Playing Politics

Is youth work a site for political education – can it be?

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Dedicated to my wonderful dad, who taught me everything
I know about hard work and determination.

Ken Ramsey

9th January 1946 – 6th November 2023

Declaration

I, Tracy Ramsey, declare that this thesis is my own work, it has not been previously submitted for an award of this university or any other institution and that the content of this thesis is legally allowable under copyright legislation.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the potential for youth work to be a site for youth participation and political education. This interest has been grown from many years of practice, experiencing the challenges and changing landscape of youth work under the influence of contemporary neoliberal discourse and drives (Davies, 2024, Jeffs, 2015). Youth work is considered a contested practice, evoking a diversity of positions regarding its principles, purpose and practice (Cooper, Gormally and Hughes, 2015). The contention within this research is that neoliberalism and austerity have impacted significantly on youth work that orientations and opportunities for a practice located on social justice values are been profoundly compromised (Pope, 2016, de St. Croix, 2010, Davies, 2024). Working from a historical analysis to locate notions of youth participation and political education within youth work and social policy over time, this research seeks to understand the existence and nature of a radical heart of within professional practice and promote its reinvigoration.

Utilising a Participatory Action Research [PAR] orientation to explore the central research question – Is youth work a site for political education – can it be? Research endeavours were located in two research sites, one an open access, universal project and one referral only project for young people with disabilities, over a period of three years. PAR cycles were developed with young people and practitioners to explore the nature and potential of youth work, as sites for youth participation and political education. Within the PAR cycles creative methodologies were introduced and utilised for data collection. These methods promoted enjoyment, engagement, inclusion and anti-oppressive practice in action, as well as seeking to demonstrate working through social justice values and commitments.

The findings were analysed through a robust Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2023) and six key themes were drawn from the data set which were, **1**. ***Roles, 2. Cuts & Money, 3. Youth Work Values & Principles, 4. Youth Participation, Power & Political Education, 5. Contemporary Challenges Impacting on Young People's Lives*** and ***6. Opportunities, Outcomes & Impact.*** The findings were presented and discussed aligning with each theme in turn, connecting with the rich data from the PAR Group to bring forward meanings and conclusions for my own and wider professional practice. From the analysis of the findings two frameworks evolve, the first the 'Taking Part – Taking Apart Spectrum which seeks to promote the expansion of practice into political and social justice terrains. Secondly, a 'DEEP Learning Framework' is constructed to support my own professional development and as a contribution to the youth work sector to return to, and rebuild, a social justice orientated practice. The 'DEEP Learning Framework' has utility to reinvigorate both social justice youth work practice and the teaching of youth work through university based programmes.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Overview of the Research Context

The focus for this research project is centred on the analysis of the potential contribution youth work can make to the political education and development with young people. The key research question being 'Is youth work a site for political education – can it be?' This research interest and central question has grown from both, extensive youth work practice over the last twenty years, and previous research in this area spanning 2010 – 2013 (Ramsey, 2013). This earlier research explored conceptualisations of youth participation within youth work practice at a time of Youth Matters (HM Government, 2005).

The earlier research project was informed by the theoretical and philosophical understandings of youth work from seminal thinkers including Hart, 1992, Jeffs and Smith, 1985 – 2023, Young, 1999, 2006, Batsleer, 2008, Davies and Gibson, 1967, Davies, 1999-2024. The study sought to illuminate lived realities with young people as they attempted to make sense of themselves and the world they lived in. The stark experiences of poverty and privilege sitting uncomfortably, side by side and manifesting in the struggle for hopes and dreams within the daily experiences of young people's lives (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009, Dorling, 2014, 2024).

It has been through the unsettling critical contemplation of practice that this doctoral research interest has evolved. I recognise the collision of espoused core principles of youth work against contemporary experiences in practice, the impact of which has structured this research question focusing on participatory and political practice. As a youth and community development worker, I have grown to believe a central tenet of professional practice lies in the social and political awareness that comes from the kind of 'moral philosophy' (Young, 2006, p.3) embodied by those seminal thinkers in the field (Davies and Gibson, 1967, Batsleer, 2008, Jeffs and Smith, 2010, Smith, 1982).

> Political education is a conscious process of helping people to gain for themselves the knowledge, feelings and skills necessary to understand and exercise power in and between societies. (Smith, 1984, p.10)

Increasingly, I contend, the realities in practice fuel a disconnection from the theoretical and principled understandings of youth work towards a deficit and correctional agenda that both disempowers young people, practitioners and communities and reduces the capacity for political education and social justice endeavours within youth work consciousness (Jeffs, 2015, de St Croix, 2016, Taylor, 2016). A key element of political education is the recognition of the impact that wider social, political and economic forces have on people, not just for communities who have been marginalised and silenced, but the toll it takes on all people. Inequality is significantly damaging for us all, positioned as the greatest global risk of our era

(Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009, Dorling, 2015, Dorling, 2024). One of the most striking forces that impacts on communities as an outcome from 'rampant inequality' is *individualisation* (Dorling, 2020, p.153). The perspective that one's life chances are in our own hands, to be self-determined through consistent hard work and conformity. These myths powerfully erode pride and potential from us all as they permeate the skin and become internalised histories of failure (Dorling, 2015, Davies, 2013). The 'politics of hatred' starts from within (Ledwith, 2020, p.1).

> Politics is everything about life. It is built on the values we hold dear, the aspirations we have for ourselves and our world, the imagination to see the future we would like to live in, the ideas to create that future and the freedom for each and every one of us to live that future. It is about human and environmental flourishing. (Ledwith, 2020, p. 1)

Given the contemporary challenges facing the world, that impact on every doorstep, the need for both local and global resolutions is pressing. We are witnessing increasing levels of racism and xenophobia, fuelled recently from Brexit, and State sponsored 'Stop the Boats', Anti-Refugee rhetoric increasing far-right nationalism and Islamophobia (Home Office, 2018, CERD, 2024). Lives and communities are devastated by rising violence and knife crime (House of Commons, 2023). The toll of 'great misery' inflicted from biting austerity measures impacting across family dinner tables (Alston, 2018, p.2). Increasing environmental destruction resulting from global climate change (van Daalen et al, 2024) along with vast financial inequality and political uncertainty (Monbiot, 2018, Dorling, 2024).

As the SARS-Covid 19 pandemic reaches its fifth anniversary, the ramifications of pandemic politics are ever present as countries and communities seek to review and recover (UK Covid-19 Inquiry, 2024). The consequences of inequality exposed as the pandemic travelled the world, with the most marginalised and oppressed communities facing the full force of its fatal impact (Burlina and Rodríguez-Pose, 2024, Jones, 2020, Haque, 2020). The political nature of the pandemic revealed as those who could, stockpiled in safe sanctuary, whilst those on the frontline faced the ultimate risk with paltry protection (Unite, 2020).

Young people are not immune to the fallout from this dislocating political, social and economic landscape (The Prince's Trust, 2024). Despite our failure to hear them, framed and blamed as their apathy to come to voice, they live with the stark consequences now and for their futures (Ledwith, 2020). Young people are all too frequently demonised under the glare of media magnification, through repeated rhetoric of deviance and disorder (Giroux, 2008, Maughan, 2020, HM Gov, 2024). This has been witnessed throughout histories of 'moral panics' where young people's lives have been shaped by misrepresentation and stereotypes fuelling both panic and protection (Cohen, 1973, 2011). Young people are also frequently positioned as both the cause and cure of societies' ills creating a somewhat impossible tension, especially within the landscape of professional practice where emancipatory

methodology, it can be argued, demands that victims rescue themselves (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018, Eddo-Lodge, 2018). With the significant expansion of technology and social media contemporary concerns continue regarding young people's digital discourse (Ofcom, 2024, Online Safety Act, 2023). The duality of panic and possibility is evident as societies wrestle to protect young people from online harms, whilst enabling young people foster new, authentic connection and voice (Children's Commissioner, 2024, EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, 2024).

The legacy of Paulo Freire (1921 - 1997) continues to speak powerfully to youth work educators who are encouraged to reconnect to their central purpose through his work (Martin, 2020). Recognising and taking a political stand in practice, as in everyday life, is a fundamental principle to support people to connect and become conscious of the impact of structural forces on the landscape of their own and others' lives. This increased consciousness bringing hope for committed and collective action for liberation.

> In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation they must perceive the reality of oppression, not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limited situation which they can transform. (Freire, 1972, p.34)

It is my belief that youth workers can be key to this process of consciousness, transformation and liberation. Freire acknowledged, that with recognition, comes new perspectives (Freire, 1972). From seeing and questioning we can become forces for action. Collectively more powerful in pushing and creating change built on mutual solidarity, rather than individual blame and shame. As a professional practice dedicated to fostering 'human flourishing', youth work has, I assert, both a commitment and a responsibility to engage and work for social justice (Banks, 2010, p.11). This process of recognising and responding to the contexts that shape the very heart of young people's lives promotes seeing beyond the immediate symptomizing.

The theoretical basis of Paulo Freire's work provides a rudder for compassionate youth work practice and is applied within this research to guide both the field work and a re-articulation for a return to the *political* within our practice in order to, once again, re-imagine a new future. The day of reckoning is close, if not, as some would argue, is already upon us. The time is ticking in terms of our chances to reverse climate change (IPCC, 2023) and to foster, build and heal a world ravaged by grotesque inequality and oppression (Christiansen and Jensen, 2019, Dorling, 2024).

1.2 Research Focus

The central focus for this research is two-fold. Firstly, I seek to explore and understand myself as a practitioner and early career researcher within youth work. I have practised within this challenging and changing landscape for over twenty years and embarking on

this doctoral journey is as much a professional and personal journey of exploration as it is a participatory process for engaging alongside others. Ultimately this research is an exploration of a professional, radical world that I believe in. I seek to forge pathways for empowering and liberating processes for human discovery and development in my own practice and for sharing with the sector and beyond.

I seek to question and consider the professional commitments towards the *political* for youth workers, young people and communities, to work with and alongside them to facilitate and support the journey of their choosing and of their making. Fundamentally, I seek a foster a practice that focuses on 'what's strong rather than what's wrong' (Russell, 2020, p.16). A practice that reconnects to relationship-based and radical roots and locates people at the heart of community collaborations (Smith, 1982, Davies, 2005, Young, 2006). I believe this practice can and should interrogate lived realties, '…re-experiencing the ordinary' seeking to explore meaning, gaining new knowledge and leading to action for change (Shor, 1992 in Ledwith 2011, p.9).

From my own practice history, I have witnessed a shift in philosophy and ethics imposed by neoliberal ideals and demands powerfully infiltrating the landscape of human services (Davies, 2013). Such ideology problematises young people and communities which creates division and deficit (Taylor, 2010). Seeking to understand and illuminate the structural problems communities face in terms of oppression caused by class, gender, sexuality, [dis]ability, 'race' and age is the demand of our day (de St. Croix et al, 2018). This denial of the 'public and social causes of private pain' (Lavalette, 2011, p. 1) has damaged professional practice by, I contend, inflicting 'symbolic violence' on the very communities we are entrusted to support (Cooper, 2012, p. 55).

I seek to explore mechanisms within my own practice that resist and reject such a practice that positions the state, through funders, as the driving force for approaches that prescribe a 'fixing framework' for perceived community deficit (de St Croix, 2018). It is also imperative for my own development that I draw out into the light the mechanisms I have unwillingly adopted within my practice that conforms to and facilitates an entrenched neoliberal dominance, utilising this doctoral study to examine and challenge my own practice. Neoliberal directives of the state agenda are seen to be eroding both the philosophy and practice of youth work and continue to endanger the profession creating a further disconnect from our radical roots (de St Croix, 2016, Taylor, 2008a and Jeffs, 2013).

> Our focus has been blurred on the real issues at stake leaving us uncritical deliverers of policy, not really understanding why we are doing what we do anyway. We have lost our way. (Ledwith, 2011, p. 13)

Secondly, I seek to apply learning from this doctoral study through a reinvigoration of critical consciousness for political education and social justice within the youth work sector. Such a consciousness that is written into the heart of our radical youth work histories, with legacies woven through strands of our practice and that remain within the National Occupational Standards for our profession (NYA, 2020). Within the long and 'untidy history' (Smith, 1982, p.17) of youth work 'a radical tradition' (Jeffs, 2013, p. 1) of political practice has existed and grown (de St Croix, 2009). Often connected to the wider social and political uprisings across the globe, youth workers have united and engaged with wider struggles alongside oppressed peoples, framed through class, 'race', gender, age, sexuality and [dis]ability, to add voices to a movement for education, empowerment and change (Taylor, 2008a). Once again, I postulate that we are at a critical juncture, both in terms of the global crisis of power, oppression and inequality and within our profession as youth workers and our attempts to educate and liberate.

This research seeks to explore how and in what ways youth work practice can, and indeed if it should, be a site for political education. I seek to ask questions of my own practice and others, including young people and across communities, to generate momentum within the landscape for a return to the radical heart within contemporary youth work – if not us, then who? This is in recognition of the scarcity of professional adults in the lives of young people and communities that have, historically, taken a critical and radical approach to education and empowerment (Kincheloe, 2010, Apple, 2013, Bamber and Murphy, 1999).

