

How do graduate community and youth workers understand
their emancipatory role and what difference does this make to
the realisation of children and young people's rights?

Daniel Connolly

A doctoral report submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of the University of Sunderland for the degree of
Professional Doctorate

May 2026

Acknowledgements

I am hugely grateful to everyone who has supported and assisted me in completing this research and thesis. To my family, supervisors, colleagues and friends, thank you.

The children and young people from Investing in Children who advised the research deserve a special mention. When I was flagging your acuity, support and humour reminded me why my research was important and of the privilege it is to work alongside children and young people. Thank you.

Most importantly I want to thank the eleven graduates who agreed to be interviewed. Your integrity shone through. Thank you.

Abstract

This thesis describes research that was undertaken as the second phase of study towards a Professional Doctorate at The University of Sunderland.

Issues associated with children and young people's rights and participation have fascinated me across my professional career. Initially as a community and youth worker and more recently as an academic who educates community and youth workers to degree level at the University of Sunderland.

One question in particular had intrigued me throughout: How do adults who work with children and young people in professional contexts think about them and how does this impact the ways they work with them, especially in relation to children and young people's right to a voice?

My role as an academic provided me with access to graduate community and youth workers. This profession, more than any other, places responding to the voices and agendas of children and young people at the forefront of its claims to professional identity. Yet my experience within the profession across more than thirty years had raised a second question: Why is there so often a gap between what adults in the profession claim to be achieving in relation to children and young people's voice and what children and young people themselves say is actually happening?

These two questions were combined to provide a focus for the research. Reviews of a range of research and professional literature helped to confirm that there was a gap in the literature covering the issues I was seeking to address. The review also helped to confirm action research as the methodology most congruent with my own philosophical stance and to shape a research question that was designed to capture

qualitative data about how graduate community and youth workers constructed knowledge around key concepts associated with voice and rights. Secondly to capture how these constructions impacted their participation practice.

A series of interviews took place with graduates of the Community and Youth Work Degree programme at the University of Sunderland with a small sample being interviewed twice. Several key themes emerged from analysis of the data captured in the interviews. In some aspects the data generated themes that were encouraging. This was particularly the case in relation to the effectiveness of the degree in supporting graduates through complex transitions to a point where their potential to deliver meaningful participation with children and young people in practice was high. In other aspects the data generated themes that were concerning. Most significantly in relation to the capacity of graduates to work through the constraints of practice to ensure that the rights of the children and young people they were working with were met on a consistent basis. This theme confirmed concerns around tokenism and performativity that had emerged from the review of literature.

Following further consideration of the findings a series of conclusions were reached and recommendations made that aim to close the gap between the potential of community and youth work graduates to deliver meaningful participation and the realisation of this potential in practice with children and young people. These recommendations cover the higher education institutions responsible for the education of community and youth workers to degree level; the community and youth work sector as a whole and those involved in research related to the sector.

Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Abstract	2
Contents	4
List of Figures	5
Chapter 1 Introduction	6
Chapter 2 Context	53
Chapter 3 Literature Review	64
Chapter 4 Methodology	112
Chapter 5 Findings	159
Chapter 6 Discussion and conclusions	207
Chapter 7 Recommendations	233
Bibliography	239
Appendices	255

List of Figures

<u>Figure 1</u> : Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation	46
<u>Figure 2</u> : Three-year-old girl having pre-operative eye drops	87
<u>Figure 3</u> : Three-and-a-half-year-old having a finger prick blood sample	89
<u>Figure 4</u> : A Re-Imagined and Empowering Model of Curriculum	97

Chapter One: Introduction

Chapter structure:

1.1 Enter youth workers?

1.2 The structure of this thesis

1.3 The genesis of the research

1.4 A focus on adult meaning-making

1.5 The research question

1.6 Key terms.

- 1.6.1 (a) Childhood
- 1.6.1 (b) Child? Young person? Youth? Adult?
- 1.6.2 Expertise
- 1.6.3 Testimonial and Hermeneutical Injustice
- 1.6.4 Meaningful participation

1.7 Reflexivity and professional identity

1.8 Conclusion

1.1 Enter youth workers?

The role of the professional community and youth worker is defined by its capacity to work directly on the agendas that children, young people and communities articulate as being important to them (Davies and Taylor, 2019). More than any other it is this feature that distinguishes community and youth work from other professions that work with children and young people such as teachers, social workers, police officers, health and care workers. Through this distinction community and youth workers are commonly understood as championing the rights, voices and participation of children and young people.

Despite this being a defining and distinguishing feature of the role, there is an absence of research and literature that scrutinises the effectiveness of professionally qualified community and youth workers in delivering on this role in practice. Nor has there been any previous research scrutinising the role played by the degree-level programmes that educate community and youth workers to professional level in ensuring that they do.

This thesis describes a piece of research that addressed that gap. By shining a light on how graduate community and youth workers understand this uniquely defining feature of their role and how that understanding plays out in practice, the research aimed to explore and expose the current realities with the purpose of generating new knowledge and prompting change. This included capturing what is currently proving effective in the teaching of emancipatory forms of participation and how that teaching makes a difference in practice. It also included being transparent about what is not being achieved in relation to the delivery of meaningful participation beyond the academy and the reasons behind this. Given the defining

and distinguishing factors at play, transparency on this aspect has significant implications for the community and youth work profession as a whole.

1.2 The structure of this thesis

Chapter One - Introducing The Thesis And The Research This chapter sets out the structure of the thesis itself and explains how the idea for the research developed over a number of years, providing a rationale for undertaking research on this specific topic. It also describes how the research and its focus fit with my current professional role and my intentions for further research.

Chapter Two - The Wider Context Of The Research This chapter situates the research in its wider practice, theoretical and policy contexts. It argues that the ways in which many adults think and act towards children and young people is framed by a pervasive and negative discourse that results in the rights of children and young people being largely ignored and their voices going mostly unheard. It introduces Habermas's theory of the "ideal speech situation" (Pusey, 1987, p. 73) as a transformational alternative and provides a brief overview of relevant policy approaches.

Chapter Three - Literature Review This chapter selectively reviews what was already known about children and young people's participation and rights. Also about the teaching of community and youth workers in Higher Education. It sets out how that knowledge has been used to justify, inform and shape the research, ensuring that what is learned builds upon what was already known and makes a contribution to new knowledge on the topic.

Chapter Four - Methodology This chapter describes the methodology that was used to conduct the research i.e. action research (AR) (Bryman, 2012). It describes

how my beliefs about what I consider to be real (my ontological stance) and what can be known (my epistemological stance) are aligned to an AR methodology, to my personal values and to the research methods that were used to collect the data I was seeking, semi-structured interviews with graduates from the programme on which I currently teach at the University of Sunderland. It describes how the interviews were conducted and analysed including ethical aspects of the research. It briefly appraises alternative approaches and the limitations of gathering data in this way.

Chapter Five - Findings This chapter introduces a number of integrating themes that help explain what graduates shared with me during the interviews in response to the questions that were asked and the discussions that took place. These themes are introduced as a means of connecting up the different responses across all the interviews in order to understand the patterns that emerged and to identify the key learning points in relation to the original purpose of the research. The themes capture the positive findings from the interviews in relation to the transitions students make into the degree programme and during it. They also capture the concerns that emerged in relation to graduate transitions into practice and what this means for the rights, voice and participation of the children and young people with whom they work.

Chapter Six - Discussion and Conclusions This chapter takes the themes identified in chapter five and scrutinises them by asking the question: so what? It considers the implications of what was found in relation to what was already known and what the research was attempting to find out. This discussion of the findings leads into a series of conclusions about what needs to change and why.

Chapter Seven - Recommendations This chapter makes a series of recommendations aimed at addressing the gap between the claims that are made about community and youth work in relation to the participation and rights of children and young people and the realities that the research has exposed. These include recommendations about what needs to change in relation to how community and youth workers are taught at degree level; how they are supported beyond the academy and in relation to future research.

1.3 The genesis of the research

The research was prompted by a concern that much of the practice within the professions working with children and young people (teaching; youth work; social work; social care) fails to adequately recognise children and young people's right to have a say in issues that affect them and in how services engage with them. Also that, as a result, they largely fail to deliver their responsibility to bring about meaningful change that emerges out of such recognition (van Bijleveld, Dedding and Bunders-Aelen, 2015; Cairns et al., 2018). This concern is founded on extensive evidence from professional engagement in the field as a practitioner and subsequently as an academic. Also from analysis of extant academic and professional literature (Gunn, 2008; Kimberlee, 2008; Archard and Skivenes, 2009; Hartas and Lindsay, 2011). This perspective emerged out of many conversations with the children and young people I have worked with. Also from extensive engagement with organisations set up to specifically promote the rights and voice of children and young people, including the delivery of training to professionals and service providers. Time after time the same patterns emerged: Adults (mostly well-intentioned) believing and reporting that they were doing a good job in listening and responding to children and young people. Children and young

people (on the few occasions where they felt able to safely share what they really thought) saying the opposite. There were always examples of high quality, inspirational work where a respect for rights and a commitment to voice had resulted in meaningful change. The concern was that these were always the exception, never the rule.

Initial concerns that this situation equated to a problem at the level of “opportunities missed” was replaced by a much deeper concern that participation done badly was worse than no participation at all. Participation done badly risks switching children and young people off from forms of engagement that nurture democratic flourishing and associational living. The powerful testimony of an experienced schoolteacher interviewed at the very early stages of the research reveals this to be the case. The teacher described trying to motivate Emily (anonymised), a 14 year old, year nine pupil to become involved with a new extra-curricular initiative. In her frustration the teacher had commented:

“I’m surprised you’re not up for this Emily. The Headteacher told me you would be perfect for it. He said you’re great on the School Council and you were elected onto it in year seven by the rest of your class.”

To which Emily had replied:

“Miss, the only thing I’ve learned from being on the School Council for 3 years is that no one really listens and nothing ever changes”. (Anon., 2018)

My personal journey with voice and participation was an additional factor that led up to the choice of children and young people's rights and participation as the focus for this research. This factor goes some way to explain both the topic and the methodology adopted. My response to adults whom I believed to be engaging children and young people in performative and tokenistic processes of

participation was always twofold: Frustration on the one hand, recognition on the other. In my early years as a youth worker I had measured effectiveness through the eyes of my manager and the agencies he had persuaded to fund my post. I understood my role as involving two, very straightforward tasks. The first of these was to think of clever ways of persuading young people to get involved with the environmental activity programme that had been designed by my manager and the project sponsors, prior to my appointment. The second was to deliver these activities to as many young people in the target area as possible so as to meet the multiple outcome targets that had been agreed. These included the number of young people involved; the range of environmental tasks completed and the total length of footpath improved by young people each month.

At the point at which this work began to collapse under its own contradictions, I was fortunate to engage in a highly cathartic conversation with a colleague in my professional network. This single conversation transformed my understanding of my professional role entirely. From that point forward I understood the young people I was working with as rights-holders and partners in their own project, rather than as potential recipients of an adult-led, adult-designed programme. I stopped trying to deliver *to* young people and began working alongside them instead.

This experience developed into a long-standing interest in the processes by which adult understandings of rights, voice and participation can be transformed and the changes to practice that can sometimes be the result. The opportunity to undertake doctoral research was a chance to explore that interest in depth.

1.4 A focus on adult meaning-making

A wide range of different starting points presented themselves as opportunities to address the concerns and interests I had developed over a number of years in relation to the rights and participation of children and young people. The choice to focus on meaning-making (Ignelzi, 2000) is justified from several interlinking perspectives. Reviews of the relevant literature indicate that such a focus has not been selected for in-depth research in the past. Much of the discourse around rights in practice takes an instrumentalist and performative perspective, focusing on the mechanisms of representation (such as how pupils are elected onto school councils or the numbers attending local authority consultation events) rather than the social processes by which rights actually come to be understood and enacted (Davis et al. 2014). Whilst there is a range of literature related to the professional education of community and youth workers in the UK and elsewhere (Buchroth and Parkin, 2010; Fitzsimons, 2011; Ord, 2011; Cooper, Gormally and Hughes, 2015; Smith and Seal, 2021) this has not focused directly on whether graduates from such programmes are able to successfully implement their understandings of rights and participation once in practice.

Focusing on meaning-making also aligns directly with the AR methodology adopted for the research. In particular the potential to generate change within a specific professional field (Fulton and Smith, 2013). Most graduates from initial professional training programmes in Community and Youth Work will work in their chosen profession for many years beyond qualification. By influencing how such programmes are delivered, the research has the potential to positively impact the lives of children and young people. Many of the workers who qualify at this level will also progress into positions of leadership within organisational practice,

as well as policy-making and even political arenas. Shaping attitudes and understandings within early professional formation and initial professional qualification therefore has significant “gearing” potential. Focusing on meaning-making also promotes the transferability and applicability of the research conclusions (Bryman, 2012) to other professions that work with children and young people including teachers, social workers, health care professionals, care workers, police officers and others. These sectors are expected to provide a focus for post-doctoral engagement and research.

It is also important to actively consider the potential dangers inherent in an approach that focuses on meaning-making, the primary risk being that of reductionism (Hughes, 1990; Crotty, 1998). In this research a reductionist perspective would blame the attitudes or capacities of individual professionals for failures that might well be more adequately explained via analysis of the structural and systemic issues that serve to constrain and pervert practice. To account for this, the research is set within a context that overtly acknowledges the role of wider cultural, structural and temporal systems in shaping how individuals come to understand the social world (Thompson, 1993; Rosa and Tudge, 2013). This is particularly relevant in relation to systems of schooling and education but also to other professions, including community and youth work, that experience the processes of neoliberal commissioning and regulation as increasingly constraining and controlling (Nicholls, 2012). As the locus of control is further externalised, opportunities for children and young people's voices to shape the curriculum that guides what they experience (whether formally or informally constituted) become more remote (Grundy, 1987; Freire, 1996). Realising children and young people's rights therefore requires transformational change at multiple levels, of which the

personal agency of individual practitioners is only one. It is, however, a very significant one. Lessons from other emancipatory approaches such as The American civil rights movement and women's movements suggest that a critical focus on the attitudes and understandings of individuals can often be the key that unlocks change at other levels (hooks, 1994). Individual practitioners achieving a better understanding of their own "regime of the truth" (Lorenzini, citing Foucault, 2015, p. 2) can help them to re-shape, resist and reinterpret the limitations placed on them by wider systemic and cultural forces.

The research explored the meaning-making of students graduating from a specific degree programme that leads to a professional qualification in working with children and young people, namely the BA Honours Degree in Community and Youth Work Studies at the University of Sunderland. It did this by asking a sample of graduates a series of questions aimed at exploring the core research question detailed earlier. In particular the research sought to understand how graduates make sense of the fact that young people have a right to a voice in matters that affect them (UNCRC, no date). Also to understand how this right gets translated into meaningful participation in their practice as qualified professionals.

1.5 The research question

Framing a question that would guide and shape the research involved careful consideration of extant literature, prior knowledge gained in the field, theoretical and methodological aspects alongside ethical and access issues. Out of these considerations the following question emerged:

How do the ways in which professional community and youth workers construct their understanding of the concepts of childhood and expertise

influence the possibilities for children and young people's meaningful participation and how might understanding this better promote opportunities for meaningful change?

1.6 Key terms

The concepts of childhood and expertise were selected for exploration within the research process on the basis of their emergence as recurrent themes in previous, related research. Also as a result of early engagements with doctoral supervisors and via reflexive journaling (Bolton and Delderfield, 2018). These concepts have been scrutinised extensively on a separate basis by other researchers, yet analysis of how they combine and interlink in the processes of meaning-making is less evident. Miranda Fricker's concept of "testimonial injustice" (Fricker, 2008) was introduced for its potential to achieve just such a synthesis. Fricker defines testimonial injustice as the process whereby "a speaker receives a prejudicially deflated degree of credibility from a hearer" (Fricker, 2008, p. 69). The concepts are analysed from a standpoint of critical theory (Crossley, 2005) and within a social constructivist epistemology (Andrews, 2012) that aligns directly with the AR methodology adopted for the wider research. In its rejection of the social world as pre-determined, this stance opens up an "emancipatory potential" for the research (Grundy, 1987). If knowledge and meaning in relation to childhood and expertise has been constructed by social actors in ways that constrain the realisation of children and young people's rights within an "adults know best" paradigm (Cairns, 2001), it can potentially be re-constructed by them in ways that achieve the opposite (Koppl, 2010).

- 1.6.1 (a) Childhood

Questions regarding the nature of childhood and how it comes to be understood by both adults and children have been explored extensively within the literature around children and young people's rights. From the essentialising positions of the early Enlightenment (Beresford, 2021) and up to postmodern, constructivist positions (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999), how individuals act in relation to children and young people is based significantly on how they understand what it is to be a child and what childhood actually means to them. Each different perspective has implications for how children and young people come to be regarded as rights holders. From a positivist perspective childhood is understood through the lens of the physical status and development of young people. Classic understandings such as Locke's concept of 'tabula rasa' or Rousseau's descriptions of the child as essentially innocent lean into a focus on childhood as a time of "becoming" rather than being (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999). Children come to be seen through a deficit lens where the focus is on what they are deemed to lack such as maturity, experience or wisdom. In viewing children and young people through this deficit lens, adults are rendered blind to what children and young people already possess - the very same qualities of maturity (despite their young age); experience and wisdom. These ways of understanding childhood through a deficit paradigm lie behind more modern projections of childhood that focus on developmental aspects, most notably Piaget's explanation of childhood as encompassing a series of linked stages of growth where the young human being develops both physically and psychologically (Piaget and Tomlinson, 1998). These positions have significant implications for how the rights of children and young people come to be understood. If adults view children and young people as not yet fully formed or as a work in progress, this influences how they will go on to

interpret, for instance, their right to a voice (Murriss, 2013) or their right to engagement in the formal processes of representative forms of democracy. The right to vote based on chronological age is one that varies significantly across geographies, cultures and timeframes (Grover, 2011). The ubiquitous use of phrases such as “future citizens” that connect children and young people with what they will become rather than what they currently are (Cairns et al., 2018) belies the same, commonly-held understandings of childhood as a preparatory stage and children and young people as social beings yet to achieve their full, human status.

From a critical standpoint the idea that childhood can be known or understood in any meaningful way as fixed; temporally-boundaried or as happening in discrete stages bears little weight. Some adults display behaviours commonly regarded as childlike such as deliberately emphasising perceived helplessness in order to gain attention, for example. Likewise some children display behaviours more commonly associated with adulthood such as taking responsibility for the welfare of siblings. Humans develop in different ways and at different rates throughout all stages of their lives, yet special developmental status is conferred on the years between approximately twelve and nineteen which are given the deficit label of “adolescence”. Seaford (2001) powerfully points to how the idea of the child gets constructed differently depending on which essentialising characteristic is chosen by adults and for which instrumental purpose. She adopts the metaphor of the child growing and shrinking like Alice in Wonderland, depending on which Whitehall department she is viewed from. As a threat to be controlled from a Home Office standpoint; as an innocent to be protected from within Social Services and as a unit of potential economic growth by the Treasury (Seaford, 2001).

Approaching childhood from this more critical and constructivist stance exposes its selective construction based on prescribed adult agendas. It also opens up a more positive, asset-based understanding of children and childhood. Malaguzzi (1993) points out that, in this positive version, the child is seen as “rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent” (Malaguzzi, 1993, p.10). Adults viewing the child’s right to a voice from this asset-based perspective are bound to see opportunities to engage with children and young people constructively and to draw on their wisdom, knowledge, experience and creativity in a collaborative exploration of how opportunities might be grasped; initiatives undertaken and concerns addressed. Approached from this perspective, the process of realising rights becomes an empowering and emancipatory experience for adults, children and young people alike (Grundy, 1987; Freire, 1996)

- 1.6.1 (b) Child? Young person? Youth? Adult?

There is no universally agreed definition with regards to age range in terms of what counts as child, youth, young person or adult. Each of these concepts can only be meaningfully understood as being spatially, culturally and temporally relative.

In the UK The Children Acts (The Children Act 1989; The Children Act 2004) define “child” as being “a person under 18 years old”. The United Nations (UN) position is confused and confusing. The UNCRC, a body of the UN, adopts the same definition for child as The Children Acts i.e. “a person under 18 years old” (UNCRC, no date) whereas the UN itself, whilst setting out its definition of youth as “those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years” (United Nations, no date) refer to a children as “those persons under the age of 14”. This confusion is justified by the UN as being related to the statistical orientation of its definition of youth, although

scrutiny of what is meant by this phrase merely renders the situation more opaque. For the UN it appears that a child is under 18 but children are under 14, depending on the different lenses through which the terms are defined.

The recently published UK Government policy “Youth Matters” sets its scope as “young people aged 10-21” with the upper age limit extended to 25 for young people with special educational needs ((UK Government (3), 2025). For many years governments worked with a narrower scope of 14-20 (infed.org, no date).

There is an argument to suggest that this broadening of age-range reflects a political need for specific policies to be seen to be doing more, rather than any commonly agreed view of what age-range constitutes “youth” or “youthhood”.

Extending policy and its associated envelope of resources downwards from 14 to 10 years avoids difficult questions around what is being done for the 10-14 year olds. This range also differs from the UN and UNESCO range for “youth” cited above of 15-24.

Attempts to draw consistent or scientific lines between child, youth and adult prove equally challenging. Phrases such as “the age of majority” (the age at which all adult laws apply) attempt to bridge across the variations but when scrutinised merely confirm the variances between and within geographies, cultures and timeframes (United Nations, no date). In England it is legally possible to get married at 16 but not to vote, unlike in Scotland where the legal right to vote is conferred at 16 (Johnston, 2026). Children in the UK in 2026 are legally protected from being exploited as workers but before 1878 it was legal to employ children under the age of 10 to work in dangerous jobs in factories (Williams, 1994). Child, youth, young person and adult have been constructed in different ways to reflect the economic, socio-cultural and political interests of different adult groups across

many different spaces and time-frames. It is only by understanding them as socially and contextually constructed, rather than universally knowable or fixed, that these terms are able to carry meaning in ways that accurately reflect the complexities of the social world and the language that is used in attempts to explain it.

In reflection of this fact it is important to explain why the phrase “children and young people” has been deliberately deployed in this thesis and the associated meanings that this phrase attempts to convey. Primarily it reflects my own experience of working on issues of voice and participation. This has been with people aged between approximately five years old at the younger end and approximately twenty years old at the older end. This age range extends beyond the 11-19 age range typically used to define youth work (NYA, 2024) and highlights the differences between youth work and participation work with children and young people. There are many crossovers in terms of the skills and approaches deployed and I argue that youth work is defined by its commitment to voice and participation. At the same time they are not equivalent areas of practice. In my experience the ways that children under the age of five communicate, associate and relate to adults who work with them are different from those aged between five and ten years. The first is often defined as “playwork” and the second as “work with children”. Similarly between those aged approximately ten to thirteen years (sometimes referred to as “junior work”) and between thirteen and nineteen. Different age groups prompt different approaches, especially in relation to voice and participation. Participation work with children aged five and with young adults aged twenty-five would not traditionally be referred to as youth work.

The phrase “young people” is deliberately preferred over “youth” in an attempt to

avoid the additional complexities associated with the term “youth” in relation to its social and cultural construction, especially its capacity to embody and embolden a dominant, negative discourse about children and young people. Paradoxically “youth” is a term that is comprehensively rejected by community and youth work commentators and pedagogues, despite it featuring in the professional title of “youth worker” and in the title of most teaching and qualification programmes, including the “Community and Youth Work” degree programme at The University of Sunderland (University of Sunderland, no date) on which this research is focused. New degree students using the term “youth” in their early writing are routinely advised to replace it with “young people”.

B: The problem of “youth”

Youth is a concept that has received a great deal of attention from a wide range of social commentators and social theorists over many years. There are occasions when the term is used in ways that reflect positively on the young people to whom it refers. Inspired by the French educator and historian Pierre de Coubertin, The Olympic Movement, for instance, embeds its call for “the youth of the world to meet in four years time” into the closing ceremony of each Olympic Games (Olympics, 2026, 2:50:54). More commonly the term is associated with a discourse that paints young people as troubled, troubling, risky, threatening, emotionally un-regulated and in need of control. The seminal work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1980’s (UKRI, no date) and more recent commentators such as Owen Jones (Jones, 2020) highlight how society projects its physical fears, economic concerns and moral panics on to young people of a particular age, reinventing the same arguments for each new generation, from mods and rockers in the 1960’s to the so-called “snowflake generation” of the new

millennials in the 2010's (McEwan and Dhall, 2022). Understanding the impact of these projections is vitally important for research that engages with issues around the rights and voice of children and young people. It is argued here that the negative discourse of "youth" contributes directly to children and young people's rights being easily disregarded by adults, even when those rights are written into international treaties and local policies. In constructing young people as a special, homogeneous category, adult society is enabled to discriminate directly against young people as a category, justifying this attitude in reference to the need to control and subjugate a section of society that threatens the moral, social and economic order (Caley, 2019; Bradford, 2012).

A key component of the negative dominant discourse is the notion of youth as people undergoing a special type of transition. This specific transition, often linked to the concept of adolescence, is assumed to be materially distinct from other forms of human transition across the life course and is thus accorded a special, negative status. Via this negatively constructed conceptual frame, which is even foregrounded by key youth work agencies (National Youth Agency, 2024), youths get constructed as in the process of becoming fully human rather than being fully human as they currently exist. This in turn plays into an understanding of youths as not yet fully deserving of the rights and benefits that accrue to what is inevitably constructed as the contrasting, fully-fledged category of citizens i.e. adults. Youth thus becomes defined negatively by what it is not rather than positively by what it is. From this perspective, youths are caught in liminal space: As beyond the support and protection that society is commonly willing to confer on children (at least in common discourse) whilst also not yet deserving of the full citizenship rights that such status confers on adults.

Spence (2005) argues that this deeply embedded and hardly acknowledged form of age discrimination can be traced back to the shifts in the economic status of those between the ages of ten and twenty that occurred during the early stages of industrial revolution, becoming embedded as new forms of industry and cultures became the norm. The factory violently replaced family and church as the primary economic and social institution and this age group, Spence argues, came to be understood as a stage in the life course characterised by “rupture, disruption, discontinuity and transition” (Spence, 2005, p.51). This was experienced by young people as a process of de-humanisation. From being important individuals within the feudal system based on strength, skill, craft and individual contribution, this age group became objectified as units of production, defined purely in relation to their capacity to maximise profit. As urbanisation developed, the contradictions of the new system became more publicly obvious. The lack of availability of both public spaces and private spaces to be young (no fields, lanes or greens; no spaces in crowded, multiple-occupancy housing) combined with increasing unemployment to create the phenomenon of the so-called “street gang”. The high-profile of the “gang” provided adult society with an easily identifiable target on which it was able to channel its moral and political anxieties. It was easier for the owning, politically active and middle classes (those who had had some choice in the decisions that had been made) to focus on the apparent lack of moral direction of modern youth rather than face up to the negative consequences of the structural and ethical decisions they had made themselves. Through these processes youth became constructed by adult society as a special category; a problem to be resolved; a threat to be controlled and a life-stage to be regulated emotionally, psychologically, politically and economically.

These forms of socially and culturally produced categorisation and the associated mechanisms of regulation and control that they bequeath have been reproduced in different forms across the generations since the shift from the field to the factory and continue to be so today. The absurdity of a so-called “minimum” wage that is structured by age is just one example (UK Government (4), no date). For those aged under nineteen the concept of “minimum” loses any meaningful connection to linguistic or logical rationality. Anyone under the age of nineteen does not receive the minimum wage for doing the same job as those aged over nineteen. Instead they receive what can only be understood as a “minimum minus” payment. For the special category of “youth”, even the commonly accepted rules of language and logic can be subverted to satisfy the impulse to regulate, distinguish and, I argue in this thesis, discriminate.

Spence argues that further layers of intersectional discrimination can be seen in relation to the impulse of the early industrialists to standardise and categorise. The separation of roles for young men and young women in factories further segmented the category of “youth” and served to embed and consolidate cultural norms around young males as undertaking strength-based roles in production and manufacture in contrast to roles regarded as lower status for young women, whether in connection with specific skills such as weaving which were paid less or childcare which was not paid at all. This separation and stratification translated across to other realms such as education, resulting in separate entrances for boys and girls in the many new schools being built to educate (and regulate) the burgeoning industrial working classes. These processes of segmentation help to partly explain why culturally reproduced representations of “youth” and “youthhood” as a form of threat focus almost exclusively on males rather than

females (Pearson, 1983). Whilst the threat from males is conceived as requiring responses that aim to control or channel their potential physicality and strength, the equivalent for young women is expressed through attempts to control the one things that distinguishes them biologically from young men more than any other i.e. their capacity to give birth. Again there is a long history of responses that have sought to address this in different ways, including early youth work with young women (infed, 2026) and its more modern manifestations focused on reducing rates of teenage pregnancy. These evidence the persistent nature of political and cultural impulses to define youth of both genders through the prism of risk and threat to a preferred social order.

Twum-Danso Imoh (2025) argues that the roots of a dominant, deficit understanding of youth and childhood lie in the determination of adults to focus on the differences between younger persons and older persons, rather than what is shared in common personhood. In contrast to Spence's primarily industrial explanation, Twum-Danso Imoh argues instead that this perspective became ubiquitous having taken root via colonialism, Christian forms of education, Eurocentrism and global economic processes. She argues that societies construct the idea of dramatic distinctions between generations as their premise when attempting to make sense of complex social relations. She goes on to argue that Nineteenth Century child-saving approaches reinforced the status of younger generations as lacking and helped to establish adulthood as the necessary yardstick against which younger personhood then becomes measured, including in contemporary legal, rights-based frameworks such as the UNCRC. Twum-Danso Imoh draws on the view that children are not childlike by nature but only because adults choose to construct them as lacking, lesser-than and helpless. Prior to the

Nineteenth Century influence of Europe and The Americas, youth and youthhood were constructed in ways that were less focused on biological age and more focused on duties, responsibilities and entitlements. She argues that the rigid binary of a popular discourse that pitches rights against responsibilities be replaced with a construct that encapsulates them operating together and simultaneously alongside duties. She also argues that this be seen as applying across the lifecourse in ways that open up possibilities for emancipatory change. Understanding social relations across the lifecourse from the perspective of duties, responsibilities and entitlements renders meaningless the construction of youth as a transitional phase. Youth and youthhood are no longer defined according to what they will become but according to what they already do and what they already have. Younger members of families, for instance, contribute competently to domestic and other duties and can therefore be understood as productive. As they grow older the specific nature of their productivity and contribution inevitably changes form and shape but they do not transition from being non-productive; non-contributory and incompetent to being productive, contributory and competent. Twum-Danso Imoh argues that constructing personhood through these lenses of reciprocity, respect and responsibility is more congruent with pre-colonial ways of understanding social relations and restores a previously held status to younger generations that has been lost in the focus on safeguarding and protection that underlies modern conceptualisations of rights. The debate around the rights and responsibilities of young carers highlights the point that Twum-Danso Imoh is seeking to illuminate. From a rights-based perspective it is argued that children and young people should be enabled to live out their childhoods free of the burden of potentially exploitative caring that it is the duty of the state to

address. Yet many young carers construct their caring not as a burden or duty but as an expression of love, reciprocity and responsibility, in precisely the same way that many adult carers do. This illustrates the benefits to children and young people of two key arguments that are central to this thesis. Firstly the importance of rejecting the notion of the adult yardstick, of youth as lesser than and youthhood as transition. This involves replacing a premise of difference with a premise of continuity and commonly-held-personhood across the lifecourse. Secondly the importance of voice and the right to a voice as a fundamental right (Shenton, 2015) that informs how many other rights become realised. Some young carers are badly exploited and are desperate for interventions that will ease the burden of caring that constrains their capacity to live a full and happy life. Others wish for only minor changes or occasional respite. Only by involving all young carers in a meaningful dialogue that leads to the specific changes required in each circumstance can a just and ethical combination of rights, responsibilities and duties be met.

When viewed through a spatial lens the discourse of youth as a transitional phase is further undermined. For children in some parts of the world the early phases of the lifecourse may well be experienced as a time of relative innocence and exploration. For child soldiers, children who are sexually exploited and trafficked, child street vendors and the many children and young people who are targets of multiple forms of adult abuse, defining this period of their lives as a time of becoming, of innocence, or of freedom from responsibility is both meaningless and insulting. In these circumstances children and young people are reduced to mere physical bodies that are deployed for their specific physical or sexual capacities (Spence, 2005). These experiences inevitably cause serious damage across the

whole lifecourse. Viewed from the perspective of many children and young people, the notion of youthhood as a period of transition can be understood as no more than an adult fantasy about what they would wish to be the case for children or perhaps what they wish had been the case for themselves.

“How we imagine children, as for example deficient in reason, emotion control, responsibility and maturity, has consequences for how we imagine ourselves.” (Murriss, 2013, p. 253)

This fantasy that takes no account of the actual experiences of many children and young people. Where the conditions for what counts as “youth” in any spatial or temporal context are set by the wealthy and powerful, including via legal and policy frameworks, the gap between these frameworks and the lived experiences of many children and young people will increase at the cost of the psychological and social development of children and young people.

Understanding youth and youthhood as a site of resistance and hope further challenges adultist assumptions of becoming rather than being. From this perspective the adult fear that youth will come together in groups and use their individual and combined power to challenge the status quo in an attempt to overthrow the current order becomes a reality. Not in the form of the types of violent behaviour that are commonly used by the media and others to reinforce the dominant, negative discourse of youth but instead in the form of highly mindful and focused forms of resistance via music, dance, dress, school strikes, youth-led campaigns for social justice, cultural movements and environmental protests. Examples often cited in the cultural studies that explore these forms of youth resistance include the Punk movement in the 1970’s and the climate and

educational campaigns led by prominent individual young people such as Greta Thunberg (National Geographic Kids, no date) or Malala Yousf Zhai (Malala Fund, no date). These youth-led movements and campaigns expose the capacity of young people to resist, refuse and reject adult attempts to control and constrain their lives now or the futures they expect to inherit (Kallio, 2026; Spence 2005). It is telling that in many cases the adult voices that oppose such movements on the basis that the young people are behaving irresponsibly (e.g. missing school lessons to join anti-climate campaigns) are often the same voices urging young people to live out the responsibilities that they believe are attached to their entitlements. Young people are simultaneously demeaned via a discourse of becoming and damned when they express their sense of already being.

Brando (2025) proposes an adaptive model for conceptualising youth. His model rejects the discourse of transition whilst also rejecting what he refers to as a “liberationist” approach that, by simply replacing becoming with being, “boxes children and young people in with who they *should* be” (Brando, 2025, p. 33, my emphasis). He proposes instead a model that takes greater account of the realities of “being” by fully honouring the complexities, pluralities, situatedness and individually agentic subjectivities of the lives of children and young people via a focus on issues of agency and voice. Beginning with a process of deconstruction, he emphasises the need to challenge the assumptions that infect how we perceive children and young people, precisely because that perception is the primary influencer of how we will then go on to treat them, an argument that is central to this thesis. Via processes of alternative construction and reconstruction that emphasise personal reflexivity; a focus on the situatedness of children and young people and on-going, critical awareness of one’s own positionality, Brando reaches

towards a focus on concepts of shared humanity and personhood as means of breaking free from the limiting binaries that have framed the “youth or adult” transitional discourse for so long.

1.6.2 Expertise

Viewed from an essentialist ontological perspective, expertise can only come to be understood as a necessarily divisive and exclusionary concept. If a thing exists in ways that allow it to be known in relation only to its inherence of a number of indelibly fixed and definite properties, then it becomes possible for one person to “know” this thing in a way that is fundamentally “better than” how others know it. This will be the case regardless of the perspective from which it is viewed or of any temporal, situational or contextual aspects. From this perspective, one person’s level of knowing - their expertise - can only ever be understood in relation to the lower-level knowing of others i.e. their relative ignorance. This inevitably results in a disparaging process whereby one group (experts) attach what Berger and Luckmann (1967, p. 132) refer to as “inferior ontological status, and thereby a not-to-be-taken-seriously cognitive status” on another group (the non-experts).

Critics of this deficit-defined stance point to a key internal paradox: How is it possible for those rendered relatively ignorant by this schema to be in a position to judge the validity of the expert’s claims to high-level knowledge if they are not equally knowledgeable themselves (Koppl, 2010). Yet if they achieve this level of knowledge, the differentials between the expert and the non-expert fall away entirely and the concept itself is rendered meaningless.

Viewed from a more critical, interpretivist perspective this paradox begins to point towards the culturally embedded power dynamics that can be seen to lie at the heart of the concept of expertise as understood from a positivist perspective. If it is not possible to explain the concept in relation to objectively discernible differences between what people know, then expert status from this perspective is viewed as being conferred (or assumed) via other, more subjective and socially-constructed means, including factors such as race, class and gender etc. Expertise comes to be understood in relation to what Jasanoff refers to as “institutionalized practices” (Jasanoff quoted in Jung, Korinek and Straßheim, 2014) by which social actors test and then use different claims to knowledge. In their critique of the concept of “universal experts”, Berger and Luckmann (1966) point to the divisive implications of an essentialist, competitive interpretation of expertise that inevitably leads to a process whereby those considered to be inside the inner circle of knowledge on a topic assume a protective, monopolistic position over their field. Koppl refers to this as an “epistemic monopoly” (Koppl, 2010 p.27) which experts then deploy (both consciously and unconsciously) to further distinguish between themselves and those outside the circle. As more outsiders incorporate their lesser status as non-experts, the monopoly becomes confirmed in the public mind as somehow objectively secure, providing tacit permission for those with existing power to monopolise the very processes of defining (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Alongside its capacity to expose how power and vested interests become embedded within the concept of expertise this perspective, as with the concept of childhood above, also holds out opportunities for expertise to be re-interpreted in more inclusive ways. If knowledge is understood as being more socially

distributed (Koppl, 2010), expertise can be shared more widely. In place of deficit-based, binary and exclusionary understandings, expertise becomes a more dynamic concept whereby the different types of knowledge held by different social actors is acknowledged and valued for what it is, rather than devalued for what it is not. In this way expertise stems from each person knowing their “separate art” (Koppl, 2010, p. 12). This allows the deficit model to be replaced with a more democratically aligned, difference-based model where so-called “scientific” knowledge is regarded as merely one form of knowledge alongside others.

Jung, Korinek and Straßheim (2014) introduce a useful framework for understanding how expertise comes to be constructed in this socially dynamic way. They begin by developing the concept of “knowledge orders” which they define as “discursive orders structuring the production of expertise” (Jung, Korinek and Straßheim, 2014, p.267). They proceed to deploy these orders at three separate levels covering firstly how expertise is generated and communicated between social actors; secondly how it is regulated and finally how it is reflexively debated. They analyse these orders in relation to two separate dimensions: a social dimension that explains how competence is attributed to experts and a procedural dimension that identifies the point at which relevant criteria are applied as expertise becomes cognitively constructed and validated. The issue of expectations is central to their analysis, focusing in particular on the ways in which people’s expectations come to shape their understanding of what counts for expertise and how such expectations generate “privileged epistemic authority” for those commonly held up as experts (Jung, Korinek and Straßheim, 2014, p. 402).

This same framework can be used to analyse how expertise comes to be understood in other fields, including how adults preparing to work with children

and young people make sense of their own expertise and that of the young people with whom they are expected to work. Focusing on expectations within such an analysis generates a potentially dynamic, theoretical bridge between the concepts of childhood and expertise in explaining the extent to which any interplay between the two constructs plays a role in framing adult attitudes towards children and young people's rights and voice.

The analytical framework presented by these theorists points towards the potential for expertise to be understood in ways that are expansive, inclusive and emancipatory rather than limiting and exclusionary. In their analysis of the social dimension by which competence gets attributed to so-called experts, they reference the importance of decision-making processes that are open and that take account of the interests and voices of those most-affected by the decisions being taken. Similarly their third knowledge order, the reflexive discourse level, is developed to explain how, in the production of expertise, prevailing discourses can be transformed, enabling new constructions to emerge that lean towards more inclusive and democratic processes of rational decision-making. This inclusive approach is consistent with Habermas's concept of the "ideal speech situation" (Pusey, 1987, p.34), a concept that is central to this research. Habermas posits that when the conditions for ideal dialogue are present, all participants to the decision-making process are regarded (and regard themselves) as having equally valid claims to what constitutes the truth on any given topic. Rational decisions emerge from the dialogue and are based on the force of the better argument presented, rather than (as is typically the case) the force wielded by the relatively powerful at the cost of those whose voices become marginal or are simply ignored entirely (Pusey, 1987).

- 1.6.3 Testimonial and Hermeneutical Injustice

Karen Murrin (2013) proposes that adults, and teachers in particular, adopt the same Habermasian humility in their social and educational interactions with young people. Murrin utilises philosopher Miranda Fricker's overarching concept of "epistemic injustice" and the related concepts of "testimonial and hermeneutical injustice" (Fricker, 2008, p. 69) to explore how adult assumptions of epistemic authority results in them missing potentially vital knowledge offered by children and young people.

Fricker (2011) argues for an approach to philosophical enquiry that moves away from classic, rational forms of epistemological analysis towards ways of understanding how knowledge is produced and reproduced that account for the social, cultural and especially the prejudicial nature of human existence and interaction. The idea that gender, for instance, can be regarded as a factor that somehow sits outside an analysis of how the world comes to be known or as a merely peripheral issue that risks getting in the way of the pursuit of "pure" or more universal truths is, for Fricker, not merely an error in thinking but a form of injustice. How we come to know the world, make sense of it and the language we choose to describe how we know it is informed at a fundamental level by the situational realities of human existence, including the prejudices and biases of different knowers. To fail to account for such biases serves to privilege the epistemological analysis of some knowers (the already privileged and powerful) over others. Fricker captures this overarching process of privileging by introducing the concept of epistemic injustice. She then specifies this concept into

two further concepts that, although applied primarily to race and gender, have particular salience for understanding how the utterances of children and young people come to be prejudicially received and understood by adult knowers:

Testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice.

Geuskens (2014) focuses her definitions of the concepts directly on the injustice aspects and from the perspective of the speaker. She defines testimonial injustice as:

“the injustice of not receiving due credence as a speaker because of ‘negative identity prejudice’”

and hermeneutical injustice as:

“the injustice of not being able to understand and make intelligible one’s social experience as the collective hermeneutical resources for doing so are lacking as a result of social inequality”.

(Geuskens, 2014, no page number)

Cronin (2014) defines the two concepts in similar terms but with the focus on culpability and from the perspective of the hearer:

“testimonial injustice occurs between individuals, with the question of culpability falling on the hearer, while with hermeneutical injustice, both the occurrence and culpability of injustice have collective societal origins”.

(Cronin, 2014, no page number)

The concept of testimonial injustice is particularly helpful in the context of this thesis due to its capacity to directly frame what happens when adults ignore or dismiss the voices of children and young people in terms of power, oppression and prejudice.

