that, at times, they need to step back and allow other people to contribute. As she put it, by the end of the programme you have a group of well-rounded young people. This is another aspect of servant leadership, as those young people who came into the programme with a lot of confidence learned the valuable skill of making other people feel comfortable to share their ideas. There is an expectation that anyone can have a good idea and that each person's idea should be facilitated at least to the point of discussion. According to many of the people interviewed, resilience is key to leadership and the experience of facilitating others helps to develop this resilience – serving others teaches us a lot about ourselves.

Limitations & Further Research

There are many gaps that have been exposed through analysing the wisdom of those with years of experience, but much of what was discussed was beyond the scope of this report.

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One thing mentioned in an interview was the question of how many graduates of Localise have sought out service roles in their adult lives – as nurses, social workers, volunteers, etc. Anecdotally, the proportion of those choosing these roles seems higher to people who have worked with Localise, but some research could prove it if so.

Something I thought worthy of comment was the idea that young people becoming increasingly engaged with online communities can be linked to depression and

and other mental health issues, as screen-time itself can be linked to such. Perhaps something worth studying would be how the distance created by communities that are largely intangible leads to social awareness without empowerment – is this a recipe for apathetic and depressed young people?

Conclusion

As Sean McEwen put it, "Localise gives every young person an opportunity and the platform to do something in the service of others. There is a belief that no matter someone's background, circumstance, geographical location, or who they are, everyone can make positive changes in the community."

This is both a simple concept and a profound one. If left to their own devices, young people might act in the service of others now and then, but by providing programmes where groups of other motivated young people, be it through school or in a separate community group, they are given the opportunity to really explore their own potential and to surprise themselves with new abilities and interests in doing so.

One benefit to the sense of empowerment gained through volunteering is that it increases the chances of these young people making volunteering a habit – when they feel that they have fulfilled a "real need" (something that was undeniably helpful to those they have sought to help) they often return to seek out more opportunities to be of service to their community in future. The way that these young people are given responsibility within a controlled environment allows them to grow their self-confidence and to develop their discipline with time-management and division of tasks among themselves. The personal development of engaging with the programme is different in each young person, but the focus on teamwork and communication helps them all in terms of their interpersonal skills.

As I see it, in an age where most young people are more engaged in online communities than physical ones, there is a new concept of community developing from this. It is both global and distant from the individuals within it – they are part of something intangible, with no expectation of making tangible change within it, in general. This sense of isolation, even within fulfilling social groupings, might well lead to general sense of apathy – as after all, most of us are aware of so many problems in the world that we barely seek to combat any.

The rough principle that "charity begins at home" is something that needs to be promoted even more in a world that no longer relies on geography to determine community groupings. This general social isolation was only exacerbated during the pandemic and Localise may shift to delivering online programmes to widen their focus after this unprecedented time, but I personally believe that what is unique and wonderfully transformative about this offering is the physical, tangible interaction that it promotes. I believe there is a real risk that young people will learn

to see themselves as too far removed to do any practical good on a small scale if we do not facilitate them to volunteer in their local area, as there is a general awareness of social issues without the self-confidence to believe in their abilities to improve things.

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