At a point when increasingly youth workers are 'preparing young people to be producers and increasingly to be good consumers' there is both a threat to our professional integrity and to the state of our nation as ideological individualism seeps under the skin (Jeffs, 2013, p. 3). There is a concern for the critical and political education of young people, for their opportunities of gain space to explore and question their lived experiences that cause such social, political and economic harm for particular groups of young people (The Prince's Trust, 2024, Kane and Bibby, 2018, Kincheloe, 2010). If left unchallenged we will not reverse the trend, evident for the first time, with the current generation who find themselves worse off than the previous one (Green, 2017). Growing austerity, inequality and rampant individualism will continue to thrive, and generations of marginalised and oppressed groups will fail to reach their potential (Alston, 2019, Dorling, 2024, Wilkinson and Pickett, 2019).

1.3 Research Question and Sub-Questions

The aim for this doctoral research is to explore the following central research question:

Is youth work a site for political education – can it be?

Within the research I seek to explore this central research question through the following key research areas:

1. What are the experiences of youth participation, political education and social justice for young people engaged with youth work?
2. What factors affect both young people and youth workers engaging with youth participation, political education and social justice in youth work?
3. What are the barriers and challenges to developing participatory and political practice in youth work?
4. In what ways can youth participation, political education and social justice practice (re)-emerge and exist within youth work settings?

1.4 Overview of the Research Strategy

In order to explore these research questions a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology was constructed to generate opportunities for young people to 'come to voice' about their own contexts and consider in real time how they wish to respond to such understandings (Batsleer, 2015, p.151). For my own professional congruence participatory articulations within both practice and research are an essential framework to demonstrate commitments to foster political and radical change. The 'recursive process of PAR' provides the natural and increasingly rare space for questioning, acting and reflecting (McIntyre, 2008, p. 7). This space is central to the process of 'conscientisation' as expressed by Freire, (1972). The research project is both an opportunity to demonstrate and research theory in practice in a way more coherent to the core values expressed. It also provides an incubation space for young people to work collaboratively with others to explore opportunities for political education in action for change.

In undertaking this study, research was undertaken in two youth work sites. The first, an open access youth centre providing, what would be regarded as traditional 'association and voluntary participation' focused youth work for young people within the local area of a geographical community (Davies, 2005, Smith and Jeffs, 2010). This centre, open across four weekday evenings, provides opportunities for young people to engage through sport, music, art, cooking and project-based activities. The young people able to engage as they wish with the opportunities within the centre. I worked in the centre on a voluntary basis for a period of four years and the PAR project ran during the period 2016 – 2019.

The second site, a referral-only project working with young people with [dis]abilities. This weekly project for young people provided opportunities for young people to develop friendships through similar vehicles of sports, music, art, cooking and issue-based work. The research group within this site centred on a young women's [dis]ability football team formed from the project group following a health and fitness project supported by a local Premier League football club with funding from Sport England. The young women involved were keen to continue with the football training and to set up their own team, playing in local competitions with other young women's teams. I worked with the group for a period of four years and PAR project was undertaken between 2017 – 2020.

The two sites provided comparison and variation in terms of the framework, understanding and position of youth work, the range and scope of engagement and potential for political education and action. In each site I navigated the terrain of each project to open up as many opportunities as possible for young people to direct, lead and make decisions within the journey of the research project on their terms and as they felt appropriate. Through mechanisms employed to create dialogue and generate themes the young people had space and agency to bring to the surface issues which are important or of concern to them. Central to the research is the exploration of factors within young people's lives that they perceive to be detrimental to their 'human flourishing' in some way (Banks, 2010, p.11). The research in each site is centred on exploring both my own practice in developing an evolving process of engagement, conversation and dialogue fostering youth participation and political education, and the action taken and achievements by young people to enact their participatory and political power.

There are three key phases within the research methodology that were consciously considered and deliberately shaped. The first was a designed *'Building'* phase where I navigated and developed positive relationships with young people in each of the research sites. My position as an 'outsider' to the research group needed to build an understanding of the young people and the workings of the environment in order to gain some 'insider' status to be able to ask critical questions about young people's lives (Heath et al, 2009, p. 108). The second stage planned was a *'Problematise'* phase (Freire, 1972). This was focused on engaging with young people to generate themes bringing to the fore matters that they felt were important for them and others. In this phase young people reflected on their lived realties and explored the connections with others in the research group. I endeavoured to create and facilitate a process where young people's interests were central to the exploration efforts. The third phase developed was a *'Evaluation'* phase. During this phase the research team explored the 'process' and 'products' of the research journey generated across the previous phases of the research project to reflect on meaning, learning and significance for all those involved.

As is the premise with adopting a participatory orientation to research it is important to acknowledge the 'messy realties' of PAR (Percy-Smith et al, 2019b, p. 255). The notion that the three research phases detailed above existed as distinct, clearly defined stages within the research trajectory is a misrepresentation, this was far from a linear, formulaic or neat process. My experience throughout the PAR research journey is consistent with the conceptions of 'messiness', seeking to initiate and utilise 'the power of disruption' throughout PAR research to create action and change (Cook et al, 2019, p. 381). The development of a three - phased approach within the research project sought to provide a framework to aid understanding in a landscape rich in young people's potential and possibilities. This can be intimidating space for young people who often require a scaffolding approach to build new learning experiences that can be outside of existing comfort zones (Vygotsky, 1978).

1.5 Reflective Research Journey

As a consequence of embarking on this EdD Project I have somewhat unexpectedly had to confront my own relationship with education as part of this journey. Educational achievement was not something that was stressed in my family. I am the daughter of a mechanic whose practical and pragmatic abilities were the valued sources of family security. Through my own secondary education the importance of learning and education were not evident until the later school years, when the reality of what I would do next loomed. I connected with subjects that I enjoyed, where I could contribute and through sport I found a space which nurtured relationship-based learning, where it mattered what kind of person you were. I trained as a secondary school PE teacher at university and taught in formal education settings until I found youth work in 1998. Once again returning to a space for relationship-based education that was familiar and fulfilling. This understanding of my own journeying only becoming apparent through this doctoral research.

There have been crucial moments of reflection through the research journey as I reflect back on my own political education [and lack of] and assess where the drivers for this research project originate. Growing up I never realised the impact of the structural political, social and economic situation and the struggles we experienced at home. I was never encouraged to; the narrative was firmly set to one of individualised effort and enterprise. Moving to Liverpool in 1993 was the most transformative of educational experiences. The stark consequences of the social, political and economic systems shaping everyday lives, including my own, was unavoidable.

This, unbeknown to me at the time, welded the desire to explore notions of political education and lived realties. Through youth work I have worked with young people who are themselves exhausted by the daily struggles of the structural system. This is a thread, I have come to realise, that connects my personal, professional and academic practice. Travelling to Palestine in 2015 was the second most transformative experience of my life. This was the first of seven field trips I have made to Tulkarem on the West Bank to date, and has further cemented my steadfastness to study in this area.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is presented through six chapters. The first, an introduction section seeks to locate the context and the challenges within the field of professional youth work, bringing forward the impact of global challenges that are impacting across human services, including youth work. Within the introduction section I detail my connection with this topic area and the research questions that frame this study.

Chapter Two is an extensive literature review which seeks to offer three central explorations, the first is a historical analysis to locate the threads and early models of both youth work and youth leadership. The purpose of this is to trace the evolution of youth participation and

political education overtime. This analysis brings the exploration up to date with the contemporary youth work experience. The second part of the literature review explores social policy through the lenses of youth participation and political education to assess the ways in which this participatory agenda has been expanded, manipulated and hijacked by the demands of governments seeking to contain and control young people's lives. The third and final part of the literature review draws on seminal and contemporary theoretical contributions to understand and position meanings of youth participation, political education and social justice within the academic literature of youth work.

Chapter Three offers an exploration of the methodology for the research which locates the research within the PAR orientation. Questions of ontology and epistemology are framed and the rationale provided for the PAR framework is discussed along with a reflective analysis of the research journey. PAR is discussed in relation to work specifically with young people and the challenges of PAR are outlined. Details of the ethical challenges within the project are outlined.

Chapter Four follows with a detailed explanation and discussion of the research methods, including details of the PAR model adopted, details of the research sites along with information regarding the PAR Group. The phases of the PAR project are outlined and discussed along with a presentation of the variety of research methods used and data analysis process.

Chapter Five provides the presentation of the findings and discussion, intentionally connected to prioritise the voices of the PAR group. The 'Taking Part – Taking Apart Spectrum is introduced and explored at the start of this chapter and used to reflect on the findings. Each theme is discussed in turn to drawn out meaning, learning and reflection. The findings section also contains examples of the attempts to generate youth participation, political education and social justice within the PAR research process.

Chapter Six offers conclusions following reflection on the research findings as the challenges and changes that could be implemented following this research, both within a youth work context and within the teaching of JNC Youth Work Programmes through Higher Education settings. Here the DEEP Learning Framework is presented and discussed for relevance for my own and others professional development.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The central focus of this literature review is to explore the theory and practice of *youth participation, political education* and *social justice* within the academic and professional field of youth work. These concepts are traditionally regarded as central principles, or cornerstones, on which the practice of youth work is built (de. St. Croix 2016, Jeffs, 2015, Davies, 2005, NYB, 1991). Commitments to equality, participation, education and empowerment fill youth work literature in demonstration of a historical determination to foster and sustain a practice rooted in social justice (Ledwith and Springett, 2022, Taylor, 2016, Batsleer, 2008). Driven by a consciousness of unequal relations of power, youth work, it can be argued is fundamentally located as a political practice, seeking the re-balancing of power in society.

Youth work is a contested practice and therefore challenging to define (Jeffs and Smith, 2010, Davies, 2005, 2021, Young, 2006). There are multiple articulations that have formed over time, shaped by the complexities of the perceived needs of such a practice within the lives of young people which are explored through this literature review. Fundamentally, youth work is perceived to be a valued-based, educational and developmental process of informal education that is created from fostering conversations and interactions generated through spending time with young people (Jeffs and Smith, 1999). Attempts to define youth work have been the site of much debate, disputed and diverse, this practice has been constructed over decades and it is argued, built on distinct characteristics (Jeffs and Smith, 2010, Davies, 2021, Young, 2006).

Resolute in their perspective Jeffs and Smith, (2010) identify 'five fused elements' (p. 1) which distinguish youth work. These reflect historical understandings and unite the prioritisation of 'young people', 'voluntary participation', 'education and welfare', 'association, relationship and community' and the 'friendly, assessible and responsive' nature of the practitioner, working with integrity (p.1). Concurring with these elements, Davies, (2005, 2015, 2021) has further explored the nature of youth work over time, manifesting a set of 'defining features' that hold to central principles akin to anchors in turbulent times (Davies, 2005, p.22). Through these principles the practice of youth work is clarified on terms that are relational, value-based, participatory and explicit of the recognition of power, the political and fostering anti-oppressive practice. Particularly significant for this research project is the work of Kerry Young (1999, 2006) and the articulation of youth work as;

> …an exercise of moral philosophy insofar as it enables and supports young people to examine what they consider to be 'good or bad', 'right or wrong', 'desirable or undesirable', in relation to self and others. (Young, 2006, p. 3)

Over time there is a recognition of the impact of changing settings and contexts on the practicalities of practice (Davies, 2021). However, it is argued the values and ethics remain steadfast in notions of the youth work process that prioritises young people at the heart of professional practice (Davies, 2021). The theoretical understandings from eminent writers within the sector, including Batsleer, Davies and Jeffs and Smith have been influential within the sector over many years and provided deep and extensive analysis of youth work, both in principle and practice (Batsleer, 2008, Davies, 1999a, 1999b, 2005, 2013, 2015, 2019, 2021, Jeffs and Smith, 2010). I have referenced such writers as 'traditionalists', reflective of their legacy and determination to hold on to and defend the historical, traditional, distinct values and principles that are regarded to be the foundation for youth work. These 'traditionalists' have provided analysis of the landscape within the contemporary challenges of practice and, remain very much active in research and writing, they provide solid ground from which academics and practitioners can navigate.

Youth work practice ostensibly seeks to challenge the orthodoxy of the social, economic and political structures that confront and curtail young people's daily lives (Davies, 2024, Taylor et al, 2018, Sercombe, 2015b). Through this thinking gives rise to a critical pedagogy that I contend is central to the youth work process and this doctoral research project. It is postulated that profound, yet contested notions of liberation and transformation are embedded in the history of youth work (Freire, 1972, Taylor, 2016). Legacies of this philosophy remain faithfully evident within the professional standards for contemporary practice (NYA 2020). As I will explore through this literature review, examples of social justice and anti-oppressive values are evidenced throughout the policy and academic documents of the profession. It is in this endeavour that this research project is located, to explore the historical legacy of the roots of youth work, including radical and targeted branches to examine contemporary notions of youth participation and political education reflected within my own experience. Taking steps to highlight the tensions, dilemmas and opportunities to practice for a more humane and just world.

Over time the shifting nature of the demands from policy on practice have created, many would argue, expectations of youth work that are more neoliberal than nurturing (de St. Croix, 2018), more targeted than trusting (Young, 2006), more 'healthy-outcomes' than heart (Davies, 2019), and more product than process (Batsleer, 2008) resulting in more social control than social justice (Cooper, 2012). Such shifts have led to a comprehensive questioning, within both the academic and practice fields, of the contemporary positioning of youth participation and political education and their ongoing status as fundamental principles and cornerstones of youth work practice (Taylor, 2016, 2010, Davies and Gibson, 1967, Davies, 2005, 2015, 2019, 2024).