There are numerous different ways in which the processes of participation can and have been analysed. Most commonly this involves perceiving them as having been successful due to the numbers of children and young people engaged; the opportunities provided for them to develop their skills or the chance to experience new contexts such as speaking in the council chamber. These types of outcome are analysed in chapter three of this thesis where they are dismissed as the largely tokenistic “secondary advantages” of participation (see Chapter 3, section 3.2). The processes can also be analysed through a developmental lens. Here the lack of significant outcomes for children and young people comes to be understood merely as a disappointing yet justifiable milestone in an organisational journey towards more meaningful outcomes that will supposedly be secured at some future point. Hart’s Ladder (see figure 1 below) is commonly used to justify this developmental analysis. The processes can also be analysed and understood through behavioural, psychological or interactionist lenses. Here the limited or non-existent outcomes of participation come to be variously understood as resulting from a lack of capacity of children and young people; their lack of interest in being involved; because they failed to relate to the adult facilitators or because they had engaged for the “wrong” reasons such as access to free food.

In contrast to these forms of analysis, the concept of testimonial injustice gets to the heart of the claim being made in this thesis, as the definitions provided by Geuskens and Cronin above expose: That participation processes and their

propensity to fail needs to be understood not through quantitative, developmental or interactionist lenses but in relation to the deeply embedded prejudices held by adults towards children and young people simply because they are children and young people. Testimonial injustice exposes the relations of power, control and oppression that lie at the centre of the relationship between adults and children and young people. It begins to explain why societies allow adults to so readily and consistently ignore the very rights that they have enshrined in international treaties, policies, guidance and law relating to children and young people.

Fricker makes an important distinction that reveals the additional relevance of her theory to the specific issue I seek to explore in this thesis. She distinguishes between hearers who recognise the value of what speakers say but dismiss it for overtly unethical reasons (for example because they recognise that it threatens their existing power base or status) and hearers who, due to prejudice and conditioning, fail to recognise the value and credibility of what the speaker or speakers are articulating and thus dismiss or ignore it as an epistemic act on their part rather than as an unethical act (even though the outcome could well be described as unethical/unjust). Fricker makes it clear that her theory is clearly focused on the latter group and not the former. In the same vein my focus in this thesis was not on those adults who deliberately choose to ignore what they have heard and understood from children and young people but on those who, despite good intention, fail to act on what children and young people have articulated because they are prejudiced, often unconsciously, against properly hearing or valuing what has been shared. This choice of focus plays an important role in my claim to have generated new information via this research. There is no shortage of existing knowledge that attempts to explain why the already powerful choose to

misuse and protect the power they wield over others. It does not require doctoral-level enquiry to explain why a headteacher who is close to retirement might choose to strategically ignore a group of pupils who ask to speak to school governors about their concerns with how the school is being run, even if he agrees with them. This contrasts with what is known about the many well-intentioned adults, including youth workers and other trained professionals, who are actively involved in processes of participation with children and young people but who consistently fail to ensure that their practice extends beyond tokenism, as the evidence put forward in this thesis demonstrates. It is a focus on this group that holds out the greatest potential for new knowledge and understanding to be generated. Applying Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice to this phenomenon is clearly a means of achieving this.

Whereas testimonial injustice is used by Fricker to explain the process whereby a speaker's testimony receives depressed credibility from the hearer, hermeneutical injustice is deployed to focus instead on issues of depressed intelligibility. This type of epistemic injustice shifts the focus away from the direct, individualised and internalised prejudices of the hearer towards a more structural and cultural analysis that encompasses the fact that some speakers and groups of speakers have differential access, compared with some hearers, to a pre-existing pool of concepts and social meanings that are available to everyone. Fricker refers to this pool as a set of "extant, collective, hermeneutical resources" (Fricker, 2011, p. 150). Powerful groups (men, the able-bodied, white people, the already wealthy) make the majority of the contributions that create and sustain the shared, hermeneutical pool of useful meanings and concepts. Other groups hardly contribute at all and therefore struggle to communicate across to others more

powerfully positioned in relation to the pool. This differential access to what is known and understood more widely across social spaces results in some groups becoming “hermeneutically marginalised” (Fricker, 2011, p. 153) compared with others.

There are clear links in Fricker’s analysis to the concepts of capital exposed by Robert Putnam and Pierre Bourdieu amongst others. Putnam breaks down the concept of social capital (reciprocal forms of trust and support) into “bonding and bridging” forms (Putnam, 2000, p.23). For Bourdieu, progress towards reduced inequalities is produced by, for instance, forms of social capital that enable individuals and groups to bridge across to people or economic resources that promote their emancipation from the circumstances that obstruct human flourishing, such as poverty or unemployment (Bourdieu, 1986). Fricker identifies similar opportunities for reducing inequality and marginalisation by creating bridges across the hermeneutical gap that exists between the powerful and the marginalised. This is achieved through access to specific forms of language, concepts and the shared meanings that enable differently positioned groups to co-create meaning collaboratively and thus to be understood. As Cronin’s definition above suggests, culpability for hermeneutical injustice rests with the collective structures that reproduce oppression and marginalisation, rather than with the agentic decisions of individual hearers, as is the case with testimonial injustice.

Fricker illustrates the concept of hermeneutical injustice by reference to the coining and subsequent legalisation of the phrase “sexual harassment” by groups of women in the United States in the 1970’s. Whilst many women, especially black women as Fricker points out (Fricker, 2023, 45:30) had been subjected to persistent, sexualised acts from men across a range of abusive behaviours ranging

from “mild” flirting to serious, sexualised touching, they did not have access to forms of shared language or to a cohering concept that enabled them to firstly generate a complete understanding of what was happening for themselves and secondly to articulate the simultaneously individual and collective nature of their experiences across social spaces (to other women or groups of women for instance) and especially across to the people, places and spaces where power resides, such as the legislature. Once these acts of abuse were named culturally as a sexualised form of harassment and the phrase “sexual harassment” became enshrined in legislation this enabled women to bridge challenge what was happening to them more effectively. Women had always known how serious the behaviours were despite attempts to downplay this. Naming it as sexual harassment provided them with access to a more broadly shared understanding of its seriousness, thus reducing the hermeneutical injustice done to them as women at both individual and collective levels.

Fricker’s analysis could be similarly applied to the more recent shift in the collective understanding around the concept of “neurodiversity” which has similarly brought together in a single, powerful concept a range of diverse and complex conditions that have been collectively misunderstood and have been the cause of significant discrimination and marginalisation for many years.

Most significantly for this research, the concept of hermeneutical injustice helps to describe the complex nature of the collective challenge that is faced by children, young people and the adults on whom they rely for access to support, services and human flourishing. It is argued that only by framing this challenge in the concept of rights can the hermeneutical injustice that is done to children and young people be effectively reduced. Appeals to rights (as opposed to needs or wishes)

generates the greatest opportunity for a shared understanding of the importance of meaningful participation to be understood. Children and young people, just as the women in the 1970's referenced by Fricker, need to be supported in first articulating to themselves and between themselves the significance of the rights they hold. They then need additional support in engaging with significant adults to generate shared meanings that result in these rights being respected and acted upon.

To achieve this Murriss, in her application of Fricker's schema to what she refers to as "child", calls for a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1970) in how adults construct their view of children, away from one based on a sense of superior levels of knowing towards one in which adults instead display "epistemic modesty and epistemic equality" (Murriss, 2013, p. 245) in ways that have the potential to transform pedagogical relationships and the educational system as a whole. Of particular relevance to this analysis is Murriss' critique of essentialist and developmental conceptualisations of childhood and her focus on what she regards to be the almost impossible challenge of persuading adults to re-think their identity as knowledge-bearers and relinquish their power as experts in relation to children and young people. Murriss also connects this challenge at adult-child level with the broader structures of the modern education system. Accepting children and young people as bearers of valid knowledge has significance for schooling and education across all aspects of theory, practice, curriculum, pedagogy, school design and staffing and, crucially for this research, children and young people's participation. It would require a shift from the tokenistic, consultative models of participation towards models that more meaningfully respect children and young people's right for their voice to be heard, listened to and acted upon.

Fricker also includes the concept of “identity prejudice” into her schema. This is defined as “a label for prejudices against people qua social type” (Fricker, 2007 quoted in Murriss, 2013, p. 247) and encompasses prejudice based on chronological age. If adults engage in meaning-making in relation to children and young people from within prevailing, prejudicial discourses that shape their understanding of childhood as a process of becoming rather than being, then it would appear almost inevitable that they will do testimonial injustice to children and young people in the course of their interactions with them. If they understand their own expertise as something that distinguishes and distances themselves from the children and young people they are engaged with, further testimonial injustice will be done. If they understand the educational process as a mechanism by which knowledge is simply transferred from the educator as subject to the young person as object then the same negative outcome will inevitably result (Murriss, 2013). Where children and young people are also understood through the lenses of other deeply ingrained prejudices (Murriss focuses on children who are Black, for instance) additional, intersectional (Beresford, 2021, p.60) injustice is done.

Despite the scale of the challenge, Murriss also points to the opportunities presented by an approach that re-conceptualises how children and their testimonies can come to be understood by the adults who work with them. These include opportunities for co-creation based on respect for children's utterances and the potential for co-production of new knowledge (Grundy, 1987; Freire, 1996). In this way Murriss envisages new kinds of relationships developing between adults, children and young people. Relationships that manifest epistemic trust, epistemic modesty and epistemic equality, much as Jung, Korinek and Straßheim (2014) suggest in their analysis of the social dimension of knowledge

orders and Habermas implies through the concept of ideal dialogue, opening up opportunities for transformational shifts to take place at the level of reflexive discourse. Fricker references the potential benefits that emerge from relationships characterised in this way. In the example below “her/she” (which Fricker is using here to represent the universal concept of female) could be replaced by any individual or group that has testimonial injustice done to them, such as children and young people:

“What we want is to move towards a practice that is at once more ethical, more good, so this bad stuff doesn’t happen to her, and more rational, because the good epistemic stuff she has to give gets through to others in the way that it should. So that they don’t lose out on the epistemic goods she has to offer just because of something stupid like prejudice” (Fricker, 2023, 34:03)

The legacy of positivist and essentialist ontologies is clearly evident in relation to how childhood and expertise continue to be understood and in terms of how modern, neoliberally conceived systems of schooling and curriculum serve to constrain, control and marginalise the voice of the child within educational and other settings (Cairns *et al.*, 2018; Stalford, 2019). The same legacy in its ontological and epistemological forms also results in many children and young people experiencing their exchanges with adults as testimonially unjust (Weller, 2009; Bray, Snodin and Carter, 2015). This is directly reflected in the evidence from literature relating to children and young people's rights and participation. Addressing these embedded legacies and the power dynamics which sustain them is a daunting task. It requires processes that, as Koppl points out, challenge those who will not give up their power easily, including those who

will fight to retain their privileged role in defining the very nature of social reality itself and who will fight “mostly because they wish to defend a definition of reality in which they sincerely believe” (Koppl, 2010). Despite such challenges, analysis of these concepts also provides extensive reasons to be hopeful of transformative change and suggests ways in which such a transformation might be secured. By engaging Community and Youth Work graduates in a dialogue that explored how they came to make sense of these and other concepts, the research was able to generate insights that have the potential to contribute to a better understanding of how testimonial justice can become more evident in the realisation of children and young people's right to a voice and to the changes that need to result from their voices being heard.

- 1.6.4 Meaningful participation and meaningful change

The stance of this research emerges out of a belief in the subjective nature of meaning and how it comes to be ascribed by social actors. Reaching judgments about the quality of the professional participation practice of others through the lens of what is or is not “meaningful” places a duty on the researcher to provide further explanation of how precisely the term is being used.

Participation can be defined in multiple different ways. Harts’s Ladder (see figure one) is the model most commonly referenced. Other models arguably attempt to expose similar options in different ways (*A Potpourri of Participation Models*, 2013).

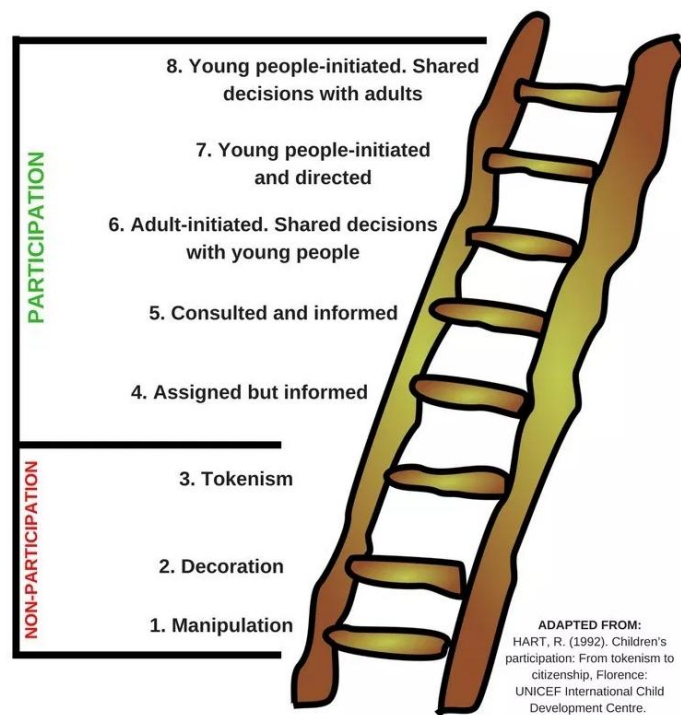


Fig. 1

(Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation, no date)

Some writers on participation (Simpkin, 2015) argue that meaningful practice needs to be understood through a developmental and organisational lens. This approach involves supporting organisations in celebrating whichever level they are at whilst encouraging them to make further progress up the ladder. This applies only to practice that falls in the “participation” category (levels 4-8 in Hart’s schema). Whilst clearly rational and constructive from an organisational development perspective, there is a risk that developmental approaches lend credence to a discourse that sees the realisation of children and young people's rights as something to be hoped for in the future rather than as a reality in the immediate moment.

For this thesis “meaningful” is defined in terms of participation that firstly creates spaces for children and young people to identify and articulate, without adult

pressure or surveillance, issues that are of genuine interest or concern to them.

Secondly that genuine dialogue occurs with relevant adults in respect of the issues articulated and that the decisions about action are arrived at via the force of the better argument alone. Finally that meaningful change is enacted in relation to the issue identified. Judgements about whether the level of change meets the threshold of “meaningful” are reserved for the children and young people alone.

1.6 Co-production

The philosophy underpinning the research is one which regards children and young people as experts in their own lives. It is a philosophy that says "adults don't know best - they just know different" (Investing in Children, no date, 1). This mantra applies to doctoral research as much as it does to how schools, social care or health facilities engage young people in designing and delivering services.

Ensuring the best possible outcome and impact of the research required the expert input of children and young people. This was achieved through the establishment of a young people's reference group. Whilst this level of involvement of children and young people does not equate to full, child-led participatory research (Shenton, 2015) it represented a pragmatic response to the opportunity of co-production (Beresford, 2021) and made a reality of young people's right to be involved in matters that affect them (UNCRC, no date). Given the topic being explored, this lent an element of internal rigour and integrity to the research process. Further consideration of this group is provided in Chapter Four “Methodology” section 4.9.

1.7 Reflexivity and professional identity

Researchers undertaking studies that aim to critically explore the professional

contributions of others working within their own professional field have an ethical obligation to reflect critically on their own professional contribution and to provide a clear outline of their own sense of professional identity (Schein and Schein, cited in Fulton and Smith, 2013). Prior to exploring how others go about meaning-making it is important to be clear about the meaning-making processes being used to interpret concepts, data and results.

Bolton (Bolton and Delderfield, 2018, p.103) describes the concept of “pentimento” as the way in which old oil paintings can sometimes become thin and transparent, gradually revealing previous versions of themselves below the ageing surface. She describes how the metaphor can be used to explain how previous narrations of ourselves, by ourselves, often lie beneath and behind our current practice. Crossley (2005, p.108) refers to these narrations as exposing “sedimented traces of our past experiences”. For myself the metaphor helped expose the assumptions - both overt and tacit (Saltiel, 2010) that lie beneath my current praxis, pentimento style. This included assumptions about who I am; about how I understand the nature of what I am and about the social world more generally. Also about how I go about claiming to know such things (Crotty, 1998).

The pentimento metaphor additionally prompts questions with regards to the temporal aspect of how knowledge about ourselves or about the world more generally is consolidated over time and as a result of experience. My own professional story involves periods of intense learning but also – when the opportunity to access quality support for reflection was not available (Shabani, Khatib and Ebadi, 2010) – experiences that I perceive to have undermined my self-confidence and which I believe still have the potential to inhibit the congruence (Bolton and Delderfield, 2018) of my current praxis as a lecturer in Higher

Education. This prompts a further set of questions about how we think about and understand how knowledge itself is known and constructed (Moritz and Lysaker, 2018). Addressing these questions has been a central feature during my journey as a “researching professional” (Fulton and Smith, 2013 p.25).

Choosing to “attend to the untold” (Sharkey, 2004, quoted in Bolton and Delderfield, 2018, p.17) has involved aspects of both risk and exposure. These stem from what Bolton, drawing on the earlier work of Argyris and Schon, describes as:

“the vulnerable effort to perceive from other perspectives, and the uncertainty and insecurity associated with questioning theories-in-use”.

(Bolton and Delderfield, 2018, p.62)

Drake (Drake, 2018) drawing on Vygotsky’s theory of proximal development, warns that significant progress in learning is often accompanied by a sense of psychological and even existential risk. This has certainly proven to be the case with this research.

An obvious starting point for making sense of professional identity are the stated attributes, values, beliefs and expectations published externally by the profession in question. In my own context I have been a professional schoolteacher, youth and community worker, self-employed consultant/mediator and now lecturer. It would be relatively straightforward to simply provide the externalised definitions of each of the above professions and claim these as my professional identity at each point.

Whilst such externalised definitions perhaps provide a useful starting point for exploring professional identity, they generally fail to capture the complexity of the

concept, primarily because it is so closely bound up with how we see ourselves, rather than how others see us. Also because how we see and understand ourselves shifts over time and according to individual context. To describe myself as a “lecturer in Higher Education” says something about my current responsibilities, but as a description of my professional identity it is a construction that is far too “thin” (White and Epston cited in Tilsen, 2018 p. vii). It describes only the most recent, surface-level paint on the canvas and fails to take account of the richness and diversity of the previous layers, including mistakes and failures, that have been painstakingly laid down during thirty five years of professional practice.

For these reasons it is more useful to work with definitions of professional identity that encompass a self-referential element. Schein and Schein (quoted in Fulton and Smith, 2013, p.10) define professional identity as:

“The relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role.”

This is especially important when preparing to engage in research that is related to professional practice. It raises, in turn, questions about the nature of research itself and the role of the researcher, all of which need to be addressed in a way that encompasses everything from the most universal concepts of ontology and epistemology to the deeply personal and specific. Hughes (1990) encourages researchers to appreciate just how much the tools and procedures they select for gathering and scrutinising data are embedded into the deeply personal and contextual commitments they have to particular versions of the world and to how that world comes to be known to them. Bolton (Bolton and Delderfield, 2018)

similarly urges practitioners and researchers to make explicit efforts, via observation and the development of self-awareness and understanding, to achieve a congruence between what they do (theories in-use) and what they say they do (espoused theories) in order to achieve greater levels of effectiveness.

For myself this has involved acknowledging an unhelpful incongruence between my espoused commitment to critical pedagogy as a lecturer and the judgmentalism, even essentialism, that resulted from my own conditioning via family, religion and schooling. Critical pedagogy is defined as an approach to education that places an appreciation of power relations front and central in its analysis. This appreciation is then used to challenge the ways that traditional approaches to education reinforce embedded forms of oppression and discrimination. The core aim of critical pedagogy is to engender critical thinking in students, especially those for whom education in the past has been a diminishing and demeaning experience. Critical pedagogy:

“aims to give to students, and people in general, the tools to undo, rethink and challenge their received wisdoms about what constitutes knowledge and education.”

(Smith and Seal, 2021, p. 5)

Conclusions about self are therefore highly relevant to the arguments in relation to the rights of children and young people that are exposed throughout this thesis. Fundamental to the concept of meaningful participation is the rejection of essentialist and reductionist epistemologies that frame children and young people in ways that fail to account for the complexities of individual contexts, histories and potentialities.

1.8 Conclusion

This thesis presents the results of a piece of research that emerged out of a long-standing, professional concern about the difference between the rhetoric and the reality of children and young people's participation in the UK. Community and Youth Work claims to be a profession that is at the forefront of this work, placing its commitment to championing the rights and voices of children and young people at the core of its professional identity. Yet there is an absence of research that scrutinises the veracity of this claim, especially from the perspective of children and young people themselves. This research attempted to address that gap by exploring what graduate community and youth workers know and understand about children and young people's rights and participation and the difference this makes in practice.

This chapter has introduced the core concepts and the research question that were used to explore the issues. It has provided an overview of the structure of the thesis as a whole whilst also attempting to contextualise myself, my values and my professional experience in acknowledgement of the role that these have played in shaping the research and its interpretation. The following chapter aims to build on this by further contextualising the research in relation to key elements of the discourse, theory and policy of children and young people's rights and participation.

Chapter Two: Context

Chapter structure:

2.1 Participation and the dominant discourse

2.2 Theoretical context: Dialogue and rights

2.3 The policy context

2.4 Conclusion

2.1 Participation and the dominant discourse

Children and young people are engaged in processes of active participation - having a say - in a range of different contexts. These include personal conversations with doctors about treatment for cancer; input into care plans for children and young people who are care-experienced; representation on school councils and youth parliaments as well as contributions to consultation exercises on social policy at local and national levels. A wide range of incentives lie behind the motivations of professionals to engage children and young people in participation such as legal and moral drivers following ratification of the United Nations Convention on The Rights of the Child ('UNCRC', no date) and the European Convention on Human Rights (CRAE, 2019); quality and consumerist narratives that place "customer voice" and service user experience at the centre of a quality assurance nexus (Sercombe, 2015 p.42) and a concern with safeguarding following reports into child abuse scandals that reveal, with depressing regularity,

how the voices of child victims are rarely sought and even more rarely listened to or heard (Rotherham MBC, 2019).

These motivations, in turn, reflect a spectrum of different understandings in relation to the purpose and value of participation work. It is the nature of these adult understandings and the potential for them to promote emancipatory change (Mezirow, 1990) that has been the central focus of this research.

Much of the academic literature and debate on participation focuses on how it might be defined, measured and categorised, particularly in relation to several well-known models (*A Potpourri of Participation Models*, 2013). Hart's "ladder" (Hart, no date) introduced in the previous chapter is an adaptation of earlier work by Arnstein (1969) whose definition of citizen participation emerged from her anti-poverty work in the United States in the 1960's. Arnstein defines participation primarily in relation to the unequal distribution of power and the opportunity for change. It is this definition, more than any other, that informs the stance taken up in this thesis:

"the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future"

(Arnstein, 1969, p. 216)

Professional debate tends to focus on the means of participation and its operationalisation. This includes issues of structure and representation such as how closely children and young people's participation mirrors commonly understood structures of democratic accountability, especially the selection and election of representatives. The practice that emerges as a result has seen an industry develop in relation to the design and operation of school councils, youth

councils, youth parliaments etc. (Shukra, Ball and Brown, 2012, p. 46). Success in this industry is commonly measured by the achievement of what Mullender and Ward (1998, p.13) refer to as the “secondary advantages” of participation. These include children and young people gaining communication skills , learning how to work in groups and better understanding how the adult world operates. The capacity to engage large numbers of children and young people in participation processes is also, for this industry, a key measure of success.

Critical commentators tend to dismiss such practice as tokenistic and performative. They argue instead for a focus on ends i.e. what actually changes as a result of participation, rather than means (Cairns, 2001) and for evaluation mechanisms that evidence whether children and young people's rights are being realised, rather than levels of activity or numbers involved; for a justification of the resources allocated to participation based on whether the political changes that young people identify as being of significance to them actually take place (including at organisational level), rather than the achievement of adult-led expectations such as whether children and young people can be shown to have “taken responsibility” or developed new skills as a result of taking part. Extant literature provides overwhelming evidence that, viewed from this change-focused stance, most participation (despite occasional, noteworthy exceptions) fails to deliver the changes that young people identify as being of primary significance to them and therefore fails to meet the threshold for “meaningful” set out in the introductory chapter to this thesis. This claim will be justified in detail in the literature review. The most consistent explanation for this that emerges from the critical literature relates to the influence of a deficit-based perception of children, young people and childhood. Studies identify a pervasive, negative, dominant

discourse (Ledwith and Springett, 2022) that is culturally embedded deep within society and that shapes the attitudes and practice of most adults, including those who work with children and young people. Rather than using participation to promote children and young people's agendas, adults working with them most often use it instrumentally to secure compliance to their own, partial agendas. This includes forms of discriminatory and oppressive practice that do epistemic and testimonial injustice to children and young people (Fricker, 2008). Arnstein dismisses these types of approach as serving a wholly negative function, creating an appearance of change whilst reinforcing the status quo and further demoralising the already powerless who get used instrumentally in the process (Arnstein, 1969). This regression is compounded at structural level, particularly in relation to education, by neoliberal agendas that constrain and curtail opportunities to engage children and young people as partners in the process of change (Nicholls, 2012; Springer and Gahman, 2016). Only exceptionally do adults combine the principles of entitlement and rights with an understanding of children and young people as competent agents. This combination enables adults, children and young people to engage in a praxis (Grundy, 1987) that comes close to the genuine dialogue envisaged in the Habermasian "ideal speech situation" (Pusey 1987, p.73.). Decisions about what needs to change are based on the force of the better argument rather than the partial interests of the most powerful participants. This theme is taken up below.

2.2 Theoretical context: Dialogue and rights

Habermas' theory of the ideal speech situation emerges from his broader consideration of processes of "communicative action" (Pusey, 1987, p.78). In his rejection of attempts to understand human communication through a traditional

lens (one that separates the parties into speaker as subject and listener as object), Habermas, influenced by the hermeneutical approach of Gadamer and others (Pusey, 1987), redraws communication as a reciprocal act where meaning emerges through the act of communication itself. This opens up possibilities for communication that reaches towards higher levels of rationality by overcoming the distortions produced by cultural norms that embody dominant forms of power and structurally-based violence. These un-distorted forms of rational, testimonially just forms of communication, embody instead:

“hope for the non-violent construction of better worlds, established through communicative action aimed at mutual understanding and directed towards unforced agreement among people”

(Kemmis, 1993, p.39)

This opens up the possibility that all parties to genuine dialogue are able to benefit from the process, providing certain conditions relating to power differentials are met. It removes the binary of one party “winning” at the cost of the other and replaces it with an alternative paradigm where the decisions about what needs to change emerge via consensus. They are based on the force of the better argument presented alongside the capacity of parties to put aside partial interests and prevailing power. The approach is unapologetically idealistic, establishing Habermasian dialogue as the standard against which different attempts at participation can and, I argue, should be measured. In this sense the “ladder” analogy appears helpful although the children and young people who advised this research speculated as to whether laying the ladder horizontally or understanding the process as stepping stones across a stream might avoid the sense of risk that accompanies being at the highest rung on a ladder. Whilst there is merit in arguing that sustainable, manageable steps forward for organisations may be more

realistic than huge leaps, the downside of this argument is that it risks legitimising mundane forms of practice that reinforce instrumental approaches, maintain an unacceptable status quo and validate the dominant discourse rather than disrupting it.

Habermas also describes how new information emerges spontaneously when the ideal conditions for dialogue are met. New information is understood as ideas or suggestions for ways forward that none of the parties had available to them prior to the act of communicative dialogue happening between them. The potential for new information to emerge legitimises an approach which begins with idealism but results in meaningful action in the social world. In this sense the approach chimes with Levitas' notion of "utopia as method" (Levitas, 2013), understanding utopia not as a desired destination but as a process for bringing into being the changes that enable the ideal to become real. In an example from my own practice involving a discussion between three police officers and a group of young men, both parties were struck by their joint realisation that driving too fast around the housing estate was putting innocent parties at risk. The "new information" generated was their realisation that this was a responsibility to others they held in common: The young men driving too fast on their motorbikes and the police driving too fast in their police cars as they chased them. Prior to the dialogue and the communicative activity that took place, neither party would have been able to articulate this aspect of common ground and shared responsibility to others. Reaching this point was achieved as a direct result of idealistic and utopian reasoning and the forms of communication that such reasoning inspires.

Understanding the level at which respondents to the research (graduates of the Community and Youth Work degree programme at the University of Sunderland)

had absorbed the significance of this concept of dialogue and their capacity to then make sense of it in their own practice was clearly a key factor in shaping how the research progressed.

Cairns *et al.* (2018) argue that despite an increase in the rhetoric around children and young people's rights over recent years and despite their recognition, most notably via Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ('UNCRC', no date), this has not been matched by a commensurate increase in the realisation of these rights in practice. They point to a series of studies undertaken into participation in a range of different contexts that reach conclusions similar to those outlined earlier in this chapter i.e. that tokenistic and self-serving forms of participation prevail over children and young people's right to a voice and over other rights.

2.3 Policy and guidance

The two-page Government paper "Listening to and Involving Children and Young People" (UK Government (1), 2014) provided statutory guidance for schools and local education authorities in respect of participation. Whilst the document makes reference to the fact that the guidance is underpinned by the general principles of the UNCRC, this is quickly followed with the caveat that the convention has not been incorporated into national law and thus confers no statutory duty to comply. Instead schools are merely "strongly encouraged" to take account of it. A cursory rationale for involving pupils in decision-making is expressed entirely in terms of the skills pupils might develop by engaging with youth parliaments and school councils (no other mechanisms for participation are mentioned or considered) and how these skills have the potential to contribute towards improvements in the attainment of pupils, whilst encouraging them to

simultaneously “take responsibility” (UK Government (1), 2014. p.2). Despite its limitations this historical document at least made reference to the notion of participation in schools. It is currently (2025) available only as an archived document from a previous government, rather than being linked to contemporary “live” guidance and no similar guidance has replaced it.

Other live guidance documents relating to statutory work with children and young people such as social work, care and health services, also include clear expectations that mechanisms will be in place to secure the voice and rights of the children and young people involved. The “Working Together to Safeguard Children” guidance (UK Government (2), 2023) emphasises the importance of taking seriously what children and young people have to say, as well as working collaboratively with them and their families when determining needs.

Additionally it emphasizes the legal responsibility of local authorities, under the provisions of The Children Act 1989 (The Children Act, 1989), to give “due regard” to a child’s wishes when providing services. This is an issue taken up by Cairns and others in response to research with young people in schools (Cairns *et al.*, 2018). In comparison with the “Listening to Children and Young People” document referenced above, “Working Together to Safeguard Children” places a very different emphasis on the significance of the UNCRC. It makes no mention of the fact that it was never incorporated into UK law, preferring instead to emphasise the fact that the UK Government ratified the UNCRC in 1991 and thus “recognises children’s rights including to expression and receiving information” (UK Government (2), 2023, p.13). This provides an insight into the relative weight that the Government places on general rights in school compared with the need to safeguard.

The debate around participation has, for some time, focused on issues relating to the mechanics of representation, on the assumption that children and young people's participation ought to mirror adult structures of democratic accountability (Badham and Davies, 2007). This raises the question as to why children and young people would wish to replicate the very adult-led mechanisms that have failed so many of them so badly (Rotherham MBC, 2019).

For many years The National Youth Agency (National Youth Agency (2), no date) was the primary, government funded body for the youth work profession in England but now, as a charity, aims to position itself as a national expert body in relation to youth policy and youth work. Its "Hear By Right" programme (National Youth Agency (1), no date) provides a framework for organisations seeking to embed participation into everyday working and is used by a number of local and national bodies, including local authorities, for this purpose. As with a number of similar programmes (British Youth Council, 2016; Unicef, no date) the framework combines self-assessment and submission of evidence against pre-set indicators with commitments to training and to making a public pledge. Much of the energy and resource that goes into participation at organisational and government levels mirrors such audit-based approaches, often leading to varying levels of "award". Unicef, for instance, report that 643 schools had achieved their Gold "Rights Respecting" Standard by 2025 (Unicef, no date, 1). As with the Government guidance cited above, there is commonly a strong focus on what children and young people are doing, achieving and gaining from participation, with reduced emphasis on the political change that results. Inevitably these publicly available documents celebrate the benefits and achievements of the participation industry from a self-promotional and self-justifying perspective,

especially as many such agencies increasingly rely on income from such programmes to survive.

Some large programmes do set standards, at least in their rhetoric, that reflect this more overtly critical and political stance:

“The Award is not just about what children do but also, importantly, what adults do. In Rights Respecting Schools children’s rights are promoted and realised, adults and children work towards this goal together.....duty bearers are accountable for ensuring that children experience their rights.”

(Unicef, no date, 1).

The contrast between this appeal for schools to respect rights and the Government guidance cited earlier which deliberately reminds the same schools that they have no legally binding duty to comply with the expectations of the UNCRC, demonstrates the lack of consensus and clarity around the nature and purpose of participation. It also clearly demonstrates the need for research that can contribute towards building such a consensus.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter contextualises the research by exposing how a prevalent, negative discourse about children and young people constrains the fact of their rights becoming understood in general; by those who work with them in professional contexts and by those responsible for framing and delivering relevant policy and guidance. It also explains how Habermasian idealism provides a potential pathway to more meaningful practice that resists and overcomes these constraints. This combination of factors, the negative and real alongside the hopeful and ideal, influenced key decisions about where the research placed its focus and about the methodology it chose to adopt.

Alongside these factors the influence of literature and existing knowledge also helped to shape the design and focus of the research. This is the focus of the following chapter.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

Chapter Structure:

3.0 Chapter Introduction

3.1 Review purpose and methods

Part One: Participation and rights

3.2 Children and young people's participation and rights - review method and rationale

3.3 Children and young people's participation and rights - insights from three pieces of research

3.4 Children and young people's participation and rights - insights from the wider review:

3.4.1 Meaningful change only by exception

3.4.2 Tokenism in practice

3.4.3 Instrumentalism in practice

3.4.4 The impact of the negative, dominant discourse

3.4.5 The impact of neoliberal agendas

3.4.6 Overview of the initial review

3.5 Applied research

Part Two: Pedagogy and Professional Education

3.6 Pedagogy and Professional Education - review context and methods

3.7 Key themes emerging from this review

3.7.1 Critical pedagogy in European professional education

3.7.2 Youth development and competency in the US

3.7.3 Tokenism and exceptions - again

3.7.4 Contextualising the challenges: neoliberalism and managerialism

3.7.5 Beyond understanding: Re-imagining

3.7.6 Practice what you teach!

3.8 Chapter conclusion

3. Introduction

Reviews of extant literature carried out in the early stages of the research process focused on the broader issue of children and young people's participation.

Analysis of these reviews and the role that they played in shaping the stance and focus of the research are covered in the first part of this chapter.

Subsequent to these reviews a complex range of issues and dilemmas presented themselves in relation to the key concepts of professional field and professional identity. Once these had been determined with sufficient clarity to enable progress to be made towards data collection, further reviews took place that focused more directly on the literature connected with the education of community and youth workers in Higher Education. In particular literature relating to what is already known about the links between what students on these degree programmes learn about participation and its subsequent impact on their post-graduation practice. These later reviews are the subject of the analysis in the second part of this review.

3.1 Review purpose and methods

How do the ways in which professional community and youth workers construct their understanding of the concepts of childhood and expertise influence the possibilities for children and young people's meaningful participation and how might understanding this better promote opportunities for meaningful change?

The genesis of the research question above and the wider context that lies behind the decision to focus on these issues has already been established in the

introductory chapters to this thesis. The specific purpose here is to focus on relevant literature and research in order to contextualise the issues in relation to what is already known; to justify the need to ask these questions and to demonstrate how this knowledge was used to shape and focus the design of the research (Costello, 2011).

Whilst this review focuses primarily on relevant research literature, it also encompasses a range of professional sources to ensure that theoretical and methodological insights are anchored firmly to their application in practice. Maintaining this link between theory and application is key to ensuring that the research achieves its primary goal of making a novel and meaningful contribution to professional knowledge and practice (Costley and Fulton, 2018).

Preliminary scoping for the literature review included consideration of the large body of literature that describes the multiple different models developed to guide practitioners on how to think about and deliver participation processes with children and young people (Youth Policy, 2013). As the research progressed this literature was deemed to be out of scope. It was judged to be peripheral to the core arguments being made and, by its nature, not able to shed useful light on the specific gaps in existing knowledge that the research was aiming to address and explore.

The focus of this research were the metacognitive processes through which meaning is constructed and the actions this prompts in adults working with children and young people. The literature on models, by contrast, is focused primarily on describing the different ways in which the logistical application of participation can be understood and delivered in a range of organisational

contexts. Critique of this “industry” (both its myriad models and the hundreds of staff employed to deliver them) is fundamental to the argument being made in this thesis. I argue that it is an industry born out of the misconception that if adults could only have access to a tried and tested model then children and young people will benefit. Its focus is on inputs rather than meaningful outcomes, as the overwhelming evidence of tokenism exposed later in this literature review and throughout this thesis demonstrates. This focus serves to distract and deflect from the more fundamental, attitudinal issues that I argue lie at the root of the problem of tokenism. It encourages an externally-focused discourse aimed at choosing the “right” model at the cost of an internally focused analysis that challenges individual and collective processes of meaning-making, prevailing attitudes, prejudices, power and discrimination.

In fact several of the better known models are considered across this thesis. They have been carefully selected in order to support key elements of the arguments being made at each point. These include Arnstein’s ladder (Arnstein, 1969); Hart’s ladder (Hart, no date); The Investing in Children “dialogue and change” model (Investing in Children, no date, 1); The National Youth Agency’s “Hear by Right” model (National Youth Agency (1), no date); The UNICEF “Rights Respecting Schools” model Unicef (no date, 1) ; the school councils model (Smart Schools Council Community, no date) and the youth parliament model (National Youth Agency, no date, 6). The Shenton (2015) thesis analysed under “applied research” later in this chapter (section 3.5) draws on the Lundy model (Unicef, no date, 2). This is a model which has developed significant currency in the participation industry over recent years. Whilst this model has significant merits, notably its focus on dialogue and change, it mostly mirrors the Investing in Children model on

which it appears to be based and as such does not present an additional analytical tool that can be used to further arguments already being made.

Part One: Participation and rights

3.2 Review of literature on participation and rights - review method and rationale

This review explored literature that evidenced participation with children and young people resulting in meaningful change. Meaningful change, for the purposes of this research, has already been defined in the introductory chapter as the specific changes (in services, provision) that take place after children and young people had previously identified them as being important to them.

The design of the review excluded evidence of secondary change as a search factor. Secondary change is defined here as the types of change resulting from participation that adults often construct as significant but that emerges from an understanding of participation that focuses on participation as means rather than ends (Cairns, 2001; Davis and Hill, 2006). Most commonly this involves highlighting aspects of personal growth and development or the acquisition of specific skills on the part of the children and young people involved and then using these as evidence that participation has generated meaningful change and/or to justify the investments that have been made. This may be evidenced indirectly via the testimony of adult facilitators or more directly via the testimonies of children and young people themselves. It commonly involves references to children and young people gaining communication skills; growing in confidence; extending their social or other forms of capital (Putnam, 2000); learning how to be effective

in groups or even learning the limitations of their power as a result of being involved in participation.

The exclusion of secondary change as a significant factor for this research aligns with the core, critical stance and argument of this thesis. From a stance that defines participation as meaningful only in respect of its capacity to directly reduce the inequalities that children and young people face in the everyday and to shift the balance of power in ways that promote testimonial justice (Fricker, 2018), secondary changes such as those identified can only be regarded as welcome (in terms of the benefits to individual growth) and yet, at the same time, largely irrelevant. The persistent and widespread justification for participation on the basis of its capacity to bring about secondary change (as the review analysed below evidences) arguably deflects from its potential to achieve meaningful change and therefore serves to reinforce and extend the hegemonic influence of the dominant discourse rather than challenging or diminishing it. In this sense it becomes justifiable to argue that it would be better not to engage children and young people in participation process at all rather than to involve them in forms of participation that self-validate on the basis of the achievement of secondary changes. This capacity of forms of participation to frustrate democratic flourishing (Davis and Hill, 2006) and arguably even take it backwards is starkly illuminated by the example of “Emily” described in the introductory chapter to this thesis. The significance of Emily’s testimony goes well beyond its critique of one school council. The danger is that in engaging Emily in a tokenistic form of participation, her commitment to democratic forms of engagement for the rest of her life has been taken backwards rather than forwards. Better if the school council had not been set up in the first place.

Search for relevant studies was carried out in January 2019 by means of electronic search using the University of Sunderland “Discover” search tool - a multi-database and journal search tool.

A “basic search” was conducted using the search terms “Young + people + participation” with initial limiters of “peer reviewed” and “2008-2019” selected. This produced over 400,000 results. This was reduced to 100 articles by adding the limiters: English (written in); Europe; Subject: “decision-making”; academic journals.

A title-only scan reduced the selection to sixteen articles to which an abstract-only search was used, from which eight articles were selected. These selections were based on apparent relevance to the question posed (i.e. matches of key words) alongside an attempt to ensure a level of variety in the final sample. This ensured the inclusion of articles on topics that ranged from children’s road safety to their engagement in asthma consultations, alongside topics more commonly addressed within the literature such as participation in schools and care homes.

Beyond the electronic search two additional articles were selected. One (Cairns *et al.*, 2018) had been received directly via email and the other (Weller, 2009) was included in order to draw from published, peer-reviewed material in the field of community and youth work. The online archive of the journal “Youth and Policy” (Youth and Policy, no date) was searched for this purpose, using similar parameters to the Discover search (where applicable).

Three of the articles selected provided significant insights for the development of the research at this point in the research journey, though for different reasons.

These articles provide the focus for the analysis below.

3.3 Children and young people's participation and rights - insights from three pieces of research

Ha'vard Bjerke's 2011 research is helpful in setting out several core aspects of the philosophy, methodology and arguments being put forward in this thesis.

Bjerke (2011) adopts a social constructivist stance (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2017) in his examination of children and young people's experiences of participation in domestic contexts in order to directly compare them with equivalent experiences at school. Using a focus group method to secure the direct voices and subjective experiences of children and young people, Bjerke demonstrates a commitment to a methodological approach that values the direct utterances of children and young people. He adopts a "difference-centred" theoretical perspective (Bjerke, 2011, p.94) to identify how participation can be seen as an expression of children and young people's agency within the context of their relationships with adults.

Key to Bjerke's argument, based on findings from this and related research, is that children and young people regard themselves as different yet equal partners to these relationships. The children and young people involved in the research report that this positive construction of power relations is shared by adults they encounter in the domestic context, where they attest to strong levels of personal agency, but not by those at school.

Bjerke adopts the language of oppression and emancipation to describe the status of the children and young people involved in the research. This frames them as a minority group, oppressed and undermined by the negative and demeaning attitudes of the adults they encounter at school. His analysis also includes an emancipatory element (Blaikie, 2007). From this perspective children and young

people are regarded as a social group who are being directly wronged by society in ways that are similar to the experiences of other oppressed groups such as women and refugees. This places an onus on adults and on society more generally to commit to forms of emancipatory action that address the wrongs being perpetrated on children and young people and shifts the balance of power towards a status quo that represents a fairer balance between its “differently equal” members (Bjerke, 2011, p.97).