This research project is located in both open access and targeted youth work provision to compare and contrast contexts, capacities and challenges of participatory and social justice

orientated practice. The contexts for the research sites are important and will be further discussed through the methodology chapter, however, the literature review will be shaped from the perspectives and histories of young people, including those with additional needs and disabilities. For brevity, this literature review is not seeking to examine in detail the expansive history of youth work per se, rather, it seeks to provide sharp exploration of central strands focused on youth participation, political education and social justice. Strands which shape the context for young people, both disabled and non-disabled people and the connections to contemporary youth work and social justice practice.

This research project seeks to investigate the somewhat turbulent, 'long and untidy history' (Smith, 1982, p.17) of youth participation, political education and social justice within youth work in seeking to provide new insights to the central research question, *is youth work a site for political education – can it be?* Within the literature review there will be attention paid to three central debates. Firstly, to investigate key strands within the origins of youth work making connections to the explicit and subtle conceptions of youth participation, political education and social justice. Secondly, key social policy directives will be explored and analysed, drawing out participatory policy motivations taken by governments and emergence of what was then termed 'self-government' (Russell and Rigby, 1908, p.85), now re-articulated as youth participation (Hart, 1992, Farthing, 2012) through history. Tracing the tumultuous relationship of youth participation and political education more broadly as hostages in the standoff between social justice and social control (Young, 2006, Davies, 2013).

The literature review will then focus, thirdly, on drawing from seminal and contemporary scholarly activity to locate this doctoral study within the body of research expanding theoretical understandings of youth participation, political education and social justice within youth work thinking and practice. The parameters of participatory and political education research literature will be examined to build a picture of the range and scope of meanings and opportunities within the policy and practice discourse of youth work.

2.0.1 Limitations, Exclusions and Language

Youth participation, political education and social justice are extensive and well-researched academic areas, for the purposes of focus within this doctoral research project there have been limitations placed on the strands considered. I have focused on the geographical boundary of the UK and have excluded detailed discussions regarding citizenship within the context of formal education through schooling.

Some of the language used within the literature review regarding disabled young people reflects the language of the era and is not considered or condoned as appropriate or anti-oppressive. The language has been used to reflect the historical context and is identified by *italics* to demonstrate this language is no longer appropriate or accepted.

2.1 Origins of Youth Work

Early models of education and welfare provision, seen to be forerunners in the evolution of modern youth work, grew from a number of strands and beliefs, from faith and heart, and from moral and panic (Davies, 2009). These strands combine to create a unique and specific context in which the practice of early youth work traditions emerge. Three crucial strands will be explored in this section in terms of evolving principles, practice and policy that are particularly relevant for this research project. The first is the impact of the industrial revolution on the lived realities of the working classes and their social, political and economic wellbeing following shifts from family-based agricultural work to alienating, independent factory labour (Leighton, 1972).

The second is the increase in philanthropic work motivated within communities to foster the '…re-moralising of a whole class…' (Davies, 2009, p. 69). Substantial efforts were made to inculcate faith, education and discipline to the masses in part to curtail the socially unacceptable behaviours young people displayed within communities. This notion of bringing succour to the working classes through imparting middle-class morals and values is significant as a mechanism of both 'care' and 'control' (Lavalette and Cunningham, *in* Goldson 2002, p.21).

The third strand explores the importance of the historical construction of adolescence for the youth work profession. The unique and precarious position of young people, with their coming of age, brought a change within the custom expectations and rites of passage for young people. This demarcation gave credence to the particular needs of this newfound group in the community, no longer children, nor yet adult (Eagar, 1953). These strands did not unfold in a coordinated or linear fashion and nor are they presented as such, but advanced as tangled, contested and interconnected endeavours emerging from the 'accidental stumbling' by 'pioneers' in the search for responses and solutions to the suffering witnessed at a neighbourhood level (Davies and Gibson, 1967, p. 21).

It is important at this point to recognise the complexity in exploring the history of youth work as if what is written depicts one clear manifestation of trajectory. Much of the history of youth work is framed in the context of middle-class endeavour and institutional development built from foundations of both 'containment and concern' of the working classes with both explicit and subtle inculcation of bourgeoise morals, however, not without resistance from working class communities (Smith, 1988).

2.1.1 Impact of the Industrial Revolution for Young People

It is postulated that it was under these conditions that the foundations of the *Boys Club* originated (Eagar, 1953). A much contested, but significant starting point in the history of youth work and a marker of a growing movement that lay the historical legacy for youth clubs in the UK and beyond (Davies and Gibson, 1967, Davies, 2009). Fuelled by the growing

concern for the education, welfare and behaviour of '…youths of the poorer classes' (Russell and Rigby, 1908, p. 4) middle class moralisers were provoked into action (Stanton, 2011, Goldson et al, 2002).

> …it was not till the later decades of the nineteenth century, when the ruffianism of youths had reached such a pitch as to become an absolute danger to the community, that attention was thoroughly roused, and men who had the welfare of their city and country at heart grew apprehensive and began to cast about for some means of checking so alarming a development. (Russell and Rigby, 1908, p. 9)

Working class young people of the era became the focus for intervention as they responded painfully and publicly to the changing living conditions emerging as a consequence of the rapid urban development during the industrial revolution (Morgan, 1939, Dawes, 1975). Large scale population growth occurred between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century, reportedly trebling in the UK during this time (Harris, 2004). With this came widespread relocation of people into urban, industrial towns as mass factory employment grew. According to prominent writers of the time, including Urwick (1904) and Russell and Rigby (1908), there perceived to be an open and accepted recognition of the devastating impact of the industrial revolution and the subsequent social, political and economic landscape on the lived experiences and life chances of the working classes.

The change in family life brought about through the 'dust and disorder, slum and squalor' (Ramsey, 2017, p.1) of the industrial revolution was unprecedented (Dobbs, 1919). The secure seasons of agrarian society setting the patterns for the daily expectations and efforts of men, women and children abruptly disrupted (Fletcher, 1962). In the spirit of progress, within a new capitalist regime, families were dislocated by the newfound monotonous mechanistic manufacturing within the factories and mills (Leighton, 1972, Smith, 2013). What emerged in response to this changing pattern of family, social and economic life was extensive social inequality, growing poverty and urban slums as towns and cities grew to meet the labour demands of industry (Smith, 1988). The impact on young people was seen to be striking and significant (Davies, 1999a).

Although child labour was commonplace prior to the industrial revolution, concerns from reformers largely grew from the change in working conditions children were experiencing as a result of industrialisation (Harris, 2004). The 'nimble fingers' of children necessary in the machinery of the age were removed as technology developed, legislation installed through the Factory Acts [1833] and attitudes to the dangers for working children increased and their working day reduced (Stack and McKechnie, 2002, p.89). During this social, political and economic upheaval of this period of the industrial revolution, the living and working conditions of the poor raised significant ideological and practical concerns for decision makers in terms of the local and national responses to rising levels of poverty, juvenile delinquency, and the education and fitness of working-class young people (Leighton, 1972).

A number of developments are relevant here in the emerging landscape of youth work as communities both struggled with, and responded to the living conditions of the poor (Young and Ashton, 1963). It is beyond this literature review to take an extensive exploration of this period however two elements are worthy and significant to the research project. The first is the ideological understandings of the issues faced by the working class and the second is the growth of the Settlement Movement in response to such struggles.

For much of the 18th and 19th centuries, prior to significant state intervention, the *'poor'* were the concern and the financial responsibility of the upper and middle classes. Through systems of Parish taxation, those with means, funded the poor relief, with decision makers seeking the lowest levies and promotion of work to reduce the demand on the Parish purse (Harris, 2004). Relief was also kept at a necessary level to ensure worse circumstances than the lowest paid worker, again to reinforce and reward 'industrious labour' (Fraser, 1984, p. 46). Those deemed '*not-able bodied*', '*lunatics*', '*insane persons*' and '*idiots*' continued to be provided for through the Poor Law relief and within workhouses (Harris, 2002, p.55). The demarcation of 'deserving and undeserving poor' being a consistent framework for judgement in the commitment of relief to the poor (Young and Ashton, 1963, Fenton, 2021).

Through pre-industrial, agrarian society people with disabilities were broadly integrated within their communities, working and earning a living based on their capacities (Barnes and Mercer, 2003). Notions at this time of 'impairment' were largely connected to the ability to gain a livelihood. Often occupying positions of lower earners, disabled people faced segregation due to economic factors, or from hospitalisation, where 'impairment' was significant (Hodkinson, 2019). Disabled young people, for example, were fostered out as apprentices with quotas of '*idiot children*' provided to the mills and workhouses to be put to use (Tomlinson, 1982, p. 28).

This focus on labour for disabled people is also connected to similar issues of social order and control as '*defective people*' were perceived to be *troublesome* or '*godless*' (Tomlinson, 1982, p.37) and therefore needed to be controlled (Pritchard, 1963). Those who owned the means of production can be seen to be motivated by the duality of the need for a productive workforce and the maintenance of social order (Fraser, 1984). The development of capitalism has shaped much of the oppressive context for people with '*impairments*', with judgements of worth made based on economic measures (Finkelstein, 1980). These ideas remain, for example, in 2014, Lord Freud, the then welfare reform minister commented 'that disabled people were not worth the minimum wage' (Watt and Wintour, 2014, n.p) highlighting the pervasive nature of such opinions.

The Old Poor Law [1597-1834] and the New Poor Law [1834-1870] reflect this dichotomy between protection and punishment, support and stigma in the effort to recognise need, but not to deter individual effort and responsibility for ones' own welfare (Goldson et al, 2002).

Whilst the New Poor Law [1834-70] is reported to have reduced pauperism, in the form of indigence, absolute destitution, along with the subsequent cost of relief to the poor through the first half of the 19th century. There was little impact on understanding and addressing the issues of poverty. The dominant perspective at this time was to see poverty as a result of 'personal failing' (Fraser, 1984, p. 132). Therefore, the antidote was to promote individual moral responsibility for welfare and that any relief should not deter such.

> It was widely believed that men were masters of their own fate…Men who had been encouraged to be idle by security could be stimulated to industry by fear. (Fraser, 1984, p. 47)

Central to this ideological debate is the acknowledgement of the impact of wider social and political structural forces that fundamentally shape lives (Lavalette, 2011, Mills, 1959). This is recognised through the tension between *individualised responsibility* and the *role of the State* in the provision and protection of people. This tension is recognisable both during this period and now within the contemporary context, as matters of provision for the working class are formulated (Dorling, 2018, 2024). Changing attitudes in relation to the weight of individual responsibility, especially in the industrialised areas, began to emerge with the impact of the changing economic and employment circumstances of the 1830s and through to the Great Depression of the late 1870s (Fraser, 1984). The industrialised areas were consistently plagued with poverty that both the Old and New Poor Laws failed to lessen. Recognition began to grow of the impact of socio-political influences on the conditions of the working classes.

> A deterrent Poor Law might be justified if men were masters of their own fate, but was an unemployed factory operative truly blameworthy if his locality and industry were in a period of slump? (Fraser, 1984, p. 49)

Growing unrest of the failure of the Poor Laws to respond to increasing need along with economic decline and rising unemployment through the 1830s brought into question the expectations of moral, religious and philanthropic duty from the middle and upper classes (Davies, 2008). Adhoc and largely uncoordinated, philanthropic and charity efforts increased, through a broad range of individual and religious activities (Harris, 2004). Such was the concern of the 'growing evil' of 'indiscriminate relief' coordinated efforts through the formation of the Charity Organisation Society [COS] in 1869 to visit, vet and verify human need were embedded into practice (Fraser, 1984, p. 130). This is widely acknowledged as a forerunner in the evolution of professional social work in the UK.

The Settlement Movement grew from a number of axis, the perceived 'godlessness' of the industrial towns (Bradley, 2009, p. 7), the concern in the ability of the Charity Organisation Society to respond to and alleviate the persistent poverty experienced in local

neighbourhoods and the shift in social and political attitudes regarding the lived experiences of the working class (Popple, 2015).

The Settlement Movement is recognised for demonstrating a transformation in attitudes and provision for the poor, beginning to recognise and research the structural nature of poverty and bring about social change through political endeavours. Less concerned with individualistic benefit, but for the collective reshaping of neighbours (Gilchrist and Jeff, 2001). There are two key elements of the Settlement Movement that are relevant to this research project. The first is the development of an orientation to social justice practice. This can be seen through the growing awareness of the impact of wider social, political and economic context that shaped the lived realities of the working class and their responses. Secondly, the development of provision within the Settlement Houses that formed and remain as bedrocks of youth work. Both of these elements tie youth work with radical, social justice orientated work (Hughes et al, 2014).

One of the important connections here is to the further development of working-class politics, the anti-Poor Law Movement had generated an uprising in political voice by the working classes (Harris, 1984). The growth of Trade Unionism through the 19th Century, bringing collaboration with a range of broadly socialist groups to form The Labour Party in 1900. The Settlement House positioned its purpose within this political movement to bring discourse between classes regarding social challenges and change (Fraser, 2005, Harris, 1984). It is argued one of the most significant contributions of the Settlement movement in the UK is the impact on those middle-class scholars who worked in the Settlements. Giants of history such as Clement Attlee and William Beveridge for example, taking their learning from their Settlement education into political life. Building, from their understanding of the needs of the poor, the Welfare State in acknowledgement of the safety net needed against pervasive structural harm (Gilchrist and Jeffs, 2001).

The second important connection from the Settlement movement to the research project is the development of specific methods and activities that evolved through the Settlement Houses that have shaped the landscape and professional practice. It is documented that early strands of adult education, youth and play work and the origins of the Citizen's Advice Bureaux, 'The Poor Man's Lawyer', grew from the Settlement Houses reflecting the needs of communities and focused on social justice through action alongside communities facing extreme hardships (Gilchrist and Jeffs, 2001, p. 58). The roots of these practices lie in the contestation of historical power struggles.

The legacy of this practice, originating in Settlements, and becoming part of the fabric of a practice for social justice that remains within the contemporary landscape. Witnessed throughout periods of social, economic and political instability the increased demand for services, for example, with the Cost of Living Crisis in 2022, Citizens Advice are reporting a

57% increase in demand (National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, 2022, The Economist, 2022). This demonstrates the significant legacy these fundamental services have in both providing access to support and practice for social justice where working class communities can challenge and uphold their rights.

2.1.1 Conclusion

The period of the industrial revolution substantially changed the landscape of lives and as I have outlined here shaped the emergence of early youth work, welding political and social justice orientations into the structure of professional practice in a number of ways. Living and working conditions changing the context of family life, increased moral panic directed towards young people, shifting ideological perspectives of the role of the State and social policy responses and regulation. There is a duality here of contested histories, of middle-class moralisers and structuralists who have left their mark on the legacy of youth work. Youth work has evolved from these diverse roots and continues to work amongst the challenges within society.

2.1.2 Philanthropic Efforts

As communities struggled to respond to the increased destitution witnessed in their towns during the nineteenth century their deliberate efforts led to a diversity of community-based responses.

> the range of charitable activity between and among the social classes was phenomenal. Institutions were under way for virtually every human ill, individual or social, moral or physical, many of them associated with the increasingly urban and industrial environment. (Prochaska, 1988, p. 39)

Models of this early practice included localised philanthropic endeavours, the development of institutions, voluntary organisations and the growth of community settlements as detailed in the previous section (Bright, 2015). The dominant features of the offers made, usually by those of greater wealth, faith and tenets, was structured on a foundation of basic education of reading, writing and arithmetic, religious discipline and practical skills relating to local trades in order to bring middle class morals to the masses (Russell and Rigby, 1908, Macalister Brew, 1968).

Fuelled by the perceived lack of religious knowledge, Christian values and moral fibre, which were attributed, by the wealthy middle classes, as the cause of the social, political and economic problems working class people faced (Gregory, 1877). The growing Sunday School movement sought to cultivate a structure of religious discipline and respect to counter ‘ignorant, profane, filthy and disorderly in the extreme’ young people that Raikes, More and others observed in their communities (Gregory, 1877, p. 56). The ideology of the middle class ‘betters’ reigned supreme throughout Sunday School industries (Davies, 2009, p.65). The offer by such philanthropists, who in many instances, made their wealth through the same

factories that caused others such harm, provided some sustenance to ease their perceived guilt as much to ease the suffering of others (Burley, 1980).

The experience for those working-class young people with disabilities, framed by continued exclusion and likely accommodation in asylum or workhouse in response to the disabling effect of industrialisation (Pritchard, 1963). The significant growth of asylums to accommodate those who were deemed '*idiots or feeble minded*' was evident during the 18th and 19th centuries as 'benevolent humanitarianism' and religious endeavour expanded from the perceived moral duty of middle-class charitable efforts (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 16). The shift from care to containment of disabled people during the rise of industrialisation is a significant reality of the experience of education and employment sectors. Moving disabled people away from the rest of society under the auspices of both productivity and protection (Hodkinson, 2019).

Ragged Schools developed in response to the overwhelming welfare and wellbeing demands during the 1840s as the working conditions and educational opportunities for some young people were challenging. Ragged Schools remained prominent until the introduction of compulsory schooling brought in as a result of the Education Act of 1870 and further 1880 Education Act (Springhall, 1986). This shift in educational policy recognised, in some part, the increasing concerns for the 'working lad and factory girl' (Davies, 2009, p.69) from the continued long working hours in squalid and dangerous conditions of the factory and mill despite the Factory Acts legislated during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century (Dawes, 1975). It was not until 1918 that compulsory schooling was enacted for those up to the age of 14 and a further wait before The Education Act in 1944 saw the school leaving age rise to 15. With this shift into schooling for some young people and at the same time a forced reduction in the working day, teenagers found themselves with time on their hands and money in their pockets (Dawes, 1975).

The reformed purpose for Ragged Schools grew from continued concerns about young people and the perceived dangers of their new leisure, social and commercial entertainment gained as a result of much societal change (Morgan, 1939). The responses of the ruling classes who sought to provide in a range of ways for the poor needs to be understood through the exploration of the wider societal, political and economic context of the time. Interpretations are contested, as actions and motivations shift between social justice and social control (Davies and Gibson, 1967).

There is a contested history for youth work during this period of industrialisation and throughout its history, with early reformers and philanthropists often involved in practice that can be interpreted with contemporary lenses as fuelling oppression towards working class communities. Despite their efforts, their focus was not thought to be concerned with widespread social change, they were working from ameliorative baselines, 'grounded in

largely depoliticized middle-class values', seeking to respond to immediate challenges (Bright, 2015, p.8). There have been multiple motivations suggested to have inspired and directed action by the ruling elite, not only driven by altruistic aims, but also from fear and panic for their own privileged position (Davies and Gibson, 1967, Smith, 1988).

Strands within the history of youth work which detail the provision developed by those of the same class are less well documented and recorded due to those having limited means and provision being informal and changeable (Smith, 1988) However, it is important to recognise the input from working class communities in the construction of youth work as a historical and political practice seeking to foster working class values and resist the bourgeoise moralising (Smith, 1988, Davies and Gibson, 1967).

Maintaining the status quo of the existing power relations in society suited and strengthened the ruling class, the capitalist ideals evident through the exploitation of wage labour for the provision of private profit (Leighton, 1972). The fear of a working-class uprising can also be seen to be a significant motivator for action, in an effort to quell potential threats to this skewed social order.

> From the start of the nineteenth century, therefore, there was a more pressing need than ever before to protect and bolster the existing social and political structure, and to ensure by all means available that the lower orders were 'loyal', 'obedient', 'respectful of law and order' and 'disciplined'. (Davies and Gibson, 1967, p. 36)

Added to the landscape of provision for young people at this time was the design and development of the Scouting and Brigade movement. Built on a foundation of faith and intertwined with the practice of '…drill and discipline…' central to brigades and fostered through '…outdoor healthiness…' within scouting (Smith, 1988, p. 16). Following the dismal defeat in the Boar War during 1899 to 1902 concern was heightened regarding the physical strength of the British military to sustain the position of the empire on the world stage (Smith, 1988). The consequences of poor housing, long working hours and malnutrition taking its toll on the bodies of working-class young men. The Scouts, Boys Brigade and other uniformed associations sought to nourish the fitness of our fighting forces whilst simultaneously curtailing the ill-discipline and delinquency growing in working class young people (Smith, 1988).

2.1.2 Conclusion

The expansion of philanthropic efforts through this period demonstrates a number of important dimensions for the evolution of youth work and to this research project. There are clear indicators that the functions of youth work are located in everyday struggles for social justice as middle-class moralising sought to maintain power and control over the working class. Youth work has grown from and become embedded in the lived realities of communities, buffeted by the currents of social, economic and political changes. Through the

history of youth work provision significant elements have been fused into its character which, during this period, have been fostered through a sense of duty, discipline and diversion. Intertwined with policy developments in employment and education which saw young people move from earning to learning as legislation changed.

There are a number of tensions that can be seen both here and in contemporary articulations of practice. The first is the dimension of moral education, to instil a sense of discipline and order to young people's lives, whilst also seeking to retain the power and status of the middle classes. The second is method, we have seen the growth of activities that both engage and educate, to foster the development of character and life skills embedding ideas that youth work is connected to future employment and preparation for adulthood. The third tension is focused on resistance, with assessments made of the resistance by the working class to the controlling forces of their 'betters' to dictate and direct them by rejecting some of the opportunities offered, for example, through the uniformed organisations.

2.1.3 The Emergence of Adolescence

A further strand within this historical analysis regarding the origins and evolution of modern youth work is the emergence of the concept of adolescence (Kehily, 2007). The biological-based belief of this 'second birth' (Macalister-Brew, 1968, p. 17) of adolescence into adulthood also framed understandings of social change and experience during this time, driven by the solidity of science. The hormonal and physiological changes perceived to hijack the behaviour of young people (Hall, 1904). The recognition that a group existed, nor child, nor adult, a newly shaped 'becoming status' in some part constructed from the struggles faced by young people of the era.

The understanding of a new stage in the lifecycle between child and adulthood adolescence became synonymous with notions of new and distinguishable needs for a group that had not existed in pre-industrialised society (Kehily, 2007). This age associated with the physiological 'storm and stress' (Hall, 1904) of puberty provided a convenient pathological explanation for adolescent behaviour as young people navigated through the individualising stages of their development (Smith, 1988). This is perceived to shift the focus of young people's struggles and responses to broader contexts of inequality towards an individual ages and stages perspective (Smith, 1988).

The social, economic and political landscape that created the shift from rural to urban factory forms of work exposed society's duality of both exploitation and protection for the adolescent (Davies and Gibson, 1967). Young people were often forced through need into exploitative work in punishing places for families' finances. The growing concerns about the welfare of young people, losing limbs and lives in factories was heard and Factory Acts were implemented to protect those most vulnerable (Bright, 2015). However, the consequence

was to turn young people out of the factory and onto the street creating a somewhat obscured status for the teenager as in between child and adult (Davies, 1999a).

Some of this impact was accommodated by the changing pattern of formal education and the onset of available leisure resultant as previous protective educational acts forced policy changes as new needs for a growing group were exposed. The development of compulsory schooling seen as 'the single most important means of taming the young and clearing the streets' (Holt, 1992, p.142). Young people were increasingly occupied outside of the home and workplace. However, what came into sharp focus was the suitability of these new forms of engagement chosen by adolescents, through 'aimless loafing' (Morgan, 1939, p. 130), and through the availability of taverns and theatres encouraging drinking and debauchery.

The promotion of commercialised forms of leisure to fill the gap and provide appropriate social and educational opportunities for working class young people were rejected by the early philanthropists. These options, even though generated much wealth for the ruling classes, were seen to hold the potential to pollute the hearts and minds of young people and further not instil the necessary values and morals requisite of middle-class ideals and for the safety of their elite privileged protection (Davies and Gibson, 1967).

The manifestations of adolescent disruptive and dangerous behaviour challenged the very basis of good, Christian, ordered society and fundamentally needed to be contained and controlled (Davies and Gibson, 1967). The well-worn mantra of 'keep the lads off the streets' (Russell and Rigby, 1908, p.18), a historical, rather than contemporary phenomenon, demonstrates the legacy of the youth club and its precarious duality in promoting association an antidote for the anti-social (Young, 2006, Jeffs and Smith, 2010, de St Croix, 2016). Youth clubs, and youth work more broadly, it is argued, have remained consistent in their principled position to divert young people away from unsavoury leisure activities promoting questionable values (Macalister Brew, 1968, Young, 2006). As throughout youth work history the behaviour of young people, a barometer for the state of a nation, is once again measured for a contemporary context with the policy prescription of control further administered (Young, 2006, Davies, 2013, Davies, 2019).

> Leisure was that dangerous time for working boys – the time between leaving work and retiring to bed. (Greenwood, 1869 *in* Smith 1988, p. 5)

Popularity in the science of adolescence grew and shifted the focus of the impact of physical, social and economic living conditions of the working classes to encourage a discourse of personal blame and responsibility for one's lot (Smith, 1988). The perceived disruptive tendencies of adolescent behaviour were used to explain young people's status, rather than the systematic and structural issues of inequality of resources and power. This conflict regarding the position and principles of youth work is long lived and remains a central factor in seeking to understanding contemporary practice (Ord, 2016, Jeffs and Smith, 2010, Taylor,

2019a). The ongoing tension between commitments to social justice and commanding social control are evident through many ideological and policy proclamations directing modern youth work efforts (de. St. Croix, 2016, Jones, 2014).

> Youth work has often become far less a means of developing young people than of unintentionally restraining and repressing them. (Davies and Gibson, 1967, p.39)

2.1 Conclusion

Through exploring these three central strands within the discussion of the early origins of youth work focusing on the impact of the industrial revolution, the development of philanthropy and motivations for early practice by the ruling classes and the theoretical and practical invention of adolescence, it is possible to draw out significance and similarities across youth work histories relevant to this research project. The position and perspectives of young people have consistently been contested, with conflicting efforts to both control and contain, facilitate and foster existing side by side in practice.