This asset-based, critical and emancipatory stance stands in contrast to empiricist and classical conceptions of children as either empty vessels or only partially formed human beings (Seaford, 2001). It encompasses instead an approach that regards children and young people as competent, powerful contributors to processes that open up the potential for their own emancipation in those contexts where adults are willing and able to re-negotiate the different forms of power they hold over children and young people (Malaguzzi, 1993). From this stance, children and young people are seen as experts on and in their own worlds and as fully formed citizens who are able to provide credible and compelling testimonies that witness their own lives and experiences (Cairns *et al.*, 2018).

From a critical stance Bjerke’s unquestioning acceptance of the universality of the children and young people's reports from their domestic experiences is insufficiently contextualised and stands in contrast to the approach taken in this research. Bjerke reports that the children and young people in his study universally regard the power and authority of their parents to be legitimate. Also that they value the ways they are being taken care of and protected at home. This may well have been the case with the sample of respondents involved. To be consistent with a stance that argues for such testimonies to be understood as

credible and expert it is important that they are given due weight (Stalford, 2018). A more critical stance, however, would require this finding to be balanced with evidence from other studies that provide a wider context on the domestic reports from the children and young people. Leaving this finding unqualified risks conclusions being drawn that what these young people report in relation to their sense of agency and control over their lives in a domestic context reflects a universal experience, which, unfortunately, it clearly does not (Lloyd et al. 2008).

Milnes et al. report on a qualitative evaluation of a pre-consultation guide intended to promote the participation of young people in their asthma review consultations (Milnes et al., 2013). Similar to Bjerke's study, the research goes to considerable lengths to secure the direct input of young people in the research process. Young people are asked what they think of the guide (which itself involved young people in its design) and their responses are quoted extensively throughout the article. In relation to how the evaluation of the guide was conducted, the research is respectful of young people as competent agents and places value on their capacity to generate new understandings via dialogue with adults.

In relation to the approach to participation being argued for in this thesis, the research exemplifies a consultative understanding of participation (Arnstein, 1969; Cairns, 2001) and embodies elements of a deficit view of children and young people that sits in stark contrast to that being proposed. Rather than creating spaces for genuine dialogue right from the start of the research process, the adults, on their own, have decided what constitutes the problem (in this case what they refer to as a lack of confidence and skills on the part of young people to be able to effectively communicate their own health concerns and anxieties) before then

proceeding to also decide what the solution to the problem might look like: A pre-consultation guide that will help address this supposed skills deficit in young people. Only at this stage, once both the problem and its supposed solution have been unilaterally determined by the adults, do they then turn to young people to help evaluate the efficacy of the initiative.

This consultative approach embodies elements of a positivist and behaviourist epistemology that limits children and young people to a more marginal, objectified position, seeing them as respondents to adult concerns about children and young people rather than as co-creators in the production of knowledge and action alongside adults (Grundy, 1987). Whilst the requirement for change to occur in both thinking and behaviour is central to the emancipatory stance adopted in this thesis, the tacitly held assumption behind the Milnes et al. research, as with much of the research conducted from this stance, is that the onus and responsibility for change falls on children and young people rather than on adults. The researchers quote from change theory, pointing out that it is those who display the confidence and motivation to change who are most likely to behave and act differently. Yet their analysis lacks any consideration of the need for the adults to change.

These tacit assumptions are illustrated by the case of one young woman involved in the survey who describes an initial asthma consultation in the following terms:

‘The first time, you know, I went about it, about my asthma, and they were asking me to do things, and I was kind of, I don’t know, I didn’t know why they were doing it, I mean, I thought that maybe if they’d have explained it to me I would have felt a bit more comfortable.’

(Milnes et al., 2013, p.93)

The adult-led solution to this situation is to design a guide which helps the young person improve their self-efficacy in order to address their own communication

deficits. No consideration is made of the need for the adults involved to learn how to better explain procedures to children and young people in ways that promote their sense of safety and comfort. By amending their own behaviour, the children and young people instead will supposedly learn how to secure more meaningful explanations from the clinicians during their consultations.

Also absent from the analysis of this piece of research is any consideration of the structural, power-related, rights-based or ethical factors that result in things being done to this young woman (being weighed, having her blood pressure taken, having her “peak-flow” measured) without her being provided with any explanation whatsoever as to why these things are happening to her, to her body and to her feelings. Drawing on the work of Rorty, Alvesson and Deetz (2000) argue that, with its exclusive focus on how people might be predicted and controlled, the behaviourist approach fails to take adequate account of the feelings, stories or agency of those to whom it is applied. Drawing the conclusion from this young woman’s utterances that the problem (and its solution) lies with young people’s lack of self-efficacy rather than with adult duties to explain themselves better, is a clear example of the type of testimonial injustice that Fricker (2018) ascribes to the ways that adults perceive and hear children and young people.

In their concluding section the researchers hint at a slightly wider analysis in their suggestion that “clinicians and parents may also need to change and become more enabling” (Milnes et al., 2013, p. 95) yet their commitment to further research focused on this approach appears relatively weak. They merely propose more of the facilitated, pre-consultation interventions similar to the one they have already undertaken. The only change they suggest is that in future consultations the children and young people could perhaps be contacted via telephone. This

unwillingness to grasp the opportunity to undertake a more critical, structural exploration of the issues reveals a stance that significantly underplays the relevance of these factors in generating a more complete and balanced understanding of the social world and of the potential for children and young people to be engaged in the types of meaningful participation being argued for in this thesis.

Researching teenagers' experiences of school-based participation from a spatial perspective, Weller (2009) adopts an openly constructionist theoretical stance. In this and in many other aspects, including her perspectives on childhood, children, young people and the research process itself, Weller's research directly informs the approach adopted throughout this thesis.

Weller sets out her commitment to a set of values that overtly challenges received, traditional perspectives on childhood whilst simultaneously encompassing the rich diversity of children and young people's backgrounds and lived experiences. These values underpin an approach that is set in contrast to a notion of childhood that regards individual children as merely single examples of a universal category of childhood. She focuses her analysis on issues of democracy, citizenship and the delivery of citizenship education within English schools and describes her approach in contradistinction to traditional approaches that define children and young people in relation to what they may become rather than the fully fledged citizens they already are (Investing in Children, no date, 1). Weller restates the traditional perspective as offering a view of children and young people that regards them variously as lacking in competence; as citizens only via their future potential to inherit such status and as empty vessels for whom the capacity to engage with systems of democratic expression or community contribution is

dependent on their willingness to be “trained-up” in such matters by current, fully-fledged citizens i.e. teachers and other adults. Only through such moral direction from adults will children and young people be in a position to live out the responsibilities and duties that their eventual citizenship will bestow upon them.

In a further embodiment of her value base, Weller argues for an approach to the research process itself that involves children and young people as partners rather than as objects to be researched. She adopts a longitudinal and diverse approach to the process of data collection. Working in a single school that includes pupils from areas with high levels of economic disadvantage, her methodology is framed around notions of place and space as defined by young people rather than by adults (Smith, 2006) and over a three-year research period. Her work within the school is combined with engagement of the local community, including key influencers such as local councillors. This approach helps to contextualise the data collected and ensures that the “often unheard voices” (Weller, 2009, p. 18) of local teenagers are included in the research process. In these ways the research approach holds out possibilities for directly addressing some of the problems it brings to attention, matching an action research methodology that aims to bring about a more just society and change the status quo rather than merely describing or observing the social world as it is (Crotty, 1998).

Weller’s approach to ethical and methodological issues also reflects a high level of respect for young people’s agency and the importance of consent and choice. She directly addresses the issue of power relationships between the researcher and young participants. This includes negotiating with two young people for them to become advisers to the research process plus a second process of negotiation with the young people that opened up new areas of enquiry, ensuring that the research

was shaped by children and young people's sense of themselves and their world, rather than by adult-only interpretations of the issues that children and young people might, or even "should", deem to be significant.

Also important to this thesis is Weller's contextualisation of her research within a critique of the wider, neoliberal context that has resulted in an increasingly commodified approach to education and to educational processes over the past forty plus years (Cunningham and Cunningham, 2012). She directly contrasts a system founded upon a set of commercial values that deliberately seeks to win at the cost of others; that aims to achieve pre-set sales targets and that promotes free-enterprise, with an approach that is based on a wholly different set of values that aim to nurture collaboration, cooperation and respectful dialogue between those involved. For Weller, as for the argument of this thesis, the two simply do not mix. As many commentators on neoliberalism have pointed out (Lea, 2012; Nicholls, 2012; Monbiot, 2016), this critique is not directly related to the pros and cons of capitalism itself but of the assumption that the values that have driven capitalism to the heights of its current "success" are the same values that should drive success in other realms such as education.

3.4 Children and young people's participation and rights - insights from the wider review:

3.4.1 Meaningful change only by exception

Analysis of these three articles alongside the wider set of research articles selected for this review revealed that participation leads to meaningful change only by exception. Archard and Skivenes (2009) identify the practice of a single respondent only (out of 53) embodying what they refer to as "exemplary" practice

that leads to dialogue (Archard and Skivenes, 2009, p.395). Bjerke's research, as detailed above, provides examples of young people's voices in family settings being taken into account and Weller's research provides examples of voice resulting in change from within a school setting. Weller notes, however, that this is largely limited to issues such as how lessons are delivered (Weller, 2009). The value to young people of having a say at this level is significant but should be distinguished from engagement that has the potential to challenge more deep-rooted and structural issues of power and oppression. Cairns *et al.* (2018) refer to multiple examples of change resulting from participation. These are available via the archive of one of the researching organisations but they also point out that the young people involved as co-researchers in the study itself were, at the time of publication, still waiting to hear back from their own schools in relation to specific recommendations for changes they had suggested. Franklin and Sloper (2009) make a passing reference to "a few examples" of children with disabilities influencing services and influencing their individual review meetings but, unlike the Cairns study, fail to describe what these examples are (Franklin and Sloper, 2009). The asthma research detailed in the previous section provides evidence that young people's voices helped shape the look and contents of the asthma guide and the young people who tested the guide reported at a later stage in the research that they liked it and said it "would" make a difference (Milnes *et al.*, 2013, p. 93). Yet the research was not set up to determine whether it actually did. This typifies the "secondary change" or "means not ends" approach critiqued earlier. The researchers attempt to value and validate children and young people's participation on the basis that they have been involved in a process (writing a

guide) rather than by measuring the impact of the process on outcomes that children and young people have voiced as being meaningful to them.

3.4.2 Tokenism in practice

A second finding from the review indicates that participation is nearly always experienced by young people as a tokenistic exercise (Archard and Skivenes, 2009; van Bijleveld, 2015; Hartas and Lindsay, 2011; Kimberlee, 2008; Gunn, 2008). This is manifest in children and young people having had very limited influence over outcomes (Bjerke, 2011; Kimberlee, 2008). Also with the lack of weight accorded to young people's views on the occasions when their views have been sought (Cairns *et al.*, 2018; Hartas and Lindsay 2011; Weller, 2009). One study (van Bijleveld, 2015) goes beyond the more benign descriptions of the impact of tokenism evident in other studies. The research analysis refers to the lack of participation for young people involved in child welfare services as being positively damaging in terms of children and young people's self-esteem and self-worth. This chimes with the argument made earlier (exemplified by the "Emily" testimony described in the introductory chapter) that tokenistic participation has potentially serious implications in relation to the democratic sensitivities of children and young people. Tokenistic participation can be more damaging than no participation at all because it replaces young people's hope that their involvement might lead to change with a sense of acceptance (based on lived experience) that it will not.

Perceptions of tokenism also emanate from parents (Franklin and Sloper, 2009) as well as workers and young people. Two studies (Cairns *et al.*, 2018; Kimberlee, 2008) reference the fact that achieving change does sometimes require patience and the passage of time. Based on prior knowledge and experience, however, they

confirm that their expectations are not high. Kimberlee pays testament to the extraordinarily high levels of energy and commitment demonstrated by the children and young people who were involved in a proposed engineering development aimed at improving levels of road safety around Birmingham. He speculates that if this commitment to the process is matched by the engineers' commitment to hearing and acting on what has been suggested then the participation work might be able to claim a level akin to "partnership" on the Arnstein ladder (Arnstein, 1969). Otherwise, Kimberlee argues, it will remain merely at the level of tokenism.

3.4.3 Instrumentalism in practice

A third finding from the review was that workers tend to use participation instrumentally to ensure and evidence their own compliance with a process, rather than sharing power via dialogue with children and young people. Several studies describe how participation is regarded by workers (both consciously and unconsciously) as a useful instrument in securing the compliance of young people to adult agendas (Archard and Skivenes, 2009; van Bijleveld, 2015; Hartas and Lindsay, 2011; Gunn, 2008). This apparent subversion of the very purpose of participation (according to most commonly held and legally supported definitions) inevitably raises questions of power and oppression. Gunn (2008, p. 260) quoting Carr, refers to the exploitative potential of participation as a "technology of legitimation". Hartas and Lindsay (2011) make reference to aspects of cultural imperialism that lie behind some participation models. Several studies juxtapose this instrumental aspect with an approach from principle. In the principled version, workers and their organisations combine an appreciation of rights and equality with a perception of young people as social actors who possess valuable

knowledgeable about the social world (van Bijleveld, 2015; Weller, 2009) and who should be regarded as experts in their own lives and in their capacity to articulate that expertise (Cairns *et al.*, 2018; Bjerke, 2011; Kimberlee, 2008; Weller, 2009). Workers adopting this approach show a willingness to share power with young people as partners in a process. Whilst acknowledging that differences between them exist, especially in relation to power and access to influence, relationships based on this partnership approach (Bjerke, 2011) allow something more akin to meaningful dialogue to emerge.

3.4.4 The impact of the negative, dominant discourse

The review also evidenced that, alongside evidence of tokenism, the most persistent theme emerging from the studies is the influence of the dominant, deficit discourse in relation to children and childhood that was exposed in detail in the chapter two of this thesis. Eight out of the ten studies reference this issue directly and many frame it via almost identical language in relation to children and young people being regarded as lacking knowledge and competency (Bjerke, 2011; Franklin and Sloper, 2009; Cairns *et al.*, 2018). Also in relation to childhood being understood as a universal rather than culturally relative category (Weller, 2009). The attitudes of workers towards children and young people and a disposition that is fundamentally resistant to their involvement is commonly cited as a key barrier (Hartas and Lindsay, 2011). Cairns (2018) drawing on the concept of intersectionality (Bright, 2015), develops this aspect further in concluding that some adults in schools discriminate against young people as a result of teacher preferences to engage only with those pupils who conform to a predetermined ideal of what a pupil could or should be. This study concludes that the views of pupils who fail to meet the expectations of such ideal types, which themselves are

determined through discriminatory stereotypes of race, class and gender, are actively marginalised within the processes of participation. Young people quoted in Weller's study similarly testify to teachers appearing to place greater weight on the suggestions of those pupils whom teachers have internally classified as "sensible" (Weller, 2009, p. 24). Franklin and Sloper (2009) extend this analysis to children and young people with disabilities, especially those with additional and complex needs.

3.4.5 The impact of neoliberal agendas

Two studies reference the impact of neoliberalism on the education system in relation to children and young people's participation. Cairns *et al.* (2018) reference the impact of academisation, the process by which local authority influence over schools has passed to independently constituted foundations such as religious bodies and trusts (Marriott, 2024), in creating barriers to the delivery of meaningful participation. Weller directly contrasts an approach that champions competition and pre-set outcomes with one that aims to foster collaboration and dialogue and from which previously un-thought-of outcomes are able to emerge (Pusey, 1987). Contextualising what is happening within the UK education system via a broader, political, economic and cultural analysis sits alongside the earlier analysis that exposes the significance of individual teacher attitudes. In this way arguments from structure are presented in a way that balances them alongside arguments from agency. The reality of structural constraints does not excuse individual agency. Instead it is argued in this thesis that the issues at play are only understood in their true depth and complexity when both aspects are considered together. It is more difficult for individual headteachers to allow the voices of pupils to shape the way that schools are run when the overall commission of the

school is so rigidly prescribed in terms of competition with other schools for the best results. At the same time there remain multiple ways through which emancipatory forms of participation can be retrieved through individual commitment and a willingness to overcome and resist structural constraints.

3.4.6 Overview of the initial review

Overall the studies selected within this early review of the literature evidence extensive engagement of children and young people in processes of participation and in a wide range of different contexts, places and spaces and with multiple secondary outcomes being secured on a wide scale. The studies evidence children and young people learning, having fun, becoming better informed and even influencing, albeit at lower levels, some aspects of the provision in which they are engaged. Whilst such outcomes are welcome, they do not meet the definition of meaningful change being adopted for this research. The studies support the view that, despite occasional, noteworthy exceptions, most participation fails to deliver the changes that young people identify as being of primary significance to them. Instead it remains at a largely tokenistic level. The most consistent explanation for this provided by the studies relates to the deficit perception of children, young people and childhood held by the adults who work with them. This attitude most commonly translates into practice that subverts the very purpose of participation as enshrined in international convention and UK law. Rather than using participation to promote children and young people's agendas, adults use it instrumentally to secure compliance to their own, partial agendas. At times the same attitude translates into discriminatory and oppressive forms of practice. This is aided at structural level, particularly in relation to education, by neoliberal agendas that constrain and curtail opportunities to

engage children and young people as partners in the process of change. Only exceptionally do adults combine the principle of entitlement with the concept of children and young people as competent agents, enabling them to engage in a praxis that comes close to the genuine dialogue envisaged in the Habermasian ideal speech situation, where the decisions about what needs to change are based on the force of the better argument rather than the partial interests of the more powerful participants (Pusey, 1987).

3.5 Applied research

The following examples of research into adult restraint of children and young people exemplify the general point made in the critical literature as has already been exposed: The fact of children and young people's rights (in so far as these have been enshrined in international conventions and, to different degrees, incorporated into UK and European law) often counts for very little when adults are able to assert power and authority over children and young people.

Bray, Snodin and Carter (2015) explored the experiences of children and young people being physically held by adults during medical interventions in a UK hospital. They identify a range of terms used by health professionals to describe such interventions before generating an important distinction between “restraint”, which they define in terms of children and young people being forcibly held by adults against their wishes and “clinical holding” which happens with the agreement of the child or young person and is regarded as a more supportive form of physical intervention by adults (Bray, Snodin and Carter, 2015, p.30).

Using the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) as a guide to their research design and analysis, the authors name two different forms of

perseverance adopted by the adults they observed (professionals as well as parents/guardians). These two forms of perseverance align to the restraint/holding distinction identified above. Some adults persevere in forms of restraint in order to satisfy their adult determination to complete the procedure regardless of children and young people’s levels of distress, trauma or their calls to stop. These forms of “perseverance in spite of” (Bray, Snodin and Carter, p. 34) are commonly justified by the adults involved as being in the best interests of the child because they ensure that the procedure is completed on the day and in as short a time as possible. The authors powerfully illustrate the experience and testimony of a child subjected to the “in spite of” approach using the graphic below:

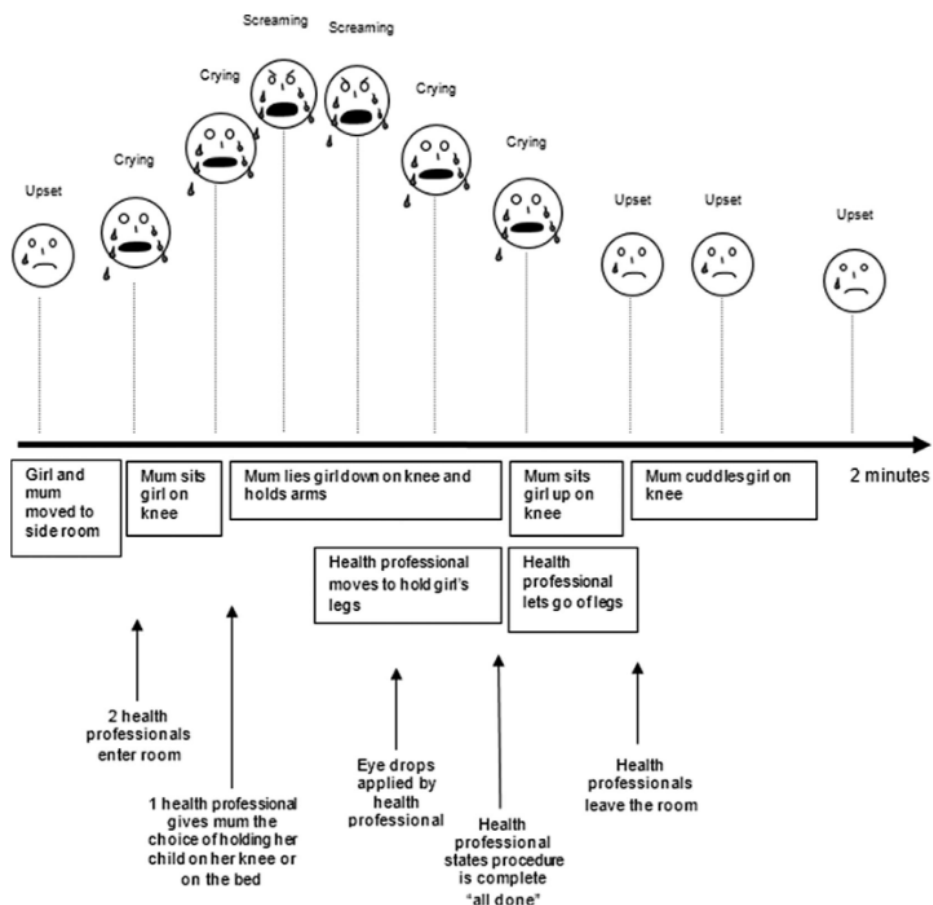


FIGURE 1. Three-year-old girl having pre-operative eye drops.

Fig. 2

Other adults channel their perseverance in ways that embody a wholly different attitude towards the child. Adults characterised by the researchers as “persevering to be child-centered” (Bray, Snodin and Carter, 2015, p.37) have typically taken time beforehand to work with the child to prepare for the procedure. Discussions have taken place at home, for example, or in pre-procedure clinics that have helped to inform, consider and plan regardless of the age of the child. This is likely to have included explaining in detail the specific nature of the clinical procedure involved (e.g. inserting painful eye-drops or finger-pricking to take blood); forecasting the the levels of physical pain to be expected at different moments during the procedure and crucially, in the view of the researchers, avoiding pre-set assumptions that experiencing distress and upset was either inevitable or acceptable. Having a negotiated and agreed plan resulted in these children and young people presenting as calm as the procedure got underway. This sense of calm provided opportunities for the adults involved to then initiate supportive forms of distraction and, where necessary, clinical holding that required less force than the comparator “in spite of” interventions. This altered experience is illustrated in the comparator graphic below:

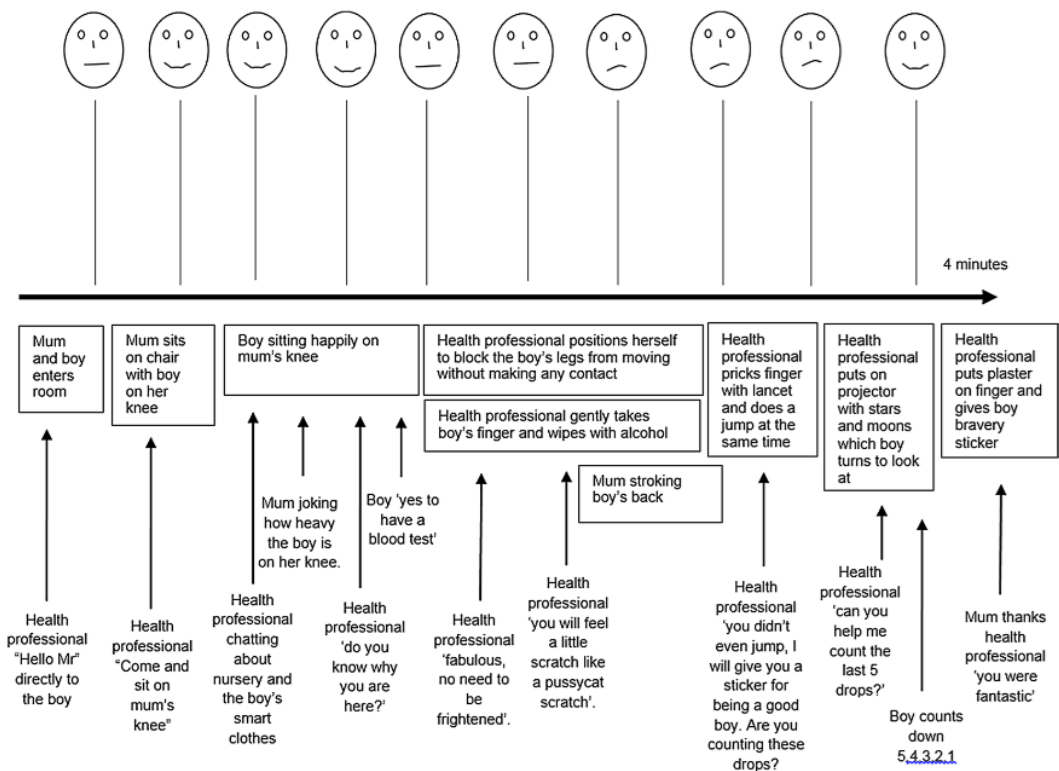


FIGURE 3. Three-and-a-half-year-old having a finger prick blood sample.

Fig. 3.

(Bray, Snodin and Carter, 2015, p.38)

Despite professional guidelines that deem clinical holding to be an option of last resort and restraint to be used only to prevent serious harm (rather than to complete pre-planned procedures), the researchers categorised 16 out of the 31 procedures they observed in the study as being characterised by restraint. They conclude that these data are in line with related research into the concept of perseverance in suggesting that once adults commit themselves to a trajectory that envisages completion of a task their capacity to read and act on signals that could threaten completion becomes constrained. This includes self-doubt or the sense that professional boundaries might have been crossed. From their own research the authors reach the even more alarming finding that, for some health

professionals, children and young people's protestations and distress during clinical procedures serve to increase adult determination to get the job over with, rather than alerting them to the need to draw back.

Alongside their primary analysis through the lens of perseverance theory, the researchers briefly consider their findings via a rights-based perspective. They identify the subjective nature of adult claims to be acting in the "best interests" of children as underpinned by Article 3 of the UNCRC (UNCRC, no date) and question whether adults ignoring requests by children and young people to "'stop, stop, stop'" (Bray, Snodin and Carter, 2015, p.39) contravenes the "due weight" requirement that is accorded to children and young people's right to express a view under Article 12, depending on their age and maturity. In line with other researchers and authors covered in this review, they draw the same conclusion: that the fact that children and young people possess such rights and that these are rhetorically considered to be somehow morally inevitable and fundamentally inalienable does not stop them being ignored in practice.

Shenton (2015) uses a participatory research methodology to include children as co-researchers, advisors and participants in a shared exploration of the use of physical restraint in the secure estate in England (secure children's homes, training centres and Young Offender Institutions). This methodology ensures that the issues are exposed from the perspective of children and young people themselves. In adopting an approach that explicitly places "the lens of children's human rights" front and centre of the research (Shenton, 2015, p.16), Shenton argues that, understood from this perspective, the persistent and culturally embedded use of physical restraint across the estate (which she argues reflects a typically negative, dominant discourse about children and childhood) is both

indefensible and ineffective. The study reveals that even when measured against the primary reasons used by adults to justify the practice such as safeguarding,; protecting others around them or changing future behaviours, there is still no evidence that it actually works. In fact, by reinforcing the idea of physical violence as an appropriate, “normal”, even inevitable response to difficult situations, it does the opposite. This is especially the case for children for whom violence has been an everyday experience prior to their incarceration. She also questions whether the shaky grounds on which restraint is currently understood as legally acceptable justifies its use from a moral and ethical perspective. If, as the research supports, the practice is counter-productive, unsafe, legally dubious and morally questionable then its continued use, in Shenton’s analysis, can only be understood in relation to the hegemonic acceptance of the dominant discourse including, to an extent, by the children and young people subjected to restraint:

By failing to construct children, specifically children who offend, as citizens with rights it is possible to see them as other, or as lesser citizen, lesser being, and therefore to fail to consider their human rights.

(Shenton, 2015, p.290)

Shenton’s analysis details a range of problems and dilemmas inherent in how rights themselves have been conceptualised, underpinned in law, researched and understood. Referring to “children’s rights” has potential to generate, on the one hand, additional protections compared with adult rights. This is due to the additional expectations placed on adults to protect children because they are relatively vulnerable (e.g. to adult exploitation). On the other hand this conceptualisation risks playing into the dominant discourse that portrays children as weak, vulnerable and still awaiting their full status as human beings, detracting

from the sense that children's rights are as fundamental and inalienable as the "human rights" accorded to adults.

Part Two: Pedagogy and Professional Education

3.6 Review context and methods

Involvement with my current professional field i.e. the professional education of community and youth workers, stretches back thirty five years to my earliest days in practice as an environmental youth worker in the North East of England in the early 1990's. In an attempt to address my lack of experience and theoretical knowledge of youth work, I established links with the Community and Youth Work department at the University of Sunderland (then Sunderland Polytechnic) in 1991. This resulted in a short piece of published writing in the primary academic journal for the field in the UK, "Youth and Policy" (Youth and Policy, no date) a professional evaluation by the University's Community and Youth Work team of the environmental youth work project I was responsible for and the supervision of several students on the undergraduate, professionally qualifying programme run by the University (then a 2 year diploma in Community and Youth Work). These students completed their professional practice placement through the project for which I was co-ordinator.

Experience of teaching Community and Youth Work students in Higher Education began in 2009, initially as a visiting lecturer on the postgraduate, professionally qualifying Masters degree programme at the University of Durham, the programme from which I had graduated over a decade earlier. In 2014 I became a full-time lecturer on the undergraduate programme at The University of Sunderland, returning back to where my engagement with the professional field had begun some twenty five years earlier.

Extended engagement with the field over this period has exposed me to a wide range of literature relevant to this research, especially over recent years teaching community and youth workers on a full-time basis at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Many of the writers I have drawn on as a teacher and whom I regard as members of my community of practice (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002) have shaped the focus and approach of this research, including those writing from both theoretical and practitioner perspectives. Several of these influences are reflected in the literature that has already been included in part one of this review.

The need to sharpen my focus in relation to the concept of professional field (Fulton and Smith, 2013) emerged as a key factor from processes of reflection, reflexive journaling (Bolton and Delderfield, 2018) and doctoral supervision. Having struggled to resolve conflicts between my desire to identify as a youth worker who teaches rather than as an academic, I eventually resolved to adopt the latter. This prompted a return to the extant literature in an attempt to explore more directly what is already known about the capacity of graduates from Community and Youth Work degree programmes to be effective in practice in relation to the realisation of children and young people's rights and meaningful participation.

Given the plethora of literature connected with youth and community work, search terms were used to limit the results as far as possible to literature that focused on the practice of graduates qualifying from professional programmes in community and youth work in Higher Education in the UK. Separate searches involving multiple combinations of search terms were conducted for books and research/journal articles going back as far as the year 2000. Using the University

of Sunderland “Discover” tool ensured that 89 different databases were searched of which 15 were identified as being most likely to yield results. Reflecting on initial results prompted a change in strategy to allow for non-UK based literature. Although this extended the scale of the task it proved fruitful and was justified on the basis that insights into the topic would be valuable from wherever they had arisen and were likely to have transferability back to the UK context. The dearth of literature on the specific topic in relation to UK degree programmes (Smith and Seal, 2021) additionally helped to reaffirm the potential of the research to generate new information as is required at doctoral level (Fulton and Smith, 2013). The searches initially identified 56 books and 143 articles. This list was reduced to a final list of 13 books and 28 articles. These were selected for their potential to be commenting on the education of community and youth workers in Higher Education, especially the impact of learning on the children and young people that qualified workers subsequently engaged with in relation to rights and participation.

3.7 Key themes emerging from this review

These are set out in the separate sections below:

3.7.1 Critical pedagogy as a central theme in European-based professional education

The review was expanded to allow for the inclusion of literature relating to the teaching of community and youth workers beyond the UK. This expansion revealed a significant contrast between the forms of community and youth work that predominate in the UK and Europe (and the teaching that supports it) compared with North American approaches, most notably in the United States.

Writing in a UK context and with a focus on undergraduate community and youth work students, Wood, Westwood and Thompson (2014) emphasise the professional duty placed on community and youth workers to challenge oppression but question how this gets achieved in practice. Cooper (2015) argues that critical pedagogy should be regarded as the key resource for teaching forms of emancipatory practice in Higher Education. Drawing on research with students studying towards a social work degree, Cooper identifies the potential of critical pedagogy in developing the intellectual capacity of students to challenge dominant discourses; build their emancipatory knowledge; strengthen their emotional appreciation of injustice and enhance their capacity to identify and name the structural causes of oppression. Smith and Seal (2021) explore how critical pedagogy informs the ways that informal educators frame themselves and their teaching, especially those teaching community and youth work in UK universities. Referencing the work of Bowler et al.(2019) they argue that resistance to unjust forms of neoliberal domination and authority are necessary in the delivery of a curriculum based in the modern university. They propose a “step change” model (Smith and Seal, 2021, p. 9) that flips threats into opportunities, taking advantage of the academic freedoms that currently remain in the gaps between political and institutional attempts to control and constrain. This enables a re-imagining of the ways in which the curriculum can be delivered to achieve empowerment of teachers, students and therefore children, young people and communities in turn (see figure four below):

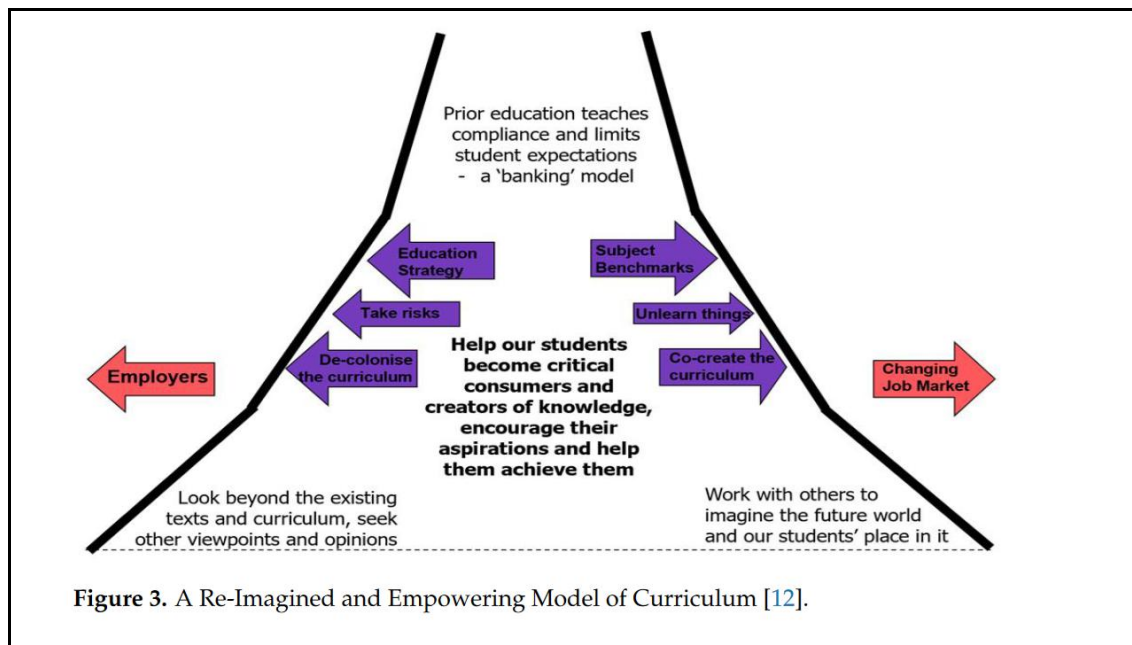


Fig 4

(Smith and Seal, 2021, p. 12)

Coburn and Gormally (2015, p. 71) emphasise the links between emancipatory praxis, human rights and processes of participation that result in “critical youth work”. These forms of critical practice are redolent of radical forms of community development that embrace practice that happens “within and against the state” (Coburn and Gormally, 2015, p. 72). Maynard and Stuart (2017) identify youth workers as a key target for their coverage of theorists who have helped to define and develop critical pedagogy and anti-oppressive theory. They include writers such as Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci and theorists such as Jurgen Habermas associated with The Frankfurt School. Maynard and Stuart (2017) argue that the concepts of hegemony, habitus, problematisation, conscientisation and dialogue associated with these writers are central to the knowledge base of youth workers. Gormally, Coburn and Beggan (2021) base their conclusions on direct research with graduate and current students of community and youth work degree programmes. They acknowledge the capacity of these programmes to deliver a

curriculum that enables students to confidently articulate their practice in emancipatory terms.

3.7.2 Youth development and competency as a central theme in US-based professional education

Corney et al.(2024) deploy a transparently selective approach in their survey of international youth work literature. In their attempt to identify cohering factors across the global range of different youth work definitions, they draw attention to the contrast between the European/Freirean “emancipatory pedagogy” tradition outlined above and the “North American psycho-social human development” tradition (Corney *et al.*, 2024, p.357). This contrast was evident in much of the US-based writing captured in my own review. Examples from both the US and Canada revealed practice that predominantly focuses on provision of out-of-school, distraction and recreational activities. These are commonly underpinned by a position in which the child development paradigm (Piaget and Tomlinson, 1998) is the predominant theoretical justification (Ashcraft, 2000; Fusco, 2011). In its most stark manifestations the contrast between the European and US traditions is exposed via writing that makes no attempt to consider issues of power, oppression or rights at any point. Nor does it provide any structural explanations for the inequalities that the youth work provision being analysed is clearly attempting to address.

Williamson (2012) describes the factors that have influenced her understanding of youth work in relation to her work in AIDS prevention amongst young people in Chicago, including her studies at the Universities of Chicago and Illinois. She references the social developmental theories of Piaget and Erikson as providing

core knowledge for understanding “human development and behavior (sic) in children and adolescents” (Williamson, 2012, p. 102). She emphasises the importance of working with young people because of what they may become - future leaders of society, at the cost of any analysis of what they already are - rights-holders and current citizens. The behaviourist emphasis of Williamson’s analysis reflects her open commitment to delivering a specific model of practice that arguably places the entire focus on individual young people and their perceived deficits:

“My approach to working with youth is reflective of the 5 C’s of positive youth development developed by Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, and Hawkins (1999): Competence , Confidence , Connections, Character and Caring”

(Williamson, 2012 p. 106)

The emphasis on developing the competencies of children and young people within the positive youth development model mirrors the competency-led approach to the professional education of youth workers in the US that is also revealed in this review.

Ashcraft, a lecturer at Arizona State University, argues for youth workers to be educated using a competency-based approach that emphasises building foundational competencies (such as the ability of the individual worker to develop their own career and their own potential to be employable) alongside what he refers to as “Professional Development Competencies” (Ashcraft, 2000, p. 41). These include fundraising, marketing and human resource management amongst others. The competencies are defined as “those deemed essential to nonprofit management” (Ashcraft, 2000, p. 41). Direct practice with young people is again defined entirely in relation to young people’s journey towards becoming adults

rather than their current status as full citizens. Ashcraft celebrates the fact that the list of professional competencies for this aspect have been “uniquely inspired” (Ashcraft, 2000, p. 41) by the concerns and suggestions of employers. At no point in the detailed description of the philosophy, curriculum design or approach to pedagogy behind the programme is there any suggestion that any of these core features might be informed by the voices, rights, interests or needs of children and young people themselves. Only the voices and requirements of employers count. Nor is there any appeal to a core value-base for the work or to any structural or sociological analysis of the experiences of the children and young people with whom graduates will be working.

The tension between forms of learning that “train” community and youth workers to become competent deliverers of the technical aspects of the role and critical pedagogy that supports them to live out an emancipatory praxis has been extensively exposed in community and youth work literature over many years (Jeffs and Smith, 1990; Ord, 2011; Bright, 2015). It continues to be a central theme in contemporary critical analysis (Connelly, 2025). The debate is commonly captured in reference to Ancient Greek distinctions between “techne” and “phronesis”. Learning that aims to achieve techne, from which the word “technical” originally derives, emphasises the skill of accurate repetition and competent, practical application in specific contexts. In contrast, learning centred around phronesis emphasises the nurturing of practical wisdom and the ethical application of theoretical understanding in complex and varied contexts. The distinction between North American and European approaches to the education of community and youth workers is succinctly captured in the techne versus phronesis analysis.

Undoubtedly there are other voices in the US and elsewhere that challenge the youth development definition of youth work and the competency-led approach to professional pedagogy. Several of these voices (Fusco, 2011; Corney *et al.*, 2024) were also captured in this review. They articulate powerful arguments for an approach to professional pedagogy that reflects the values of anti-oppressive and emancipatory forms of practice. Heathfield (2012), writing in the same publication as Williamson and based in the same city of Chicago, references Males' analysis of the ways in which adults construct the very notion of "teenager" as a mechanism for deflecting attention away from their own oppressive behaviour towards children and young people. Heathfield also describes how placing the concept of voice at the heart of a professional youth work education had encouraged a student to think in genuinely emancipatory ways about her practice and to go some way to ensure that voice led to meaningful change:

"After mingling with the young residents and talking to them, they told me that the main reason they stand around was because the basketball court on the premises had no hoops at all and was unusable. That's when the light bulb turned on in my head!... I got busy, walked around the housing complex and recruited the teen boys to organize themselves and take action! That action being the process of lobbying the Chicago Bulls organization as well as the CHA, to sponsor the basketball court restoration. We've had several very productive meetings ... The guys eagerly participate; they provide wonderful input and useful feedback."
(Heathfield, 2012. p.94)

3.7.3 Further examples of tokenistic participation emerge when reviewing this literature as well as some further examples of exceptions

Despite using very different search parameters from previous reviews conducted in the course of the wider research, this review into professional literature exposes examples of tokenistic participation and occasional exceptions in similar

proportions. This further reinforces the conclusions reached following previous reviews that meaningful participation occurs only by exception and that, in most cases, adults rather than children and young people derive most advantage from the processes of participation (see part one of this chapter). Schools again emerge as the primary arenas for tokenistic and instrumental forms of practice.