> The idea that youth work can have a social control as well as an empowering function is hardly new (Rosseter, 1987). It has always been, and remains today, one of the most important aspects of negotiating the youth worker's role with employers and the state and is a crucial element in the art of youth work. (Shukra et al, 2012 p. 42)

Running parallel to this are recurrent themes that connect the personal and the political (Hanisch, 1970). Evident through fluctuating acknowledgement and acceptance of the impact of the wider social, political and economic circumstances on the lived realities for young people, at times acknowledging '…the 'problems of youth' are deeply rooted in the soil of a disturbed modern world' (Ministry of Education, 1960, p. 2). These perspectives have then been neatly negated through neoliberal diatribe giving way to policy positions claiming individual 'blame and shame' (Ramsey, 2016, p.1). Conflicting perspectives on the ideological motivations and policy positions regarding youth participation and political education throughout history can be seen as central to both the manipulation and liberation of young people in youth work, operating as both a mechanism for controlling and crafting young people's independence (Farthing, 2012, Taylor et al, 2018).

2.2 Tracing Youth Participation and Political Education Through Social Policy

Within this section I seek to demonstrate how notions of youth participation and political education have evolved throughout youth work history and social policy. From the early stirrings of 'Youth Leadership' (Davies and Gibson, 1967, p. 65) as this practice was known at this point to the contemporary practice of 2025. The history of youth work is extensive and the approach taken within this section is to explore specific social policies to highlight the changing nature of youth participation, political education and social justice within youth work. The section will start with a brief exploration of the early boy's club development including the Circulars 1486 and 1515 (Board of Education, 1939 and 1940) and will then

explore The Albemarle Report, (Ministry of Education, 1960), The Milson-Fairbain Report, (DES, 1969) and The Thompson Report, 1982. The later part of this section will explore selected contemporary social policy, highlighting significant changes in relation to participatory and political youth work from 1997 to 2025.

2.2.1 Boys' Clubs

With the growth and expansion of Boys' Clubs during the twentieth century and the recognised success at alleviating some of the urgent social problems impacting on young people and communities, attention is focused on the promotion of personal development facilitated within such clubs (Eagar, 1953). The success of this intervention, drawing young men, and later young women, into focused and productive association and challenge within their neighbourhoods created, it was believed, change and benefit for all (Smith, 1988).

One of the central pillars of the Boys' Club Movement was the acknowledgement that club life was distinctly positioned to realise and respond to the '…special wants and dangers' within young men's lives (Sweatman, 1863, *in* Solly, 1867, p. 243). The focus of good club leadership was to support the development of good habits within young people, to stand them in good stead ensuring they grow into respectable adults of honest and moral standing (Bradford, 2008). Notions of self-government, through the development of expectations of responsibility and leadership, within Boys' Clubs is important in providing a framework for understanding the motivations and purpose of early practice. Connections are evident to strands of the 'moralising agenda' continuing to run through practice at this time (Davies, in Verschelden et al, 2009).

Early endeavours in the development of what could be seen as 'youth participation' are depicted in the histories that are available [See Russell and Rigby, 1908, Urwick, 1904]. What is interesting at this early stage is the recognition of the importance and benefit gained by young people's involvement in their club, for their own development of character and future role.

> There can be no sounder policy than to give as many of the seniors as possible something to do in connection with the club…All service of this kind kindles a lad's interest in his club, and teaches him not only to find pleasure in helping his fellows but also how to handle them. (Russell and Rigby, 1908, pp. 84-85)

However, alongside this perspective sits a contradictory position, where adult control is regarded as sacrosanct. It can be perceived from the early recorded histories that there is also awareness of the potential for manipulation with token efforts provided to give young people the impression their views are important, but in reality this is limited. These dimensions of tokenism and manipulation have plagued ideas and strategies regarding youth participation throughout history as the tension between adult and young peoples' agenda compete (Farthing, 2012, Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021, Hart, 1992, Lundy, 2007).

> In general, the most satisfactory principle is to listen to the opinions of all the older lads and seek their help without giving them any share, real or imaginary, in the actual control of the club. (Russell and Rigby, 1908, p.86)

The Boys' Club can be interpreted as an apprenticeship in this pathway, supporting young people for their future roles as members of workforce and community (Leighton, 1972). Responsibilities firmly expected and shared as part of club life (Russell and Rigby, 1908). It can be seen from these histories that committees, for example, feature in this early stage of development. This practical method of fostering 'self-governance' developed through the Boys Club Movement, to support the operational management of the clubs and provide practical experience for the young men in the spirit of both a disciplining and civilising effect (Russell and Rigby, 1908).

> In their own committees young people learn the power of the vote in practising democracy in a miniature society they fit themselves to become intelligent members of a democratically governed country…we must see to it that our club committee has *real* power and *real* responsibility and be strong enough to let them make their own mistakes and have sufficient faith in their power to put them right eventually. (Macalister Brew, 1968, pp.76-77)

This coordinated action by the state was crucial to the expansion of a future youth service in England (Davies, 1999a). Through Circulars 1486 *The Service of Youth* (Board of Education, 1939) and 1516 *The Challenge of Youth* (Board of Education, 1940) central government embarked on an era of increased state interest and responsibility for young people and youth work (Jeffs 2015). This development by the state formally recognised and framed a need to provide for this particular age group with a dedicated service (Smith and Jeffs, 1999). Much of what follows in terms of youth work history and policy development is the shaping and reshaping of the purpose and function of this youth service depending on the needs of governments to both facilitate and frustrate young people's freedoms for flourishing (Young, 2006, Batsleer, 2008).

Within the details of the Circulars, the administration presented seminal attitudes of 'self-government' to be developed as part of the landscape of provision within voluntary sector partnerships (Board of Education, 1940, p.2). The legacy inherited from earlier models of practice within Boys Clubs, for example, and the promotion of purposefully 'self-governing groups' central to the Scouting movement and organisation within the troops. Framed as '…a sense of shared responsibility' (Loades, 1977, p. 16) with the intertwining of joint responsibility and control between the Scout leaders and Scouts themselves.

> …self-governing groups play an essential part in the structure of contemporary society and in the political education of responsible citizens. (Loades, 1977, p. 17)

The importance of self-government for young people is key within the developing state sponsored agencies and organisations. It can be seen to challenge and shift the dominant, discipline focused leadership of Boy's Clubs previously upheld. The growing interest and popularity of Boy's Clubs gave rise to the importance of identifying young people's responsibilities in terms of running their club and the benefits of these growing opportunities for citizenship (Evans, 1965). Forced partly due to the reduced availability of adult leaders, senior youth members were enlisted to support and self-organise, taking responsibility within club life for the progress of younger members (Smith, 1988).

> …young people are expected to be initiators of the youth activities. What we would call 'youth participation' is taken for granted. This applies to the identification of appropriate activity…and the regular business of the Youth Committees... They even seem to anticipate annual conferences to which young people might be invited to ensure wider input... (Roberts, 2004, n.p.)

The context and understanding of notions of self-government are important here and for the purposes of this study it is postulated that youth participation and political education within youth work evolved from origins rooted at this point (Eagar, 1953, Russell and Rigby, 1908, Ministry of Education, 1960). As Boys' Clubs expanded, a National Association of Boys' Clubs (NABC) formed in 1925, to oversee and coordinate the movement (Davies, 1999a). According to the NABC (1930, *in* Eagar, 1953) *Principles and Aims,* notions of self-government were positioned centrally in the workings of Boys' Clubs.

> The club itself, rather than its Leader, is the educator of its members...They are rudimentary social units, through which the first lessons of citizenship are unconsciously learnt. (NABC, 1930 *in* Eagar, 1953, p. 419)

The expectation and experience fostered was for boys to be nurtured through the duality of opportunity and responsibility within the club context. These principles and ways of working are seen to create the ideal conditions in which boys are able to learn '…as the voters and workers of a few years hence, as citizens in training for their responsibilities' (NABC, 1930, *in* Eagar, 1953) The awareness of both the importance and potential of such practice jarred with previous attitudes depicted through the philosophies of earlier club provision, which demonstrated adult dominance and discipline over young people's purposeful pastimes.

> It may be feared, however, that in some clubs we too are not ignorant of a democracy of an even more modern kind; the democracy under which, as in the modern state, the "masses," or the boys, call the tune, while the "classes," or the managers, pay the piper. Both in club and state, such a topsy-turveydom happens easily enough, but in neither does it afford good ground for the development of character, and we may hope that in neither is it more than a passing phase. (Braithwaite, 1904, pp.174-175)

2.2.1 Conclusion

Consistent throughout the history of youth work is the perceived tension between competing agendas that shape professional principles and practice (Davies, 1999a). Fundamentally, youth work professes to be committed to locating the young person and their agenda at the heart of practice (Davies, 2015, 2021), however, contemporary practice, just as the historical demonstrates, the young person-centred approach is often overridden by dominant adult agendas and persuasive social policy redirection (Percy-Smith, 2019a, Walther et al, 2019).

The legacy of this tension regarding young people's place, participation and power to take on meaningful leadership and responsibility within their clubs and communities remains evident within the debate of contemporary youth work practice (Shukra et al, 2012, Farthing, 2012, Taylor, 2016, Walther et al, 2019). Within this early period, notions of 'youth leadership' (Davies and Gibson, 1967, p. 65) were evolving, however through the duality of drill and discipline and community and contribution. Youth Participation at this stage was located within both the moral expression of those middle classes and the re-moralisation of those working classes. Youth participation cements itself as a tool within the landscape and utilised for multiple agendas.

2.2.2 The Youth Service in England and Wales - The Albemarle Report (Ministry of Education, 1960)

With the formation of a new Youth Service established from Circular 1486 in 1939 (Board of Education, 1939), government attention turned, in the late 1950s, to forging a renewed vision for the service, taking stock of its purpose and history to this point. With political pressure mounting the committee sought to reflect the needs of a changing youth population in light of the social, political and economic transformation witnessed over the decade since the Second World War (Ministry of Education, 1960). Following nearly ten years of Conservative rule from 1951 to their re-election in 1959 the Youth Service had seen its funding and potential future depleted (Bright, 2015).

Socio-political concerns grew from a number of key factors including, the realisation of an imminent 'youth bulge', the impact and changing nature of young women's lives, and National Service ending. The third factor was once again a recognition of the increased disruptive and delinquent behaviour by young people (Ministry of Education, 1960). In assessing the context for the Youth Service, the Albemarle Committee felt it urgent and necessary to reassert the central value and purpose of the service and subsequently recognised the purpose of the service as an educational one, with the following aims;

> To offer individual young people in their leisure time opportunities of various kinds, complementary to those of home, formal education and work, to discover and develop their personal resources of body, mind and spirit and thus the better equipped themselves to live the life of mature, creative and responsible members of a free society. (Ministry of Education, 1960, p.36)

Following the seminal state exploration of notions of self-government identified within Circulars 1486 and 1516 coherent strands of self-government were evident and expanded upon within The Albemarle Report providing a clarity and consistency in terms of expectations of practice of the time. Framed as 'the task of the fourth partner' (Ministry of Education, 1960, p. 48) after the Ministry, LEA, and voluntary sector, the committee deemed it imperative that young people participated, framing such participation as,

> Where the living activity in the field is concerned their co-operation, their criticism, their drive, their responsibility, ought to be as real as we and they can make it. (Ministry of Education, 1960, p. 49)

And further, what it proposed necessary to participate meaningfully,

> Committee experience can give admirable training, provided that the committee has a real job within the power of its members…but Club and Unit committees on which the young sense that they are given only the pretence of power merely bore them with the tedium of office without giving them a taste of its reality. Similar provisos apply to the work of youth councils; topics of discussion should be within the immediate experience of their members, and their executive tasks should be within their scope. Without this ballast they are apt to agitate for the impossible. (Ministry of education, 1960, p. 49)

This is important recognition from the Albemarle Committee regarding the tokenistic tensions within participatory work, going further to express the challenges in practice for the encouragement of authentic opportunities for young people's participation. Alongside this is an explicit awareness of the importance of space and freedom within the Youth Service to discuss 'controversial public issues', including politics and religion, recognising the challenges workers face in this goal (Ministry of Education, 1960, p. 59).

This is one of the most testing of lasting legacies within participatory practice with young people, the issue of finding and maintaining genuine spaces for young people 'to come to voice' (Batsleer, 2008, p. 10). Much of what is written and described under the auspices of self-government to this point is structured on opportunities for young people to learn and take responsibility and leadership as directed by adults which hark to ideas of promoting conformity, rather than challenge and change (Davies, 2009, Farthing 2012). These opportunities are fundamentally located within the workings of the club rather than elevating philosophies of participation and political education more broadly, expanding through the wider community, which can be proposed as more radical acts of social justice.

2.2.2 Conclusion

The Albemarle Report was heralded as one of the central and development policy documents which led to the growth and expansion of youth work resources, through the provision of buildings, staff, training and regard. Located within the shadow of conflict and hardship, the

recognition that young people were impacted by the external social, economic and political undulations is key to Youth Service development during this period. Expansion was also motivated by concerns for the social order, given the capacity of young people to disrupt. Notions of youth participation and leadership were fostered, in terms of the development of specific roles within clubs and projects that were deemed to enhanced character and foster responsibility.

2.2.3 Youth Work through the 1970s and 1980s - Youth and Community Work in the 70s (The Milson-Fairbairn Report) (DES, 1969).

During this period two subsequent reports are noteworthy in tracing the continued evolution of youth participation and political education within youth work. The first, *Youth and Community Work in the 70s,* The Milson-Fairbairn Report (DES, 1969) and the second, *Experience and Participation*, The Thompson Report (DES, 1982). These reports will be explored in turn, specifically examining the trajectory and impact of matters concerning youth participation and political education.

As in previous social policy directives, the aims of the Youth Service are shifted and rearticulated to connect with the demands and values of the day. Here we can see orientations exploring the increasing role of schools and the community taking a more prominent position in government thinking at this time.

> The primary goal of youth work is the social education of young people…we are concerned to help young people to create their place in a changing society and it is their critical involvement in their community which is the goal. (DES, 1969, p. 55)

Noteworthy within social policy at this time is the perceived explicit acknowledgement regarding the impact of the social and political world on the lives of young people (Board of Education, 1939, 1940, Ministry of Education, 1960). The demonstration of the government's clear concern about the impact of industrialisation, of War, of economic change on the lives of young people is evident and in part drives social policy change (Davies, 1999a).

> A Youth Service that wishes to be relevant must estimate the social scene and in particular those parts of it which affect the lives of young people. (DES, 1969, p. 17)

The Report does accept that 'participation is the 'in word' with expectations 'that there is a growing demand for the people to be involved in the decisions which affect their lives' (DES, 1969, p. 22). One of the key strands detailed in the Report is of the development of 'The Active Society' through mechanisms of promoting engagement, '…when all can be involved in public activity' (DES, 1969. p.60). The Report emphasises the need for the Youth Service to be central in this endeavour to reconnect young people within communities and to foster a shared determination for social change envisioned from collective lenses.

> We see it as a task of the Youth Service to further this engagement of the young in and with society. There is talk in many quarters today about 'participation'. An important aim of the Youth Service should be to facilitate critical and responsible participation among the rising generation. (DES, 1969, p. 75)

Evident here are the shifting meanings of participation, moving from the involvement in provision, where young people can be both indoctrinated to adult moral values to a more challenging and critical stance on the role of participatory practice, which enables young people to shape from their own ideas with support from adult workers. This dynamic is also articulated as the Committee recognise the role Youth Work has as a 'device for the social control' of young people and the need for this to change (DES, 1969, p.75).

The Committee places significance on 'self-determination' and the complexities of the relationship between services and young people, describing the implications borne of perceived 'providers' and 'receivers' of services (DES, 1969, p. 74). They also identify the problem of 'shadow' responsibilities which restricts the growth for young people and limits the contribution the Youth Service can make to the development of young people for their futures.

> […] if the purpose of our society is to develop a discriminating, critical, sharing adult, then young people must have the opportunity of practising self-determination prior to adulthood. There are, however, too few adults who are willing to let young people have the chance to work things through for themselves. (DES, 1969, p. 74)

The Committee further developed the ideas of youth participation as political education;

> Politics is concerned with life and how people live together. We see the new service providing many opportunities for young people to discuss matters of controversy and to share in the formation of public opinion. (DES, 1969, p. 80)

This can be appreciated as a bold statement from the Committee regarding the connection to politics, identifying these as matters that are controversial, which it recognises is '..not the province of youth organisations' (DES, 1969, p. 76). The Report recognises the tensions inherent within any effort towards political education and reflect the seriousness of this, however, the impact of this wariness is avoidance on the part of the Youth Service (DES, 1969). Given the imminent lowering of the voting age, which came into force 1970 through The Representations of the Peoples Act (1969) the Committee believed that it was of increasing importance that young adults should be involved and educated in these matters, fundamentally realising that young people cannot be separated from political issues, nor should they be (DES, 1969).

The Report includes reference to the needs of '*handicapped*' young people presented through orientations of help, rather than growth and development as is the context for non-disabled young people (DES, 1969). This in keeping with the deemed patronising tone and expectations from the education system at this time (Tomlinson, 1982). The Report gives a brief assessment of the landscape of club provision for '*educationally sub-normal*' young people which are largely segregated organisations through special schools (DES, 1969 p. 15). Throughout this time those young people with the most severe of disabilities remained segregated however, shifts in perspectives were witnessed as attempts to understand the wider context of disability as environmental and structural, rather than individual, were developing to encourage equality for young people within the education system (Blackburn, 1990). Some innovative practice to organise provision had begun which sought to promote equality between disabled and non-disabled young people.

2.2.3 Conclusion

Whilst there is much in the Milson-Fairbairn Committee Report: Youth and Community Work in the 70s that is relevant for this research project there is little evidence to suggest there was substantial impact and influence from this on the development of youth work practice. With the change of government in 1970 bringing the entry of Margaret Thatcher as Secretary of State for Education support for increased state intervention towards the Youth Service was minimal (Davies, 1999a). This period of time is characterised by concerns of rising volatility. The growing discontent through the late 60s in the US and polarisation of positions and perspectives. Youth participation was positioned as a device to quash potential uprisings. The articulation of youth participation within the remit of 'matters of controversy' (DES, 1969, p.80) are indications of the attempts to manage any potential outpouring.

2.2.4 Experience and Participation Report of the Review Group on the Youth Service in England (The Thompson Report) (DES, 1982).

The Review and Report was deemed long overdue and is fundamentally different with the voices of young people themselves included providing an analysis of the '…features of present-day society which most affect young people…' (DES, 1982, p. 2). It is presented in the Report as beyond doubt that the wider social, political and economic conditions shape the context in which young people live and that this must be considered (DES, 1982). This recognition of structural forces is also somewhat surprising, given the 'ideological assault' from the Thatcher government.

The decade between 1970 and 1980 is one of profound change in the UK, and globally. Positioned as '…a period of rapid transformation in many of the ideas and characteristics which make our society what it is' by the Review Group (DES, 1982, p.3). The resultant global economic decline led to a reassessment of the ideological commitment towards the Welfare State and enabled the promotion of neo-liberal ideas, sold on free market economics, competition and reduced state intervention that would provide the necessary boost to the

economy (Fraser, 1984). In relation to youth work, there are two broad implications for practice in terms of funding and focus.

Alongside this global change, the landscape of community life was shifting, with the arrival of HMT Empire Windrush in 1948 bringing the first African Caribbean immigrants to Britain and continuing this journey into 1973 attitudes and tensions were raised as to the rights and place of those arriving (Slaven, 2022, Phoenix, 1998). Hostilities had been stoked, and further fuelled in 1968 following Enoch Powell's 'River of Blood Speech' highlighting immigration as a 'threat to British cultural homogeneity' (Hickson, 2018, p. 354). Increased racism and wider conflicts within communities, economic hardship as a result of unemployment and the redrawing of the economic ideology of Britain through the decade shaped the landscape for the Thompson Review Group in 1981 (Davies, 1999b). Young people report unemployment, racism and homelessness as central concerns for them in contemporary society with the Review Group appreciating the 18-25-year-old age group as the largest population finding themselves unemployed and with little state support (DES, 1982).

> Deep-seated attitudes are no doubt in some cases compounded by feelings of insecurity and resentment springing form lack of good housing, educational disadvantage and a shortage of jobs. The undeniable fact is that there is a significant amount of racial prejudice and racial discrimination, and it is the effect of this on young people which we have to keep in mind. (DES, 1982. p.10)

There are broader considerations given attention within the Report from the Review Group, including the changing pressures that culminate during adolescence regarding education, relationships and leisure. On this basis the Thompson Committee, Experience and Participation provide the following re-framing of the purpose of youth work (DES, 1982)

> The fundamental purpose of the youth service is to provide programmes of personal development comprising…social and political education. The twin aims of this purpose are thus affirmation and involvement – affirming an individual in his or her proper identity and involving an individual in relationships with other individuals and institutions. (DES, 1982, p. 68)

This framing and purpose still carry the explicit commitments to social and political education, however, on individualistic terms. They firmly locate the Youth Service within education and they fundamentally see the function as '…enlarging and extending the experience of young people in critical ways…' recognising the importance and centrality of the '…experiential approach…' which is unique within youth work (DES, 1982, p. 14). Similarly to the Milson-Fairbairn Report (DES, 1969), the Review Group recognise that the Youth Service should not be focused on the social control of young people, with young people afforded '…the freedom to choose, to experiment and to reflect…' in terms of fostering their social education, warning against the Youth Service as an 'instrument of cultural reproduction' (DES, 1982, p. 15).

There is reference to work with specific groups perceived to be particularly disadvantaged, including '*the handicapped*'. This was presented in more equal terms, reflecting that some young people with disabilities were integrated into mainstream club life and this was to be acknowledged (DES, 1982). The Report gives a focus to what it considers to be 'special community needs' including the needs of inner cities and to young people from '*ethnic communities*' and '*the handicapped*' (DES, 1982, p. 57). What is suggested in the report is a series of statements of intent, about both inclusion and the need for segregated provision recognising some of the practical difficulties in terms of transport and access (DES, 1982).

Within the youth work context social and political education and participation is highlighted, again framed as 'self -organisation' (DES, 1982, p. 20). The benefits for personal development of the members is stated, although it is suggested that practice in this area is diverse, with some clubs fostering high levels of participation and leadership by young people and others more authoritarian and hierarchical (DES, 1982). There are specific participatory methods and structures emphasised within the report, including working with young people through youth parliaments, forums and councils in order to hear their views and foster the development of young people led activities and to,

> […] focus the attention of young people on matters of a political nature in the local community with efforts directed to some sort of action as well as discussion. (DES, 1982, p. 21)

Participation and political education within this context are seen to be connected with young people running their own activities, being connected to and understanding their local communities and decision making and taking action (DES, 1982). The Review Group highlight the importance of the Youth Service in terms of young people gaining real experience of decision-making. Reflective perhaps of the struggles of the time and the increasing unrest within communities, the Review Group positions political education as a central tenant of the Youth Service going forward. Recognising the variety of views held and expressed in a democracy, the focus is toward political literacy, promoting respect and understanding where views diverge (DES, 1982).

> What is required is experience of such a kind that the young people learn to claim their right to influence society in which they live and to have a say in how it is run. It is active participation in some form of political activity, formal or informal, which really counts...The Youth Service has the potential to fulfil a much needed and vital role not only as a forum for the theory of political education but also as a scene of political activity addressed to issues which are of concern to young people. (DES, 1982, p. 45)

2.2.4 Conclusion

The tensions in this period are refracted through youth work as the period of extensive change altered communities with the onset of war in the middle east and financial hardship,

the social bonds and connections between people strained. With rising hostility through racialised lines, youth work was both a site of struggle and intervention. The election of Thatcher in 1979 profoundly changed the public discourse and lived realities. Youth work was positioned here as a mediator of individualisation and management.

The committee demonstrate an awareness of the risks involved in such a development of political practice, the potential space for conflict to occur where young people are encouraged to enact their rights within a live learning context, steadfast in their assertion that political education should be a 'normal part of the Youth Service Curriculum' (DES, 1982, p. 48). However, this expansion of participatory and political education was designed in the shadow of the retreating state and the growth of neoliberal individualist accountability within human services (Davies, 1999b). It presents as contradictory to consider wider social and political forces as impacting on people's lives when in reality the growing neoliberal ideological position is focused on the promotion of individual rights and responsibilities (Davies, 1999b).

2.2.5 Contemporary Social Policy – 1997 – 2025

Within this section analysis will be offered of more recent social policy, exploring the trajectory of youth participation, political education and social justice from the election of New Labour in 1997 through to the re-election of a Labour Government in 2025. During this period key social policies were implemented that shaped and reshaped youth services and youth work, particularly in relation to youth participation, political education and social justice.

This section will focus on three key policies during this period that have relevance for this doctoral project. These are New Labour's *Transforming Youth Work (2001)* and its partner paper, *Transforming Youth Work - Resourcing Excellent Youth Services (2002)* and The Conservative Government *Positive for Youth (2010).* These will be explored in turn to reflect their contributions to the landscape of participatory and political orientated youth work.

2.2.6 Introduction to New Labour

New Labour, under Tony Blair, came to power in 1997 in what has been described as an 'political earthquake' (Norris, 1997, p. 509). New Labour were, it is argued, elected on a mandate of reform, visioning the promotion and achievement of social justice, promising to tackle the human harm caused by social inequality and exclusion (Margetts, 1997, Oliver and Pitt, 2013). The heralding of New Labour was widely welcomed by those in human and community services after such '…relentless ideological and policy storm…' of the Thatcher Government (Sercombe, 2015 in Bright, 2015, p.38).

The context of the UK social, political and economic environment in 1997 can be interpreted as one of fracture, with growing inequality between rich and poor, rising child poverty,

unemployment and social exclusion (Lupton et al, 2013). The position and pursuit of a reduced welfare state under Thatcher, rendered the UK with one of the lowest levels of public spending of all the EU nations standing at just 39.5% of National GDP (Lupton et al, 2013). The speed and scale of change through social policy directives from the New Labour administration was ambitious and determined, premised on supporting those facing most social, economic and political disadvantage (Davies, 1999b, Lupton et al, 2013).