Wood, Westwood and Thompson (2014) assert that most young people are already actively engaged within their schools, communities and even political movements and that this creates a platform on which youth workers should build. Unfortunately they offer scant evidence for this bold claim other than the duties placed upon local authorities to consult young people and the rise in the number of school councils. The assumption that the fact of legal duties and the sheer number of school councils equate to anything close to meaningful participation for children and young people belies an adult-centred stance that fails to account for the lived realities of children and young people. As the examples in part one of this review have shown and as the “Emily “ example provided in the introduction to this thesis starkly exposes, there is no necessary link whatsoever between the fact that a school council exists and the meaningful participation of its members. In a case study example the authors evidence young people on a school council successfully influencing the decision to set up a breakfast club but only as a result of this being the favoured project of the adults. In contrast the young people’s request for a basketball court, which was not high on the agenda of the adults, was refused. Nor was any explanation for this refusal provided by the adults to the children and young people involved in the campaign. More positively the authors evidence a group of young people having a say in the funding of a series of rights-led projects although no detail is provided as to what these projects were or whether they

actually happened. Davies (2019) describes the lofty rhetoric of a commitment to genuine participation in the policy statements of the 2010 Coalition Government as amounting in practice to no more than an attempt to divert young people from any “genuinely independent exercise of power” (Davies, 2019, p.7). Allen and Ainley (2010) are similarly dismissive of the tokenistic nature of councils in schools and colleges in the UK, comparing this with the active participation of young people in protest and demonstration in other parts of Europe such as France and Greece. Fuller and Ord (2011) question whether involving young people from within a consumerist framework reaches beyond tokenism. Hughes (2015) draws on Foucault’s distinction between things that may not be bad but could well be dangerous, to suggest that, based on her research with young people, schools are mostly places that children and young people experience as dangerous. Children and young people report them as being spaces that promote disconnection rather than engagement. The following quotation mirrors almost identically the “Emily” testimony referred to above:

“[Gill]: Did you ever have any say in decision-making at school – a school council?

[Helena, aged 18]: We did but it wasn’t very good – nothing would happen at all. I think they had a meeting once every six months but nothing happened, I didn’t really take note of it.

(Hughes, 2015, p. 227)

Fitzsimons et al.(2011) argue that despite the clamour for increased participation over recent years, the tools developed have been used tokenistically and instrumentally in order to satisfy the managerialist expectations of public sector bodies and staff. Whilst they critique Arnstein’s model for its lack of attention to power relations, they also remind their readers of her powerful definition of

participation as “a strategy by which the have-nots get a say” and her clarity in relation to the impact that tokenistic forms of participation have on the “have-nots”:

“participation without the redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless.”

(Arnstein quoted in Fitzsimons et al. 2011, p.46)

The description of “Civic Youth Work” provided by Minnesota-based writers VeLure Roholt and Cutler (2011) and the practice examples from their research in the US, Northern Ireland and Palestine stands in sharp contrast to the predominant youth development” tradition in the US. They define civic youth work in relation to the three core concepts of “lived citizenship, youth as citizens now, and lived-citizen(ship) as vocation” (VeLure Roholt and Cutler, 2011, p. 174). Their explanation of these terms and the evidence from the practice they describe brings this understanding of youth work very close to the ideal definition of emancipatory praxis on which this thesis has been based. They directly challenge the negative dominant discourse about children and young people and substitute it with the concept of children and young people as competent, active citizens in the immediate term rather than in relation to their potential to become future citizens. They understand children and young people to be already capable of engaging in forms of democratic and participatory activity without the need to be “trained” by adults. They place the voice of children and young people at the heart of their method, describing the role of the civic youth worker in facilitative terms, as someone who engages groups of children and young people in a constructive dialogue about what they want to change and supports them to bring their

creativity and imagination to the process of achieving the changes identified. The practice examples they provide come as close to meeting the standard set for “meaningful participation” as any of the exceptions provided elsewhere in this thesis. The young people’s group in Palestine were frustrated that their attempts to build a new school library had been resisted. As an interim measure and whilst continuing to campaign for a new building, they persuaded a local carpenter to build a temporary library in the youth centre to store the free books they had received from across the world. Fitzsimmons et al. (2021), writing in a series designed specifically for students on UK-based community and youth work degrees (Fitzsimons, 2011), describe the approach to participation delivered from The Warren youth project in Hull which also comes close to the standard for meaningful participation taken in this thesis. The relevance of these positive examples lies in their being exceptional rather than commonplace, even in the community and youth work literature that analyses a sector that, more than any other, distinguishes itself as championing the rights and voices of children and young people.

3.7.4 The importance of enabling community and youth work degree students to contextualise the challenges they face in delivering meaningful participation in relation to constraining neoliberal and managerialist imperatives.

The need to contextualise modern practice in relation to the constraints that neoliberal and managerial agendas have placed upon it is a persistent theme in professional literature. Many of the writers contributing to the literature that supports the teaching of community and youth work in the UK are concerned to make students aware of how and why this has occurred over the last forty years; how it has the potential to constrain opportunities for meaningful participation

and democratic flourishing but also to suggest ways in which it can be resisted and even overcome. Spence (unpublished draft quoted in Davies, 2019, p. 316) expresses her fear that the gap between the demands of employers (wanting workers trained as technicians to deliver targeted outcomes) and universities (delivering programmes founded on critical pedagogy), was becoming so large as to be unsustainable. Bunyan and Ord (2011) track the ways in which successive governments have used their power over language to consolidate the hegemonic grip of neoliberalism. They see few reasons to expect the grip that neoliberalism has on youth work practice to ease and they urge universities to respond by strengthening the depth and impact of the work they do to raise the political awareness of community and youth work students. Harrison and Ord (2011) draw on Foucault's notion of "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 2020) to expose the ways in which a managerial and leadership discourse drawn from the world of commerce and promoted by right wing ideologies has gradually supplanted alternative ways of thinking, especially in relation to the development and improvement of services that work with children and young people. Fuller and Ord (2011) emphasise the importance of hearing a diverse range of voices in attempts to counter the pressure that managerialism places on forms of democratic functioning within organisations and within society more generally. They argue that such forms of resistance and dissent should be understood not as irrational acts that undermine attempts to properly manage workers and organisations but as inherently rational responses to the irrationality of increasing inequalities and forms of oppression. Grayson (2015) urges community and youth workers and those who educate them to draw on lessons from the history of social, labour and working-class educational movements in order to re-imagine ways of working with young people during a

time of crisis and insecurity. Drawing inspiration from activism past and present, including young people organising school strikes and protesting against austerity, he argues that the potential for resistance to neoliberalism remains strong and that youth workers should grasp the opportunities that this potential creates in order to make their own history. Cooper Bradford (2008) argues that the ways in which universities themselves have been shaped by the forces of managerialism and neoliberalism are similarly to be resisted. She argues that a focus on the modularisation of the curriculum and the delivery of pre-set learning outcomes mirrors precisely the ways in which youth work practice has been compromised, constrained and commodified in order to meet the expectations of a market-driven ideology. Her appeal to those responsible for the education of community and youth workers in Higher Education in the UK is clear:

“In the same way as practitioners in the field need to take a courageous stand against responses that allow external targets, for example accreditation, to pervert the purpose of youth work, we too need to have faith in our ability to challenge the dominance of outcome focussed curricula.”

(Cooper Bradford, 2008, p.69)

More recently Curran, Gormally and Smith (2022) conducted research on behalf of the same group of educators to consider the future of community and youth work degree programmes “located in the neoliberal university” beyond the COVID-19 pandemic (Curran, Gormally and Smith 2022, p. 1). Their analysis mirrors Cooper Bradford’s view that the reshaping of community and youth work practice to deliver outcomes has been matched in universities by the way that community and

youth work students are taught. They argue that the relationship-building that lies at the heart of an approach to education founded in critical pedagogy has been hugely constrained by the demands of performativity and the need to deliver learning outcomes via forms of assessment that commodify and objectify learners. More optimistically, the authors identify several ways in which the response of community and youth workers and the sector to the pandemic has prompted a renewal of a sense of value and vitality, enabling the sector to re-connect to values of community, collaboration and mutuality. They encourage youth work educators to grasp this moment by forming alliances with other professionals struggling to achieve with similar emancipatory aims; by resisting demands to de-intellectualise the educational experience offered to students and by locating alternative starting points in relation to research that aims to shed light on how the education of community and youth workers can be effective in disrupting and resisting the impact of instrumentalism.

3.7.5 The need to enable community and youth work degree students to go beyond understanding and into re-imagining

Cooper (2015) draws inspiration from the work of Giroux, Freire, McLaren, hooks and others in setting out how a commitment to critical pedagogy in Higher Education was able to shift the ways in which the students involved in his research (final year students studying towards a social science degree) were able to re-construct their understandings of the social world in emancipatory terms. Cooper frames the threat of neoliberalism in similar terms to the writers covered in the previous section but also links directly to its potential to undermine wider processes of democratic engagement and flourishing. He argues that the scale of the threat demands more radical responses from educators in Higher Education,

including from those already using critical pedagogy such as those teaching community development and youth work, which he references specifically. Of most significance to this thesis are the conclusions Cooper reaches in relation to what the radical, critical pedagogy approach he adopts in his teaching does not achieve. His analysis of both the gains and limitations of critical pedagogy closely match the results of my own research. Cooper provides clear evidence, including via student testimonies, of the capacity of critical pedagogy to shift student understandings of young people away from deficit and towards emancipatory positions. This leaves them, he argues, with much greater emancipatory knowledge; with an enhanced capacity for empathy and reflexivity and with the intellectual confidence to notice and challenge structural causes of inequality. What the educational process does not achieve, according to Cooper, is the development of student capacity to then use this new knowledge and understanding to articulate a vision of what a different, more democratic, fairer society might look like. Drawing on the work of Durkheim, Cooper frames this in terms of the difference between understanding how the world is, whilst struggling to move beyond existing frames of reference in order to describe how it might be and what it could become.

3.7.6 Practice what you teach! New ways of teaching and learning that better prepare community and youth work degree students to deliver meaningful participation once in practice by experiencing it themselves in their time at the academy (Emslie/Australia)

Emslie (2009) focuses directly on the link between how youth workers get taught about participation in Higher Education and how this enables them to subsequently deliver meaningful participation once in practice. He argues for an

approach that prioritises the modelling of processes of participation with students over purely academic or theoretical inputs, what might be best understood as a “practice what you teach” approach. Enabling students to develop the skills of participating themselves is seen as a key method for ensuring that they carry these skills and a commitment to voice and participation into practice. In setting out his rationale for this approach, Emslie points out that much of the evidence available (as this thesis has shown) reveals Article 12 of the UNCRC to be a human right that is largely violated rather than delivered. He then draws a powerful equivalence to the ways in which students taught via traditional education frameworks are provided with few opportunities to have a say in how their teaching is shaped and delivered. To be teaching students about how participation is ignored without providing them with opportunities to actually participate is, he argues, deeply hypocritical. Emslie sets out a range of pedagogical approaches that secure the collaboration of students in their own learning, including reflexive, biographical analysis of their own experiences of participation; the delivery of peer education sessions and the use of case-study analysis within assessments. Although Emslie does not provide evidence of the impact of his interventions on the children and young people his graduates have gone on to work with, there are significant implications in his work for those involved in the challenge of ensuring that the ways in which participation gets taught translates into meaningful participation beyond the academy.

3.8 Chapter conclusions

The review of research and professional literature helped to shape the research in a number of ways. It confirmed that the research question that had been drafted stood a good chance of addressing issues that had not been directly addressed before. It also confirmed the importance of a focus on meaningful participation as a benchmark for assessing the practice of research respondents in light of prevalent tokenism and instrumentalism. Also for an exploration of the issues that encompassed aspects of both agency and structure. It helped to guide the direction for the co-productive elements of the research and informed how the young people's reference group would be developed. The professional literature raised important issues that had not previously been considered in relation to the significance of critical pedagogy in achieving forms of emancipatory praxis and the space that remains in the UK to deliver such a curriculum despite the pressures and constraints of neoliberal agendas. It also began to point towards ways in which the teaching of community and youth work at degree level might be re-imagined and re-focused.

The review also helped to confirm the suitability of AR as the preferred methodology for undertaking the research. This enabled the detail of the methodological approach to be fully considered. This detail, including the philosophical stance that underpins it, is the subject of the next chapter, methodology.

Chapter Four: Methodology

Chapter structure

4.0 Chapter Introduction

4.1 Philosophical stance

4.2 Methodological alternatives considered

4.3 Research methodology

4.4 Researcher values

4.5 Methodological considerations emerging from the review of literature

4.6 Ethical considerations

4.7 Intent and the data being sought

4.8 Methods used

4.9 Co-research and co-production in data collection including the young people's reference group

4.10 Chapter conclusion

4.0 Chapter Introduction

“AR (action research) sits somewhat uncomfortably with conventional academia...the practical orientation and alignment with particular sorts of outcomes contravene some deeply held academic norms...This, in turn, places a burden on the researcher who wants to use AR for research in a university setting to argue their case and justify their choices, procedures and validity criteria”

(Coleman, 2018, pp. 168-169)

In this chapter the action research methodology selected to conduct the research is closely considered in order to meet the burden Coleman sets out above. This involves consideration of researcher stance (both ontological and epistemological); researcher values (personal and professional) and the methodological implications that have emerged from on-going reviews of extant literature. Key theoretical concepts are also scrutinised as well as the nature of the data being sought and the ethical implications of the methods used to collect it. Alternative methodological options are appraised in order to justify the choices made. Achievement of change within the field being researched is a defining characteristic of AR (May, 2002). The methods chosen for data collection are therefore appraised in relation to their potential to achieve change compared with realistic alternatives. In order to meet the additional requirements of a Professional Doctorate, attention is also given to the professional context in which the research took place and to the concept of professional field (Fulton and Smith, 2013).

Drawing on work by Reason (2006), Coleman acknowledges the additional pressure placed upon postmodern researchers to address the issue of quality “head-on”. Doing so requires arguably higher levels of transparency with regard to

choices made and greater articulation of position and positionality compared with more traditional research approaches that conform to received, positivistic understandings of what quality in research “should” or “ought to” look like. For postmodern researchers the “messiness of real life” (Coleman, 2018, pp. 167) is not experienced as a frustration that gets in the way of organised research or a barrier to be overcome. Instead it is embraced as deserving attention, exploration, even celebration. The research methods adopted are designed to capture and celebrate such messiness rather than have it squeezed out in subjugation to assumed methodological norms or expectations - avoiding the distortion of what Koestler refers to as “the cataract of accepted beliefs” (Koestler, 1959, p. 519). The contingent nature of what can be known and what comes to be known via an AR approach therefore requires thoughtful and precise answers to questions of epistemology; intent (and how such intent has been established); methods used (broken down against first, second and third person engagements); the nature of the judgements used to support claims of new knowledge having been produced or worthwhile contributions having been made and finally the basis for the participative approaches adopted during data collection (Coleman, 2018).

4.1 Philosophical stance

“So to develop my practice, gain greater effectiveness, I need to observe and understand my theories-in-use, what I actually do, alongside my espoused theories, what I believe I do. And as far as is practically possible I need to bring these into congruence”

(Bolton, 2018, p.4. Emphasis in the original).

Critical reflection carried out during preparation for this research exposed aspects of incongruity in researcher stance which risked the enquiry becoming confused and constrained. This was manifest in the misalignment of an espoused

interpretive stance with a more deep-rooted, positivistic ontology that was demonstrably influencing both thought and action.

For myself the reflective process exposed a philosophical stance that espoused a thoroughgoing, interpretivist epistemology (Blaikie, 2007). Knowledge, from this perspective, is understood as socially constructed by social actors and emerges from the interactions between them (Andrews, 2012). I espouse a wide range of associated theories in justification of this stance including symbolic interactionism (Burgess, 2007), linguistic theory (Lyons, 1972), correspondence theory (Russell, 1986), cultural theory (Charmaz, 2012) and psychosocial theory (Bradford, 2012).

Taking this first-level reflection to a second, deeper level I discovered these espoused epistemological theories to have been laid upon a set of theories-in-use which belied an ontological stance more akin with positivism than interpretivism. Whilst this was initially experienced as an unwelcome surprise that smacked of hypocrisy, ongoing consideration helped to explain the confusion in ways that became more constructive and purposeful. The educational, familial, cultural and religious influences of my childhood had left a powerful ontological legacy below the surface of my espoused epistemology. This legacy privileged a tacit belief in the existence of several realities that interpretivism, by definition, rejects. These included the universality of “natural” laws; aspects of essentialism; a retained belief in outdated notions of objectivity and a latent tendency to privilege traditional forms of scientific endeavour above the postmodern paradigms and techniques around which I had built my professional identity and research practice (RSA, 2010).

Alongside Bolton's encouragement to approach such reflections constructively, other writers urge interpretivist researchers to reject simplistic, binary "positivist bad, interpretivist good" constructions and adopt instead a stance that regards different ontological perspectives as as relevant to different types of research and different researchers (Costley and Fulton, 2018). Robson and McCartan (2018) argue that social constructionist and critical realist positions (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2017) can be held in alignment as part of a broader, pragmatic approach. In this sense my epistemological commitment to critical social theory (Crossley, 2005) - a perspective that views knowledge as socially constructed through unequal relations of power and oppression - is able to sit alongside a critical realist ontology that chimes with the legacy of my traditional, positivist-leaning childhood in positing that "not *everything* is socially constructed" (Coleman in Costley and Fulton 2018 p. 158. Emphasis in the original). At the same time it allows for a crucially important re-interpretation - a fresh layer on the painting - of precisely what the thing that exists actually is i.e. a set of social and structural relations that consistently and persistently favour the interests of the already advantaged at the direct cost of the marginalised (Freire, 1996). In contrast with a classical, positivist, realist ontology, critical realism does not posit that this set of social relations is governed by immutable, universal laws but by individual and collective choice. Furthermore it posits that, in being a matter of choice rather than pre-determined fact, the emancipatory potential of such a stance is exposed, making it ideally suited to an action research methodology in which the expectation of real change is a central tenet.

4.2 Methodological alternatives that were considered

There is a clear and direct alignment between the social constructivist stance that underpins this research and the qualitative methods selected to produce data. Whilst this matches a traditionally accepted trajectory (Crotty, 1998) it was not an automatic choice. Other options were considered carefully. Undertaking a larger scale, quantitative analysis using a survey method (Bryman, 2012) was deemed viable given my privileged access to the field both internally and externally. It is not uncommon for lecturers in Higher Education to be asked to distribute doctoral research questionnaires to their students. In addition, my connections with colleagues across my own institution and across my wider, national community of practice (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002) might well have influenced return rates positively. These could have been used to inform an even broader field of practitioners, with a reasonable expectation that at least some constructive changes in practice would eventually result.

The primary reasons for not choosing this route were both methodological and practical. Methodologically I was clear that using a large scale survey method to ask graduates of my own programme and of similarly validated programmes across the UK to describe how they understood the concepts I was interested in (childhood, expertise, rights etc.) would have produced a significant amount of potentially useful and generalisable data (Bell and Waters, 2018). The fact of a common validation process across the UK community and youth work degree programmes could be regarded as a useful, controlling variable (Silverman, 2014) from a research perspective. It also supports the potential generalisability of results drawn from data gathered in this way, allowing learning from one programme to have good levels of applicability to others. The limitation of this

approach was that it could only ever have resulted in me ending up where I had already begun. Focusing on just one concept, childhood for instance, explains why. It is not unreasonable to assume that the responses to a well constructed survey question around constructions of childhood would have produced data showing that graduates across the UK construct the concept in different ways. Some would have focused on the age-range aspect in their response, others might have been prompted to talk about their own experiences of childhood and how these had shaped their current understanding of the concept. Some might have focused more on the theoretical angle and mentioned the social construction of knowledge or how childhood needs to be understood as a culturally relative concept. Some would no doubt have raised more critical concerns around the dominant negative discourse around children and young people and the lack of respect accorded to their rights and voices. These data could have then been aggregated alongside the answers to other questions in order to draw potentially useful comparisons between the different programmes. Results might have included statements such as “university x clearly achieves greater levels of criticality with respect to the key concepts being explored when compared with the average levels of criticality across graduates from all the institutions surveyed”. Useful results undoubtedly, but not useful in terms of the core rationale and motivations behind the choice to pursue these topics in the first place. My motivations and intentions for this research were not borne out of an interest in structural issues alone, such as how different degree programmes might be achieving certain outcomes compared with others - even if those outcomes were positive. Instead, as has already been described in the introductory chapter, my intention in the research was to explore how individual journeys of understanding and processes of meaning-making can

be supported through pedagogical interventions and how these get translated (or not) into the meaningful participation of children and young people. Findings from a broad survey would merely have prompted questions for me around how and why. Questions such as which modules made a difference? Why? Which theorists? Why? What did each individual student know about key concepts prior to the programme and how did this impact their journey? What difference was their understanding actually making to the children and young people they are working with now, as graduate practitioners? Given these were the types of questions about which I was most interested in securing data in the first place, it was clearly better to choose a method that addressed these directly from the beginning, hence the decision to sacrifice breadth and generalisability for depth and transferability (Bryman, 2012). The fact that all community and youth work professionally qualifying degree programmes share a common validation process still has salience with respect to the potential transferability of results from my programme to others similarly validated. Given common validation, it is not unreasonable to assume that the other programmes across the UK will be interested in transferring knowledge gained from this research to their own programmes. The second reason why this or other similar approaches were not selected is that they run counter to my skill base and experience. I have no relevant experience in conducting and analysing large scale surveys or statistical analysis. On the other hand I have extensive experience of designing, delivering and analysing qualitative approaches to research, investigation and evaluation. This has been consolidated in a range of contexts over a thirty-year career including as a project manager, freelance consultant, dispute investigator, accredited mediator and currently as a supervisor of undergraduate researchers

who predominantly adopt qualitative research methods in completing their studies. Choosing a qualitative approach to data production was thus aligned with my epistemological stance but also with the values that motivated the research focus; with existing skills and competencies and with the types of further research likely to follow post-doctorally.

In line with an understanding of research as an emergent rather than imposed process, grounded theory (Creswell, 1998; Charmaz, 2012) was also considered as a potential theoretical and methodological lens through which the research might proceed. One potential advantage of adopting a more thoroughgoing grounded theory approach was my prior experience of exploratory interviewing. This had been gained through conducting multiple, complex workplace investigations and mediations. Each of these typifies the “zigzag” style of data production (Creswell, 1998, p. 57) used in a grounded theory approach and has developed my capacity to use professional judgement in knowing when points of “saturation” have been reached (Charmaz, 2012, p. 96). Whilst the research drew on aspects of a grounded theory approach, a decision was taken for this not to be adopted as a primary methodology. At a philosophical level it has already been pointed out that the commitment to a critical realist philosophy constrains opportunities to engage in research using a purely “data upwards” approach in which theory is generated through the process rather than preceding it (Blaikie, 2007, p. 99). More pragmatically, the opportunities to make repeated visits back and forth to the field would have been severely limited in terms of my own time and in terms of the accessibility of graduate respondents in the sample. Achieving just a single revisit to half of the original sample proved challenging.

A hermeneutic methodology was also considered as this would have met the criterion for attention to individual journeys of graduate learning. This could have involved analysis of submitted assessments by selected graduates across the three years of undergraduate study to which, again, I had privileged and easy access given the digital storage of completed assessments across recent years of teaching. Whilst this would have been an exciting journey involving high levels of new learning for myself as a researcher, this factor was also the main reason for its rejection, given the constraints on my time during the research period. In addition the digitised submission and storage of all assessments had only been happening for two years at the time of having to decide which research methodology to adopt for data collection. This would have severely constricted the available sample. Instead, as with the approach to grounded theory mentioned above, opportunities for data collection and analysis that embraced aspects of hermeneutics were embraced, especially the concept of body language as text (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011; Crotty, 1998).

4.3 Research Methodology

The definition of AR adopted for the research draws on definitions from Bradbury (2025) and from Coghlan and Shani (2018). Bradbury focuses on the democratic, reflexive and collaborative aspects of AR whilst Coghlan and Shani focus on the achievement of meaningful change.

For Bradbury:

“AR is a democratic and participatory orientation to knowledge creation. It brings together action and reflection, theory and practice, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern. AR is a pragmatic co-creation of knowledge *with*, not about, people.”

(Bradbury, 2025, p. 1)

For Coghlan and Shani, AR is also:

“simultaneously concerned with bringing about change”.

(Coghlan and Shani, 2018, p. 520)

AR aims to go further than traditional forms of observational study by deliberately crossing the boundaries between research and practice, boundaries that other methodologies seek to preserve (Coleman, 2018).

Out of the different qualitative methodologies considered, it was also judged that AR provided the best alignment between the wide range of different factors that needed to be consistently coordinated throughout the research. These included stance (ontological and epistemological); researcher values (personal and professional); the insights generated through the review of extant literature; professional context and field; key theoretical concepts; the nature of the research data being sought; ethical considerations; alternative methodological options and the potential to achieve change/influence future practice. Further advantages in the specific context of this research included the potential of AR to consolidate the prior experience and practice of the researcher and to create opportunities to work from and test existing theoretical models whilst also allowing new theoretical positions to emerge. Also to incorporate internal evaluation as well as external dissemination.

The research proceeded via a series of AR cycles (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014) which built upon cycles already completed during twenty five years as a professional practitioner in the community and youth work field. Further cycles

bringing about changes in practice will hopefully emerge from the research itself and via knowledge production and exchange post-doctorally. Co-production (involving children and young people as advisors to the research) has also been integrated as part of the research methodology and design (Grundy, 1987). This provides a level of internal and external congruency to the research which is also clearly aligned with philosophical stance and researcher values.

4.4 Researcher values

For practitioners undertaking doctoral research, personal and professional integrity can be understood as providing a central, cohering thread around which the different aspects of methodological design can be built (Maguire 2018). This places transparent, reflexive processes at the forefront of endeavours to ensure the necessary alignment between researcher positionality, field, methodology and methods (Blaikie, 2007). Such processes promote the trustworthiness, validity and reliability of research outcomes (Maguire, 2018) and help to locate the subjective, interpretive role of the researcher and their personal values at the very centre of the research process. With this approach the “values-laden” nature of research is openly acknowledged (McNiff, 2010, p. 34), rejecting the idea that social research can ever be regarded as somehow values-free (McNiff, 2010; May, 2011) given that it must always be guided at its most fundamental and design levels by human actors.

In eschewing the notion of researcher objectivity, it is incumbent upon interpretivist researchers to spend time and effort describing instead the approximations, assumptions, prejudices, values and frames through which their

research has been designed. Also how these same frames have shaped data production (May, 2011) and the interpretation of results.

My own choice of methods for data production reflects a personal and professional journey with the alternative sets of values that underpin different approaches to teaching, learning, systems of education and their application in practice.

As a classroom teacher in UK secondary schools in the early 1990's, my efforts to deliver the outcomes prescribed by the recently introduced National Curriculum (*National curriculum*, 2014) proved highly challenging. Fortunately I was able to use these difficult experiences to forge a professional focus on the significance of context, recognising that my failure in the classroom reflected a mix of personal inexperience; the absence of timely coaching support and the pressures of structural issues upon myself, the pupils and the school as a whole. The problems I encountered were explained by the presence of these complex, personal and structural factors rather than by any mis-match between the core values of education and my own. Understanding my experience in schools from this perspective enabled a clarification and acknowledgement of more deeply-held values that had lain hidden behind my motivation to become a schoolteacher in the first place. This included a commitment to understanding children and young people's lives from the inside out (Blaikie, 2007) and to valuing the exploration of topics of their own choosing rather than attempting to inspire them about topics and material that adults unknown to them had pre-determined to be in some way beneficial to them. (Grundy, 1987). The experience of attempting to promote learning in formal, classroom contexts similarly helped to confirm my preference for working with small groups in order to honour the significance of individual expression and testimony (Mullender and Ward, 1998). Also to respect children

and young people's right to engage with adults and with each other in places and spaces that promote their comfort, free expression and democratic rights (Gallagher, 2006). Spaces that help create what Kemmis, drawing on Habermas, refers to as “the formation of a communicative space” (Kemmis, 2013, p. 122). In these spaces, consensus about what to focus on and what to do emerges through dialogue rather than being imposed from the outside or via assumed adult authority within the space. This is in contrast to the industrially-derived values that underpin the current layout of UK schools and classrooms in their attempt to produce consistent batches of pupils who conform to a pre-determined ideal (RSA, 2010; Cairns et al. 2018). Clarification of these alternative, informal educational values and sensibilities (Buchroth and Parkin 2010) led to my decision to pursue a career as a professional community and youth worker rather than as a schoolteacher. This involved working alongside children and young people in the facilitation of informal educational experiences that enabled greater congruency between personal values and professional practice.

These same values informed the decision to collect data for this research using less formal, more dialogical methods. Qualitative methods such as semi-structured, one-to-one interviews prize individual testimony over larger scale, quantitative approaches that rely on researcher detachment, distance from respondents and the imposition of a predetermined research frame that seeks to assure validity via, amongst other factors, the large number of respondents involved. Similarly the decision to engage respondents in places and spaces of their own choosing reflected values of freedom, choice and flexibility, enabling respondents to feel at ease with the interview process.

Values of cooperation and collaboration lay behind the choice of a co-operative enquiry approach (Heron and Reason, 2012). Values of respect for people as experts in their own lives lay behind the decision to engage young people directly in the process of research design and delivery via the young people's reference group and behind a perspective that dignifies the capacity of individuals to socially construct the world for themselves. Values of fairness and a commitment to anti-oppressive and emancipatory forms of practice lay behind the critical approach adopted throughout the research. This approach seeks to hold to account the powerful and privileged in relation to actions that both knowingly and unknowingly shape the social world in ways that benefit themselves at the cost of others less powerful and in the diminishment of democratic flourishing. Values of humility and integrity lie behind an overall reflexive approach that embraces my own faults, background, prejudices, limitations and potential to misuse my own power as a researcher. Reflections centred on these aspects - including the fact that all interviewees were university graduates whom I had taught and assessed - have been integrated into the research process itself. This was done in the hope that its findings, however narrow or limited to a highly specialised audience, will at least be regarded as credible in their own right and of some worth in their transferability to the field.

4.5 Methodological considerations emerging from the review of literature

Bjerke (2011) adopts a focus group method in order to secure the direct voices of his respondents and as a means of accessing their subjective experiences, understandings and opinions in relation to issues of rights and participation in home and school contexts. The emergent nature of Bjerke's approach to

knowledge construction at an epistemological level proved informative. He describes a method that involves the researcher moving between data, theory and literature in a series of interlinking movements. In his belief that empirical data can exist in some real sense, Bjerke's stance aligns with my own in its capacity to embrace the idea that aspects of a critical realist stance are not necessarily incompatible with a social constructionist epistemology (Crotty, 1998).

Furthermore, Bjerke's analysis of his results in terms of authority, power relations and fairness extends this stance into one of critical realism, combining a critique of society with a belief in an underlying social reality. Bjerke's critical realist stance also encompasses an "emancipatory component" (Blaikie, 2007, p. 148), an aspect which chimed directly with my own stance and motivations and which remained central to my choice of methods for data collection.

Bjerke also describes the efforts that, from this stance, researchers are ethically bound to make in the process of meaning-making. This involves moving intentionally between abstract reasoning around theoretical concepts and applied discussions about concrete situations. This movement between the abstract and the concrete lies behind my decision to engage respondents first in discussions around key concepts ("childhood"; "expertise" etc) before proceeding to an exploration of how they had attempted to apply these concepts in professional contexts.

In other aspects Bjerke's research served as a helpful warning against over-generalisation of research findings and the need to apply criticality consistently throughout the research process. He reports that the children and young people in his study universally regard the power and authority of their parents to be legitimate. Also that they value the ways they are being taken care of and

protected at home. Whilst this may well have been an accurate reflection of the testimonies in his sample, a more critical stance requires this finding to be balanced with evidence from other studies that challenge the idea that children and young people generally experience home life as safe, or even relatively safer than school life (Lloyd, 2018).

The report by Milnes et al. (2013) mirrors some of the strengths of Bjerke's research in relation to the high value attached to the direct testimonies of respondents (in this case young people involved in producing a pre-consultation guide to asthma review consultations). At the same time the research exposed a more positivist epistemology that objectified respondents, seeing them as vehicles for consultation about an outcome that had been pre-determined by the adults i.e. the requirement for a new guide. This approach contrasts sharply with an approach that leaves space for outcomes to emerge out of the data and its analysis. One that regards respondents as co-creators in the production of knowledge alongside the research team (Grundy, 1987). Rather than using respondents to help justify or shape an outcome I had already determined, I presented them instead with a set of pre-prepared questions that I hoped would help shape a journey of shared discovery.

The "theory-testing" (Bryman, 2012) approach of the Milnes et al. research also stands in stark contrast to the inductive methodology I adopted. Their determination to apply "health behavior (sic) change theory" (Milnes et al., 2013, p.95) exposes their pre-supposition that positive outcomes from the research will be exclusively secured via changes in the behaviour of the young patients. It excludes any opportunities for a research space to be established that generates data in relation to changes in the attitudes and behaviours of the adult health

professionals. This limiting, deductive approach blinkers the research from exposing any of the structural, cultural or oppressive forces that may well be resulting in poor outcomes from the medical consultations. Alvesson & Deetz, (2000) draw on Rorty's critique of a behaviourist approach that places an emphasis on understanding how to predict and control people rather than more important aspects of human existence such as how how people go about making choices about their lives or about the structural forces that constrain and restrict choice.

In applying their deductive methodology the researchers not only exclude the possibility of seeing structural causes behind the problems they seek to understand but also do testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2018) to their young respondents. This argument was exposed in the literature review in relation to the example of the young woman whose suggestions that clinicians might have explained things better were ignored by the researchers. They concluded instead the young woman needed to improve her self-efficacy.

By adopting an inductive research methodology that aims to do justice to the utterances of respondents beyond the constraining lens of pre-conceived ideas or theories, my own research was designed to leave space for structural and cultural explanations of the issues to emerge and to capture the nuances and richness of individual stories in order to generate deeper, highly contextualised and shared understandings of what is really happening in complex situations.

In contrast to the Milnes et al. methodology, Weller (2009) adopts an openly constructionist theoretical stance when researching teenagers' experiences of school-based participation from a spatial perspective. This includes an overt commitment to operating from a value base that seeks to directly challenge the

dominant negative discourse on childhood. Also to a methodological approach that involves research *with* her respondents (in this case children and young people themselves) rather than on them. Her understanding of childhood as socially constructed encompasses a stance that embraces the diversity of their individual lives in terms of backgrounds and a range of other factors.

Weller also advises taking time to conduct research that makes a small yet meaningful difference in the field, in contrast to performative forms of research that primarily benefit the researcher. She also models a form of co-operative enquiry that includes children and young people as advisors to herself and to the research process.

All these approaches fed directly into the approaches adopted within my research. A great deal of effort went into explaining to respondents that the research sought to capture their current understandings and constructions rather than test their retained knowledge. This was especially important given that I was their former tutor and had graded their assessments on multiple occasions during their time as undergraduates.

Shenton (2015) adopts a similarly constructivist stance to her research with young people who experience being physically restrained whilst incarcerated in the Secure Estate. Emphasising a critical realist ontology that comes very close to my own stance, Shenton allows for the existence of multiple, co-existing realities and sees the research task as one that aims to capture and expose this multiplicity rather than seeking to uncover a singular or universal “truth” about any situation. It is in understanding the social world as constructed through these multiple realities that allows alternatives to emerge that challenge essentialising, dominant discourses about childhood and childhoods.

The methodological implications of this research paradigm in relation to my own research are significant. In the same way that Shenton prioritises the importance of exploring how the reality of physical restraint gets constructed “through the eyes of the child” (Shenton, 2015, p.123), I was equally determined to place the voices and constructions of graduates front and centre when making decisions about how the links between what they had been taught and its translation into practice might come to be known and understood. This approach does not seek to exclude the constructions of other players or “key informants” as Shenton describes them (Shenton, 2015, p.347). Having explained the social world as constructed via multiple realities it would be absurd to then suggest that it can be fully understood through the articulation of only one of these realities. Instead it clearly acknowledges the contributions of other informants but includes these only as additional perspectives rather than primary ones. In prioritising the constructions of the relatively powerless and those whose voices are only rarely heard (Weller, 2009) this approach makes a reality of the critical dimension of the critical realist stance. The literature explored in Shenton’s research and similarly in my own review for this research, exposes how adults invested in children and young people's services construct the realities of these services in ways that are mostly self-serving and that perpetuate existing forms of oppression and inequality. Research that prioritises the voices of invested adults is unlikely to challenge or change the status quo in relation to how services operate. It is only in these attempts to “attend to the untold” (Sharkey, 2004, quoted in Bolton, 2018, p.17) that the potential of research to redraw the balance of power relationships between children and young people and adults can be achieved. This is unlikely to happen overnight or as the result of a single piece of research. The contribution of

research such as Shenton's and others that prioritise exposing the voices of the marginalised is perhaps better understood in relation to von Redecker's metaphor of sowing seeds of change in the cracks between different realms of knowledge, what she refers to as the acts of "interstitial revolution" (New Books Network Book of the Day, 2024) that begin in small spaces of the social world but have the potential to generate significant change.

Whilst this goes some way in justifying my decision to capture and prioritise the meaning-making of graduates, it also raises a legitimate question in relation to the absence of the direct testimony of children and young people as respondents to this research. I argue above that research that prioritises the voices of invested adults is unlikely to challenge or change the status quo in relation to how services that support children and young people operate. Yet my own research, in contrast to Shenton (2015), Cairns et al. (2018), Bray, Snodin and Carter (2015) and others presents the adult, service provider perspective alone.

This issue requires careful consideration and is perhaps best understood in relation to two concepts. Firstly that of research validity and secondly that of research as a journey.

In relation to issues of validity the decision not to seek data directly from children and young people significantly limits my findings but does not, in my view, undermine them. I believe my findings to be a valid representation of the data I collected in response to the specific research question that was posed. Also that the process through which data were collected and analysed demonstrates the necessary alignment between researcher values, philosophy, methodology and conclusions. From a doctoral perspective I also believe that the research exposes important issues that have not been explored in this way before and that

opportunities for change will result via the processes of dissemination and post-doctoral research that will follow.

The research begins to explain the disconnect between two things that need to be better connected. Firstly what graduates from a single degree programme know and understand about children and young people's participation and rights. Secondly their capacity to exploit this knowledge in achieving meaningful change once in practice. Yet the research explains this disconnect only by telling only one side of the story - that of the adult graduates. From a critical, emancipatory perspective the more significant testimonies in relation to this disconnect - those of the children and young people these graduates are working with - remain, up to this point, untold.

In his consideration of the research journey, Schon (1995) adopts the metaphor of a swamp to expose the contrasting experiences of researchers who explore matters of human complexity with those who research more manageable matters of a purely "technical" interest.

Technical researchers, he argues, have the luxury of making their way across the drier ground above the swamp. Researchers aiming to address more critically important matters of genuine human complexity and concern are instead forced to trudge through the mud and mess of the swamp itself, stumbling and tripping as they attempt to navigate a way through their own doubts and confusions, whilst adopting research methods that deliberately invite complexity. They do so in an attempt to do justice to the nuanced meanings, complex lives and difficult-to-tell testimonies of those they are researching.

My own journey through the swamp was certainly experienced as messy, confusing and prolonged. At the same time it also involved a progressive

unfolding of answers to key questions and their methodological implications.

These were primarily around what might be done, how it might be achieved and what could not be done.

4.6 Ethical considerations

The research values outlined earlier provided a firm foundation for consideration and management of all ethical aspects of the research. Research ethics were considered in detail at every stage in relation to the key principles of beneficence, respect for autonomy, justice and non-maleficence (Costley and Fulton, 2018).

These considerations went beyond the limited information required for ethical approval from the University. They included consideration of professional body requirements for working with children and young people, consideration of the purpose of the research, consent, data protection, data storage, confidentiality and anonymity, conflicts of interest, risk assessment and dissemination (Costley and Fulton, 2018). Extensive personal and professional experience of managing complex ethical dilemmas in a range of different contexts proved a helpful resource on which the research was able to draw. This helped to build the necessary “practical wisdom” (Grundy, 1987, p.183) required when taking “micro-ethical” decisions about research practice (Costley and Fulton, 2018, p. 90) alongside decisions relating to broader ethical research design. This also involved having access to other experienced and wise voices within and beyond the academy through which my own ethical perspectives could be triangulated. Knowing when to seek their advice as critical friends to the research process has proven to be key (McNiff, 2010).

The aspect of the research that arguably required the most acute ethical consideration related to the potential of the semi-structured interviews to harm the respondents in some way. This stemmed primarily from two elements: My relationship with them and the implications of the questions I was asking.

All eleven respondents were former undergraduate students I had taught for a minimum of three years, some longer. Several had experienced significant life trauma during their time as undergraduates and I had supported them through this. Most had experienced some form of significant trauma or difficulty prior to becoming students and I was also aware of this. Based on my eleven years involved with the programme, this profile is typical of students who choose to study community and youth work and is referenced here to contextualise the depth and intimacy of relationships that are commonly developed between students and tutors during their time together on the degree programme. In the sample were respondents who had switched out of well-paid jobs in the private sector following life-changing trauma. This had resulted in a wholesale reappraisal of life ambitions leading to a decision to work with young people and communities instead. Also respondents who had been supported through adverse childhood experiences and were motivated to become community and youth workers either to improve the poor quality of the services they had received or to replicate the excellent practice of youth workers and others who had supported them through difficult times. For some the trauma had occurred during their time as undergraduates and I had been closely involved in supporting their journey to graduation via a range of pastoral and administrative interventions.

These aspects of student/tutor intimacy, especially when working with small cohorts of fewer than fifteen students, are additional to the pedagogical

relationship that occurs more commonly across any teaching context. It is natural for students who have chosen to study a topic to want to hear that their tutor thinks well of their understanding of the issues and of their capacity to put that understanding into practice. This aspect was of particular significance during data collection and analysis. Despite my efforts at the start of each interview to persuade respondents that their knowledge and understanding of what they had been taught and their subsequent practice was not being judged or tested, it was inevitable that this element would be present in some way. How it would be interpreted would vary for each respondent but its presence placed a serious ethical onus on myself and on the research process in relation to autonomy and especially to non-maleficence.

It could be argued that using someone independent and not previously known by the graduates would have been an appropriate way to mitigate the ethical risks in this situation. This was neither practical nor necessary and would have significantly constrained the research. The quality of the data collected was achieved as a direct consequence of the relationship between myself and the respondents. Instead this ethical aspect was managed primarily through the use of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2012). The advantage of this approach to sampling releases the researcher to focus on the meanings and value of the data that have been secured rather than spending time and effort trying to justify the sample itself, especially in terms of its “representativeness”. The sample I arrived at was generated at first-level by the decision to interview graduates I had taught myself. The option to engage graduates from similar programmes across the UK in order to extend the generalisability of the results was considered and rejected on practical grounds and on the development of my own understanding of the

difference between generalisability and transferability. An element of self-selection which addressed the ethical imperative to promote respondent autonomy happened at the second level. I approached 20 different graduates directly. Either by meeting them at pre-arranged events (for example at graduation for the most recent graduates) or when visiting their workplaces for those who had graduated some years ago. Most graduates from the degree programme remain in the region after completing their studies. Most work in organisations who are field partners of the programme, often becoming placement supervisors for new cohorts of students. This ensures easy access to multiple cohorts of graduates from a research perspective. Not all of those I approached agreed to be interviewed. In this way the sample selected itself. Having supplied outline detail of the research and what I wished to discuss with them, only those who were comfortable with what they had received agreed to be interviewed. This initial decision already implied something about their trust in me and their willingness, based on their extensive prior knowledge of me and my approach to their learning and development, to enter into a new dialogue about themselves, about theory and about practice. It was reasonable for them to expect that this new dialogue would mirror those we had entered into many times together before, during their undergraduate years. In this sense their decision to agree to being interviewed was a highly informed one. They knew what they were entering into, they knew me and felt safe with me, based on their prior experience of me. They also trusted me, including with their own personal growth and learning. This ensured that even if the interviews raised questions for them about their current levels of knowledge, understanding and practice, these would be handled in ways that promoted further growth and the unfolding of new insights, rather than any

negative or destructive responses. In this way the ethical requirement for non-maleficence was met. Evidence from the interviews strongly suggests that this was the experience of respondents, including the willingness to meet for a second time of all of those who were asked.