However, the reforms were widely critiqued as being a continuation of the previous Conservative Government's neoliberal ideas, despite the 'Third Way' rhetoric and increased availability of financial resources (Fraser, 2017, Powell, 2000, Garrett, 2009). This 'Third Way' discourse seeking to promote a 'new' and more palatable version of neoliberal capitalism for the New Labour masses. Encouraging choice, the new code for the market, with regulation, commissioning and 'payment by results' as the shift of responsibility from the State to civilians carefully continued under the promotion of New Labour 'rights and responsibilities' agenda (Whitfield, 2006b).

It is argued that two key indicators evidenced this transition to 'Third Way' politics, the first an acceptance of 'marketization' in the mediation of human wants and needs (Sercombe, 2015b, p. 41). Marketization is understood as a process by which,

> market forces are imposed in public services which have traditionally been planned, delivered and financed by local and central government. (Whitfield, 2006a, p.4)

The process includes the redrawing of the boundaries of relations between the State and citizens, seeking to position people as consumers and clients, commodifying human services as products that can be exchanged, traded or commissioned (Whitfield, 2006b). The second indication is seen to be the infliction of doctrines of New Public Management within human services to ensure State metered measurement to control agendas and engineer evidence (Jones, 2014, Sercombe, 2015b, de St. Croix, 2022). Positioning the State as the commissioner, rather than provider of support services. The emphasis on managerial efficiency and impact can be realised through the inculcation of New Public Management technocracy to demand the measurement of predetermined outcomes (Smith, 2003, Whitfield, 2006b, Sercombe, 2015a, de St Croix, 2018, McGimpsey, 2018).

Whilst many early policies from New Labour focused on young people, this attention was realised as a false positive in terms of the youth work sector. New Labour demonstrating their commitment to the 'generation game' once more emitting energies of empathy with young people whilst continuing to position young people on deficit and disaffected terms (Cohen, 1984, *in* Curran, 1984, p.454). New Labour effectively polarising young people as 'the 'deserving' troubled child, or the 'undeserving' troublesome one' (Goldson, 2002, p.685).

New Labour promoted ideals based on the individualisation of lived realities, reconfiguring structural analysis in the landscape of human lives which fuelled the 'blame and shame' narrative for certain groups of 'disadvantaged' young people (Ramsey, 2016, p.1). This negative narrative acted as justification for 'targeted' Government intervention and mechanisms of control directed toward young people (Davies, 2019, p. 24).

> Once the actions of government have been divested of their aura of welfare and benevolence, the persistent, close and often deep importance that governments attach to youth ultimately reveals itself to be more fundamentally a tool of political control. (Mizen, 2003, p.455)

2.2.6 Conclusion

The initial period under Tony Blair's New Labour brought forward welcomed social policy developments, including increased investment and growth. However, marginalised groups faced particular attention. The rationalisation of services became prolific, with money being spent, but at the cost of the values and ethics of the youth work profession. This is widely seen as a form of rampant neoliberalism through targets, outcomes and the demand for evidence in youth work.

The promotion of a new relationship of 'rights and responsibilities' between individuals and the State is both a lasting legacy and central critique of the New Labour vision for public services (Such and Walker, 2005, p. 39). The shift from a broad concern of structural and social justice issues to a position promoting the individualism of chances, choices and consequences reformed both professional 'thinking and doing' (Ledwith, 2016, p.5). This shift requiring services to focus on solutions orientated to individualised, targeted behaviour modification under the guise of personal and social development (Smith, 2003, de St. Croix, 2016, Jeffs and Smith, 2010, Sercombe 2015b).

2.2.7 Transforming Youth Work – Developing Youth Work for Young People (DfEE, 2001)

Transforming Youth Work (DfEE, 2001) was the first policy which centred on youth work from the New Labour Government and sets out the parameters and role of Youth Services, its purpose identified as,

> Our goal is that young people should leave [secondary school] equipped for the challenges of the 21st Century. Young people must be prepared for life in the fullest sense - learn how to contribute to their family, their community and the wider society; have the skills, interests and confidence to use their leisure time positively and above all learn to respect themselves and those around them and so become caring and active citizens - adults to be proud of. (DfEE, 2000b, p.8)

Transforming Youth Work (DfEE, 2001) is focused on 'keeping young people in good shape', (p. 13). Concerned with those most at risk, the determined end goal demanding 'young people participate effectively in society, learning and the economy' (DfEE, 2001, p. 5). The strategy

includes aims regarding their 'personal, social and educational development', and their 'voice and influence and inclusion and engagement in society' (ibid). The report also recognises two further priorities, stating that 'we must offer quality support and promote intervention and prevention' (DfEE, 2001, p. 13). This duality of both participation and protection is a consistent theme within the debate about youth participation and political education, as young people's readiness for the adult world of decision making is questioned based on their not yet adult status (Bessant, 2003).

Wrapped in the 'language games' (Hoyle, 2008, n.p.) of New Labour was the intentional reorganisation of the landscape of policy making, shaping a new 'modernised', but controlling State role. Positioned as 'steering at a distance' the provision of human services (de St. Croix, 2018, p. 7) the State prominently provided the direction under which youth services were to move. On this basis funding was secured through increasingly complex and cumbersome commissioning arrangements for third sector organisations (Whitfield, 2006a, Davies, 2008, Davies, 2019). The creation of a marketplace within human services, including education, health, housing and youth work was underway at pace (Whitfield, 2006a, de St. Croix, 2016, Taylor et al, 2018).

Youth Voice and influence is highlighted within Transforming Youth Work (DfEE, 2001) as an element of good youth work and is promoted throughout, however, framed in the limiting context of young people's involvement within services, rather than their community or beyond. This model of rationalising the remit of youth participation is a central feature of New Labour administration, 'putting language to work' (Garrett, 2009, p. 3) to give the illusion of solid democratic values, however, it is argued, seeks to increase 'governmentality' (Foucault, 1991, p. 87). Throughout this literature review, it is argued that participatory practice and political education have been consistently manipulated as a device of 'Governmentality'. 'Governmentality' details the process in which governments exert power over groups, under the auspices of providing engagement and encouraging participation.

> Official talk about democratic participation and citizenship for young people is less a solution to political problems than a strategy of government designed to extend management of them. Youth participation is presented as a technology of citizenship that has the effect of increasing state sponsored regulation of young people. (Bessant, 2003, p. 88)

The language within Transforming Youth Work is of consultation and details proposed structures that mirror adult systems of engagement with decision-making, through the workings of youth councils and representation within local authority committees that are largely perceived to 'advantage the already advantaged' (Tisdall et al 2008, p.347). The transactional policy context is already firmly set in that New Labour seek to provide opportunities for young people and subsequently blame them when they do not respond or take up these opportunities in the appropriate way, as outlined with these statements,

> We want to develop young people who add value to their social surroundings rather than subtracting through anti-social behaviour. (DfEE, 2001, p. 13)
>
> An important element of the new service will be the involvement of young people themselves in all aspects of the service, including design, delivery and governance. (DfEE, 2001, p.15)

2.2.7B Transforming Youth Work Resourcing Excellent Youth Services (DfES, 2002)

A year later Transforming Youth Work Resourcing Excellent Youth Services [REYS] was published (DfES, 2002) representing a tangible shift from traditional, universal youth work to targeted practice. Mechanistic in its demands, REYS brought with it unprecedented clarity regarding groups to be targeted and targets to be achieved (Smith, 2003). Within this policy the Government sets out requirements for a 'Curriculum for Youth Work' highlighting a more formalised educational role for youth work, so that 'young people can develop the skills and knowledge needed for their longer-term employability…make responsible choices…gain a clearer understanding of their rights and responsibilities' (DfES, 2002, p. 11). Youth workers, as in other historical points, are increasingly positioned as agents of social control in the management of young people, rather than as informal educators engaged in processes of 'moral philosophy' (Young, 2006, p. 3). The policy recognises young people with disabilities within the targets and objectives for Transforming Youth Work, however, through the language of 'mainstreaming' merely states the responsibilities youth work has to promote equality and inclusion in line with the Special Education Needs and Disability Act 2001.

Specific performance indicators are given, requiring youth workers to support 60% of young people to achieve a recorded or accredited outcome through the youth work process (DfES, 2002, p. 17). This requirement was time specific in the form of contact hours and shifted the participatory potential of youth work from a relationship-based, developmental space to one that demanded predetermined outcomes to be achieved. This manipulation of the agenda changed practice significantly as youth workers faced the damaging demands of targeted practice and the outcomes offensive, challenging the centrality of young people's needs and interests as the heart of youth work practice (Smith, 2003, de. St Croix, 2018).

New Labour, it is argued, are actively diminishing analysis of the structural, political, social and economic context as life chances are reinterpreted as simply opportunities to choose, ultimately holding people individually accountable, returning to notions of 'responsibilisation' and 'remoralisation' (Davies, 2009, p.69). Notions of participation and voice were promoted in all New Labour policy making through the Local Government Act, 1999, increased duty to involve at the heart of its new model of public service administration (Bevir, and O'Brien, 2001, Bochel, 2006). However, the capacity for youth participation and political education became simultaneously restricting and tokenising through both agenda and action (Farthing, 2012, Davies, 2008). An example of which is presented through REYS (DfES, 2002) explicit demands that '85% of contacts report satisfaction with the youth services offered' and

authorities must demonstrate clear arrangements for involving young people in democratic processes' (p. 25). It is postulated these constructions limit the depth and authenticity of youth participation, political education and social justice (Farthing, 2012), offering young people tokenistic opportunities to provide 'customer feedback' regarding their youth services. Local authorities have a narrowing responsibility to,

> ensure the active participation of young people in the specification, governance, management, delivery and quality assurance of youth services. (DfES, 2002, p. 9)

2.2.7 Conclusion

Significant change here from earlier articulations of participatory practice in youth work which sought to engage young people in 'controversial public issues' (Ministry of Education, 1960, p. 59) or recognised youth work as a '…forum for the theory of political education, as a scene of political activity to address issues which are a concern to young people' (DES, 1982, p. 45). Perceived as a political demarcation from the 1960s and 70s where youth work policy held to central democratic principles, with practice structured through 'association, training and challenge' (Ministry of Education, 1960) and commitments to 'participation, self-determination and political engagement (Jeffs and Smith, 2010, p. 10). Contemporary practice is, it is argued, overshadowed by capitalist and consumer principles generated by unrelenting globalisation as 'the needs of the market came to dominate, and the well-being of civil society a matter of governmental indifference (Jeffs and Smith, 2010, p. 11). The impact of which is witnessed in hollowing out of civic and community life (Jeffs and Smith, 2010).

2.2.8 Positive *for* Youth (HM Government, 2011)

Positive for Youth (HM Government, 2011) is the final piece of social policy to be explored in this section. With the fallout from the global financial crash in 2008 removing New Labour from Government in 2010. David Cameron was elected as Prime Minister without majority, needing the support of the Liberal Democrats to take office. The global financial crisis powerfully positioned the Coalition Government into the newly declared 'age of austerity' (Cameron, 2009, n.p). The Coalition Government are perceived to have used the financial crisis to embark on a process of reforming public services undertaken in the form of cutting central government funding to local authorities and thereby, shrinking the State (Evans and Walker, 2020, Alston, 2019). The austerity measures introduced in 2010 applied so vigorously the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights visiting the UK in 2018 was scathing in their assessment of the impact of such measures (UN, 2019). Recognising that the UK was the 5th largest economy, it argues the austerity measures have 'deliberately gutted local authorities…and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos' (UN, 2019, p.1).

> The social safety net has been badly damaged by drastic cuts to local authorities' budgets, which have eliminated many social services, reduced policing services, closed

> libraries in record numbers, shrunk community and youth centres and sold off public spaces and buildings. (UN, 2019, p.1)

For youth work, it is argued, the participation and political education agenda has been manipulated and manoeuvred to adopt a similarly conciliatory position, to fall in line with the pervasive neo-liberal environment in which youth work exists (Davies, 2019, de St Croix, 2018). Shrinking the participatory agenda from tackling issues that were deemed 'controversial' to 'consumer' as young people's political efficacy is limited to the boundaries of their service (Ministry of Education, 1960, Smith, 2005, Batsleer, 2008, de St Croix, 2010, Davies, 2013, Yanar et al, 2016, Davies, 2019).

Positive for Youth (2011) set out the strategic development of services for young people from the newly formed Coalition Government of Cameron and Clegg. Highlighting the Government's intention to align policies for young people into a central, 'cross-government policy approach' responding to the needs of particular young people.

> …it is clear we need to do more to help many young people who [are] at risk of dropping out of society to develop a much stronger, clearer sense of responsibility and respect for others and real aspirations and pride for themselves…we need to develop new approaches which encourage the whole of our society to help young people and which are less dependent on government funding. (HM GOV, 2011, i)

Clearly presented within Positive for Youth is the shift of both responsibility and funding of services for young people from the State to other people, organisations and services who will deliver the vision they have set out (HM GOV, 2011). This perceived withdrawal by the State of long held responsibilities to its citizens is striking and further demonstrative of the ideological trajectory of contemporary Governance under the guise of austerity (Davies, 2011). Wrapped in a new, but familiar neoliberal narrative, the language throughout Positive for Youth is grounded in mixed-market economy, with the Government as committed, cost-cutting commissioner.