4.7 Intent and the data being sought

The intent behind any piece of research tends to be shaped by a range of intertwining values and motivations. Intervening in the lives of respondents brings with it a set of responsibilities to which the researcher is accountable (Fulton and Smith, 2013) and requires justification in respect of the promotion of overall human flourishing. For myself, the decision to choose the Professional Doctorate route aligned closely with an intent to make a difference directly in the field of professional practice, compared with the more academic traditions of the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) route. This aligns with a critical research stance and methodology that involves a search not for knowledge for its own sake but specifically for “emancipatory knowledge” (Crotty, 1998, p. 159). To a great extent this intention was driven by frustration as much as it was by curiosity or the desire to make a difference in the lives of children and young people. The story of “Emily” described in the introductory chapter alongside the range of literature analysed in chapter two, illustrate these frustrations and reflect my experiences in the field. Too often the potential of children and young people's participation has been curtailed, in my experience, by the oppressive attitudes and behaviours of associated adults, either directly in terms of operational mechanisms or indirectly via policies, cultures and wider structural forms of oppression.

Describing the problem is, inevitably, the easy part. Researchers have a duty to explore ways forward and this has to include some element of hope that research

can bring about change. Despite the frustrations of working in the field there were also moments during my time in practice that embodied significant shifts in the understanding of the adults involved towards a more emancipatory stance. The research aimed to explore how, when and why these shifts occur in the hope that it might be possible to replicate them more commonly amongst professionals working with children and young people.

Freire's analysis of emancipatory praxis is both helpful and hopeful in its exposition of the possibilities of oppressor and oppressed moving towards humanisation together (Freire, 1996). This happens, in Freire's schema, through processes of conscientisation and dialogue. At one point in my own practice with participation I had experienced an initially obstructive and powerful "gatekeeper" shift wholeheartedly towards an emancipatory stance as a direct result of her (reluctant) engagement in a dialogue with young people. Prior attempts at encouraging change via reflection alone, what Freire (1996, p. 68), might have referred to as hollow "verbalism", had failed. In this case it required action to prompt reflection in order for a form of praxis to emerge (Freire, 1996). The research intention was to explore the extent to which the initial professional training of professionals working with children and young people routinely assures the development of an equivalent emancipatory praxis in graduates. Understanding this better held out the possibility of transferring the knowledge gained into the wider realm of practice so that what in my experience had been a rare occurrence (the transformational shift made by the adult gatekeeper) might become more common.

In attempting to better understand how social actors construct meaning from within a particular milieu (in this case putting into practice what has been learned

on a degree programme) it followed that the data production methods chosen needed to be more suited to a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach. A qualitative approach lends itself towards production of the types of rich description and “reflective practice narratives” (Bolton, 2018, p. 80) that stand a chance of producing useful data. Data that explains how respondents are going about making sense of the topics about which the researcher is curious.

I was seeking data around language. The words and phrases graduates chose in response to my questions had the potential to inform my own understanding of the impact of teaching on their learning and their subsequent practice. How they explained key concepts was important to capture but also how they made connections between them. I was curious to learn how they made connections between the concepts and their own lives and practice. I was seeking data around understandings. I was seeking to understand for myself how graduates demonstrate their understanding of the topics under discussion, whether through conceptual explanation; through application to examples from practice, through use of metaphor or by other means. I had a good understanding of what they had been taught, especially my own inputs, but I wanted to discover what they were able to recall on the spot and why. This aspect led to what I came to refer to in my analysis as “modules and moments” - why certain modules were raised by respondents and not others. Also why specific taught sessions had “stuck” whereas others were beyond their immediate recall. I wanted to capture data around patterns. Did graduates recall the same modules or different ones? Were specific lecturers recalled more often than others or had specific lecturers become associated with certain topics in the minds of the graduates? Securing data around impact was key. What evidence would graduates provide about how learning on

the degree programme had impacted their decisions about practice, whether in terms of the macro-level of which jobs to apply for or the micro-level of reflecting in practice (Schon, 1995)? Did the ways that graduates constructed childhood lead them to apply for specific types of work and how had this played out once in post? In addition to data about what they understood, I was also seeking data about when certain concepts or phrases were raised. This was particularly the case in relation to rights. I deliberately held back from mentioning the concept until later in the interview schedule in order to discover who raised it first and in what context. If a rights-led praxis was central to how they understood their practice it seemed likely that they would resort to the concept early on in the process and vice-versa. Some factual data were also sought in order to help contextualise the responses to the main questions and potentially to explore linkages across a wider timeframe. This included gathering data around the time that had elapsed since graduation, relevant experience prior to starting the programme, posts held since graduation and, as a result of a suggestion made by the young people's reference group, motivations to study the programme in the first place. I was interested in body language. What did their physical response to the conversation suggest about their comfort and confidence in relation to the direction in which the discussion was heading? Were they able to express what they were meaning through body language (hand gestures etc.) as well as through their choice of words?

For the second cycle of data collection (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014) the nature of the data being sought held many aspects in common with the first cycle but with two very important distinctions. Firstly I was not seeking data in response to a common set of pre-prepared questions but in relation to a common set of themes.

These were the themes that had emerged out of the analysis of round one of data collection i.e. the first set of interviews. Secondly each interview was pre-shaped by individual responses from round one. This meant that the starting point for exploration was what each of the individuals selected for interview in round two had already contributed. In round one we had built something together from scratch, albeit shaped significantly by my pre-prepared questions. In round two we were able to retrace our steps back across what had been jointly constructed in round one. This altered the locus of the data collection process and allowed for a more bespoke approach shaped by the prior response of each individual. This embodied May's observation that, for these types of qualitative approaches, data are better understood as being produced rather than collected (May, 2011).

Depth over breadth had been a choice in round one and had helped to keep the number of questions down to just four primary topics. For round two, depth became even more of a priority. The round two interviews allowed for further, in-depth scrutiny of specific aspects of the data already captured in round one. The purpose being to expose insights that could not have emerged in round one where the priority had been on ensuring a good level of consistency between the interviews in order to secure comparative data. As a researcher, round two interviews felt considerably less constrained compared with round one. I was able to choose which aspects of the first interviews to re-explore based on my own judgement about which were most likely to shed further light on the emergent themes. For one respondent this allowed me to focus on a specific phrase they had used in response to the round one question about expertise. For another I was able to follow up why they had chosen to respond to an incident from practice in a particular way. This allowed data to emerge that, whilst highly bespoke, were

arguably more useful in relation to the core issue the research had aimed to address i.e. the impact of understanding on participation practice with children and young people.

4.8 Methods used

Coleman (2018), drawing on the work of Reason, Marshall and others, invites researchers using an AR methodology to pay attention to the broad range of ways in which data are collected across the course of any research project. She proposes a helpful division of these “multiple simultaneous attentions” (Marshall et al., 2011, p. 245 quoted in Coleman 2018, p. 159) into first, second and third person levels of focus. Coleman also encourages AR-based researchers undertaking research as part of a Professional Doctorate to consider their current focus in the context of a wider arc of action-focused research activity across a whole professional career. This includes the period before the current activity as well as what may come after it. Prior to taking up my current role as an academic I embraced the concept of career as a form of action research. As a young, inexperienced secondary school teacher I was persuaded that structural and situational factors rather than an inability to forge effective relationships with children and young people, lay behind my struggles to engage students in the classroom. The fact that I had previously developed excellent relationships with a diverse range of young people in several voluntary contexts helped. Within weeks of leaving formal education I had secured a paid post working with the same age group (and subsequently during one piece of work, the very same young people I had taught in the classroom) using an informal education philosophy and approach (Buchroth and Parkin, 2010; Smith, 2006). This was a role in which I thrived both personally and professionally. After several years of practice in this

context, an opportunity arose to explore whether such an approach could also be used to meaningfully engage young people labelled by the post-16 education and training sector in relation to their supposed distance from the labour market. My work in this field answered some questions but prompted new ones regarding the relative value placed on children and young people's voice and participation. My next appointment addressed these questions directly. This was achieved primarily by embedding an overtly rights-based philosophy that gave children and young people (with adult support) the power to decide how "every penny" of the project's budget would be spent. This conceptualisation of each separate post as sequential spirals of action research (Coleman, 2018) helps to weave a coherent thread through a diverse professional career and brought a level of congruence to my choice of action research as an underpinning methodology for my doctoral research.

Within the current spiral represented by this research, reflection and reflexivity have been used extensively to collect and analyse first-person level data. This included reflective writing compiled in relation to the assessment of taught modules of which the "pentimento" example described in the introductory chapter to this thesis is an example. Reflexive journaling has happened throughout and has been used extensively, alongside supervision, to "cultivate *critical* subjectivity" (Coleman, 2018, p. 159, emphasis in the original) in order to guard against the temptation to believe that my own "regime of truth" (Foucault, 2020) might be of greater inherent value than the regimes of others.

At the second-person level, the research involved two rounds of semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2012) lasting a maximum of 2 hours with eleven graduates (nine female and two male) of the Community and Youth Work BA (Honours)

degree programme at the University of Sunderland, all of whom I had taught for a minimum of three years. Four respondents had graduated just a few months prior to being interviewed. Others between two and five years. All except one were working in some form of practice related to their degree at the time of being interviewed although this had changed for some of the six selected for the second round of interviews. The detailed list of practice contexts is available at appendix one. It illustrates the range of settings that graduates progress into beyond qualification. It also serves to further justify the decision to choose a method for data collection that prioritised depth over breadth. Further levels of complexity might also have been included to illustrate, for instance, the range of organisational contexts encountered by graduates of the programme and the highly precarious nature of the funding and support arrangements that lie behind the posts they secure.

Attention was paid to generating the types of “communicative space” (Kemmis, 2013, p. 122) required to achieve a good level of collaboration, authenticity and the sense of co-enquiry (Heron and Reason, 2012) that the AR methodology invites. In most cases interviews were held at the respondent’s place of work where a suitable, confidential and uninterrupted space could be made available. In other cases interviews took place in booked spaces in hotels or on the University campus in accordance with the preference of each respondent. Graduates were sent briefing materials prior to the meeting and these have been made available at appendix 2). These materials aimed to establish a clear set of boundaries and parameters around the conversations including timings and confidentiality. They were also an attempt to initiate and “prime” the conversations so that a balance between focus and opportunities for emergence would be achieved (Coleman,

2018). This process of informal contracting was aided by the fact that all respondents had passed a final year dissertation module that had included an applied research task. In the majority of cases these had involved data collection using semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. This made it reasonable to assume that the level of understanding of respondents in relation to research purpose, methods and ethics was relatively high, enabling these aspects to be covered concisely during the interviews and leaving more time for the substantive discussion.

All interviews were digitally recorded capturing audio only. Video was actively considered given its capacity to capture a broader range of data in relation to body language. A decision was taken that, on balance, being videoed risked respondents feeling surveilled and could work against achievement of the type of authentic, communicative space desired. Instead I took several opportunities to deliberately expose significant instances of changes in body language or use of hand gestures during the interviews by mentioning these to respondents as I noticed them. This approach compensated for the absence of video and arguably went beyond it in ways that aligned more directly with the interpretive and emergent nature of the adopted methodology. Firstly it ensured that what had happened made it into the transcribing process and thus became data in itself. Secondly it honoured the commitment to a subjective process of meaning-making and the social construction of knowledge as is implied by the stance and methodology adopted. Having placed my own meaning on a hand gesture or change of look by a respondent (through verbalising it as potentially significant) I then provided them with an opportunity to construct their own interpretation (including the opportunity to dismiss my interpretation as irrelevant). This was also captured on

the audio recording and therefore the subsequent transcription. This was done in a deliberate attempt to embrace opportunities to draw hermeneutic analysis into the research in order to further enhance the quality of the findings alongside my own growth as a researcher.

Audio recordings were transcribed using a combination of digital software and meticulous “tidying up” to account for transcription errors. This was particularly important in relation to respondents with strong accents and who spoke in local dialect which, in this case, was the majority.

For the first round of data collection the questions used to structure the interviews (see appendix 2) had been generated through a series of conversations with supervisors and with the young people's reference group. Whilst each was addressed during all the interviews, the sequence by which they were asked and the time spent on each was varied to enable the time spent together to feel less like a question and answer session and more like a fluid, yet structured conversation. This required skill and concentration on my part in being able to gently lead the conversations back to unanswered questions whilst also leaving space to explore topics of interest that arose organically. The introductory questions were designed to capture key contextual data but also to set the conversational tone for the type of exchange being sought. They provided an early opportunity for me to express my genuine interest in learning what each individual had been involved with since graduating or since I had last been in contact with them. They also helped respondents relate to me as their former tutor and as someone who has a genuine interest in their life journey, rather than seeing me as an external researcher simply wanting answers to my questions in order to progress my own research. I was prepared for the introductory questions to either sit separately

from the substantive questions or for them to lead directly into the substantive conversation I was seeking to promote.

The questions for round two, as described earlier in this chapter, emerged from the thematic analysis of round one, although again these had been influenced by inputs from supervisors and from the young people's reference group. The aim in this second round was to place the emergent themes in front of some of the people who had helped create them. This was done in order to explore the salience of the themes from their perspective, focusing on one in particular. I had prepared several diagrams to share with the respondents that aimed to secure focus on this aspect. This framework also provided opportunities to focus on specific topics, phrases or moments from their own round one interview that related to the emergent themes and especially to the one I was most keen to focus on. Each of the second round interviews thus had some aspects in common and others that were bespoke, enabling greater depth and focus.

The transcribed interviews from round one were stored, coded and analysed with the help of the Quirkos qualitative data management and analysis software tool (*Quirkos*, no date). In its advertising Quirkos breaks down the assistance it provides to qualitative researchers into three main functions. Firstly digital storage of large amounts of data in a way that aids easy access and retrieval. Secondly, the capacity to store a framework of codes based on categories generated by the researcher and to enable these codes to be linked hierarchically through the use of sub-categories. Although the software can only reflect the capacity of the researcher to read through all of their data and use their judgement to generate codes that authentically emerge out of the data, the primary advantage of the codes being held by the software is its capacity to hold and

simultaneously represent many more categories (plus the links the researcher has made between them) compared with a human. Having stored the whole data set and the categorised codes, the third and primary function of the software is to enable the researcher to link the two by going through the whole data set in detail and linking selected sections (in my case sentences from the transcribed interviews) to specific codes. Once linked or “tagged” in this way these data are represented on the screen as different sized “quirks” or nodes of linked data. Because each separate code and sub-category is given a different colour by the software, this allows for easy visual distinction between codes and between codes of different sizes. Other views allow the links between codes and their hierarchical relationship to be represented. An example of the visual presentation of quirks and categories generated by this research is provided at appendix 3.

The process of meticulously linking the data to the initial set of codes that had been generated required new codes to be named. This process of “to’ing and fro’ing” between the data and attempts to code and categorise it in some meaningful way, reflects the complexity of using conversation as data (Charmaz, 2102) and is perhaps a necessary aspect of any inductive process that genuinely allows themes to almost identify themselves rather than deductive approaches where themes are decided up front and effectively imposed upon the data (Bryman 2012). This unnerving process of expansion continued through the next stage as analysis of each of the 36 separate quirks produced a plethora of emergent themes to the point where the process began to feel overwhelming. Fortunately this was replaced at the following stage by a process of contraction as it became clear that the multiple themes under each quirk could be reasonably

condensed down to just three main themes that would form the focus for the second (and final) round of data collection.

Third-person engagements can be divided into two aspects. Firstly the impacts that have already generated change within the degree programme for which I am programme leader. The course of the research has coincided with a period of significant change for the programme including the design and launch of a new degree-level apprenticeship in Community and Youth Work, a re-writing of the overall curriculum and a shift towards the delivery of fewer, larger and higher credit-bearing modules over the three year programme (down from six per annum to four). The new curriculum foregrounds several aspects that were previously embedded but which now shape the learning more overtly. This includes a more overt focus on reflection and reflexivity, on the teaching of oppression and emancipation and around rights and participation. Aspects of leadership and self-leadership which had previously been the focus of the final year of study have been brought forward into the second year to give students more time to absorb these concepts and develop the disciplines that they encourage. As an example at level five (normally the second year of study) separate modules covering organisational management and social policy have been absorbed into a new, single module titled “Leadership for Emancipation” that is taught across the whole of the academic year. All aspects of theory and practice are taught with a view to the development of an emancipatory praxis on the part of each student. Two formal assessments focus firstly on reflection, authenticity and the concept of the “true self” and secondly on the application of a rights-based, participative response to an ethical leadership dilemma through a practice-based case study that embeds the neoliberal constraints typical of the field. This module and the pedagogical

approach that informs the way it is taught directly addresses the findings from this research in relation to the core, emancipatory purpose of community and youth work and its application in real situations beyond the academy.

A further, direct outcome of the research is the recent decision to pilot the provision of non-managerial supervision to new graduates in an attempt to address the practice-based isolation identified in the research findings.

Discussions have been initiated aimed at resourcing this as a permanent offer to graduates of the programme.

The second way in which the research aims to engage at the wider, third-person level is via its plan for post-doctoral dissemination. This will involve engagement internally at the University of Sunderland (contributions to lecture series, faculty conferences and knowledge exchange across the institution) and externally via my community of practice and professional association. It will also include submission of articles for publication and book chapters. Engagement with the field of practice will ensure that findings related to the organisational implications of the research will be disseminated. Post-doctoral research will involve further exploration of curriculum changes within the community and youth work field to reflect what has been learned and enquiry into the extent to which other degree-level, initial professional training programmes address the gaps between intention and delivery in relation to children and young people's participation and rights. This will include teacher training, social work and professional policing - all of which is delivered from within my current faculty.

It is envisaged that dissemination will represent the dispersed approach described by Gustavsen (2020) where influence and change are achieved via multiple, low

level engagements over a period of time rather than naively assuming that a single event or publication is likely to bring about significant shifts in understanding or practice. There will also be further opportunities to work alongside children and young people involved with Investing in Children (Investing in Children, no date, 1), possibly even some from the young people's reference group if they choose to remain involved. Feeding back my results to the young people's reference group is likely to prompt further suggestions for related research that could either combine or run in parallel, as has already happened with this research.

4.9 Co-research and co-production in data collection and the young people's reference group

Co-production and co-research as a method within an overall action research approach (Grundy, 1987) also provide a level of internal and external congruency to the research design and are directly aligned with the philosophical stance of the research. They exemplify research as an exploration of how human actors, including the researcher, construct the social world together as partners, rather than as separate, objectified beings. They also align directly with my own practice in the field, my current work as an academic and with the action research methodology selected. The requirement that children and young people are engaged in a genuine dialogue (Habermas in Pusey, 1987) about their lives and that meaningful change results from such dialogue is a central tenet of the emancipatory stance on which this research is founded, as is the conviction that children and young people be regarded as experts in knowing and articulating what would most make a difference to their lives (Murriss, 2013). This being the case, it was fundamental to the credibility of the research that the direct voices of young people were included in its design. This was achieved via the establishment of the young people's reference group. Shenton (2018) drawing on the work of

Lundy and McEvoy, makes the important point that children and young people should be included in the design and delivery of research not simply because they have the capacity to contribute; because their input will enhance the quality of the research or because it assures congruence with researcher values and stance but because, quite simply, it is their right:

“ when children are viewed as rights-holders they are not just recognised as able but also entitled to be engaged in this process, with a concomitant duty on the adults working with them to ensure that their right to express their views and influence their own lives is respected.”

(Shenton, 2018, p.127)

Making a reality of this right in respect of my own research was facilitated by my relationship with Investing in Children (IiC) (Investing in Children, no date, 1), a locally-based children’s rights initiative with whom I had been engaged at a range of levels for many years. Careful consideration was given to the ethics, safeguarding, conflicts of interest and practicalities of engaging with the IiC staff and with the children and young people the organisation had engaged. This was especially important given my role as a non-executive director of IiC at the time. Following these deliberations a decision was made to approach an already existing group of children and young people who had named themselves the IiC “research” group. The group involved children and young people connected with separate IiC project groups (Investing in Children, no date, 2) who had come together to explore a common interest in research around children and young people’s voice and rights.

Over the course of the research a diverse group of seventeen different children and young people were involved. This included a range of genders and different gender identifications within an age range from approximately eight to twenty

years. Individuals were involved across the full range of IiC project groups (see appendix four) and attended or had attended a wide range of different schools and other educational institutions from across County Durham. IiC engages children and young people from a wide range of socioeconomic, racial, cultural and religious backgrounds and strives to extend its reach into minority and oppressed groups wherever possible. This includes paying an allowance and travel expenses to the children and young people who get involved with the project groups as a means of reducing financial barriers to engagement and acknowledging their democratic contribution.

Engagement with the group involved me visiting them at the IiC base in Durham. This was vital to establishing a relationship in which it was unequivocally clear that they held the power in the room and not me. At the first meeting I was a visitor and a stranger to most of the children and young people in the group, although two of them I had met before as fellow non-executive directors on the IiC Board of Governors. Meeting them in a place and space with which they were already familiar and with which they identified positively, aimed to consolidate their sense of having genuine options. It was my job at the first meeting to present them with an opportunity to be involved with my research. It was entirely their decision as to whether they took up the opportunity. I made it clear to them that there were no consequences to them whatsoever if their decision was to say “no” and that if this turned out to be the only time we would meet, I was grateful for them having given me their time and attention. Fortunately they said “yes” and this led to a series of meetings (six in total) across the course of the research.

Each time I met the group the membership had changed. This required me to strike a balance at each new meeting between describing the research and its current status in sufficient detail so that, on the one hand, new members would be able to make informed contributions. On the other hand I was conscious that members of the group who had been at previous meetings would not appreciate listening again to the introduction and summary they had heard before. In addition my time with the group was always relatively short (30-45 minutes maximum). They had other, on-going projects requiring decisions before the end of their meeting. Summarising months of complex doctoral research in a few sentences, alongside outlining a specific focus for their contributions in each new meeting was challenging. Appendix Four provides examples of how pre-prepared written material was shared with the group in an attempt to achieve the balance required.

On reflection I need not have worried. The experience of working with the group, despite its flexible membership, re-confirmed everything I had learned about working with children and young people during my time as a practitioner. Their acuity was remarkable. Complex and nuanced issues that I could easily have spent an hour trying to explain were understood in seconds. Their capacity to select only what they needed from my inputs in order to get quickly to the nub of whatever ethical or methodological issue I had introduced and to suggest ways forward was breathtaking at times. As a result I came away from each meeting with the answers I needed from them in order to make progress in the wider research but also re-invigorated by their enthusiasm for what I was seeking to explore and re-convinced of its relevance to their lives.

It is argued in this thesis that a wasteful focus is placed by the participation industry on “training” children and young people how to participate. The evident capacity of the individual children and young people involved with the reference group supports this critique. Whilst it is reasonable to assume that these children and young people were perhaps more confident in engaging with an adult such as myself as a result of their prior involvement in liC project groups and agenda days™ (Investing in Children, no date, 1), this does not equate to them having been “trained” and does not justify an argument that they should have been trained in some way. At no point does the liC approach involve training children and young people. To do so would contradict philosophy and value base that sees children and young people as expert knowers regardless of adult prejudices and preconceptions of their capacity. Children and young people already know how the social world is shaped and they have clear ideas about how it might be re-shaped more fairly and more justly. The argument of this thesis is that it is adults who need to be trained to listen without prejudice in order to overcome the epistemic injustices done to children and young people, rather than children and young people who need training in how to share their testimonies.

A similar argument applies in relation to the capacity of this particular group of children and young people to somehow impartially represent the perspective of a more universal group. It is the argument of this thesis that the emphasis placed upon these aspects of participation reflects the problem that the research aimed to address, rather than a reason for doubting the credibility or reliability of the co-productive research methodology itself. At no point does the research attempt to

claim that the young people's reference group was either representative or impartial. The individuals involved represented themselves alone. Their responses to the issues that were placed in front of them no doubt reflected a wide range of individual influences and personal biases resulting from prior experience and individual sensibilities - as would be the case with any group of children and young people. Their involvement with the research happened neither through election nor selection, other than they had selected themselves onto the liC research group. They happened to be an existing group to which I was able to negotiate access and, fortunately, they happened to be interested in helping me conduct my research. Their inputs were no more valid than any other group, nor any less valid. The fact that they were involved in a long-established organisation that has robust mechanisms in place to promote fair access provides some reassurance that they did not represent a single interest group or a very narrow stratum of society. The fact that they could theoretically have been "more" representative is also true but does not render their testimonies invalid for the purposes of this research.

The contribution of the group across the course of the research was significant. In the initial stages they helped to confirm that a focus on the attitudes of professionals working with children and young people was warranted (see appendix 5 a). This was based on their own experiences with teachers, social workers, staff in the care system, the police and others. They helped reshape and extend the questions used in the first round of data collection and subsequently helped me to analyse initial findings (see appendix five b). After consideration of the themes that had emerged from these interviews they also helped to appraise

options for further research, resulting in the decision to re-approach selected graduates from round one. Our conversations also helped the group to think through their own priorities, resulting in a decision to pursue their own piece of research with school teachers. In this sense the “co-production” approach was able to work both ways, reflecting the quality of the discourse that was present during the meetings.

These aspects of co-production and co-research also informed the approach to interviewing, taking maximum advantage of the direct and on-going engagement methods opened up by an action research approach that embraces opportunities to do research “*with* people, not *on* them...an emergent process rather than fully planned in advance” (Coleman, 2018, p.156, emphasis in the original).

4.10 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter accounts for the methodological choices made in the design and delivery of the research. It has sought to justify these choices using a systematic, reflexive approach that reveals the necessary alignment between key research elements in order to demonstrate that the outcomes of the research are ethically justifiable, safe, credible, valid and academically rigorous. It has been transparent about the nature of the judgements being used to claim new knowledge and worthwhile contribution, as is expected of doctoral level research. The following chapter presents the findings that emerged from the adoption of this methodology.

Chapter Five: Findings

Chapter Structure

5. Introduction

5.1 Round one themes:

- **Journeys to emancipatory praxis**
 - Diversity of starting points on application
 - Backgrounds
 - Motivations
 - Consistency of ending points on graduation
 - Childhoods not childhood
 - Expertise not experts
 - Voice, participation (and rights)
- **Modules, moments, processes**
 - Teaching through lives
- **Transitions and transformations**
 - First transition: Becoming a student

- Second transition: Emancipatory praxis
- Third transition: Tokenism and isolation

Section 5.2 Round two themes:

- **Contexts for meaningful participation**
 - Rich and promoting/stick and change
 - Poor and constraining/move or quit
 - Isolation
 - Supported versus unsupported transitions

Section 5.3 Conclusion

5. Introduction

This chapter details the findings from both rounds of interviews with the selected graduates. The findings are represented in relation to the themes and sub-themes that emerged from analysis of the responses to the questions prepared and the dialogues that took place within the interviews. Each theme is supported with examples from the data.

5.1 Round one themes

Journeys to emancipatory praxis

Data revealed the capacity of the degree programme to support students through a complex journey of growth and transformation that directly mirrors the journeys of transformation and change they are expected to deliver alongside children and

young people once in practice. This section explores the nature of this journey in relation to the diverse starting points of applicants by background and motivation. It then evidences the capacity of the programme to work with and from these diverse starting points to bring students to a place where there is a significant level of consistency by the end of the three years. This consistency in levels of knowledge and understanding is exposed via presentation of graduate responses to the key concepts introduced in the interviews namely childhood, expertise, participation and rights.

Diversity of starting points on application

- Backgrounds

Relevant experience prior to starting the programme was diverse. For some this was minimal, such as having completed a short, voluntary placement in a relevant setting or having cared for a sibling with additional needs. Some had limited prior experience such as sustained work with children and young people but not in a relevant setting. Being care experienced was relevant in one case. Three graduates had come from successful careers in finance, sales and marketing. These graduates were clear about what they had given up and excited about what they hoped to gain by choosing to switch. Five graduates had substantial experience in relevant settings. This included paid work or parents being employed in the sector. Parental influence featured strongly when graduates were given the opportunity to say something about the journey that had resulted in them applying to study on the programme.

“It was like such a negative experience for us at that time (childhood). And I always felt like, because I had quite a lot of issues. I mean, I have parents who have mental health issues. I've

grew up in abusive households, things like that. To me, that was really a negative journey.”

(P01)

“I became the chairperson of (a local branch of a national youth organisation), so I'm 16 years old. So we basically...we were a young person's co-operative...we were a bit of a different...and we basically got a building in (local park)...which was our space...until when the council took the building off us.

At one point I became the safeguarding officer for a local (sports) club... So I always had stuff with young people.

I had a very open upbringing, where I was encouraged to make decisions about everything from where I wanted to go to school, you know, where I wanted, what I wanted to do outside of school, like, what I wanted to wear, everything was my decision. And that was encouraged.

I think I must have been about nine. I decided that I wasn't wearing a school uniform anymore. And, you know, that was my decision and my dad (single parent) was like, alright, cool, do what you want. You get put in a room and you can't be around other students because you're not wearing a uniform, you know. I remember being pulled out of this exclusion room and shouted at because my dad had written a three page letter about my rights to the school...as I say, I've had a very different upbringing to a lot of people...and I think that probably shaped me in what I do now.”

(P02)

“Well, I started a youth club on the camp (army camp abroad where parent was posted as a soldier) because I got annoyed with the camp commander. Because he started a youth club. It was for 16-18 year olds. And I was 11. And I was like, why?...We haven't got one, that's not fair. So I went round my class at school and there was loads interested so I went back to him: “There you go” ...That was an opportunity to start. They asked us what we wanted and we made it happen.

I think it's because in the schools for the military...they were really open and listening to young people. And like, on any level.

You felt like you were something...like you had an opinion, even at 11 years old when I was going to like senior school (army-run). It

was still like your voice was heard. And then when I came back to England (into a non-military-run school), it was like...what is this?...So I would express myself all the time as I do. And they (teachers/pupils in English senior school) were like: "Be quiet, be quiet". And I just found it really hard to deal with."

(M01)

"...my mum's always been involved in community and youth work. She started an action group, with the local community because the place where I lived it was big in deprivation. There wasn't a lot of funding coming towards us. There wasn't much opportunities at all for anyone. There was a lot of crime, a lot of antisocial behaviour, and a lot of negative press from newspapers. So my Mum got together with another bunch of people and they set up this action group.

I kind of volunteered when I was younger. So from being quite young, I got a responsibility to help out. It wasn't a big responsibility but I kind of heard about the stuff that my mum needed to do such as meetings, speak to the local community, questionnaires, find out people's voices of kind of what would they want in the local community.

...growing up, I went to youth clubs and the youth workers were always...my experience of youth workers were shouting, telling you what to do...So you always got shouted at. I got told I was not allowed to play in the sports area because I'm a girl. By a youth worker...So I would be like, well, where do I fit in a youth club? Because I don't do hair. I don't do make up. I don't want to draw. I don't want to colour-in. You know, that's not my thing.

I came from doing Business and Admin., which I didn't like whatsoever. It wasn't me at all. So, and then I done an apprenticeship in a local community centre...Business and Admin. And then I was like, Oh, you've got a youth club and they said "do fancy doing a shift?" Oh, yeah, and I loved it. Wow, this is what I want.

So yeah, so obviously just, it's basically for me, it was just giving them (young people who had been excluded from the youth club by the other workers) the power and giving them the choice of what they wanted to do.

I mean, I didn't understand it. I didn't understand what I was doing, I didn't know what I was doing. And I didn't understand that I was fighting for young people at that time. It was just quite natural.”

(M02)

“I came from very much a working class background, I moved into a middle class area whilst we moved down here, just because of the opportunity for my dad, but I still always felt...I did have impostor syndrome for years because of that. I hated, hated living where we lived. Because I just thought everyone was too posh...I don't think I was pushed by the education system to actually go into further education, go to college and the rest of it. And I don't know whether that's because I was white. Not necessarily white but I think it's because I was working class and a female, probably.

I didn't have the encouragement from mum and dad. Because they didn't go to university.

I started charity work (after a significant life trauma and whilst working in sales)...I thought, actually, you know, I could be doing something a bit different with my life...right, okay, I'm gonna actually change my career. Like, that's how much of an influence it had on us...working with vulnerable people in the food bank and the soup kitchen, you start to notice that things are not right. Because people shouldn't be having to use them really.”

(M03)

“Before I started the course, I didn't actually have very much experience working with young people...I had...spent a lot of time with (relative with additional needs) and that sort of shaped my knowledge of where young people were at in general. Interactions with younger members of the public around the place that I used to work in xxxx, but that was about it.”

(M04)

“I had a very, shall we say, liberal upbringing. I was surrounded by adults who listened. They didn't just kind of....it wasn't tokenistic, I had conversations with adults that I remember that I learned an awful lot from. But then as I grew up, and went into senior school, and then into work, I was in working environments on my own and away from these people. And I spent an awful lot of time with adults who were trained and paid an awful lot of money to work with children and young people who *did not* listen to them. They didn't listen to them and therefore they didn't care, to me, about who that

child grew up to be or how that child was going to view or place themselves in the world as they became adults.”

(M05)

“My education background is at A’ level where even at GCSE level, I stopped taking social sciences and humanities and at A’ level I did biology, chemistry, physics, and maths. So I hadn’t really been exposed to the psychological theory or sociology or that kind of education at all other than being a student, a learner, and that kind of passive learning from it.

That (work experience prior to the course) was predominantly in the care sector. Working in specialized care homes for high need young people with challenging behavior and additional needs.”

(M06)

“Yes, so when I left school, I went to sixth form and took an A’ level in health and social care. That didn't work out. So I went to college and done a BTech in health and social and then whilst I was there, I done a placement with young carers in xxxxx. So although it wasn't paid experience, I was still working with young people.”

(M07)

“I grew up with very racist parents. So I grew up with that. I left my childhood with racist language in my head, but I didn't know where that'd come from.

I blamed myself for my experience of school, everyone else did fine, my siblings did fine. I thought the problem was me and school just didn't work for me.

So I had come out of supported accommodation, myself. And had started to volunteer within supported accommodation, doing some setting up of youth work sort of thing and volunteering, and then looked at career options and went to college to do youth work. It was an access course to higher education. So I did a couple of placements like detached and outreach youth work, mainly for xxxx (detached youth work project).”

(M09)

“I had a really good childhood. I grew up mum and dad together. Brother, house, holidays every year. Mum and dad both worked. Mum was always in for us when we got in from school or took us to

school. She worked while we were at school. Dad worked full time. And so I never really had to go anywhere after school. I was always in the safety of my own home with my brother. Had a street where we had lots of friends in the street and I just had a lot of family round us. Nana, I've still got my Nana now. Just a lot of family with a lot of cousins as well. I was really, really lucky.

I didn't really have much (experience) before I started. I'd worked for a bank for 10 years...selling 125% mortgages. And then when the recession hit...I went from selling these mortgages to then helping people who were in financial difficulty because I'd sold them a mortgage they couldn't afford...Women who were in the home through domestic violence, people who had terminal illnesses...And it took a young person that asked me what qualifications I had and I was like, I haven't really got any. I only had GCSE's. And that was it...I went home and started to think about my life. It was unbelievable. And I remember thinking, "what am I going to do?" And it took us a year to do it. Because I mean, confidence was really low...So I've done an access course for over a year and applied for social work but didn't get on that and thought "I'll go for the community and youth work one instead."

(M10)

"One of the most important things I think, for me, about the course was that it's so diverse, it's not the same type of people. It is so diverse, just even the age range. The reach of it being a very Northeast dominated course as well. You know, the students, particularly where they come from, you know, they've come from the same area in life as me but their lives have been so different."

(P02)

- Motivations

Motivations for studying the programme provided by graduates were equally diverse. Some had questions to which they were seeking answers such as the difference between what they considered to be ethical work with children and young people compared with work aimed at meeting pre-established outputs. Some had prior experiences they wished to explore in more depth such as

unhappy times whilst at school. These had left them curious about alternative approaches to education and whether a different approach might have produced a different outcome for them and therefore also for the children and young people they hoped to work with. Some were keen to help others avoid the negative experiences they had been subject to as children and young people. Conversely others were motivated to replicate the significant support they had received during difficult times at home, whilst in care or at school/college. Some had hopes and desires they hoped the programme would satisfy such as the desire to see social justice done and inequalities addressed.

“I worked in a marketing department in xxxx and my commute every day, I saw a lot of young people and then it sort of made me think why? Why did they behave in that way? What has gone on in their life to be in that situation that they were in? I've walked past the methadone clinic, that's in xxxx as well. And also the fact of sort of like, the job that I had wasn't fulfilling, wasn't making me happy. The money I was making wasn't worth sort of...I wasn't like, the way I sort of put it at the time was like, my bank account was fulfilled, but like, my soul sort of wasn't. And that was the main reason why I think I wanted to go on to the (degree) course. I think at the time, I think I'd probably say that I wanted to make a difference.”

(M04)

“But then obviously, my journey into a youth work degree was totally different in that I didn't apply for a youth work degree from my first year...So I went and did (other degree) for a year. And then everything was pulling me back to youth work. So I transferred on to a youth work degree after a year.”

(P02)

“And I was just like, this is just not right (people having to use food banks). So anyway, I went off and did social work access and really kind of like, knew that was kind of...I thought that was the kind of route I wanted to do.

I turned up at the social work, interviews/open day and xxxx was there (community and youth work tutor)...And then I didn't know that (community and youth work) was even a course... I didn't even

know that that existed. And I was like, actually, that's more me than that (social work). And I think simply because I think there was just... it felt more warmer, and less sort of legal. And that's why I thought, actually community and youth work is maybe more suited to me."

(M03)

"I think probably just personal life. So growing up in a, like, an abusive household maybe, and feeling the need to help other young people.

I had applied for social work, but I didn't get in. So then I got offered youth work. And I wasn't too sure. So I ended up coming up to the uni and having like a meeting with (tutor) and just talk a bit about the modules, and then decided to give it a go. And now I realise that that was the best route. And I don't think I would have actually been happier, maybe stuck if I had done social work. Because I feel like this has opened more doors than what that would have."

(M07)

"And so what I was doing (working as a social and emotional wellbeing lead in a primary school) was more battling with myself at that time, because I knew that it wasn't really kind of how I wanted to be working with children...I had a kind of...was surrounded by an informal education upbringing (parents both youth workers and youth work educators) and then worked in a formal education setting, and then I chose to come out of that."

(M05)

"...it was just built inside of us to do that. And I always wanted to... like I was in a really bad relationship when I was younger. And I kind of wanted to use my experience of that relationship as well. To help people. Yeah."

(M10)

"I'd had a good experience of support work. And I just knew that my support worker, xxxx, had made a huge difference to me. And that's the only kind of dream that I went with. I wanted to help someone how I had been supported. But how I went about that, it was just by chance that I had found the university course and it became more of a profession for me, other than just a job, sort of thing."

(M09)

“So I always had these questions in my head, I just didn't know there was an answer out there.”

(P01)

These data reflect the commitment of programme leaders to a set of values and beliefs that stem directly from the theory and practice of critical pedagogy that underpins the programme as a whole. These same values are manifest in the public commitment made by the programme that literally anyone who applies to study on the programme will be interviewed, regardless of whether they have reached the minimum threshold of UCAS points (*Choose your future / UCAS*, no date) required). In this way the programme manifests its commitment to testimonial justice (Fricker, 2018), the right of applicants to have their testimony heard and considered, regardless of background or the specific nature of their prior experience. It mirrors the central values of community and youth work practice that will be taught, even before an application to study has begun. Central to critical pedagogy is a critique of traditional forms of schooling. Ensuring that the programme is potentially accessible to applicants whose experiences of schooling have not been enriching and who have not accumulated the traditional tokens of academic achievement becomes a potential starting point in an individual journey towards emancipatory praxis, rather than a reason for rejection by the academy. Several graduates described their very first contact with programme staff in transformational terms.

“I wouldn't even have gone there. I don't think so. I think the course literally, I think, even from the very, very first stages...I think it's probably where you actually look at your own transition, I think, amazing. I think that really helps to actually understand where you are at that moment in time. And how actually that identity is not necessarily...it's not set.”

(M03)

Consistency of ending points at graduation

The data revealed how the programme is able to build on the varied starting points of students in ways that successfully challenge conditioned, dominant and discriminatory ways of constructing meaning in relation to the social world more generally and to children and young people in particular. Graduates provided consistent testimony as to the transformative impact of the programme, how it had secured paradigmatic shifts in their thinking on key topics related to the potential delivery of meaningful participation via forms of emancipatory praxis. They also provided evidence of their knowledge and understanding of key concepts - regardless of prior knowledge of such concepts. Even those who began the programme ahead of others in terms of understanding and experience were still able to provide evidence of how the programme had helped them further confront, unpick, expand and develop their knowledge and understanding.

- Childhoods not childhood

Graduates were able to consistently articulate how the meanings they had ascribed to the concept of childhood at the start of the programme had been shaped almost exclusively by their individual childhood experiences, both good and bad. They identified specific influencers; milieux; school experiences and class as significant in this respect. Even though these experiences had left them with questions about themselves and the social world more generally, they had assumed that how they understood childhood was the only way it could be understood. From an epistemological perspective they had regarded the concept as fixed. Viewed from the perspective of critical pedagogy, at the start of the programme they had not regarded it as a concept that was contestable or open to being problematised in

any way. In contrast graduates described how they now understood childhood as a highly contested, fluid and fundamentally constructed concept.

Graduates consistently articulated a view that in understanding childhood as multiple, as having a different meaning for each person, this led to the conclusion that the concept of “childhoods” was more helpful for them as practitioners. The shift to understanding the concept as fluid rather than fixed had enabled them to re-narrate their own childhoods. They were able to articulate that they now realised how things could and, in some cases, should have been done differently. This new-found capacity to re-narrate their own childhoods was described as highly significant by several graduates. It appeared to have been a key process in the journey towards emancipatory praxis. By seeing how their own childhood could have been different they were then able to see how they could contribute to making the childhoods of the children and young people they were working with different in turn. This represents a powerful shift: At the start of the programme understanding the social world as fixed and therefore not subject to change. By the end of their three year journey seeing it instead as constructed and therefore open to being re-constructed, including by themselves.

“Childhood is not universal in its experience and the way people experience it. I think it also speaks to the fact that if you want to use childhood, it's important that you define it in the terms of how you mean it, and you plan to use it when you're talking about childhood. So there's that clear understanding because it can be made differently.”

(M06)

“... it's because of that direct link from everything to childhood and my own childhood traumas and relevance to you. Yeah, it just sparks a huge passion in me. And so every module that I did, I kind of had my own kind of perception of what the module would be, but then was mind blown with what I'd learned from it, in that it was

just like connecting the dots...there's plenty of modules that, you know, talked about, like what we should have had at school and the education that we should have had, I mean, political education, I knew nothing until the course really”

(M09)

“Yeah, it was for me, like, you know, I felt like I finally understood everything that was like building up from the different modules that we did, and how you can, like, free your mind from thinking of, like, it's always me, why is it always me?”

(P01)

“...it's looking beyond just the individual and looking into their context. Okay. And their kind of contexts, socio economic, cultural, and understanding how that might affect those more immediately and the role that plays or how that affects our own interpretation of that young person.”

...we, not necessarily reject but we stray away from the more clearly defineable, measurable tangibles such as age, physical development. And we look, I think, more holistically. We do take those (tangibles) into account but I think we look very much more through a social lens, and on an individual basis of that young person. And I think that approach to it...versus that more pragmatic and definite approach, leaves more not open, but a kind of a wider, broader definition that works on a more individual basis than a broad stroke that is applied to all.

And then when looking at that young person, it's that understanding of different lenses is something that I didn't expect, when it first came. And then through the course I've learned to kind of understand that interplay. And that it is more complex than what we first looked at in the videos.

I found that interesting, the cultural process in the way that people experienced childhood is very geographical and social based. There's a strong link there and that really formed how I interpret childhood.”

(M06)

“...unpicking those small things from my childhood kind of gave me the experience and practice to then unpick the bigger stuff.

(M09)

“Their opinions are as important as mine (children and young people’s). Their outlook on life is as important as mine. And I don't want to be someone that tells them what to do. I want to be someone that helps them make the decisions on what they want to do. Whereas maybe the teaching staff (at an FE College where the graduate had worked since qualifying) wanted them to do exactly what they wanted immediately. And when they didn't do that they were belittled, maybe, you know, shouted at. Treat (as in “treated”) very much like “you are less than” I think it was. A lot of the time, there was not the level of respect as a person that I thought that the young person deserved.

I don't know what their opinion was (the teaching staff). But I think that if they had the same opinion as me on childhood, and the same sort of outlook on what childhood is then they might not have behaved the way that they did towards young people.”

(P02)

“How people make sense of childhood is mainly determined by their own experience of it. Like you call that a chair but I might call it a stool – people make sense of things through their own perspective and experiences.”

(M02)

- Expertise not experts

Graduates deconstructed the concept of expert through the lens of power, authority and seniority. This further evidenced their understanding of critical theory. They saw “expert” as a loaded concept that denotes “better than” and as fixed, inflexible. This mirrored how they had responded to the concept of childhood. They associated expert with particular types of knowledge and knowing, primarily scientific and narrow. One graduate was comfortable with the idea of being referred to as an expert in their chosen hobby (dog breeds) but not comfortable with the idea of being referred to as an expert in youth work, despite holding the professional qualification, a university degree in the subject and several years experience in the field. This was explained in relation to the importance of being responsive to the needs and contexts of children and young people which, unlike dog breeds, were understood as constantly changing and

difficult to predict. Another key aspect shared by this graduate was the need for community and youth workers to understand themselves as generalists rather than specialists and to understand their knowledge-base as fleeting and momentary in order to counter the risk of complacency. Becoming complacent risked losing touch with children and young people. Another graduate emphasised the contextual nature of the concept. In one meeting they saw themselves as a novice, in another the expert. Several graduates made links with reflection and the importance of reflexivity, associating the fixed nature of being an “expert” with an unwillingness to change one’s view as a result of reflection. One graduate shared a journey of shifting understanding on the notion of the expert in relation to management and managers. Originally they had understood managers to be experts purely on the basis of hierarchical status but this had changed on realising that, in many aspects, managers knew less than they did and regularly acted in ways they considered to be incompetent and counter-productive.

Expertise, in contrast, was understood in a highly favourable light. Graduates understood expertise as inhering the flexibility and humility that was absent in “expert”. Expertise was positively associated with being at a specific place on a spectrum of knowledge and understanding on any given topic at any one time (based on prior learning and experience to that point) yet always being open to the opportunity of learning more. New learning or experience helps movement along the spectrum but, unlike, expert, no end or fixed point can ever be reached.

Graduates made links between expertise and concepts of empowerment, inclusion and voice. Acknowledging the generally unacknowledged expertise of care experienced children and young people was seen as helping to ensure that their voices get heard and their knowledge respected, leading to opportunities to

overcome oppression as they become more confident in the value of their skills and knowledge. Children and young people having their testimony respected was understood as allowing them to re-define themselves as possessors of valuable expertise. This sense of personal agency was then seen as a key factor in prompting action.

Graduates were able to articulate an understanding of expertise as being internally constructed by individuals by and for themselves and via a process. This was juxtaposed with “expert” which they regarded as an externally verified and imposed construct. They shared how the programme had helped them to value how they constructed themselves as having a level of expertise, regardless of the labels that others might attempt to impose upon them.

“Those processes that are explicit and synonymous with academia, and with say, I guess, formally acknowledged intellectuals, such as professionals and academics, I think now, I think first that's how I would have understood expertise. And now having gone through the course I would accept and acknowledge that is also a part of it. That idea of organic intellectuals and people being experts in their own lives and my understanding of expertise is an endeavour and a process and it can get more broad than that.

I think prior to study, I would have looked more perhaps at the pragmatic, the idea of expertise, expert power, especially in those kinds of concepts of power. And hegemony, which is perhaps a point in the learning where I've come to understand and change my understanding, but being about the position you hold, and the authority you have and you're looked at by others, okay, and that sense of it. Whereas now, for me, expertise is something that people, everyone I think, really has the ability to have expertise.

I think it's having a stake in that, or being at a certain point of that journey, where you become competent to independently and collectively kind of, critically reflect and come to your own conclusions and with clarity and reasoning behind it.

I would be hesitant to call myself an expert, even though I think rightly so I could, I would more and currently jump to expertise, a strong expertise.”

(M06)

“Expert. So, expertise. Is anyone really an expert?”

(M03)

“The concept of being an expert...it's like quite a negative underlying tone with it.

I felt, like, I finally had a voice to be able to say, well, hang on, this is my understanding, and I know what it feels like, from my perspective.

I think young people are starting to be more confident and comfortable. Especially if, you know, you give them the right platform, to have that voice and stand up and go "but this is how I feel and I don't care what you think anymore." And so yeah, but they are definitely experts in how they view the world around them and what goes on around them.

How can you tell me that I'm wrong in my feelings? And how I've understood my world around us. I'm the expert on that. It's my like, it's my lens. It's how I view things.

(P01)

“maybe I am more comfortable in that (dog breeds). But that's straightforward knowledge. And I don't think youth work is straightforward at all. I think it's always changed, chopping and changing. Everything's always developing. And I don't know how you could ever be an expert, given the field of youth work and how different young people are and how everything changes.

I think power is part of expertise. If you've got more knowledge of something, then you've got power.

(P02)

“I think as well is, anybody an expert, because time is always changing and people are changing.”

(M10)

“I think that we let children leave childhood without feeling like they're experts on anything. They are kind of powerless, you know, in terms of the parenting that the parents are having to do, because of society's demands, the limiting of time that they want to spend on things or the forcing to go to school because they need to go to work. All of this, I think we kind of let them leave childhood feeling like their voice and opinion doesn't matter enough to change anything. And I think we need to look at...I think secondary school is possibly the window for that, that we spend five years cramming education into kids to pass tests and we've wasted five years of letting the child, you know, feel their feelings, articulate them, understand them, and connect the dots.”

(M09)

- Voice, participation (and rights)

Graduates were able to describe how the programme had helped bring about significant shifts in their understanding of the concepts of voice, participation and rights, although it was only by exception that the language of rights was used explicitly prior to the question on rights being asked.

Graduates displayed high levels of passion, resolve and determination in their commitment to working alongside young people, adults and communities. This was displayed most forcibly in relation to situations where they perceived that the voices and interests of the young people and communities they were working with had either been ignored or used for performative and tokenistic reasons.

Graduates displayed a high capacity for identifying and critiquing tokenistic forms of participation, including in their own organisations. One graduate described how a lengthy piece of participation work involving an “enterprise challenge” with a group of young women culminated in a public celebration event at which several “D list celebrities” (M04) spoke from the podium about the project whilst the young women were merely asked to pose for a group photograph before being provided with cake. This was regarded by the organisation as the completion of a highly successful project, despite the recommendations for change made by the young women not being implemented. Graduates were able to analyse situations such as this (and others such as the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic or the behaviourist focus of schooling) through critical lenses and to construct meaning through an anti-discriminatory lens in respect of adult attitudes towards young people.

The level of knowledge and understanding of what constitutes meaningful participation varied between graduates. Whilst it appeared to be strongest in those who had engaged in meaningful participation in some way prior to the programme (e.g. where a parent had adopted a rights-based approach to issues at school or where meaningful participation had been modelled for them) it was generally high across the sample.

Graduates consistently displayed a strong understanding of what an emancipatory praxis could and should involve and of its transformative potential in relation to dominant and deficit discourses with regards children and young people. The programme had clearly been effective in supporting students through their own journey of transformation, regardless of the diverse backgrounds and motivations that had influenced their decision to apply. This had left them, on graduation, with the knowledge and understanding required to enter practice as potential agents for the delivery of the radical and emancipatory forms of practice that children and young people require.

“Before the course, I didn't know, like, I wouldn't have known how to articulate that everyone's got a right. I think, what like, for me, from a personal aspect, I was almost sort of like, made to feel like I was forced into choosing at a very young age, what I needed to do.... I remember you coming into teach it...and you told us about Investing in Children and how they work with young people and participate in...I remember, like that particular lesson, and thinking like, I've never known that you can work with somebody in that way before and that they actually had a right to have a say over what they wanted to do or how they wanted something to be”.

(P01)

“Before I was kind of like, it'd be the adults running the youth club and like, they know what to do, to put out and that was good. Now I'm on the lines of well, why aren't the young people in charge of that? Why aren't they making the decisions of what's happening?”

Rather than having eight sessions for the next eight weeks written out? Why aren't they deciding how it works?

To make things better, from their perspective, to do in line with what they think would be better for them, rather than thinking, we think this will be good for you. Actually, you need to tell us what's good for you.

(M01)

“the clients, there's only nine of them, and it costs a quarter of a million per client per year (experimental heroin addiction project). But their voice and participation has been absent from this service, from the beginning...But the people that have been involved in this project have gone around the world talking about the success of the “x” (anonymised) project, yet, I'm working with clients that...two of these clients that are on this program, that have both said to me how thankful they are that the program is ending, because they're going to get some of their life back...But their voice and them being glad that this is ending, that's not being passed on.

I wouldn't have been able to do that level of thinking. I possibly would have, you know, I can see how easy it is to think you know, that they've had every chance that they've been given accommodation, they've fucked it up. I would have always struggled from that one from a moral perspective, but I just feel more able to articulate, challenge and advocate for their rights. And that wouldn't have been there if I hadn't have done the course.”

(M09)

“I was saying (to a representative of the private company who had commissioned a piece of participation work with young women) like it's great that you guys are doing this, how exactly are you going to implement their (the young women's) ideas? And she was really enthusiastic up until the point in which I asked her that. And it was almost as if I was the first person to have asked her that and what she had to say and like, respond to, it was almost like she was saying words, but there wasn't actually anything there from my point of view. And I was sort of standing there thinking like, are you actually going to do anything with the content that the young people came up with or the ideas that they've done?...So it was almost as if like, they had used this enterprise challenge as like a token to show how inclusive they were or how they would listen to the young people's voice. And it almost did, they were almost there in terms of like, working collaboratively with the young people and listening to what

they had to say and implementing those things. But it didn't seem like they did manage to do it. And that's where it sort of came across to me as tokenistic and that they did it to get that...And in the young people I work with, you can almost see it in their eyes that they see through it...I think, for me, it was more (that I was wanting to ask her) so are you going to give the next generation of young girls in schools the opportunity to choose? Do they want to work in this sector? I don't want to hear about like, how many more women you've got in the workplace? I don't want to hear about have you hit your diversity quota? Because I don't think that's the way to look about it. I want to hear about how you made it equal, how have you made the opportunity equal?

So I think what I didn't realise during the course, was all the theory we were learning about. I was like, sort of, especially the first year I was sitting there, I understood it, I guess, but I was sort of sitting there thinking, like, why do you learn about this, I know this stuff, like I understand it. But it's not until you like you've had a decent amount of time being a practitioner, that you sort of realize that it's not about, like, thinking in your head, right. That was Hart's Ladder, this point now that I'm experiencing right now is at this level of his ladder. And I think it's more to do with understanding the theoretical concepts behind it, and being able to apply that to real world situations. So I probably unconsciously, in my brain somewhere, had stored that information on participation or tokenism. And then it sort of arose in that situation."

(M04)

"Young people are experts, they should be involved in the conversation, the setting up of projects...if it's a young person's project, they're the ones that should lead the work.

There's incredible amounts of knowledge, to be learned from a child, if an adult is just willing to sit there and listen and say nothing. And to try and understand.

There's been this thing about engagement, engagement, engagement, but I see a lot of talk, and not a lot of doing.

They're saying that it's youth-led as such, and they've got like a board with young people on it. But I would say actually, who are the young people? Is it actually inclusive?

I think if the funding is coming from the government or from local authorities or councils, because of funding criterias a lot of the time with youth projects. You tend to find some of the times it is tokenistic.

I have experience of working in it, like I can always think of xxxx (field placement undertaken on the degree programme), for instance, and then we would have funding from one of the... like it was like obesity strategy or something like that. But a lot of that is just a tick box exercise.

What they're doing is taking that money in that kind of sense. And using it to their own benefit, but just ticking the box for the council."

(M03)

"I don't think that they (adults) would have had the bollocks to exclude people based on their skin but they would exclude young people based on their age... because if you are racist, that's got a label, doesn't it? That's gonna label you a racist, a sexist...but when it's young people.

I think as people that work with young people we promote their rights. I think that should be what underpins all of the work that we do, the right to be heard, the right to participate, you know...that young people are able to make decisions themselves and have got the right to be informed, so that they can participate. And I think that our role is to give them that information so that it can, to let them know that they know that they have rights.

Our work is around giving young people those tools so that their rights come into play.

But you know, you've got to try and get this above this level six (on Hart's Ladder) where a young person's fully participating, and they're making their own decisions, and then moving on. And then there's right down at the bottom, there's the...you know, you're making these decisions for these young people. And I think when you look at it from those different theories, which you learn about during the university course, then you have more of an open mind, maybe to, like, all of the different ways that we can encourage young people and that we see young people."

(P02)

"The clearest example of children not having the rights that they deserve is children from care, care leavers. That we know that they have the right to safe, secure accommodation with strong attachments and the same life chances as everyone else. We get it wrong, we miss the mark, and we don't address it. So to me, that is completely neglecting the rights of a child and individual. They have the right when in foster care and things when we know that they would do better with a long term placement and that the switching

and switching and moved homes and then dumped when they're 18. We know from a human rights perspective, child's rights perspective, that they deserve more than that, and have the right to, you know, safe, secure childhoods, and it hasn't been given."

(M09)

"Rights in terms of access to space, safe spaces; in terms of access to animated adults; rights to the freedom that allows children to explore the type of learning that they want to engage with; and the type of environments that they want to engage with, that they might never even know exist.

I was caught up in the kind of system...of the banking concept of education. And I didn't know how to in my mind, almost I was kind of like, if I bail on these children and young people now then they're only going to be surrounded by adults who aren't listening to them."

(M05)

Modules, moments, processes

- Teaching through lives

Graduates referenced a range of modules and impactful moments over the course of the interviews. Two modules in particular were consistently referenced: a first year module "Learning from Lives" and a final year module "Education for Transformation". Several times these modules were linked by graduates in a way that suggested they had understood them as somehow "bookending" the programme. The final year module had revisited themes introduced in the first year module and this had enabled graduates to acknowledge and affirm the transformational progress they had made.

Data capture the way in which the programme embraces the potential of critical pedagogy to teach through the lived lives of the students it engages. This approach embodies a definition of education as a "drawing out" (from the Latin "educare") in contrast to traditional forms of schooling that emphasise "putting in" (delivering

pre-determined content). Processes of reflection, hearing the life stories of visiting lecturers, placement experiences and space for debate were consistently linked to this theme of student lives as the primary teaching resource.

For an approach to education that seeks to draw out rather than put in, the diverse and complex lives that students have experienced prior to the programme are understood by tutors as a pedagogical advantage. They are embraced as an opportunity for generating multiple “teachable moments” (Lawson and Flocke, 2009; Smith and Seal 2021) rather than being feared as potential barriers to teaching. It is easier to draw out an understanding of anti-oppressive practice (Mullender and Ward, 1998) with a group of students who have experienced diverse forms of oppression, compared with a group who have not. This drawing out approach mirrors the values and practices of community and youth work itself. In this sense the programme both teaches and models emancipatory processes at the same time. The capacity of graduates to deliver an emancipatory praxis is achieved as a result of having been through the very processes they are learning to practice.

“Learning from Lives as well, that made us think about my childhood and where I'd been and how I got to where I was and the different transitions. And I always relate that to the people that we work with here as well about their journeys and how they've...you don't wake up one day and go you know I'm going to be homeless today because I want to be a heroin user. I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna do that. It's the different transitions in their life that's led them here.

There are ups and downs as well, where you actually start to think about yourself in your life and where you're placed in the world. And that's exactly what happened in year three (Education for Transformation module) with about social capital and thinking where you are in that chain, even though I wasn't a fan of the module it was so hard that module but that changed the way I viewed myself and the world of my son, my family from what I

wanted to achieve going forward. And it had a massive impact on us. It had a huge impact. And I'll never forget seeing that on the board and xxxx (module tutor) drew a graph and where people were and that is still in my head and I still see it all the time... It was just where people were people who had capital, people who had social capital, people who had different things, and where they were and what they had around them. And the amount of people that they had (in their network) and it's still etched in my brain and I still see it. Typically, these things would typically... middle class, working class people and the difference of what they have compared to working class. And it was...it was brilliant, absolutely brilliant. I was up and down, up and down with it. But it really just made me think where I want to be.

You had the sense (at the start of the programme) that there was only one version of a good childhood, yeah. And that your view of it at the time was, I just need to repeat that. Get married. Or blah blah blah. Yeah. Make it exactly the same as what I had. Whereas with Learning from Lives then something else that happened in third year, in Education for Transformation, Learning from Lives was the first time where you thought, oh, maybe what I've experienced is just one version. Maybe there are others. And the versions as well, because you'll have had to listen to the other versions in the class"

(M10)

I wouldn't even have gone there (when asked whether they would have been able to articulate their position on childhood prior to the programme). I don't think so. I think the course literally, I think, even from the very, very first stages, like Learning from Lives, I think it's probably where you actually look at your own transition, I think, amazing. I think that really helps to actually understand where you are at that moment in time. And how actually that identity is not necessarily...it's not set.

That bystander training, I think, first couple of days at university. I think that was like, a big thing in my head as well...But I definitely think that...I was like, actually, no, that's not like, why? Why can't I do that? (Intervene to support). And I think it kind of... and then the course then empowers you at the same time...because I literally wouldn't say boo to a goose before, I literally wouldn't say anything but now, honestly, if I see anything, I literally go and challenge it straightaway. And I've done it so many times. Just literally, something clicked in my head after that.

(M03)

“Neil Thompson model (anti-oppressive practice), when we did that, I think it was in the second year as well, massively informed, right, my practice still now.

Oh, definitely. I think, like, through ongoing, I think for me, it was when we did the Education for Transformation, I felt like doing that module finally made all the modules prior to that...really thinking. And not only for me learning, but for like, from a personal perspective, it completely freed my mind of how I viewed my life and my world around us.

When we have discussions in the office and stuff and sometimes I feel like I'm screaming at them (other staff) being like "I know but there's other things, like, it's not just as simple as this, there is so much more that you've, you've got to unpick it, you've really got to get down to it and start looking at what's playing around it, what is the play? What's interlinking with each other, to stop this person from, like, moving on and flourishing in a way that we want them to.”

(P01)

“I think that childhood is a concept, it's a window of time that you then view the world from moving forwards. I mean, if you think about, like the Learning from Lives module that we did, that was the kind of the first time that I had to challenge some of my perceptions...and racism.

It was so significant because it was the first module that we did on the course. So I had no idea what the picture of university looked like, but I hadn't been expecting to start by looking at the past. And that, for me, was really significant. Because, for me, as a practitioner now, like, the biggest thing I value is being able to look at the past to figure out what goes forward. So that was key for me. And that has shaped you know, how I view the world from that point for me being able to go back in my life, which I never would have done, had it not been for the course. I'd looked back, but I'd not tried to unpick different parts of my past.”

(M09)

“Oh, yeah, like, unbelievable (the impact of the programme)...But I put myself back into the position of a child in a classroom with adults like yourself, like xxxxx and xxxxx (other tutors) who listened and who invited differences, conversations. Provided spaces for debate, for things to be discussed.”

(M05)

“When you start the course you immediately do this Learning from Lives don't you. And that, that essentially helps you look at your own experience.

We had a guest speaker in for that Learning from Lives module. I can't remember his name. And his childhood experience came from, you know, having an alcoholic parent. You know, being involved in the care system and stuff like that. And the way his childhood shaped him is totally different to the way my childhood shaped me. But at the same time, we've both gone to the same point in our lives where we've gone, we want to work with young people. So yeah, I don't know, I just think it's a very shaping process, isn't it.”

(P02)

“I remember from the first year, Learning From Lives. That module always stuck in my head that one. Thinking about the different ways that young people are in their cultures”

(M01)

“Learning From Lives, which at the time was with xxxx (tutor). It was kind of, it was nice to be able to look introspectively at myself as the first kind of way of being able to understand the religious theories to lived experience.

(M06)

“Maybe the placement modules as well. Because like, for me, in the past, I had only really, like, worked with younger young people. Whereas when I went to do some work with the xxxx project on placement, they were homeless people from the age of 18 to 25. So I had not really, like, seen that part of childhood before.”

(M07)

Transitions and transformations

This theme captures the journey from applicant to graduate practitioner in terms of three transitional experiences and the transformational impact these transitions had on the graduates in the sample. The first two transitions have already been captured in the presentation of the themes described above. They are set out briefly below in order to introduce the third transition. This section focuses on the presentation of the third transition.

- First transition: Becoming a student

The first transition refers to the journey from applicant to student. Findings related to this theme have been detailed above in terms of the diversity of the starting points of applicants. Data evidenced that, for the graduates sampled, this was a challenging but overall positive experience that laid strong foundations for the subsequent transition.

- Second transition: Emancipatory praxis

The second transition refers to the journey of learning during the programme. It builds on the foundations laid in the first transition. Findings related to this theme have been captured above through the theme of “journeys to emancipatory praxis”. Data evidenced the capacity of the programme to consistently bring students to the point of being ready to deliver forms of emancipatory praxis by the time they graduate, despite the diversity of their starting points on the journey.

- Third transition: Tokenism and isolation

The third transition focuses on the transition beyond the programme as graduates progress into diverse practice contexts beyond the academy.

This transition exposes the limitations experienced by graduates in applying their extensive knowledge and understanding of emancipatory forms of participation once in practice.

Graduates described an extensive range of face-to-face and other roles undertaken post-graduation. These diverse destinations are listed at appendix one and help to contextualise the breadth of roles that graduates from community and youth work degree programmes will enter. Graduates described their engagement in these

roles in terms which were consistent with the values and principles of what they had been taught and which evidenced their determination and commitment to working “alongside” rather than “for” young people and communities (Jeffs and Smith, 2005). They also describe occasions where this commitment has led them to take risks in breaking organisational protocols in the interests of the people they are working with or to advocate passionately on their behalf.

When asked more directly to describe rights-led or voice-led practice, graduates commonly responded by expressing frustration, disappointment, shock (at the levels of tokenism they had experienced) and even guilt at the gap between their desire to deliver an emancipatory approach and their capacity to do so.

“It wasn’t the best decision however, it was putting all the elements...We listened to him and...he wanted his mam, that's all he wanted, even if it was a toxic relationship. Even though...there wasn't a lot of abuse or anything directly to him, he just had a bit of a bad childhood with his mam and he wanted to be with his mam in a supported accommodation. He was able to go there. He was 18 year old, classed as an adult. But it was then up to them to work with him and get the right support for him to go in there.”

(M10)

“Yeah. So when I worked at xxxx we had a group of young women that came up with their own kind of social enterprise project. This was how it was supposed to be but along the way with time and pressure it's giving young people the answer that you want, essentially, for them to relate back to you. Too led, not enough freedom or conversation or democracy located. And that's really tough. Because if it's not even happening in places of youth work, where professionalism is intertwined, because of service pressure, I suppose it's definitely not happening in other places.

Something that I feel guilty of all the time that I know that the work... that I could be and want to be, and I know that client's voice and participation should be coming first. And they should be involved in every step of the process. I know as a worker I’m unable to facilitate that. And that's what should be happening. But it doesn't matter what job it's been, just the sector in general, that I'm just not able to do that.

I don't think that young people do have enough of a voice in any of the services that I've worked in. There's just not...What am I trying to say here? I think that society is at such a deficit with time, availability, training, education, that even when a service is full of staff that do know how to do things right, and do know that young people need to have their voice at the forefront, that it's because they're caught up in that system that fight and these frustrations, that it still becomes very tokenistic and slid in here and there to tick boxes for other people. And then the young person's voice is either lost or manipulated from that."

(M09)

"We're bringing residents in who help us to develop sort of like learning and stuff like that, pop in. There's a few different community companies involved. But there's no young people involved in that. They have done some really clever work like, they've got like a climate tenant jury which was the first of its kind. There was a big thing on the website about it. But again, there was no young people involved in that. It was just all adults."

(M03)

In response to this statement the above graduate was asked whether they felt in a position to influence the situation:

"Oh, well, I'd like (pause)...probably not. No...I don't know if my voice will be heard to be honest".

(M03)

Another graduate realised during the interview that questions they had posed regarding promised changes as a result of a piece of participation work with a group of young women had been ignored by the commissioning agency:

"because I feel like, it's (pause)...it's probably (pause)...it's my duty to chase that up almost"

(M04)

It was noticeable that whilst graduates displayed a passion about rights once the topic had been raised, they did not generally frame their practice in the language of rights.

When questioned around the topic of independent mechanisms for evaluating levels of participation, none of the eleven graduates were able to identify that any such mechanisms were currently in place. Instead graduates referred to evaluations and review processes carried out internally (either by staff or involving young people directly); to extensive engagement of young people in determining the shape and focus of activity programmes and to attempts at involving young people in processes of governance. These were commonly expressed as a desire or a hope and even in apologetic terms, rather than as an ongoing reality:

“...previously there was, out of necessity, a lot of focus put on the face to face delivery and activities and what we're doing. I think now, generally, as we've grown in size and the strategic infrastructure behind the scenes and those conversations, there's more of a day to day and larger portion of time dedicated to that (i.e. voice/participation).”

(M06)

One graduate was able to describe how they had been able to support local young people in taking forward their interest in how their local park was being managed and how this work had included working with associated adults using the ladder of participation tool (see fig 1). The tool had been deployed in a training session (led by the graduate) in an attempt to encourage the adult “friends of the park” group to embrace the young people as equal partners in the management of the park. Up to this point the adults had preferred the idea of a separate “young

friends” group that would be allowed to feed ideas into the adult group and would involve the young people implementing adult-led initiatives in the park, of which litter-picking had been one suggestion. Whilst the approach had yielded only limited results, the example itself stood out. This graduate demonstrated considerable confidence and clarity in describing the deeply political nature of their role as a community and youth worker and the affront to the young people’s rights that was inherent in the attitudes of the adults involved. The graduate described working alongside the young people (with organisational support) to devise and implement a strategy that directly confronted the discrimination they were facing, whilst also opening up an opportunity for the adults to reconsider their own positions and reframe their responses to the young people’s request for their right to full engagement to be respected and acted upon.

In these aspects the example above illustrated the delivery of an emancipatory approach to participation. Other graduates in the first round of data collection were able to articulate this approach as desirable yet unattainable. This suggests that the shifts in knowledge and understanding that the degree programme is able to achieve may well be necessary but, in most cases, are insufficient on their own to enable graduates to deliver the emancipatory forms of practice that they are committed to and have been prepared to deliver. Unlike the previous two transitions that were experienced by graduates as transformative, the transition into practice was generally described in terms of frustration and isolation, especially in relation to the professional duty to deliver meaningful participation. It was these concerns that prompted the second round of data collection.

5.2 Round two themes

Contexts for meaningful participation

This theme captures the reality that graduates described in relation to the different practice contexts they had experienced since graduation and their potential to deliver meaningful participation within these contexts. Appendix two details the diversity of these contexts by types of work and organisation. The data did not suggest any significant correlation between these factors and graduate capacity to deliver meaningful participation. Instead the data were more nuanced and complex. They suggested correlations between a wide range of personal, situational, structural and temporal factors. The sub-themes below attempt to capture the interplay of these factors by dividing them into contexts that emerged as either positive or negative and by linking these to the responses of graduates.

- Rich and promoting contexts that produce a response of “stick with it and work for change” in graduates

Graduates interviewed for a second time in round two identified key factors that they felt promoted possibilities for their emancipatory praxis to be lived out in their practice, or which would be likely to do so. These factors were heavily biased towards what graduates felt they required from themselves compared with what they required from others. For themselves they needed to be clear about the purpose, values, and goals of their role in leading the delivery of meaningful participation. They also needed to be and to feel: Empowered, confident, informed and knowledgeable. From others they needed to be and feel supported; to be listened to and to be able to engage constructively with partner agencies.

These factors were cited as helping to result in the meaningful participation of children and young people and to graduates developing a series of interconnected,

positive attitudes towards their capacity to consistently deliver meaningful participation within their organisations. The presence of these factors imbued in graduates a determination to continue working for their organisation and a confidence in their capacity to argue for change in relation to the participation of children and young people where necessary. Also in some cases, to win those arguments. One graduate described this mindset in terms of a process that gradually and carefully carved out spaces for meaningful participation within their organisational context, emphasising the importance of working tactically, strategically and with the long-term in mind, sometimes at the cost of short term setbacks. This graduate had predicted the inevitable collapse of a project in which a colleague had imposed a summer activity programme on the children, young people and families with whom they were working. Following its collapse, the graduate was able to step in and take up a participative approach and thus wrest the responsibility for this area of practice from the colleague on a permanent basis.

The importance of personal agency in living out the duties of the professional community and youth worker role in respect of rights and participation was also mentioned in several interviews. This helped to frame these findings in a way that does justice to the complex interplay of agency and structure, avoiding simplistic, binary forms of analysis. One graduate described this sense of personal agency and associated duty in the powerful phrase “if not me, who?” (M06) when discussing a complex situation in their current post that had required them to stand up for what they believed was right for a young person. This phrase suggests that they had grasped the core, defining characteristic of the community and youth work role in respect of meaningful participation, a theme that lies at the heart of this research. Another graduate was asked what might have been in place

that would have helped them to challenge a tokenistic piece of participation practice in their previous job and answered “a longer contract” (M04).

“It's people like me and my colleagues, the people that aren't managing, that are fighting for the rights of the clients and are talking about rights. So we were in a meeting around housing and like “do not place orders” and we were the ones saying about the, you know, the right for housing, basic need like, bottom level, like the need to move on. And their response is they had the chance they were housed. They broke the rules, they've done that they no longer have the right to housing.”

(M09)

“However, it's as if she's like a youth worker in disguise (line manager in a private sector agency delivering government contracts in the criminal justice sector). She has the same ethical values and (appreciation of) dilemmas. She's very interested and focused on promoting and identifying young people from disadvantaged backgrounds...And that's made me feel empowered...Made me feel OK from the top down. I'm able to identify and enact change.

I do feel like my ideas are heard. My ideas are taken into consideration.

I think if there was some sort of organisation that has oversight of how companies or organisations consult with young people? And if you're publicly promoting something around young people's voice or young people's ideas or art or whatever it is. There needs to be certain tick boxes and accountability levels that need to be checked before you can promote it. It's all well and good doing these things, but if it's not implemented properly then there's no point.

I think that the barriers and difficulties that are so frequent in youth work weren't addressed by the (degree) course. I think the proof is in the pudding. That I didn't recognise something (the opportunity to challenge tokenistic practice) until I look back. In the moment I didn't see it. I think maybe having even, like, half a module on the frequent barriers of youth work. The more common difficulties that you might find when working in the youth sector.

Is there a structural opportunity? People on placements on the course? Of working groups to talk about their difficulties on placement regarding participation. Maybe every two

months? Like a not a focus group but off into small groups. Have a discussion. That would maybe be beneficial.

(M04)

“OK, go for it. See what happens” (quoting manager)...my boss is really good at that, she's like, “OK, even though this wasn't really your family (family in a homeless hostel) because you'll be working with someone else” ...the boss was good and saying, “OK, do you think you can help? Crack on.”

It was definitely, I think a lot of it down to confidence, but also having conversations to speak to the boss about like “this is what I need to do”, just quite a strong character and sometimes not always approachable. So it's hitting the right spot to know when she's in the right mood to suggest things.

Maybe having the opportunity to get supervision outside of work. OK, because I get supervision now, but it's very...I think it's tick boxes, right? I'm thinking, it doesn't feel like supervision to me (i.e. compared to the model taught on the degree programme).

...actually take time to educate their own organisations about how do you explain what it is (youth work). Why do I take this different approach? OK, here's the theory. Here's how the theory relates to practice. I think it would be very helpful, especially for those organisations that don't have that connection. And that's the point, isn't it? They're the really important ones because if organisations already know it and understand it.

Explaining that (graduates of the programme) work in all sorts of roles that you know like, because I never thought I would be working...I didn't think I would be working for the homeless.

Supporting undergraduates to see that their life beyond the university is likely to look like this, and it's going to involve these challenges and these are the strategies that you can put in place. This is the support you can get. These are, you know, you might need to organise your own supervision or whatever you might need to. You know, provide some educational materials to your employer.

The reality is that over the course of your career, you'll be working in all sorts of places and spaces that just do not understand your work.

Absolutely, but only if you have that mindset. Only if you understand that it's not about waiting until you're in this perfect space where it says “youth work project” ...I'm gonna

go straight up to work and do this and do that...I'll be welcomed...and my practice will be welcomed with open arms."

(M01)

- Poor and constraining contexts that produce a response of "move or quit" in graduates

Graduates identified a number of factors they felt constrained the possibilities for their emancipatory praxis to be lived out in practice. How they felt about themselves was important in this regard including retained "impostor syndrome"; feeling disempowered; isolated; lacking confidence and feeling stifled by lower-level, organisational priorities. Not yet having the necessary experience and knowledge of delivering meaningful participation was a factor for some. Others described their capacity to deliver on the emancipatory expectations of their role as something that was yet to fully unfold, despite what they had learned from being on the degree programme.

In contrast to the positive contexts, the overall balance of responses weighed heavily towards organisational, managerial and structural factors rather than issues of personal agency. These included poor and precarious working conditions; unhelpful management agendas and managers who lacked relevant life experiences. Lack of understanding of the professional expectations placed on community and youth workers and a lack of space for alternative discourses about participation to emerge were also cited as unhelpful, organisational factors.

Professional factors that served to constrain participation included the fast pace of change within the sector and the lack of a collective professional identity, recognition or influence for community and youth workers. The absence of an

independent “kitemarking” process for meaningful participation and a lack of resources including the “right” people was also cited as a constraining factor. The oppressive impact of neoliberal agendas was cited as a broader, societal and economic constraint on the delivery of meaningful participation.

These factors, when present, contributed to an absence of the meaningful participation of children and young people in everyday practice and to graduates developing a “move or quit” attitude towards their work and their organisations. Of the six graduates interviewed for a second time during round two, three had changed jobs since round one. Another had found a job in the sector having been unemployed at the time of round one. Of the two graduates who were in the same post as during the first round, one indicated a likelihood of moving on soon due to frustrations with management. Where a sense of defeat was expressed through what has been categorised as the “move or quit” mindset, it was also associated with feelings of regret, hindsight and guilt at not having done more to fight for children and young people’s voice and rights at the time i.e. when they perceived it could have made a difference. The same graduate who had voiced the “if not me, who?” phrase introduced earlier in this section had also expressed, at a different point in the round two interview, a sense of personal guilt at not having acted to promote participation more meaningfully in the post they had been in during their round one interview. This suggests a temporal aspect to the development of graduate capacity to confidently deliver meaningful participation. For this graduate, their capacity to fully grasp the responsibilities of the role was something that gradually unfolded after graduating from the degree programme as a result of further experience and personal reflection. This experience of “praxis shock” (Ngan, 2021) has clear implications for degree programmes teaching

community and youth work and for the sector more generally in terms of support to graduates beyond the academy. These implications are addressed in the discussion and recommendations that follow this chapter.

“(Working in) the sector left a sour taste in my mouth because of how poorly organised these organisations are. The funding doesn't go towards where it's supposed to go. I found that there wasn't much room for autonomy, to make something of my own. A lot of the roles I had ideas and I wasn't able to implement them.

I guess leaving the course I was very positive of what I could do. It sounds a bit naive now, but what I could do to change the world and what I could do to make the world a better place for the young people, both here and in the future. I found that my idea of what my role was at xxxx (previous organisation in the youth sector) was probably bigger than it actually was and that I was hoping to be an advocate for young people...someone who could champion their voice and their views in arenas that would be receptive for that...to make the world listen to what young people need and want. And make society fairer.

That's what I wanted out of it (for the young women's voices involved in the enterprise challenge project to lead to changes that promoted equality) . What I got out of it was I felt very disempowered. And I think probably the young people felt disempowered. And also, the ironic thing is, they probably knew that what they were doing wasn't going to do anything. (In the round one interview this graduate had referred to being able to “see this in their eyes”).

I think there's two ways to go with it. I've learned one way. One way to go is you stay in somewhere like xxxx where I was. On the ground with young people. I know xxxx (fellow graduate) does a lot of work with youth participation, the Youth Parliament. Being a direct advocate and continuing the frontline fight. That's one way. Keep doing what I was trying to do, ruffling those feathers. Having those difficult conversations on the ground. Saying “not good enough, what is going on here?” Or there's another way, that I went. Recognising that... it's a very frequent frustration that youth workers have, not just youth workers, social workers too, that young people aren't really listened to. And I think that's why. I'm not gonna lie. It's part of the reason why I've wanted to progress in my current role. Obviously I get more

money to support myself. And I found that. If I work towards at least my perceived version of organisational power within an organisation that fosters change I can have them...I can have more...I don't like using the phrase that I can have more power, but that can affect more change. I think it's far easier to look at things from, like, the top down than the bottom up. And I found it was so frustrating and so difficult to affect change when you're essentially at the bottom of the ladder. You've got so many obstacles in front of you. We've got funding obstacles. You've got contract obstacles. Your own role as a barrier in trying to make a change.

(M04)

“I mean, particularly in that (Further Education) college, I wasn't valued while I was there, I don't think. I think the young people did right because I loved working with them and I think, yeah. But I don't think people understood why I was there and why I wanted to work with all the young people at all.”

(P02)

- Isolation

Graduates were given the opportunity to suggest what might have made a difference in counteracting the negative impact of the constraints they had identified. This question covered their practice as well as suggestions for how the programme itself might have done more in preparing them for the realities of practice. These suggestions have been incorporated into the recommendations that emerge from the research and are detailed in the final chapter of this thesis.

Analysis of responses to this question suggested that the transition beyond the academy had seen connection replaced by isolation for many graduates. This isolation took several forms. It included feeling isolated from colleagues within organisations, especially where colleagues and managers were unfamiliar with the

emancipatory expectations placed on community and youth workers. Also isolation from the network of support that had been developed whilst studying on the programme, especially fellow students and tutors. Professional isolation due to the low levels of professional identity and status of the role was another factor. Graduates also shared the negative impact of being isolated from their own core motivations for undertaking the role and from mentors who were able to provide the types of learning-based, developmental supervision they had been led to expect would be available to them in practice.

“(I thought) I didn’t do the (degree) course to be cleaning toilets. I literally looked in the mirror and thought: “Right, you need to sort this out. What are you going to do?”

M01

“I think that looking back, being in that situation, I think it's about having those difficult conversations with young people and looking back, I didn't have those conversations. Saying: “Look, this is what we've done.” So even though I've said the young people could see through it (that they have been used tokenistically), I didn't know that (at the time) and I didn't explicitly address it. And I think being conscious and having the ability to delve a bit deeper into those subconscious thoughts and then articulate it to the young people you are working with. Because if I'd had a conversation with those young young people and said: “This is the work we've done, however, we haven't managed...I haven't had...I have no proof that any of this is going to be implemented. This is what you can do to investigate it, to ask about it, to exact (sic) change once I'm not here, because I'm not always going to be here. And giving them (pause) not giving them, *supporting* them in developing those tools of questioning.”

M04

“I think if we can find a way of youthwork being valued a bit more and people understanding what it is then I think youth workers finishing university and going into professional youth work roles would have a better time, an easier time maybe?

I don't know whether it's about the sector more than what's done on the course, but then I don't know whether on the course we should be advocating to the wider world more about what youth work is and what it does and what its values are. Because we play a role here, because we're passionate about youthwork. So we're all in this bubble here saying "youth work is great" but if the rest of the world doesn't understand it then how do we show the value of it?

The only time where I'm out there (in practice during the degree programme) is on placement right? So our placements are great because they're in, it's like exciting or community settings where our supervisor is a youth worker and that's great because we've got that opportunity to learn from their experience, but even within the course, find a way of diversifying maybe placement so that we are sometimes in a situation where it's not just a youth work environment....We know that youth workers don't just work in youth work settings. We go into schools, we work with social workers, there's youth workers working in hospitals, right? So why (not) in my mind, let them experience those roles? Why are we pushing placements in youth work settings?

Actually I don't know if I would have coped with a placement in a school or a college because it's not my environment, right? But I just wonder if it was a smaller situation, students to go and do a week in a project?

If there was a way of bringing educators (e.g. those teaching in Further Education or Secondary Education) into the fold for a little bit, even if it was a student project where students could present their ideas of what youth work is to educators, which is a different...very different people, right? The formal educators, the teachers. Maybe there's something there in that. It could be that passing-on- of-knowledge from students and then sort of exchange, yeah?

I think because I was one person working for the college (first paid post in a Further Education college after graduating) whereas now I'm working for a different organisation and I'm a partner (with the local FE college). As a partner we do things with them for their young people and they respect that relationship now. Whereas I think before it was "you're an employee of the college, that's your box over there". Now there's that partnership in place and they're willing to learn from us. It's very much (about) changing the power dynamic I think.

Youth work is a collaboration isn't it. It involves working in groups. Working in partnership. So when you are on your own it feels like a very different environment.

Is there a part of the course where we just get students to explain what youth work is? Because it's quite hard to articulate to someone that doesn't know what it is...I know it sounds like such a prescriptive thing but actually we all see youth work differently. We've got this common idea of what it is, but in my role there's different things for it. So I just wondered if they (students on the degree programme) were prepared a bit more to talk about what actually is youth work. And there will be elements of that throughout the course, right, there's little bits in every module. But if it was just something where you could just say: "Right, tell us what you think." I don't know whether that would just...and then that's a sharing of ideas isn't it? It gives you that...I don't know how to say it, it's like...just to have a statement in your pocket right? So you can explain it to people. It might just help that student to know those extra little...I don't know how I explain this, extra ways of like, being able to change the perception of youth work by being able to explain it articulately, to articulate it well.

If it was a situation where, right, students are going to explain the role of youth work to the social work students and teaching (teacher education) students, and you know. That in itself will inform the next generation of social workers and teachers. That's really what it is. I would have hated it but I'd have learned from it, if I'd had to present my role and they had to present their role.

When I think about the situation at xxxx (FE college) there's always been a bit of a regret in that there was stuff I wanted to challenge and I didn't challenge it. If I had my time again, thinking back to it, I should have and I would have challenged it but... there is a feeling of guilt within that though for me, because my job is to have an opportunity to make things a little bit better for young people and kind of, I think I did in a lot of ways, but I also gave up (laughs regretfully) and there is a regret there because I always see it as, working with young people, it isn't a job, it's an honour...but if I could challenge it, I should have challenged it...but I'm sticking with "should" just because I was able to learn from that situation and then to go "yeah, I should have done that" in the new (current) role where I went "right, I'm handling that now, I've got the opportunity to do that".

The CYW Facebook site (degree programme social media networking resource). Which is helpful, right? And I've posted on it a couple of times. No responses ever, which is a shame. It was there and I just think that's such a good resource but why aren't people talking to each other?

Connection, networking, postgraduate. But I think it needs to be started and implemented, well, in the beginning of the course and I don't know, because by the end of it it's like: "Right, you've finished the course, now it's time to start networking" and I don't think that's going to work. I think it needs to be implemented right from the beginning, because also, we're post-pandemic. People don't know how to network anymore...people don't talk to each other as well anymore...networking needs to start right from day one.

When you're in university, right, you've got your fellow students there, yeah, and you become a team, whereas that might not transcribe into your working life. And that even in lectures like you would use, you know, when we're talking about different situations we've had the opportunity to talk about our experiences of what's happening on placement now and give each other that bit of advice, right. And I don't think that happens outside. It's competitive youth work, right, because we're all asking the same people for the same money to do different things...We can be a network, but we are competing with each other, but there isn't that safe space to go "Look, we're having this situation, it's stressful, what's your advice?" Even some anonymity. If there was a forum."

(P02)

"I realised I can't make any connection between this job that I've got and my fundamental motivations for the work.

Maybe it needs to happen after you've done your degree, after you've shook hands and all the rest of it (on graduation day) maybe three months after that, when it resumes back in the September, maybe workshops type of thing?"

(M03)

"The battleships analogy perhaps helps to describe some of the interesting interplay that happens between the different groups within or in an organisation, whether that's the board when it's a charity...the more senior management, the the kind of, yeah, the face to face workers or the youth workers

and and the young people. It's not necessarily intentional or malicious, that people are playing different games.

If there was more time and space to be able to have those conversations (about co-creation with children and young people). But I think it's often one of the first things that gives way or is kind of cut short in service of meeting those other responsibilities to stakeholders.

Being able to fully embody that (youth work as a valued profession) and have that kind of confidence and strength to actually say "well, I am a professional youth worker. It is an important and valued profession and as a part of that, this is what we need to be doing" ...and, you know, if not you then who else is going to do that?

Perhaps bringing in, yeah, graduates who have had some time out in the field, who faced these challenges, to come and speak to them (students studying the degree) so that there can be that dialogue...so that perhaps when they've done, those students feel better prepared to have an understanding of what those challenges look like in the real world?

I think for me as an individual, what would have been more useful is not those spaces within the organisation, but spaces from outside of it, away from my colleagues. To be with other professionals, colleagues in the broader sense, people who are facing similar challenges elsewhere. To have that continued connection and shared dialogue to other professionals...to kind of know that it's not just a challenge that I'm facing...maybe have different approaches to it that could be used and implemented in my own practice...I think that's it...to feel a sense of community within that? So it feels a little less lonely at the more challenging times when it can be discouraging and feel very isolating. That there's those networks and resources you feel emboldened again to continue to engage with the work that needs to be done.

(M06)

- Supported versus unsupported transitions

Taking into account the themes emerging from both rounds of data collection alongside that of isolation, the overall theme of supported versus unsupported transitions emerged as significant. Each of the three transitions described in this chapter demand a great deal from individuals,

including deeply challenging points of reflection and the re-shaping of embedded identities and world views. Data suggest that the first two transitions are typically experienced as constructive, transformational experiences and that the contribution of staff, curriculum, networks, tutorials and debates plays a very significant role in ensuring this is the case, especially given the diverse starting points of applicants to the programme. This stands in stark contrast to the largely unsupported nature of the final transition which is typically experienced as isolating. Graduates find themselves in a highly diverse set of organisational contexts and graduate destinations but without the support that had surrounded the equally challenging, prior transitions.

5.3 Conclusion

The first round of data collection shed useful light on the journeys of understanding that students studying on the degree programme had experienced from a diverse range of starting points. It helped confirm the capacity of the degree programme to support students in reformulating their understanding of key concepts towards an emancipatory stance. It identified specific modules and moments that had been most effective in achieving these transitions and confirmed the importance of combining the teaching of critical pedagogy alongside opportunities for applied experience across the three years. It evidenced how this combination had enabled the selected graduates to successfully negotiate a path through their initial transition into the academy and through their second transition to becoming qualified practitioners with the knowledge, skills and understanding required to negotiate the complexities of practice from an emancipatory stance.

At the same time it found that the capacity of graduates to use their evident understanding in securing the meaningful participation of children and young people on a confident and consistent basis once in practice, was limited. Examples of the meaningful participation of children and young people emerging from the first round of data collection mirrored what was already known from experience and from extant literature: That delivering on children and young people's universally acclaimed right to meaningful participation happens by exception. With a few exceptions, graduates were consistently better able to describe their frustrations with tokenistic approaches to participation than they were able to give examples of meaningful participation that they had seen or that they had helped make happen in their organisations.

These findings prompted a second round of data collection which helped to identify a range of factors that either promoted or constrained the potential of graduates to deliver on the expectations of themselves and their profession in relation to the meaningful participation of children and young people once in practice. This third transition was experienced as largely unsupported and isolating. This stood in stark contrast to the previous two.

These findings and their implications for students, graduates, universities, employers, children and young people and the sector more widely are considered in the following chapter.

Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusions

Chapter Structure:

6.0 Chapter introduction

6.1 Research overview

6.2 Discussion and implications of key findings

6.2.1 Journeys to emancipatory praxis - reasons for celebration

6.2.2 Modules, moments, processes - new understandings

6.2.3 Transitions and transformations - reasons for concern

6.2.4 Contexts for meaningful participation - reasons for hope

6.3 Evaluation and limitations of the research

6.3.1 The focus on a single degree programme

6.3.2 Capacity to influence the field of practice

6.4 Conclusions and implications of the research

6.4.1 Pedagogy

6.4.2 Practice

6.5 New knowledge and contribution

6.6 Chapter conclusion

6.0 Chapter introduction

The findings presented in the previous chapter, set out as a series of integrative themes (Braun and Clarke, 2012) could be interpreted in a number of different ways. In order to guide the interpretation in a direction that is congruent with what the research set out to achieve, this chapter begins by revisiting the original aims, purpose and context of the research. It reflects briefly on key learning from the literature review and on the practical and methodological decisions that were taken prior to data collection. Key theoretical and definitional aspects are also revisited. This ensures that the research findings are contextualised, reviewed and synthesised through the different lenses that the research established as significant, prior to data collection (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011).

Following this introduction, each of the themes is then analysed in turn and its implications set out. After reflecting on the limitations of the research, a series of conclusions are drawn in relation to the significance of what the research has been able to discover, understand and learn. These are presented as implications for pedagogy first and secondly for practice. A section identifying the new knowledge generated by the research and its contribution to the field is presented before the chapter is concluded. The recommendations that stem from the conclusions reached in this chapter are set out in the subsequent and final chapter of this thesis.

6.1 Research overview

The opportunity to engage with doctoral-level research enabled me to explore a concern that had emerged out of my involvement with the theory and practice of children and young people's rights and participation across my career. I was

concerned about the injustice inherent in the gap that existed between the claims that adults make about participation and the reality on the ground for children and young people. In my experience most participation, with some notable exceptions, had been tokenistic. This included the practice of community and youth workers, despite this profession claiming a distinction as champions of the voice and rights of children and young people.

My role as an educator of community and youth workers enabled me to focus the research on graduates from my own programme. I was curious to find out how graduates of the programme made sense of the concepts of childhood, expertise, participation and rights and how this linked to their capacity to deliver meaningful participation once in practice. A research question was designed that aimed to capture data on this.

An early literature review confirmed my experience that tokenism was the norm. It also confirmed the prevalence and impact of a negative, dominant discourse that works against children and young people having their rights respected, their voices heard and the changes they require being enacted. The review shed light on the impacts of politics and policy on children and young people's right to participate, especially whilst at school and for children and young people who are care experienced.

From a theoretical perspective, Habermas's concept of "dialogue" (Pusey, 1987) held out hope for a way out of tokenism and instrumentalism. I was interested to find out what graduates had taken from this theory and how they were putting it into practice. Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2008) also appeared potentially powerful. Research relating to the rights of children and

young people in specific contexts such as in schools, hospitals and places of incarceration demonstrated a similarly inspiring approach, understanding children and young people to be experts rather than dismissing their testimonies due to their age. This also helped shape the development of the young people's reference group who became advisers to the research.

A later literature review looked specifically at the teaching of community and youth workers at degree level. This identified significant differences between North American and European traditions and highlighted the freedoms that have been retained in the UK up to this point, despite neoliberal and managerial constraints. I was unable to identify previous research that had specifically looked at the topic being explored.

Reflecting on what I had learned from the literature review and from previous experiences of applied research as a practitioner, led to a decision to adopt action research as my preferred methodology for conducting the research and to use semi-structured interviews as the method for collecting data. Children and young people from the young people's reference group helped compile the questions I would ask. Other factors feeding into this decision were my philosophical stance, a combination of social constructionism and critical realism; my personal and professional values of fairness and social justice; the ethics of researching graduates whom I had taught to avoid doing them any harm and the precise nature of the data I was seeking. The capacity of AR to build on previous learning on a topic and to encompass the idea of research generating change, made it especially suitable.

I used theoretical sampling to approach 20 graduates, 11 of whom agreed to be interviewed. Transcripts of the meetings were analysed via thematic analysis and with the help of professional software. This analysis exposed the need to revisit a key theme that had emerged in relation to the struggles that graduates were facing when attempting to implement what they had learned about rights and participation during their time studying on the degree programme. Following some time away from the research due to ill health, a second round of interviews took place approximately two years after the first. Six of the original eleven graduates were approached and all six agreed to be re-interviewed, enabling the data collection process to be completed.

6.2 Discussion and implications of key findings

6.2.1 Journeys to emancipatory praxis - reasons for celebration

Round one of data collection found that the people who apply to study community and youth work do so for a diverse range of reasons, with an equally diverse range of motivations and as a result of a diverse range of childhood experiences. These include engagement with community and youth workers and other professionals. These experiences and prior knowledge shape how students approach the programme and how they navigate their way through the curriculum over the course of the three years. The theme “journeys to emancipatory praxis” emerged from analysis of the data from round one in an attempt to capture and celebrate the evident success of the programme in using critical pedagogy to bring graduates to a place of understanding that matched the necessary shift required for the delivery of emancipatory forms of practice. This success was achieved on a

consistent basis across the graduates sampled and despite the diversity of their individual starting points prior to the degree.

These journeys were illustrated in detail in relation to journeys of understanding around the key concepts introduced by the research question i.e. childhood, expertise, rights and participation. Graduates rejected the very concept of childhood, replacing it with “childhoods” to reflect its reflexive, social construction through the lived experiences of each individual. They rejected the notion of the expert due to its potential to essentialise and oppress, preferring instead the concept of “expertise” because it encompassed the sense of knowledge as momentary and learning as lifelong. This is evidence that the programme was able to support graduates in the development of the “epistemic modesty” that Fricker argues is essential in order to achieve the necessary epistemic equality between children, young people and adults that leads to meaningful participation (Fricker, 2008). This rejection of “expert” chimes directly with the analysis of Smith and Seal (2021, p.10) who argue that, paradoxically, teaching via critical pedagogy requires university tutors to “become an expert in deconstructing the idea of being an expert”.

Although few graduates articulated their understanding through the direct language of rights, it was clear from their responses that they understood the nature and impact of negative, dominant discourses, as well as the duties and expectations inherent in their professional role in respect of championing the rights and voices of children and young people. It was disappointing that their understanding of this duty was articulated mostly through their frustration at not being able to deliver on this expectation, rather than through multiple examples of how they had.

In these ways the first part of the research question had been answered. The research aimed to explore the meaning-making of graduates. It had used the concepts of childhood and expertise as vehicles to evidence the extent to which graduates had been able to absorb the values and underpinning principles of critical pedagogy and critical theory, in order to frame these concepts in ways that aligned directly with an applied commitment to social justice, equality, anti-oppressive and emancipatory practice. It had confirmed that the selected graduates had also absorbed teaching around dialogue, rights and participation to the point where they were able to accurately describe the differences between meaningful and tokenistic forms and the consequent duties this placed upon them as practitioners. In addition the research had revealed how significant these shifts in understanding were for graduates. Many had experienced them as transformational in terms of self-identity, understanding and outlook. For some this transformation had begun even during the application process. These are significant findings. They provide confirmation that the design and delivery of the programme that was experienced by these graduates successfully met one of its major goals: Supporting students through a complex series of shifts and transformations to the point where delivery of an emancipatory praxis was made possible.

The introductory chapter of this thesis identified the work of Jung, Korinek and Straßheim (2014) as potentially useful in suggesting that the notion of “expectations” could be deployed as a dynamic, theoretical bridge between the concepts of childhood, expertise and rights. Revisiting this analysis in light of the journeys made by graduates during the programme helps to realise this potential. Where adults view children and young people through the lens of the prevailing,

negative discourses on childhood, this results in them expecting (and therefore getting) very little from children and young people in the course of their engagements with them. Graduates were able to articulate how their journey of understanding through the programme had enabled them to reject the dominant discourse and with this the very concept of “childhood” itself, replacing it with “childhoods” instead. Where adults view expert status only in respect of exclusionary, culturally received and embedded “institutionalized practices” (Jasanoff quoted in Jung, Korinek and Straßheim, 2014) they reinforce the epistemic monopolisation (Koppl, 2010) of so-called “experts” in ways that exclude any possibility of the children and young people they are engaged with being included in the expert circle. If adults do not expect children and young people to be experts, they can never access their latent expertise. As a result of their increased awareness of these inherent power dynamics in relation to who is and who is not an expert, graduates similarly rejected the very concept of “the expert” altogether, preferring instead to focus on the more dynamic and temporally constituted concept of expertise. Turning finally to the concept of rights, even if adults are aware of the fact of children and young people's rights, those who frame childhood through the dominant discourse and expertise through an exclusionary lens, will have low or non-existent expectations of what rights actually mean in practice and how they affect the dynamics of their engagements with children and young people. This lack of expectation results in rights becoming ignored, even when awareness of them is high. Graduates were able to describe how the programme had raised their own awareness of the rights of children and young people and the associated expectations this placed on them as qualified community and youth workers.

6.2.2 Modules, moments, processes - new understandings

The theme “modules, moments, processes” aimed to capture the impact of specific elements of the curriculum on students, especially specific modules or teaching inputs that graduates consistently mentioned as being significant for them, even though they were interviewed separately and had been involved in several different cohorts. Findings on this theme generated new understandings of the mechanisms through which transformation is achieved via the delivery of a curriculum based in critical pedagogy. Most significantly, graduates consistently referenced two modules as “bookending” the programme and paid testament to the specific concepts and pedagogical moments that helped them shift their understanding of key issues. In terms of the pedagogical process, the data revealed how staff had embraced the complex and challenging prior experiences of students as a resource for learning. By teaching through the lives of students, these experiences were allowed to become the curriculum, rather than being seen as barriers to the delivery of a pre-set curriculum. This exposition of the means by which journeys of transformation are achieved via critical pedagogy is an unexpected outcome of the research that goes beyond its original aims and design. It is potentially of significance for the designers of similar programmes of study. It links directly with the themes that emerged from the review of professional and pedagogical literature that exposed the importance of designing programmes of study for community and youth workers that seek to draw out what students already know prior to the programme, in order to build the practical wisdom (Grundy, 1987) they will require after it. This approach contrasts with traditional approaches to teaching and learning that aim to impose information on learners in an attempt to create competent technicians (Ashcraft, 2000).

6.2.3 Transitions and transformations - reasons for concern

The theme “transition and transformations” was developed to capture the importance of appreciating and understanding the three, main transitional experiences that graduates had experienced, from initial applicant to graduate practitioner. Also the transformational impact these transitions had had on them. The first transition captured what they had said about their journey into the programme. The second covered their journey of learning during the programme and is captured by the “journeys to emancipatory praxis” theme. The third transition focused on the transition beyond the programme (as graduates) into very diverse and complex practice contexts.

Analysis of this third transition raised significant concerns about the capacity of graduates to use their evident understanding and potential in order to deliver meaningful participation once in practice. Graduates spoke of isolation in multiple forms and on the central topic of rights and participation were consistently more able to describe frustrations and constraints rather than examples of success. This finding mirrored the results of the literature review on this issue and confirmed the central concern on which the research was based: That even qualified community and youth workers (who are defined by their commitment to voice and rights) are more often engaged in forms of participation practice categorised as tokenistic and instrumental than they are in meaningful participation. This finding justified the decision taken early on in the research to introduce a second element into the original research question that aimed to hold the research to account from the perspective of its impact on the rights of the children and young people that graduates went on to work with, rather than its impact on students alone. By asking what difference the constructions of graduates actually made to children

and young people, the research was forced to be accountable at an entirely different level. At this level the findings gave cause for serious concern, rather than celebration.

This finding has significant implications for the youth work sector as a whole and for those responsible for delivering and designing community and youth work programmes in Higher Education in the UK and elsewhere. It also has implications for other professional programmes, especially those where there is no structured, post-graduate support framework for graduates. Formal education, medicine and many other professions impose strictly monitored and compulsory, post-qualifying support frameworks that are designed to withhold full professional status until a period of post-qualification support and experience has been completed. Graduating teachers who seek work in the maintained sector assume Early Career Teacher (ECT) status on graduation (what was previously “Newly Qualified Teacher” or NQT status). They are required to complete a two year induction which includes aspects of mentoring and oversight (Department for Education, 2025). Graduating doctors complete two foundation years with the legal “license to practice” being conferred only after successful completion of the first year (General Medical Council, 2025). Graduating social workers complete an “assessed and supported year in employment” (ASYE) although, unlike teachers and doctors, this is recommended rather than compulsory (Department for Education, no date).

This finding exposes the lack of attention paid by the community and youth work sector to the issue of post-qualifying support for graduates. Opportunities for continuing professional development exist at both local and national levels (North East Youth Alliance, no date; National Youth Agency, no date (3)) and graduates

remain nominally connected to teaching institutions via the alumni associations of their qualifying universities. Support networks exist at local and regional levels (North East Youth Alliance, no date) but these have always been subject to the vagaries of leadership and funding. Graduates involved in this research spoke of digital networks with fellow students that had flourished whilst at university but had become obsolete soon after graduation. Universities typically provide on-going employment and career-related support to graduates (University of Sunderland, no date, 1) but these tend to be highly generalised and focus on finding work rather than support to address the challenges within employment. Controversial new changes to the current qualifications framework currently being imposed by the National Youth Agency against the advice of the Higher Education Sector (Connelly, 2025; Thompson et al., 2025) focus entirely on routes to qualifications at different levels and make no mention whatsoever of the types of in-post support that this research has exposed as being required. The current funding crisis in Higher Education (Adams, 2025) and embedded cultures that result in degree programmes regarding their work with students to be largely completed on graduation, serve to further isolate graduates from the types of in-practice mentoring and support that these findings suggest is required in order to ensure that community and youth work graduates realise their emancipatory potential on a consistent basis once in practice.

Review of the professional literature identified the importance of enabling community and youth work degree students to contextualise the challenges they face in delivering meaningful participation in relation to a wide range of constraining neoliberal and managerialist imperatives. These constraints were identified as being played out within universities themselves and in practice.

Given the struggle to deliver meaningful participation described by graduates in this research, the onus is on programmes of learning to develop better ways of enabling this contextualisation to happen during the degree programme itself and arguably beyond. The onus is also on the wider sector to support graduates to continue this contextualisation once in practice.

Whilst the curriculum at Sunderland covers neoliberalism and managerialism extensively throughout, questions arise as to whether it is being sufficiently contextualised in ways that enable graduates to have the confidence and vision to deliver forms of practice that resist and overcome these constraints once they are in practice, especially in relation to children and young people's rights and participation. The findings suggest that the programme could do more to take advantage of opportunities to re-imagine the ways in which the current curriculum is delivered as suggested in the step-change model proposed by Smith and Seal (2021) (see figure 4 of this thesis).

The findings from this research similarly align with the findings from Cooper's research into final year students studying towards a social sciences degree (Cooper, 2015). Cooper evidenced the development of significant emancipatory knowledge and intellectual confidence in students during their final year but this was not matched by the necessary capacity to then use this knowledge to articulate a vision of what a more democratic society might look like. Cooper describes how students struggled to move beyond their existing frames of reference in order to make the shift from describing how the social world is, to describing what it could become. In my own research, most notably in round one of data collection, graduates were similarly able to frame the constraints to

participation in emancipatory terms but were considerably less able to describe strategies by which they might be overcome.

6.2.4 Contexts for meaningful participation - reasons for hope

Prompted by these concerns, the second round of data collection explored the issue of participation in practice directly. Analysis of data collected in this round exposed two contrasting contexts. On the positive side, graduates were able to describe contexts that promoted meaningful participation. These contexts inspired graduates to stay in organisations and pursue every opportunity to promote the rights and voices of the children and young people they were working with, even if this required adopting longer term strategies for change at the cost of losing short-term confrontations with other staff and management. Graduates in these contexts were clear about their professional duty and the need to stay in post in order to carve out spaces for the meaningful work to take place. On the negative side, graduates described contexts where they felt constrained and isolated. In these contexts their ability to deliver forms of meaningful participation that matched their values and core motivations were almost non-existent. In these situations their confidence and sense of empowerment was low and this induced in them a desire to leave the post rather than a determination to stay and pursue meaningful change.

Analysing this theme through the lens of the research question and the results of the literature review generates a range of potentially contrasting interpretations. Focusing on the negative context confirms the original concern around tokenism and the ways in which the rights of children and young people are largely ignored, even if they are recognised at all. From this perspective the degree programme

can be understood as failing children and young people through its inability to produce graduates capable of carving out spaces for meaningful participation even in the most hostile of contexts. It is in these very contexts that children and young people are most in need of workers who are motivated to stay and struggle alongside them in achieving change, rather than workers who choose to move on in the face of the challenge. From a more constructive perspective, it is reasonable to expect graduates to take time to develop their confidence and to learn from failure and frustration. This had clearly been the case for several of the graduates interviewed in round two. It is also reasonable to acknowledge that not every context is a good match for every graduate and that moving on can sometimes be understood as a predominantly personal rather than professional decision (although these two factors are typically intertwined in complex ways). This was certainly the case for one graduate. Although they had been employed during round one of interviews in a policy role where their attempts to promote the rights and voices of children and young people had been frustrated, they explained the decision to leave that role primarily in terms of the need to be working at a face-to-face level. Having achieved a move to this level they were able, in the second round of interviews, to provide several powerful examples of meaningful participation. This was similarly the case with other graduates who had found new posts in the time between the two rounds of interviews.

Reasons for hope emerge from this analysis, including the reasons graduates gave for feeling frustrated, isolated and wanting to leave their posts. Whilst some of the reasons related to wider structural factors beyond the reach of universities and the community and youth work sector, most related to aspects that, with effective support in place, could potentially be changed. This theme is captured below in

relation to conclusions of the research for pedagogy and practice. Considered through an AR lens in this respect, the research can be seen to have completed one cycle of learning and be preparing for the next.

6.3 Evaluation and limitations of the research

6.3.1 The focus on a single degree programme

The research successfully exposed how a small sample of graduates from a single degree programme constructed meaning around several concepts they had studied and how this had developed their capacity to work in emancipatory ways with children and young people. It also exposed the constraints that hindered their ability to consistently deliver on these expectations once in practice.

These findings give cause for celebration in respect of the effectiveness of the degree programme in supporting students through complex journeys of learning and transformation. They give cause for concern from the perspective of children and young people and in relation to the capacity of the sector as a whole to replicate in employment the necessary transitional support that graduates had received whilst students.

The choice to focus on a single programme and a small number of graduates is justified by the quality of the data captured and the honesty of the testimonies provided by graduates, even when sharing information that was sensitive or that made them uncomfortable. This ensured that a primary goal of the research and a key determinant of the chosen methodology was met - the focus on meaning-making. Understanding the complex processes that adults working with children and young people use to make sense of their world and their work has been a

personal and professional curiosity for many years. This curiosity emerged from a professional concern that how this happens for each individual determines their practice in relation to their capacity to allow children and young people to have a say in matters that affect them and for that to make a difference to their lives.

Exploring how learning, knowledge and experience are processed at this highly individual level and how this links to action, required depth to be given a priority over breadth.

The relevance of the research findings to the single degree programme on which it was based are clear. My position as Programme Leader and my confidence in the capacity of colleagues and the University of Sunderland to implement the recommendations that relate to pedagogy provide a high level of confidence that this will happen. The resources and authority to implement change at this level are already in place.

Mechanisms will also be required to capture the impact of these changes on graduate practice over the following period. Given the findings of the research, these mechanisms must be based primarily on the direct testimonies of the children and young people they work with. This will require additional resourcing and will prove more challenging to implement. This issue is taken up in the recommendations set out in the final chapter of this thesis.

Extending the impact of the research beyond this single programme presents a different set of challenges. The plans for dissemination will ensure that other programmes are made aware of the research. Whether they subsequently regard its findings as transferable to their contexts is more difficult to predict, precisely because the methodology adopted for the research prioritised depth over breadth.

For those programmes similarly validated as the Sunderland programme, it is reasonable to expect a good level of transferability. These programmes are subject to a common, nationally-regulated validation and quality assurance process that ensures adherence to a common set of nationally-agreed, subject-related benchmarks and occupational standards (National Youth Agency, no date (4)). External examiners are shared between these programmes to further ensure that standards are consistent across the network. Whilst programmes are encouraged to adapt the validation requirements to their own contexts, these shared processes effectively result in the delivery of a common curriculum across validated programmes. Learning from one programme is likely to be highly transferable to another.

6.3.2 Capacity to influence the field of practice

Implementing changes in practice beyond the field of Higher Education presents additional challenges. As this research has shown, the relationship between the academy and the field of practice is one that is primarily focused on supporting students only up to the point at which they graduate. Universities are resourced to encourage graduates to stay connected via alumni associations and to support them in finding work, but not to support them once in work. The reality for the vast majority of graduates is that graduation day completes their relationship with their programme of learning and with the institution where they have studied.

From a field-based perspective, organisations employing degree-qualified staff expect them to be ready to deliver from day one and to be taking up positions of leadership within a short period. Given that the degree is the highest level of professional qualification available to community and youth workers, this is not an

unreasonable expectation. The quality and consistency of professional supervision and oversight of graduate community and youth workers is a concern that is commonly raised within the sector at local, regional and national fora. Securing funding for investments in infrastructure and workforce development is a huge challenge for the sector as funders prioritise support for direct delivery to children and young people.

Despite these challenges there are likely to be specific funders who are willing to invest in infrastructure, the continuing professional development of staff and non-targeted support to the sector. In the North East the Ballinger Trust appears to be just such a funder (Ballinger Charitable Trust, 2023). This research points towards a new relationship between the academy and the field. One that extends well beyond graduation day in its support to newly qualified graduates as they transition into work. It recommends that this support is available locally via new forms of supervision and networks, as well as nationally via a post-qualifying period equivalent to that in place for teachers. These changes will not be easily or promptly implemented but placing them in front of the sector and generating new conversations represents an important moment in the research journey and opens up possibilities for change.

6.4. Conclusions and implications of the research

These themes have significant implications in relation to the pedagogical approach taken by universities teaching community and youth work at degree level and for how graduates are supported in their practice beyond the academy. These two aspects are considered separately below.

6.4.1 Conclusions and implications of the research - pedagogy

The research findings support the conclusion that the degree programme at The University of Sunderland is effective in supporting students from diverse backgrounds through challenging transitions into the programme and subsequently through the programme, up to the point of graduation. The potential of graduates to deliver forms of emancipatory practice beyond graduation varies for each individual but was generally high and consistent across the sample that were interviewed. The implications of these findings are that the current ways of supporting students and the current configuration of the programme are working well.

The findings also support the conclusion that consistently bringing students to this point of potential at graduation is no guarantee that it will be realised in practice. The transition beyond the academy is equally challenging for the individuals involved. Yet the support that helped them reach this point drops away almost entirely, leaving them in many cases exposed, isolated and subject to the vagaries of leadership in a sector that is under huge pressure and constraint. The implications of this for children and young people are significant. Even where degree-qualified community and youth work staff are present, this is no guarantee that their rights will be met or their voices heard. The implications for the degree programme are also significant. There is an onus on programme staff and wider management to integrate new forms of applied learning into the degree programme that enable graduates to more consistently and effectively realise their potential in a diverse range of operational contexts once in practice. Also for the institution to re-think the scope of its responsibilities in recognition of the clear requirement that the types of highly effective support it has offered during the programme are replicated beyond graduation.

6.4.2 Conclusions and implications of the research - practice

The research findings support the conclusion that graduates entering the profession too often find themselves isolated and un-supported, especially in relation to their professional duty as community and youth workers to champion the voices and rights of the children and young people they are working with. This isolation can be explained via a wide range of personal, cultural and structural factors (Thompson, 1993). It often results in graduates becoming frustrated, demotivated and in some cases choosing to seek alternative work, including outside the profession. This experience of “praxis shock” (Ngan, 2021) has significant implications for the career decisions of newly qualified graduates and places the onus on universities and the wider sector to better prepare and support graduates in order to avoid them leaving the profession before they have had the chance to consolidate their academic learning into confident and effective forms of practice. The findings also support the conclusion that some graduates (especially after moving jobs) find themselves in contexts that enable them to more fully live out their emancipatory potential. In these contexts the voices of children and young people are more likely to be heard and their rights respected. Examples of this emerged in the second round of interviews. Whilst on the one hand this is a positive conclusion, it begs the question: What happens to the children and young people in the organisations that graduates have left behind and where the need for challenge and change is arguably higher?

The implications of these conclusions for the wider community and youth work sector are multiple. The community and youth work workforce is typically part-time and typically qualified at levels below degree level (National Youth Agency, no date (5)). Many projects involve unqualified volunteers. As a result, graduates

from professionally qualifying degree programmes such as the programme at the University of Sunderland are commonly the highest qualified staff in organisations, including at management levels. This generates an expectation within the sector that graduates will be ready, at the point of graduation, to deliver the higher forms of practice and manage the complexities of diverse, organisational contexts. This is clearly not the case in other professions as has been discussed earlier in this chapter. The onus is on the sector to address this issue and to consider local and national responses that acknowledge and support the newly qualified status of graduates.

This research confirms that the provision of quality supervision and mentoring for graduates remains highly inconsistent. The sector urgently needs to establish new ways of providing access to high quality supervision and mentoring for graduates to ensure that transitions into practice are supported more effectively. This will also increase the likelihood that graduates struggling to effect change in contexts where the environment for meaningful participation is challenging will remain in post and work for change, rather than seeking work elsewhere. The potential benefits for children and young people of these changes is clear.

The sector also needs to strengthen access to formal and informal professional networks for graduates. This will enable graduates to derive support by contributing to processes of collaboration with colleagues within and outside the profession, raising the professional recognition of their role internally and externally.

The findings of the research also support a conclusion that the original concern that prompted the research remains a real issue for the community and youth

work profession. The gap between the rhetoric of the profession in its claims to be distinctively championing the voices and rights of children and young people and the realities on the ground remains significant. The testimonies of the graduates interviewed in the course of this research support the claim that tokenistic forms of participation continue to prevail and that whilst examples of meaningful participation are evident, they remain the exception. This fact has implications for all professions working with children and young people but remains most significant for community and youth work, having positioned itself as being at the forefront of work in this field.

6.5 New knowledge and contribution

The two main purposes of this research were to firstly generate new and useful professional knowledge in relation to the capacity of community and youth work graduates to achieve meaningful change in the lives of the children and young people they work with. Secondly, to contribute that knowledge in ways that actually make a difference in the field. Up to this point this contribution has been limited to a single degree programme. The nature of this contribution and the plans to extend it further post-doctorally have been outlined.

In relation to the first purpose, it is important for any researcher to place some methodological scrutiny on the nature of the judgments that have been made to claim that new knowledge has indeed been generated.

In respect of existing knowledge the processes of literature review exposed a good deal of literature that was relevant and that helped inform the design and delivery of the research in multiple ways. There is a plethora of extant literature in relation to the key concepts that were deployed and a selection of this was used to shape

both methodology and methods, the interview questions in particular. There is also some literature that focuses more directly on the professional education of community and youth workers and selected elements of this existing body of knowledge helped frame and contextualise the research within its own professional field. None of these multiple sources, however, directly addressed the specific context that was the focus of this research or the specific questions it was determined to ask, despite their relevance and usefulness to the research as a whole.

The judgement that new knowledge has been generated is also supported by evidence from prior and on-going experience in relevant professional fields. Working in relevant fields of practice over many years and in my current boundary-spanning role as a community and youth work academic, lends credibility to claims that the issues this research has sought to expose are real and require the light of research in order that they get addressed. There are many organisations, including many led by qualified community and youth workers, claiming to be delivering meaningful participation. This research suggests that these claims will, in the majority of cases, be overstating what this actually means in respect of the rights and voices of the children and young people involved.

There is a clear need to better understand the attitudinal, psychological, structural and cultural reasons why children and young people's rights remain marginalised in the services that are supposed to promote their democratic flourishing. This research has shed light on one aspect of the problem. The new knowledge generated on that aspect has significant gearing potential when understood in its full context. If it is possible to better understand the reasons why those with high-level, professional qualifications in the theory and practice of emancipatory work

with children and young people struggle to deliver it consistently in practice, then it is possible to use that new knowledge to improve how they are educated and supported. It is also then possible to transfer that new knowledge into other forms of initial professional training for work with children and young people and beyond that, into the wider services that children and young people rely on for their welfare and flourishing.

In terms of how the knowledge was generated, methods for data collection were rigorously designed with inputs from those with genuine expertise in the field, including children and young people themselves via the young people's reference group. This helped moderate the inevitable impact of researcher bias and subjectivity. Ethical matters were addressed head on and with formal approval from the relevant research institution. Data were collected and analysed in a methodologically robust manner as has already been detailed. A great deal of care and attention went into ensuring that the picture that emerged accurately reflected the ways that graduates generated meaning around core concepts and the ways in which these constructions then informed practice. The data also accurately captured the constraints that graduates experienced in practice and their attempts, at times, to resist and overcome them. In these ways a synthesis was achieved that represents a new contribution to the field in enabling graduates from a community and youth work degree to explain in detail how they understand the connection between specific concepts they have been taught and the implications of these concepts for their practice.

6.6. Chapter conclusion

Having set out the main findings of the research in the previous chapter, this chapter has reviewed them through the different lenses that the research had

established as significant. This included evidence from literature and in relation to key terms and theory. This review identified reasons for celebration, concern and hope. It also clarified the limitations of the research and evidenced new understandings.

Through this discussion the implications of the research findings have been clarified. These have been set out in relation to pedagogy and practice, establishing a clear rationale for the recommendations to follow.

Chapter Seven: Recommendations

The implications of the research findings set out in the discussion chapter established a clear rationale for the recommendations below.

Picking up on themes already introduced, the recommendations are framed in a way that distinguishes between those more directly associated with pedagogy, with practice and finally with future research. They are also linked, where relevant, to the central themes of journey and transition that emerged from the analysis of the research findings.

Recommendations - Pedagogy

Transition into the academy: More needs to be done to support students from a diverse range of backgrounds who are new to the programme to withstand the discomfort they experience when confronted with new ways of thinking about themselves, the social worlds they inhabit and the demands that community and youth work places on workers whose job is to challenge prevailing discourses and practice.

To achieve this it is recommended that community and youth work degree programmes conferring the professional qualification:

- a. Involve previous graduates of the course directly in the teaching of stage one of the programme in order to promote understanding of the barriers to meaningful participation that are experienced in practice and the ways that these

barriers have been successfully overcome. To include learning in relation to developing courage, risk-taking and confidence.

- b. Establish robust mechanisms that enable students to recognise and acknowledge isolation and marginalisation and ways to combat them, both whilst on the course and subsequently once in practice. To include learning in relation to:
 - i. Different forms of marginalisation and isolation including becoming marginalised from one's core motivations for becoming a community and youth worker.
 - ii. Using collaboration and networking to combat isolation.

Transition whilst on the programme: More needs to be done to support students during the programme to make the shift from identifying as isolated individuals to identifying as active and engaged members of a professional community of practice.

To achieve this it is recommended that community and youth work degree programmes conferring the professional qualification:

- c. Build in scenario-based learning and assessment that is directly informed by the realities that graduates face in delivering meaningful participation in practice contexts that will be hugely

diverse, often unfavourable and sometimes hostile. To include learning in relation to:

- i. Factors that promote a “move or quit” mindset in graduates.
 - ii. Factors that promote a “stay and develop” mindset in graduates.
- d. Develop new forms of practice placement experience that:
- i. Focus exclusively on participation and rights.
 - ii. Place students (over short periods) in contexts that represent the challenges of practice in potentially unsupportive contexts and match these with opportunities for support and analysis.
- e. Incorporate opportunities for community and youth work students to explain their role to other students studying towards professional qualifications that involve working with children and young people, especially teachers in secondary and further education and social workers. For this to include reciprocal exchanges of learning.

Transition beyond the academy: More needs to be done to support graduates of the programme to deploy the critical consciousness they have developed in order to effect social change alongside others and as co-equal partners once in practice.

To achieve this it is recommended that community and youth work degree programmes conferring the professional qualification:

- f. Deliver workshop-style experiences for recent graduates (including via digital and social media) beginning no later than three months post-graduation and establish mechanisms that provide for on-going engagement with graduates over the first two years beyond graduation aimed at supporting graduates to overcome experiences of praxis shock that risk them leaving the profession before full professional formation is complete.

Recommendations - Practice

Transition beyond the academy: From the perspective of children and young people, enabling community and youth work students from diverse backgrounds to develop the potential to deliver meaningful participation represents only a first step in a journey. New forms of applied learning are also required that will enable graduates to realise this potential in a diverse range of operational contexts once in practice. The mechanisms that programmes have used to help students thrive during the degree programme need to be replicated by the sector in supporting graduates to thrive beyond it.

To achieve this it is recommended that the following support mechanisms are put in place for all graduates from community and youth work degree programmes:

- a. Access to professional support networks and forms of collaboration that have the challenge of promoting the participation and rights of children and young people as their central focus. Also that combat the isolation experienced by graduates working in constrained contexts.

- b. Access to high quality supervision based within a rights-led, emancipatory-based and solution-focused approach.

- c. Access to intelligence, information, people and resources related to participation and rights including case studies that identify meaningful participation where it has occurred and that set out strategies for working with children and young people to identify and challenge tokenistic and instrumentalist forms of participation practice when they occur.

- d. Access to an external and independent “kitemark” that validates meaningful participation via the direct testimonies of children and young people.

- e. Access to a “newly qualified graduate” scheme that mirrors those already in place for teachers and other professionals.

Recommendations Three - Research

Further research is recommended in the following areas:

Transition beyond the academy:

- a. Direct research with children and young people that captures the impact of graduate community and youth workers in relation to the realisation of voice and rights.

Transition into, during and beyond the academy: Other professionally qualifying programmes:

Research that extends the questions asked of community and youth work education in this research to the initial, professional education of other professions working with children and young people including teachers, social workers, health-related professions and the police.

Bibliography

Adams, R. (2025) English universities' income falls for third consecutive year. *The Guardian*, 8th May, education section. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/may/08/uk-universities-income-falls-for-third-consecutive-year> (Accessed: 26 September 2025).

A Potpourri of Participation Models (2013) *Youthpolicy.org*. Available at: <https://www.youthpolicy.org/library/documents/a-potpourri-of-participation-models> (Accessed: 30th August 2025).

Allen, M. and Ainley, P. (2010) *Lost Generation? New Strategies for Youth and Education*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.

Alvesson, M. and Deetz, S. (2000) *Doing critical management research*. London: SAGE (SAGE series in management research).

Alvesson, M. and Skoldberg, K. (2017) *Reflexive methodology: new vistas for qualitative research*. 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Andrews, T. (2012) 'What is Social Constructionism? | Grounded Theory Review', *Issue 1, June 2012, Volume 11*, June. Available at: <http://groundedtheoryreview.com/2012/06/01/what-is-social-constructionism/> (Accessed: 1st April 2019).

Anon. (2018) 'Interview with Schoolteacher'.

Archard, D. and Skivenes, M. (2009) 'Hearing the child', *Child & Family Social Work*, 14(4), pp. 391–399. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2008.00606.x>. (Accessed 29th September 2025)

Arnstein, S.R. (1969) 'A Ladder Of Citizen Participation', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), pp. 216–224. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>. (Accessed 29th September 2025)

Ashcraft, R.F. (2000) 'Where Youth Work Preparation Meets Higher Education: Perspectives From an American Humanics Campus Program', *Applied Developmental Science*, 4(sup1), pp. 38–46. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS04Suppl_5. (Accessed 29th September 2025)

Badham, B. and Davies, T. (2007) 'The active involvement of young people' in Harrison, R. (ed.) (2007) *Leading work with young people*. Milton Keynes: SAGE.

Ballinger Charitable Trust, 2023. Available at: <https://www.ballingercharitabletrust.org.uk/> (Accessed 27th September 2025)

Bell, J. and Waters, S. (2018) *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-time Researchers*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education.

- Beresford, P. (2021) *Participatory ideology: from exclusion to involvement*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Berger, P.L. and Luckmann, T. (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin.
- Bjerke, H. (2011) “It’s the way they do it”: Expressions of Agency in Child–Adult Relations at Home and School’, *Children & Society*, 25(2), pp. 93–103. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2009.00266.x>.
- Blaikie, N.W.H. (2007) *Approaches to social enquiry*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bolton, G. and Delderfield, R. (2018) *Reflective practice: writing and professional development*. 5th edn. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986) ‘The Forms of Capital’ in Richardson, J., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*(1986), Westport, CT: Greenwood, pp. 241–58. Available at: https://home.iitk.ac.in/~amman/soc748/bourdieu_forms_of_capital.pdf (Accessed 25th May 2026)
- Bowler, R.; Buchroth, I.; Connolly, D.; Woolley, L. (2019) ‘Resistance is not futile: Ensuring critical pedagogy despite neoliberal governance’. In *Teaching Youth Work in Higher Education: Tensions, Connections, Continuities and Contradictions*; Seal, M., (Ed). Tartu, Estonia: Tartu University Press:
- Bradbury, H. (2025) *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*. 3rd edn. London: SAGE Publications Ltd. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473921290>. (Accessed 27th September 2025)
- Bradford, S. (2012) *Sociology, youth, and youth work practice*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brando, N. (2025) ‘Am I a critical children’s rights researcher? A reflexive analysis of the adaptive model of childhood’, *Critical Children’s Rights Studies*. 1st edn. United Kingdom: Routledge, pp. 28–42. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003510284-2>. (Accessed 25th May 2026)
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2012) ‘Thematic analysis.’, in H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57-71). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Bray, L., Snodin, J. and Carter, B. (2015) ‘Holding and restraining children for clinical procedures within an acute care setting: an ethical consideration of the evidence’, *Nursing Inquiry*, 22(2), pp. 157–167. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/nin.12074>. (Accessed 27th September 2025)
- Bright, G. (2015) *Youth work: histories, policy and contexts*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- British Youth Council (2016) *Youth Voice - British Youth Council*. Available at: <https://www.byc.org.uk/uk/youthvoice> (Accessed: 28th September 2019).
- Bryman, A. (2012) *Social research methods*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Buchroth, I. and Parkin, C. (eds) (2010) *Using theory in youth and community work practice*. Exeter: Learning Matters.
- Bunyan, P. and Ord, J. (2011) in Ord, J. (ed.) (2011) *Critical issues in youth work management*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Burgess, R.G. (2007) *In the field: an introduction to field research*. London: Routledge (Contemporary social research series, 8).
- Cairns, L. (2001) 'Investing in children: learning how to promote the rights of all children', *Children & Society*, 15(5), pp. 347–360. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/chi.665>. (Accessed 27th September 2025)
- Cairns, L., Byrne, S., Davis, J.M., Johnson, R., Konstantoni, K., Kustatscher, M. (2018) 'Children's Rights to Education – Where is the Weight for Children's Views?', *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 26(1), pp. 38–60. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-02601007>. (Accessed 27th September 2025)
- Caley, T. (2019) *Keeping them off the streets: a youth work story*. Kibworth Beauchamp, Leicestershire: Matador.
- Charmaz, K. (2012) *Constructing grounded theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: SAGE.
- Children Act 1989. Statute Law Database. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41> (Accessed: 23 May 2026).
- Children Act 2004. Statute Law Database. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/31/contents> (Accessed: 23 May 2026).
- Choose your future | UCAS* (no date). Available at: <https://www.ucas.com/> (Accessed: 21st September 2025).
- Coburn, A., and Gormally, S. (2015) 'Emancipatory Praxis: A Social-Justice Approach to Equality Work' in Cooper, C., Gormally, S. and Hughes, G. (eds) (2015) *Socially Just, Radical Alternatives for Education and Youth Work Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137393593>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)
- Coghlan, D. and Shani, A.B. (Rami) (2021) 'Action research in business and management: A reflective review', *Action Research*, 19(3), pp. 518–541. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750319852147>. (Accessed: 19th September 2025).
- Coghlan, D. and Brannick, T. (2014) *Doing action research in your own organization*. 4th edn. California: SAGE.

- Coleman, G. (2018) 'Action Research' in Costley, C. and Fulton, J. *Methodologies for practice research: approaches for professional doctorates*. 1st edn. London: Sage.
- Connelly, D. (2025) 'Colluding with Control: The Reconfiguration of Youth Work Education in England', *Youth & Policy*, 13 August. Available at: <https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/colluding-with-control/> (Accessed: 31st August 2025).
- Cooper Bradford, S. (2008) 'Teaching' Values in Pre-qualifying Youth and Community Work Education'. *Youth & Policy*, 97-98 (Autumn 2007/Winter 2008) pp. 57-72.
- Cooper, C. (2015) 'Critical Pedagogy in Higher Education', in Cooper, C., Gormally, S. and Hughes, G. (eds) (2015) *Socially Just, Radical Alternatives for Education and Youth Work Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137393593>. (Accessed 27th September 2025)
- Cooper, C., Gormally, S. and Hughes, G. (eds) (2015) *Socially Just, Radical Alternatives for Education and Youth Work Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137393593>. (Accessed 27th September 2025).
- Corney, T., Marion, J., Baird, R., Welsh, S., & Gorman, J. (2024) 'Youth Work as Social Pedagogy: Toward an Understanding of Non-Formal and Informal Education and Learning in Youth Work', *Child & Youth Services*, 45(3), pp. 345–370. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2023.2218081>. (Accessed 27th September 2025)
- Costello, P.J.M. (2011) *Effective action research: developing reflective thinking and practice*. 2nd ed. London: Continuum.
- Costley, C. and Fulton, J. (2018) *Methodologies for practice research: approaches for professional doctorates*. 1st edn. London: SAGE.
- CRAE (2019) *European Convention on Human Rights - CRAE, Children's Rights Alliance for England*. Available at: <http://www.crae.org.uk/childrens-rights-the-law/laws-protecting-childrens-rights/european-convention-on-human-rights/> (Accessed: 28th September 2019).
- Creswell, J. W. (1998) *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five traditions*. California: Sage.
- Cronin, I. (2014) 'The Epistemic Injustice of Self-Directed Prejudice'. *Understanding Epistemic Injustice*. Conference held at The University of Bristol, June 2014. Available at <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/philosophy/research/epistemic-injustice-/> (Accessed 9th May 2026)
- Crossley, N. (2005) *Key concepts in critical social theory*. London: SAGE.
- Crotty, M. (1998) *The foundations of social research: meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: Sage.

- Cunningham, S. and Cunningham, J. (2012) *Social policy and social work: an introduction*. London: SAGE.
- Curran, S., Gormally, S. and Smith, C. (2022) 'Re-Imagining Approaches to Learning and Teaching: Youth and Community Work Education Post COVID-19', *Education Sciences*, 12(3), p. 201. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12030201>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)
- Dahlberg, G., Moss, P. and Pence, A.R. (1999) *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: postmodern perspectives*. London ; Philadelphia, PA: Falmer Press. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED433943.pdf> (Accessed: 4th January 2019).
- Davies, B. (2019) *Austerity, Youth Policy and the Deconstruction of the Youth Service in England*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-03886-1>. (Accessed: 28th September 2019).
- Davies, B. and Taylor, A. (2019) 'On Critical Beginnings: How We Got To Where We Are', in: Bright, G. and Pugh, C. (eds) (2019) *Youth work: global futures*. Boston: Brill Sense.
- Davis, J.M. and Hill, M. (2006) 'Introduction', in: Tisdall, E.K.M. *et al.* (eds) *Children, young people and social inclusion: participation for what?* Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Davis, J., Hill, L., Tisdall, E.K.M., Cairns, L. & McCausland, S. (2014), *Social Justice, The Common Weal and Children and Young People in Scotland*. The Jimmy Reid Foundation. Available at: <http://reidfoundation.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/03/Childhood1.pdf> (Accessed 27th September 2025)
- Department for Education (2025) *Induction for early career teachers (England) Statutory guidance for appropriate bodies, headteachers, school staff and governing bodies*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/680a0c3e6d6ac02ee99d8437/Induction_for_early_career_teachers__England_.pdf (Accessed: 26th September 2025)
- Department for Education (no date) *Assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE)*. Available at: <https://support-for-social-workers.education.gov.uk/asye?preferenceSet=True>. (Accessed: 26th September 2025)
- Drake, D. (2018) 'Creating zones of proximal development in coaching: The power of working at thresholds', *The Coaching Psychologist*, 14(1), pp. 42–47. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119835714.ch45>.
- Emslie, M. (2009) 'Researching reflective practice: a case study of youth work education', *Reflective Practice*, 10(4), pp. 417–427. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623940903138258>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)
- Fitzsimons, A. (ed.) (2011) *Empowerment and participation in youth work*. Exeter: Learning Matters (Empowering youth and community work practice).

- Foucault, M. (2020) *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. Translated by A. Sheridan. London: Penguin Classics.
- Franklin, A. and Sloper, P. (2009) 'Supporting the Participation of Disabled Children and Young People in Decision-making', *Children & Society*, 23(1), pp. 3–15. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2007.00131.x>. (Accessed: 28th September 2019).
- Freire, P. (1996) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Penguin
- Fricker, M. (2008) 'FORUM: Miranda FRICKER's Epistemic Injustice. Power and the Ethics of Knowing', *THEORIA. An International Journal for Theory, History and Foundations of Science*, 23(1), pp. 69–71. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1387/theoria.7>. (Accessed: 28th September 2019).
- Fricker, M. (2011) *Epistemic injustice: power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fricker, M. (2018) 'Epistemic Injustice and Recognition Theory: A New Conversation —Afterword', *Feminist philosophy quarterly*, 4(4). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2018.4.6235>. (Accessed: 28th September 2019).
- Fricker, M. (2023) 'Interview Prof. Miranda Fricker - Epistemic Injustice'. Interviewed by Prof. Clara Mavellia for the Cultural Entrepreneurship Institute, Berlin. Available at <https://youtu.be/48cTwTzfhvM?si=2DCxuDkByVmnEqIQ>. (Accessed 6th May 2026)
- Fuller, P. and Ord, J. (2011) in Ord, J. (ed.) (2011) *Critical issues in youth work management*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fulton, J. and Smith, P. (2013) *The professional doctorate: a practical guide*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan (Palgrave research skills).
- Fulton, J. (2013) *Professional Doctorate: A Practical Guide*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fusco, D. (2011) *Advancing Youth Work: Current Trends, Critical Questions*. Oxford, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group. Available at: <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/sunderland/detail.action?docID=958094> (Accessed: 1st February 2025).
- Gallagher, M. (2006) *Spaces of Participation and Inclusion*. In Tisdall, E.K.M. et al. (eds) (2006) *Children, young people and social inclusion: participation for what?* Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- General Medical Council (2025) *Outcomes for provisionally registered doctors*. Available at: <https://www.gmc-uk.org/education/standards-guidance-and-curricula/standards-and-outcomes/outcomes-for-provisionally-registered-doctors>. (Accessed: 26th September 2025).
- Geuskens, M. (2014) 'Epistemic Justice: A Positive Conception.' *Understanding Epistemic Injustice*. Conference held at The University of Bristol, June 2014.

Available at <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/philosophy/research/epistemic-injustice/>
(Accessed 9th May 2026)

Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1967) *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. London New York: Routledge.

Gormally, S., Coburn, A. and Beggan, E. (2021) 'Idealistic Assertions or Realistic Possibilities in Community and Youth Work Education', *Education Sciences*, 11(9), p. 561. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11090561>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)

Grayson, J. (2015) 'Challenging The Order Of Things: Independent Working-Class Education As A Model For Contemporary Praxis' In Cooper, C., Gormally, S. and Hughes, G. (eds) *Socially Just, Radical Alternatives for Education and Youth Work Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137393593>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)

Grover, S.C. (2011) *Young People's Human Rights and The Politics of Voting Age*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands (Ius Gentium: Comparative Perspectives on Law and Justice). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-8963-2>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)

Grundy, S. (1987) *Curriculum: product or praxis?* London: Falmer Press

Gunn, R. (2008) 'The power to shape decisions? An exploration of young people's power in participation: Young people's power in participation', *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 16(3), pp. 253–261. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2524.2008.00779.x>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)

Gustavsen, B. (2020) 'Action research and the problem of the single case', *International Journal of Action Research*, 16(1–2020), pp. 77–82. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3224/ijar.v16i1.07>. (Accessed: 20th September 2025.)

Harrison, R. and Ord, J. (2011) in Ord, J. (ed.) (2011) *Critical issues in youth work management*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hartas, D. and Lindsay, G. (2011) 'Young people's involvement in service evaluation and decision making', *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 16(2), pp. 129–143. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2011.569397>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)

Heathfield, M. (2012) 'A Chicago Story: Challenge and Change', in Fusco, D. (ed.) (2012) *Advancing Youth Work*. New York: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203829769>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)

Hennink, M.M., Hutter, I. and Bailey, A. (2011) *Qualitative research methods*. London: SAGE.

Heron, J. and Reason, P. (2013) 'Extending Epistemology within a Co-operative Inquiry', in Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (Eds) *The SAGE handbook of action research: participative inquiry and practice*. 2nd edn. London: SAGE.

- hooks, B. (1994) *Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom*. New York London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Hughes, G. (2015) “Imagining Otherwise” or Tinkering with the System?, in: Cooper, C., Gormally, S. and Hughes, G. (eds) *Socially Just, Radical Alternatives for Education and Youth Work Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137393593>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)
- Hughes, J.A. (1990) *The philosophy of social research*. 2nd ed. London ; New York: Longman (Aspects of modern sociology).
- Ignelzi, M. (2000) ‘Meaning-Making in the Learning and Teaching Process’, *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2000(82), pp. 5–14. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.8201>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)
- Infed.org. (no date) ‘Circular 1486 - The service of youth’. Available at: <https://infed.org/dir/welcome/circular-1486-the-service-of-youth/> (Accessed: 23 May 2026).
- Infed.org (2026) ‘Maude Stanley, girls’ clubs and district visiting’ Available at: <https://infed.org/dir/welcome/maude-stanley-girls-clubs-and-district-visiting/> (Accessed 25th May 2026)
- Investing in Children (no date, 1) ‘Investing in Children Statement of Purpose’. Available at: <http://www.investinginchildren.net/about-us/statement-of-purpose/> (Accessed: 4th January 2019).
- Investing in Children (no date, 2) ‘Groups’. Available at: <https://investinginchildren.net/groups-projects/> (Accessed: 11th May 2026).
- Jeffs, T. and Smith, M. (2005) *Informal education: conversation, democracy and learning*. 3rd ed. Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press
- Jeffs, T. and Smith, M. (eds) (1990) *Using informal education: an alternative to casework, teaching, and control?* Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Johnston, N. (2026) ‘Who can vote in UK elections?’ Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8985/> (Accessed: 23 May 2026).
- Jones, O. (2020) *Chavs: the demonization of the working class*. Third edition. London: Verso.
- Jung, A., Korinek, R.-L. and Straßheim, H. (2014) ‘Embedded expertise: a conceptual framework for reconstructing knowledge orders, their transformation and local specificities’, *Innovation* (Abingdon, England), 27(4), pp. 398–419. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2014.892425>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)
- Kemmis, S. (1993) ‘Foucault, Habermas and Evaluation’, *Curriculum Studies*, 1(1), pp. 35–54. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965975930010103>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)

Kemmis, S. (2013) 'Critical Theory and Participatory Action Research' in Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (Eds) *The SAGE handbook of action research: participative inquiry and practice*. 2nd edn. London: SAGE.

Kimberlee, R. (2008) 'Streets ahead on safety: young people's participation in decision-making to address the European road injury "epidemic": Participation in street safety', *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 16(3), pp. 322–328. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2524.2008.00762.x>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)

Koestler, A. (2014) *The Sleepwalkers*. Available at: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/255037/the-sleepwalkers-by-koestler-arthur/9780141394534> (Accessed: 19th September 2025).

Koppl, R. (2010) 'The Social Construction of Expertise'. *Society (New Brunswick)*, 47(3), pp. 220–226. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-010-9313-7> (Accessed: 31st August 2019).

Kuhn, T.S. (1970) *The structure of scientific revolutions*. [2d ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (International encyclopedia of unified science. Foundations of the unity of science, v. 2, no. 2).

Lawson, P.J. and Flocke, S.A. (2009) 'Teachable moments for health behavior change: A concept analysis', *Patient Education and Counseling*, 76(1), pp. 25–30. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pec.2008.11.002>. (Accessed: 22nd September 2025)

Lea, S. (2012) 'Are youth workers free to lead?', in Ord, J. (ed.) *Critical issues in youth work management*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Routledge.

Ledwith, M. and Springett, J. (2022) *Participatory practice: community-based action for transformative change*. 2nd edn. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.

Levitas, R. (2013) *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lloyd, M. *et al.* (2008) 'When a child says "no": experiences of nurses working with children having invasive procedures', *Paediatric nursing*, 20(4), pp. 29–34. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7748/paed2008.05.20.4.29.c8252>. (Accessed: 22nd September 2025)

Lloyd, M. (2018). 'Domestic Violence and Education: Examining the Impact of Domestic Violence on Young Children, Children, and Young People and the Potential Role of Schools.' *Frontiers in Psychology*. [Online]. 9. Available from: <https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02094/full>. [Accessed: 19th September 2025].

Lorenzini, D. (2015) 'What is a "Regime of Truth"?', *Le foucauldien*, 1(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/lefou.2>. [Accessed: 19th September 2025].

Lyons, J. (1972) *Chomsky*. London: Fontana

- Maguire (2018) 'Methodology as personal and professional integrity: Research designing for practitioner doctorates'. In Costley, C. and Fulton, J. *Methodologies for practice research: approaches for professional doctorates*. London: SAGE. pp. 95-115.
- Malaguzzi, L. (1993) 'For an Education Based on Relationships.', *Young Children*, 49(1), pp. 9–12. Available at: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ej474755> (Accessed: 30 August 2025).
- Malala Fund (no date) 'Malala's Story'. Available at: <https://malala.org/malalas-story>. (Accessed 25th May 2026).
- Marriott, J. (2024) 'The unaccountable academy model is failing our schools and students', *The Guardian*, 20 March. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2024/mar/20/the-unaccountable-academy-model-is-failing-our-schools-and-students> (Accessed: 31st August 2025).
- May, T. (2002) *Qualitative Research in Action*. London: SAGE.
- May, T. (2011) *Social research: issues, methods and process*. 4th ed. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill.
- Maynard, L. and Stuart, K. (2017) *Promoting Young People's Wellbeing through Empowerment and Agency: A Critical Framework for Practice*. 1st edn. Abingdon: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315676418>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)
- McEwan, M. and Dhall, S. (2022) 'The "snowflake generation" are brave to display their sensitivity', *The Guardian*. 27 November. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/nov/27/the-snowflake-generation-are-brave-to-display-their-sensitivity> (Accessed: 23 May 2026).
- McNiff, J. (2010) *Action research for professional development: concise advice for new (and experienced) action researchers*. Poole: September Books.
- Mezirow, J. (1990) *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: a guide to transformative and emancipatory learning*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers (The Jossey-Bass higher education series).
- Milnes, L.J. *et al.* (2013) 'A qualitative evaluation of a pre-consultation guide intended to promote the participation of young people in asthma review consultations', *Patient Education and Counseling*, 91(1), pp. 91–96. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pec.2012.10.010>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)
- Monbiot, G. (2016) 'Neoliberalism – the ideology at the root of all our problems', *The Guardian*, 15 April. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot> (Accessed: 31st August 2025).

Moritz, S. and Lysaker, P.H. (2018) 'Metacognition – What did James H. Flavell really say and the implications for the conceptualization and design of metacognitive interventions', *Schizophrenia Research*, 201, pp. 20–26. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.schres.2018.06.001>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)

Mullender, A. and Ward, D. (1998) *Self-directed groupwork: users take action for empowerment*. London: Whiting & Birch.

Murris, K. (2013) 'The Epistemic Challenge of Hearing Child's Voice', *Studies in Philosophy & Education*, 32(3), pp. 245–259. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-012-9349-9>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)

National curriculum (2014) *GOV.UK*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum> (Accessed: 19th September 2025).

National Geographic Kids 'Greta Thunberg Facts' Available at: <https://www.natgeokids.com/uk/kids-club/cool-kids/general-kids-club/greta-thunberg-facts>. (Accessed 25th May 2026)

National Youth Agency (2024) *National Youth Work Curriculum*. Available at: [5.3.1-0923-NYA-Youth-Work-Curriculum-DIGITAL1-03.24-1.pdf](https://www.nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/5.3.1-0923-NYA-Youth-Work-Curriculum-DIGITAL1-03.24-1.pdf) (Accessed: 23rd May 2026).

National Youth Agency (no date) (1) *Hear-by-Right-20pp-brochure-P4.pdf*. Available at: <https://nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Hear-by-Right-20pp-brochure-P4.pdf> (Accessed: 4th August 2019).

National Youth Agency (no date) (2) *National Youth Agency*. Available at: <https://nya.org.uk/about-us/> (Accessed: 30th August 2025).

National Youth Agency (no date) (3) *NYA Youth Work Academy*. Available at: <https://nya.org.uk/nya-academy>. (Accessed: 26th September 2025).

National Youth Agency (no date) (4) *Qualifications and training*. Available at: <https://nya.org.uk/qualifications-and-training/>. (Accessed: 27th September 2025).

National Youth Agency (no date) (5) *The National Youth Sector Census*. Available at: <https://nya.org.uk/census/>. (Accessed: 27th September 2025).

National Youth Agency (no date) (6) *UK Youth Parliament*. Available at: <https://nya.org.uk/ukyp/>. (Accessed: 25th May 2026).

New Books Network Book of the Day (2024) *Eva von Redecker, 'Praxis and Revolution: A Theory of Social Transformation' (Columbia UP, 2021)*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tebZXSrDtkk> (Accessed: 19th September 2025).

Ngan, T.T. (2021) 'Navigating "Praxis Shock": Disentangling an Early Career Teacher's Emotions and Actions in Organizational Socialization Through a

- Micropolitical Lens', *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies*, 37(3). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.25073/2525-2445/vnufs.4670>. (Accessed 12th May 2026)
- Nicholls, D. (2012) *For youth workers and youth work: speaking out for a better future*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- NEYA (no date) 'Workforce development and training' *NorthEast Youth Alliance* Available at: <https://neya.org.uk/workforce-development/> Accessed 28th September 2025
- Olympics (2026) *Closing Ceremony | Milano Cortina*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cE-r2SvhSY> (Accessed 23rd May 2026)
- Ord, J. (ed.) (2011) *Critical issues in youth work management*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Parkin, C. and Buchroth, I. (eds) (2010) *Using theory in youth and community work practice*. Exeter: Learning Matters (Empowering youth and community work practice).
- Pearson, G. (1983) *Hooligan : a history of respectable fears*. London : Macmillan. Available at: <http://archive.org/details/hooliganhistoryo0000pear> (Accessed: 25 May 2026).
- Piaget, Jean. and Tomlinson, A. (1998) *Child's Conception of the World: Selected Works Vol 1*. Oxford, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group. Available at: <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/sunderland/detail.action?docID=1272990> (Accessed: 30th August 2025).
- Pusey, M. (1987) *Jürgen Habermas*. London: Routledge.
- Putnam, R.D. (2000) *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Quirkos - *Qualitative Data Analysis Software made simple* (no date). Available at: <https://www.quirkos.com/index.html> (Accessed: 20th September 2025).
- RSA (2010) *RSA ANIMATE: Changing Education Paradigms*. Presentation by Sir Ken Robinson. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcdGpL4U> (Accessed: 19th September 2025).
- Robson, C. and McCartan, K. (2016) *Real world research: a resource for users of social research methods in applied settings*. 4th edn. Hoboken: Wiley.
- Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation* (no date). Available at: <https://www.mefirst.org.uk/resource/arnsteins-ladder-of-participation/> (Accessed: 30th August 2025).
- Rosa, E.M. and Tudge, J. (2013) 'Urie Bronfenbrenner's Theory of Human Development: Its Evolution From Ecology to Bioecology', *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 5(4), pp. 243–258. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12022>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)

Rotherham MBC (2019) *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham (1997 – 2013) | Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council*. Available at: https://www.rotherham.gov.uk/downloads/file/1407/independent_inquiry_cse_in_rotherham (Accessed: 28th September 2019).

Russell, B. (1986) *The problems of philosophy*. 13. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (OPUS).

Saltiel, D. (2010) 'Judgement, narrative and discourse: a critique of reflective practice', in Bradbury, H. (ed.) (2010) *Beyond reflective practice: new approaches to professional lifelong learning*. London ; New York: Routledge.

Schon, D.A. (1995) 'The new scholarship requires a new epistemology. *Change*, Nov/Dec 1995; 27(6), p. 26.

Seaford, H. (2001) 'Children and Childhood: Perceptions and Realities', *The Political Quarterly*, 72(4), pp. 454–465. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.00425>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)

Sercombe, H. (2015) *In the Service of the State: Youth Work under New Labour*. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/11604131/Sercombe_H_2015_In_the_Service_of_the_State_Youth_Work_under_New_Labour (Accessed: 31st August 2025).

Shabani, K., Khatib, M. and Ebadi, S. (2010) 'Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development: Instructional Implications and Teachers' Professional Development', *English Language Teaching*, 3(4), p. p237. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v3n4p237>. (Accessed 28th September 2025)

Shenton, F. (2015) 'Even if it is legally defensible, does that make it morally right? Children explore the use of physical restraint in custody'. British Library (not currently accessible due to cyber attack)

'Shukra, K., Ball, M. and Brown, K. (2012) 'Participation and Activism: Young people shaping their worlds.' *Youth and Policy* 108 pp. 36-54. [online]. Available at: <http://www.youthandpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/yandp108.pdf>' (2012). (Accessed, 27th September 2025)

Silverman, D. (2014) *Interpreting qualitative data: David Silverman*. 5th edn. London: SAGE.

Simpkin, B. (2015) *PhD Thesis on Participation*. British Library (not currently accessible due to cyber attack)

Smart Schools Councils Community 'Let's build a better way to run your school council'. Available at: <https://smartschoolcouncils.org/for-schools>. (Accessed 25th May 2026).

Smith, M. (2006) 'Place, space and informal education', in Richardson, L.D. (ed.) *Principles and practice of informal education: learning through life*. London: Routledge.

- Smith, A. and Seal, M. (2021) 'The Contested Terrain of Critical Pedagogy and Teaching Informal Education in Higher Education', *Education Sciences*, 11(9), p. 476. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11090476>. (Accessed 27th September 2025)
- Spence, J. (2005) 'Concepts of Youth' in Harrison, R., Wise, C. *Working with young people*. London: SAGE
- Springer, S. and Gahman, L. (2016) 'Fuck Neoliberalism and then some! A6', *Active Distribution*. Available at: <https://www.activedistributionshop.org/product/fuck-neoliberalism-and-then-some/> (Accessed: 31st May 2025).
- Stalford, H. (2019) 'The price is rights!: Cost benefit analysis and the resourcing of children's services', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 99, pp. 395–407. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2019.01.037>. (Accessed 27th September 2025)
- Stalford, H.E. (2018) 'David and Goliath: Due Weight, the State and Determining Unaccompanied Children's Fate', *Journal of Immigration, Asylum & Nationality Law*. [Preprint]. Available at: <https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/3023144/> (Accessed: 29th October 2019).
- Thompson, N. (1993) *Anti-discriminatory practice*. Basingstoke: Macmillan (Practical social work).
- Thompson, N. et al. (2025) 'Youth work is NOT a minimum wage profession – a plea from youth work educators to our National Youth Agency...' *Youth & Policy*. May 2025. Available at: <https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/youth-work-is-not-a-minimum-wage-profession-a-plea-from-youth-work-educators-to-our-national-youth-agency/> (Accessed: 26 September 2025).
- Tilsen, J.B. (2018) *Narrative approaches to youth work: conversational skills for a critical practice/ Julie Beth Tilsen*. Routledge, p. Available at: <http://catalogue.sunderland.ac.uk/items/438943>, <http://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=Sunderland&isbn=9781315105970> (Accessed: 7th August 2021).
- Tisdall, E.K.M. et al. (eds) (2006) *Children, young people and social inclusion: participation for what?* Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Twum-Danso Imoh, A. (2025) 'Destabilizing images of the competent adult vs. the incompetent child in dominant children's rights discourses through the lens of Akan notions of personhood and social relations', *Critical Children's Rights Studies*. 1st edn. United Kingdom: Routledge, pp. 123–136. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003510284-9>. (Accessed: 25th May 2026).
- UK Government (1) (2014) *Department for Education (DfE) (2014) Listening to and involving children and young people (statutory guidance)*. London: DfE. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437241/Listening_to_and_involving_children_and_young_people. (Accessed: 28th September 2019).

UK Government (2) (2023) *Working together to safeguard children*, GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2> (Accessed: 28th September 2019).

UK Government (3) (2025) *Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy* GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy> (Accessed: 23 May 2026).

UK Government (4) (no date) *National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage rates*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates>. (Accessed: 25th May 2026)

UKRI (no date) *The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies: connected collaboration, connected communities and connected impact*. Available at: <https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH%2FK000500%2F1> (Accessed 23rd May 2026)

'UNCRC' (no date) *UNICEF UK*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/> (Accessed: 30th August 2025).

Unicef (no date, (1)) *The Rights Respecting Schools Award Strands - Unicef UK, Rights Respecting Schools Award*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/the-rrsa/the-rrsa-strands/> (Accessed: 4th August 2019).

Unicef (no date, (2)) *The Lundy Model Article 12 in Practice*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/resources/teaching-resources/guidance-assemblies-lessons/the-lundy-model-article-12-in-practice/>. (Accessed 5th May 2026)

United Nations (no date) *Youth*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth> (Accessed: 23 May 2026).

University of Sunderland (no date, 1) *Centre for Graduate Prospects*. Available at: <https://services.sunderland.ac.uk/employability-enterprise-hub/support-available/>. (Accessed: 26th September 2025).

University of Sunderland (no date, 2) *Community and Youth Work BA (Hons)*. Available at: <https://www.sunderland.ac.uk/undergraduate/ba-hons-community-youth-work?option=3060d37e-ba44-4cf1-8d74-623aba8ff360> (Accessed: 23rd May 2026).

van Bijleveld, G.G., Dedding, C.W.M. and Bunders-Aelen, J.F.G. (2015) 'Children's and young people's participation within child welfare and child protection services: a state-of-the-art review: Children's participation within child protection', *Child & Family Social Work*, 20(2), pp. 129–138. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12082>. (Accessed: 26th September 2025)

VeLure Roholt, R. & Cutler, J. (2011) 'Youth work as engagement' In: Fusco, D. (2011) *Advancing Youth Work: Current Trends, Critical Questions*. Oxford, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group. Available at:

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/sunderland/detail.action?docID=958094> (Accessed: 1st February 2025).

Weller, S. (2009) 'Exploring the spatiality of participation: teenagers' experiences in an English secondary school Weller, Susie (2009) Exploring the spatiality of participation: teenagers' experiences in an English secondary school.', *Youth and Policy*, 101(Winter), pp. 15–32. Available at: <https://www.youthandpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/youthandpolicy1011-1.pdf> (Accessed: 4th January 2019).

Wenger, E., McDermott, R.A. and Snyder, W. (2002) *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. La Vergne, UNITED STATES: Harvard Business Review Press. Available at: <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/sunderland/detail.action?docID=5181870> (Accessed: 31st August 2025).

Williams, F. (1994) *Social policy: a critical introduction*. Cambridge: Polity.

Williamson, C. (2012) 'The Journey to Becoming a Youth Worker', in: Fusco, D. (ed.) (2012) *Advancing Youth Work*. New York: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203829769>. (Accessed: 26th September 2025)

Wood, J., Westwood, S. and Thompson, G. (2014) *Youth Work: Preparation for practice*. 1st edn. Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315767376>. (Accessed: 26th September 2025)

Youth and Policy (no date) *Youth & Policy*. Available at: <https://www.youthandpolicy.org/> (Accessed: 28th September 2019).

Youth Policy (2013) *A Potpourri of Participation Models*. Available at: <https://www.youthpolicy.org/library/documents/a-potpourri-of-participation-models>. (Accessed 25th May 2026)

Workplace destinations of graduates in the sample

Respondents were involved with youth work (detached and outreach; work with young women and girls); social action work; community work (including work with families); support and engagement work with young people (including youth mentoring; independent visitor work; support work in education at both secondary and further education levels; work with young people missing from home; work with young refugees; counselling and “low level” therapeutic work; anti-poverty work (e.g. feeding young people who are hungry; work to address young people’s poverty of experience; work with young women experiencing period poverty); work to address issues of poor mental health; work associated with sex, sexual health, relationships and the sex industry (including support during court proceedings and survivor support); work around housing and the homeless (including young people; adults; supported living; rehabilitation and independence); work around addiction and substance misuse (including opiates, alcohol and others); work around crime connected with homelessness and young people’s involvement with the criminal justice system; work around voice, rights and participation (e.g. including teaching adults about these topics in relation to theory and practice); charity management; work with people with additional needs and special educational needs; work around access to nature and growing (including trauma-based work).

Pre-interview briefing materials

Interview schedule for qualified community and youth workers

Preamble

The focus of the research

This research explores 3 main things:

1. What graduates from Community and Youthwork courses know about children and young people's rights and participation.
2. How they make sense of the concepts of a) childhood and b) expertise.
3. How this links to their practice in relation to children and young people's participation and rights.

The purpose of the research

It is hoped that the information gathered (all of which is anonymised) will help towards closing the gap between the fact of children and young people's rights and their realisation in practice - what is sometimes referred to as the "democratic deficit" experienced by children and young people. For instance it might:

- Help those who design professional training courses (youthwork/social work/teacher training etc) adjust what they teach and how they teach it.
- Provide insights into which aspects of what is taught make the most difference in practice.
- Draw attention to the importance of having a focus on rights as a key aspect of initial professional training.

Initial information (you could email me your brief answers to these questions before the interview if you wish or we can cover it on the day):

- Did you have any experience of working with children and young people before starting the degree course?
- How many years/months is it since you qualified/completed the degree?
- Briefly describe any work you have been involved in since qualifying (paid or unpaid) that involves children/young people.

Note on recording

The interview will be recorded for the purposes of transcription and analysis. Only the primary researcher will have access to the digital audio file. The filename will be coded and the file will be kept behind a secure, password protected device. Only the primary researcher will be in a position to match codes to filenames and once the research is complete the digital recording will be deleted with only the anonymised transcript being retained for analysis.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your participation or how the data you provide will be stored, analysed or use please contact Dan Connolly at dan.connolly@sunderland.ac.uk

Page two - questions

Question one: Can you say something about how you would describe “*childhood*” - not so much your own childhood but how you understand the concept more generally? Maybe some of its key characteristics as you see them?

Potential follow-up/prompting questions for Q1:

- How might you explain childhood as a “*contested concept*”?
- How do you think the concept of childhood is *understood more generally*?
- Can you say anything about *the C&YW degree* and childhood? E.g. can you think of when it was addressed or discussed as a concept?
- Are you able to say anything about how the course has altered the way you think about the concept of childhood in any way? If so, how? Which aspects?

Question two: Can you now say something about how you understand the concept of “*expertise*”? You might want to start by saying something about how you view your own expertise or whether you consider yourself to be an “expert” in any way. Or you might want to say something about what you think makes an expert an expert?

Potential follow-up/prompting questions for Q2:

- What is your current understanding of the phrase “*young people as experts in their own lives*”?
- What about issues of *power* in relation to experts and expertise?
- Can you describe any aspect of *the C&YW degree* where you have explored the notion of expertise in any way?

Question three: Following on from our conversation about childhood and expertise, can you say something about how, or whether, you think these issues link to *practice* in any way?

Potential follow-up/prompting questions for Q3:

- Do you think these issues - e.g. how these two concepts are understood by you or by others - are *important* for practice in any way? If so why? Explain.
- Do you think these topics are relevant in relation to practice around *children and young people's voice, participation, rights etc*?
- How would you describe your current *stance* in relation to children and young people's rights?
- Can you describe any aspect of *the C&YW degree* which has helped you to frame this stance? Is this stance (towards children and young people's rights) different in any way from the stance you had at the start of the course? If so, which aspects prompted it to change?

Finally: Do you have any questions about the research or anything you would like to add about the topics we have discussed before we finish?

Quirkos example

The screenshot displays the Quirkos web application interface. The main workspace is titled "DProf Data Analysis Data set one" and contains a collection of nodes represented by colored circles and overlapping shapes. Each node is labeled with a topic, such as "Experience", "Childhood - the concept of", "Expertise - the concept of", "Rights-led practice - examples", "Youth workers as champions of rights", "Impact of the degree", "Modules and Moments", "Praxis", "Meaningful participation and dialogue: Understanding of and", "Schooling", "Internal participation processes", "Impact of the Interview on respondent thinking", "Covid and rights", "tokenistic participation - examples of", and "How do you work with young people with special interests like Autism and". A "Quick filter quirks" search bar is located at the bottom left of the workspace.

On the right side, a sidebar displays a transcript titled "Copy of Interview MO1 4th Aug 2022_tidied up.docx". The transcript content includes:

Interview MO1 4th Aug 2022
 Fri, Aug 05, 2022 6:20PM • 1:24:05

SUMMARY KEYWORDS
 people, rights, childhood, question, young, youth worker, bit, interesting, adults, experts, interested, politics, community, understanding, understand, thinking, terms, conversation, voice, big

Q1
MO1 07:46
 To me, childhood would range from baby to teen. Okay. I think even now, the way people are a bit older in their ways in the way that they are. So maybe even sort of 11 years or older, they are older than what they were when I was a child. When I was 11, some of us were still playing with dolls. Yeah, yesterday, I was working with a group of eight year olds and they haven't been playing with dolls for ages. Yeah. So that kind of thing, what is happening? Like, what are they doing instead of that sort of sort of claim? For me, childhood should be free. Should be spontaneous and should be allowed for young people just to be able to express. But I think there's so many different ways of expressing these days, it's hard for to find the right way.

08:40
 Okay. Okay.

MO1 08:43
 And then the business of social media.

Dan 08:47
 So how do you think social media?

MO1 08:50
 I think social medias makes childhood a lot harder. I think the way that young people behave on social media has made them a lot older. Because the more we're interested in following the relationships, that maybe they're following celebrities, that sort of nonsense, or even like adults on social media trying to emulate that, but they're not really in the right mindset or ready to deal with the consequences of some of them actions. And another reason I'm saying this is because of the conversations that I'm having with my nephew and his friends about social media, and how easy it is for some of the young people from 11 to 12 Sending photographs of themselves to each other, what types of

Investing in Children Project Groups

- **The eXtreme group:** A group of young people with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) who meet regularly to share ideas and help to improve SEND services for young people.
- **Durham Children in Care Council:** A group that supports care experienced children and care leavers to have a voice and to have a say in how care services are run.
- **The Decisions Group:** Investing in Children's own internal (children and young people's) scrutiny group.
- **The Art Cafe:** A project that supports children and young people with their mental health and wellbeing via creative expression.
- **Type 1 Kidz (T1Kz):** A project that supports children and young people who have been diagnosed as having Type 1 diabetes and works with them to campaign for change.
- **Your Autism:** An NHS funded project that provides information for children and young people with autism including work to address stigma and stereotyping.
- **The LGBTQIA+ project:** A project that supports the voice of LGBTQIA+ children and young people and campaigns for change in services; The County Durham

<https://investinginchildren.net/groups-projects/>

Note for thesis appendix five (a): The notes reproduced below were prepared for meeting 2 which took place in February 2022.

Young People's Research Reference Group

Page One: General Briefing Notes

Who am I?

I am a student on a "Professional Doctorate" research degree at The University of Sunderland. I have completed 3 years of research with 2 more to go.

I am also a lecturer at The University of Sunderland. I mainly teach Community and Youth Work students but I also teach Social Work students.

I was a Community and Youth Worker in Durham and across the North East for 25 years. I have been involved with liC in lots of different ways since 1996 including managing a project called "The Children's Fund", working on Membership applications and supporting project groups/Agenda Days etc. For the last few years I have been a member of the liC Board of Directors and I also sit on the Six The Mowbray Professional Support Group.

What is the focus of my research?

I am interested in finding out what people who are professionally qualified to work with children and young people know about children and young people's rights. Also to find out what they know and understand about how to work meaningfully alongside children and young people to make sure that having rights makes a difference.

From what I have read and from my own experience (especially my involvement with liC) I think that lots of the work that happens around "involving" children and young people (e.g. on school councils or youth parliaments etc.) ends up being tokenistic. It meets the needs of the adults/organisations involved but doesn't bring about the changes that would make most difference to children and young people.

Why am I asking for your help?

Whilst I might have a few useful things to say about these issues, I understand them from the perspective of a 56 year-old. If the research is designed only from this perspective it is likely to miss the mark in terms of what makes a difference to young people. You are the experts in terms of knowing what young people in 2022 think about their lives and how they feel about the issues being researched. So involving young people in the design and implementation of the research increases its chances of being useful to other young people in the long run. It also helps to model how young people might be meaningfully involved in research processes, which is an important message to give to future researchers.

Page Two: Proposed next steps

How might we continue to work together on this research?

After our meeting in November I came away very excited about two things:

1. You said very clearly that the things the research is currently exploring are important and are worth exploring. This felt very confirming of the work done so far.
2. The possibility of working together to mutual benefit: I am clear about the ways you can help shape and improve this research. But the meeting also identified several areas where you are interested in making progress such as:
3.
 - Ensuring that more young people know precisely what their rights are.
 - Making sure that trainee Social Workers are taught about rights.
 - Involving young people in re-writing and updating their rights.

These are all things that the research could help you move forward with via your work with liC, though of course we would need to be realistic about not taking too much on!

Proposal

In light of the above I would like to suggest the following as an agenda for next time we meet up:

1. **How you can help the research:** I am currently writing some questions that I will be using to interview people who have recently qualified as Community and Youth Workers. The questions are aimed at finding out what they know about children and young people's rights and how this affects the way they work. I am keen to hear what you think about the questions. Whether they should be changed; are they the right ones etc?
- 2.
3. **How the research can help you:** Out of the different ideas we discussed last time (e.g. the three bullets above or other ideas in Lauren's notes from the meeting), which might we look at working on together? How might being involved with this research help move some of them forward practically? Or is there something else that you think is even more important to work on?
- 4.

Thanks, Dan Connolly

(Note for thesis appendix five (b): These notes were prepared for meeting 4 which took place in December 2023)

Research by Dan Connolly, University of Sunderland

Update for young people's research reference group, Thurs 21st Dec 2023

1. For several reasons (work and personal) the research is taking longer than originally planned but the good news is that I have been given an extension until 2025 if needed.
2. I have completed the first set of interviews with 11 qualified Community and Youth Workers using the questions which the group helped design.
3. I have started analysing the answers that were given using software called "Quirkos" (see screenshot below)



Example:

In response to the question about how youth workers understand the concept of childhood I was able to group the answers into the following categories:

- Childhood understood as *biology and chronology*
- What childhood *should* be
- How childhood gets *idealised* by adults
- Childhood experienced as *transition* - or not
- Childhood experienced as a period of *intensive influencing and conditioning*
- Childhood experienced as a period of *lack, lacking, stigmatisation, discrimination, vulnerability and trauma*
- Childhood as a *relative concept*
- Childhood as *socially constructed*
- *No such thing as childhood* - only childhoods
- Childhood as a period of *learning, development, exploring, testing, adventuring, gaining understanding*
- Childhood as a time of *unrecognised power*
- Childhood as a *drastically important stage* in the lifecourse

4. Once this initial analysis stage is complete, decisions will need to be made about where the research goes next. Several options are being considered but it is still too early to decide.

I am happy to be led by the group in terms of what we focus on when we meet on 21st December. This could include answering questions about any of the above four points or hearing about where the liC-led research is up to or anything else.

Dan Connolly Dec 2023