Consistent with other Government policy of this era there is a failure to acknowledge the 'structural inequalities and injustices' that limit young people's lives, which since the economic crisis of 2008 have been made much starker for some groups of young people (Davies, 2011, p. 100). Where structural factors are recognised they are brushed aside by narratives of personal choice, hard work and determination, it is clear where the focus for attention lies through the policy making of Positive for Youth, in the pursuit of individualisation and personal responsibility (Taylor- Gooby, and Stoker, 2011).

> Young People's lives are influenced by different social, cultural and economic circumstances and personal choices. (HM Gov, 2011, p.4)

At the heart of policy making from New Labour and the Coalition Government the focus on personal choice, of rights and responsibilities is enduring. Seemingly side-lining the impact of the structural in favour of prioritising the personal failings of bad behaviour and criminality, of substance use and unemployment (HM Gov, 2011).

> Pressure is put on social workers, youth workers and pedagogues to address and remedy systemic inequalities as if they were individual shortcomings. (Bečević and Dahlstedt, 2022, p. 376)

Positive for Youth prioritises young people's views and voices, positioned as 'the real experts' (HM Gov, 2011, p. i) the Government is consistent in its approach to encouraging a hijacked version of 'empowerment' presenting this as,

> empowering young people by enabling them to inspect their and report on local services and to help 'youth proof' government policy. (HM Gov, 2011, p. iii)

The proposal through Positive for Youth is to contract out the collecting of youth voice to national organisations and promote young inspectors roles at Local Authority levels, which can be seen as opportunities 'to advantage the already advantaged' (Tisdall et al, 2008, p.347). Within Positive for Youth traditional participatory processes are highlighted though the promotion of youth councils and cabinets, young mayors and inspectors (HM Gov, 2011) These approaches are critiqued for mirroring adult decision-making processes and for often excluding particular young people from marginalised groups, on the basis of disability, social class, ethnicity and gender by failing to understand the landscape of their lives and the impact of social exclusion. This can be seen as an escalation of the regulation of participation that has been witnessed alongside the growth of the neoliberal agenda (Farthing, 2012, Bradford and Cullen, 2014, Walther et al, 2019).

> Being continuously associated with social problems, like unemployment, criminality, underachievement in school and religious radicalism, goes hand in hand with feelings of resentment and mistrust towards the conventional routes to participation offered by society. (Bečević and Dahlstedt, 2022, p. 368)

Youth workers are seen to have a leading role in supporting young people, especially those the government deems 'at risk' (Pearson, 1983, Buckland, 2013). However, this can be interpreted as a contradictory position given the subsequent speed and scale of cuts to youth services over the parliament following the publication of Positive for Youth. The Government's own sources recognise the budget cuts to youth services as nearing 60% (O'Donnell et al, 2019). Subsequent analysists fear the scale of the cuts reach over 70% across the parliament (Unison, 2014, Unison, 2016, YMCA, 2020).

2.2.8 Conclusion

Once again, links to previous Government strategies can be evidenced of the efforts to refute and reframe the impact of structural inequalities on the landscape of lives. This pervasive position of Government ideology, several decades in the making, through New Labour and Coalition Conservatism had conscripted the media to carry the mantra, infiltrating news, social media, TV and homes with the rhetoric that poverty was deserved, individually based due to bad behaviour, poor choices and laziness (Skeggs, 2004, Bamfield and Horton, 2009, Atkinson et al, 2012). This proxy indoctrination sought to build consent within the masses for the 'unrolling of neoliberal economic and social policies that 'punish the poor' (Tyler, 2013, p.7).

2.2.9 Youth Policy to 2025

Since the publication of Positive for Youth (HM Gov, 2011) there has been an absence of a coherent strategy for young people. Over the last decade the UK has faced multiple, seismic shocks to the social, political and economic landscape in the form of leaving the European Union, recognition of climate crisis, the global SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, and the election of five prime ministers since 2010. Whilst it is not the scope of this literature review to provide detailed analysis of this change, recognition of the impact of these events on the lives of young people is important. Brexit is perceived to have impacted on the life chances of young people in a number of ways, including work, study and overseas opportunities. Covid-19 it is argued, has had the most profound effects on young people at all points on the life cycle with those from marginalised groups deemed to be most disadvantaged (ONS, 2020, Burgess et al, 2022, The Prince's Trust, 2024, Frances-Devine et al, 2022, YMCA, 2024).

In response to the global upheaval and growing pressure on the Government to acknowledge the importance of youth work along with a shifting discourse regarding funding for the National Citizen Service, a parliamentary debate was undertaken to explore the role and sufficiency of youth service in July 2019. This led the Government to undertake a Youth Review in 2020 (HM Gov, 2022) through which they consulted with young people on their views regarding out of school youth provision as part of the broader 'Levelling Up' Agenda (Hm Gov, 2022). The findings from this youth review are striking, but hardly surprising, young people said,

> They told us to prioritise three things: regular clubs and activities, adventures away from home, and volunteering opportunities. (HM Gov, 2022, n.p.)

The Government has responded by announcing,

> It is the government's commitment that by 2025 every young person will have access to regular clubs and activities, adventures away from home and volunteering opportunities. (HM Gov, 2022, n.p.)

This is a bold commitment from a Government who is charged with the decimation of the youth work services it is now seeking to replace.

With the election of The Labour Party in July 2024 an announcement followed in November 2024 giving details of the development of a National Youth Strategy, the closure of the National Citizen Service and the investment of £185 million for youth facilities and delivery (DCMS, 2024, Coleman, 2025). This has been broadly well received in terms of investment in youth work, however, alongside fears of the substantial erosion of funding over the last decade and continuation of targeted, rather than universal, provision (Lockyer-Turnbull, 2025). The Government commenced a National Listening Exercise in March 2025 through the 'Deliver You' Survey, the marketing of which akin to ordering fast food, deftly applied to the ordering of fast futures.

Alongside this in January 2025 the National Youth Agency (NYA, 2025) released details of proposed changes to the qualifications framework for Youth Workers in England. The proposals would position the existing level three qualification, equivalent to an A Level, as the new standard for professional qualification, rather than the current degree level 6 (NYA, 2025). This proposal has been condemned by the sector, seen as a threat to the standards of professional youth work, to the critical pedagogy of youth work training within universities and to professional parity (Thompson et al, 2025). The impact of this change would be extensive across all areas of professional practice, however, central to this research project, I contend these changes in professional education would further distance critical, participatory, political and social justice agendas from youth work practice.

2.2 Conclusion – Tracing Youth Participation and Political Education through Social Policy

Having undertaken a review of some key social policy developments of youth services since the 19th Century it is ironic for the lasting act of the outgoing Conservative Party to be 'returning' the idea of youth clubs as a contemporary and valued element of professional practice. Those founding pioneers within Scouting and Brigade Movements initiated a practice, not without challenge, that was focused on association and belonging, challenge and activity, and relationships, teamwork and democracy. Opportunities for these remain universal (Jeffs and Smith, 2010, Davies, 2021). The changing fortunes of participatory and political practice within social policy have been explored and reflect the context in which it was generated. However, more contemporary social policy has, it is argued, followed the discourse of neoliberal doctrines of control and correction more than care. It is further argued that youth work has been utilised and positioned as a tool for the transmission of this work.

2.3 Theoretical Understandings of Youth Participation, Political Education and Social Justice

2.3.1 Introduction

As traced through the historical and policy analysis in the previous sections, youth participation, political education and social justice are not new concepts to be applied within youth work. It is argued they have been embedded in a variety of forms and evident throughout youth work policy and practice. Participation is determined as one of four cornerstones of youth work and voluntary participation, especially seen as sacred to the youth work process (Davies, 2021, Jeffs and Smith, 2010). Understandings of youth participation in youth work have been formed and reformed over time, appearing as 'self-governance' (Russell and Rigby, 1908, p. 85), 'youth leadership' (Davies and Gibson, 1967, p. 65), 'youth participation' (Hart, 1992, p.5) and more recently framed as a right and a professional duty through the Children's Rights perspective (Lundy, 2007, Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021).

> Youth participation is held to be a marker of quality within interventions involving young people. It is variously framed as an issue of social justice, a platform for positive development, a medium for active citizenry, a human right and a strategy for nation-building. (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018, p. 243)

This conceptual evolution of participation is understood to have been influenced by significant social and economic policy factors reflecting the needs and context of the time and place. For example, through educational reform, perceived threats from moral decline or inculcation of young people's war time responsibilities (Davies, 1999a). It is argued that young people's place and space, value and voice has been buffeted by the contours of the social, political and economic context and this emerges through the proclamations and promises of youth participation, political education and social justice within youth work.

The aim of this theoretical section of the literature review chapter is to explore and locate central academic articulations of youth participation, political education and social justice within scholarly endeavours. The discussion seeks to bring forward key theoretical debates and understandings within youth work and how conceptualisations have changed over time. It is argued that much of the focus for contemporary youth participation, for example, is directed towards the improvement of services, or to report satisfaction of services from individualised perspectives, with participatory processes another casualty of the neoliberal project. (DfES, 2002, Clark and Percy-Smith, 2006, Smith, 2005, n.p., Percy-Smith, 2010, Raby, 2014, Walther et al, 2019).

As we have seen in the previous sections of this literature review, for example, increased opportunities for participatory practice are often brought forward by governments

themselves as a requirement of youth work providers under a more limiting, regulatory neoliberal capacity (Lundy, 2007, Batsleer, 2008, Yanar et al, 2016, Walther et al, 2019). This section will explore **definitions and models, purposes and challenges** to present a critical analysis of youth participation, political education and social justice to build theoretical connections and form a framework through which to explore the research findings from this doctoral study.

One of the challenges in reviewing the literature of youth participation, political education and social justice is the sheer wealth of academic and theoretical attention these areas of investigation have received, spanning decades of research across both practice and policy. There is an enduring interest in seeking understandings of these concepts and young people's roles in practice (Hart, 1992, Tisdall et al, 2008, Cornwall, 2008, Lundy and McEvoy, 2009, Yanar et al, 2016, Walther et al, 2019, Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021, Ward and Lundy, 2024). This impacts on finding unity of meaning in relation to these concepts with increasing complexity evident within the sector. The approach taken in this section of the literature review is focused on exploring both seminal and contemporary theoretical understandings of youth participation, political education and social justice located within and relevant to the youth work sector.

2.3.2 Understandings of 'Everydayness'

The terms 'everyday' and 'everydayness' are used throughout this study and it is important to recognise and provide some exploration of these terms in relation to the research project. Pragmatically these concepts are used to reflect the positioning of occurrences that take place in people's lives on a regular, daily, basis. This can include for example, spending time in their communities, utilising public services, connecting with work, education, health, social, leisure facilities and activities, meeting and talking with other community members. These activities form the basis for how community members spend their time on a day-to-day basis. Use of these terms within this research project fundamentally reflects the interaction between people and the State in relation to how political, social and economic systems and structures impact the lives of community members by oppressing or liberating experiences.

Recognising that the 'personal is political' (Hanisch, 1970). It is argued that in order to work to foster social justice we must first see and understand the ways in which oppression operates to limit life chances (Ledwith, 2020, Freire, 1972). This, it is postulated, involves 'extraordinarily re-experiencing the ordinary' (Shor, 1992 *in* Ledwith, 2011, p.9). Recognising that the 'practice of a more just society starts in the personal everyday experiences that shape people's lives' (Ledwith, 2005, p. 255). The process of starting with the 'everyday' experiences of people enables an engagement with their ordinary realities, through which to build an understanding of the political.

2.4. Definitions, Models and Purposes of Youth Participation

As has been explored in the previous sections of the literature review, youth participation is perceived to have a 'long and untidy history' (Smith, 1982, p. 17). This acknowledges that youth participation is a contested concept across the landscape of academic and professional practice of youth work. Notions of participation are challenging to define, 'the concept of participation is a slippery one. It can simply mean taking part…' (Walther et al, 2019, p. 16). It is argued that youth participation can be positioned as;

> An infinitely malleable concept, 'participation' can be used to evoke – and to signify – almost anything that involves people. As such, it can easily be reframed to meet almost any demand made of it. (Cornwall, 2008, p.269)

Checkoway (2011) further amplifies the ambiguous nature of youth participation, broadly contextualised as a process of involving young people in matters that affect their lives, by defining participation as;

> It includes efforts by young people to organize around issues of their choice, by adults to involve young people in community agencies, and by youth and adults to join together in intergenerational partnerships. It varies in its expression from one area to another, but as long as people are involved in the institutions and decisions that affect them, it is participation. (Checkoway, 2011, p. 341)

This malleability or variety of expression can be problematic, as holding multiple meanings within a diversity of agendas impacts on universal understandings and application in practice (Farthing, 2012, Cornwall, 2008, Tisdall, 2013, Walther et al, 2019, Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021). This also gives rise to an uncritical acceptance that participation is a positive process in which development should be encouraged (Cooke and Kothari, 2001, Farthing, 2012, Cahill and Dadvand, 2018). Analysis of specific definitions of youth participation highlight the diversity of articulations and models that seek to represent youth participation, purposes and notions of best practice. These definitions are shaped essentially through a number of core elements, including, level of engagement, scope and focus of participatory endeavour, its purpose and desired, or increasingly, determined outcome. These are key elements in defining the very nature of youth participation.

The work of Arnstein (1969) provides an early model through the development of a typology to articulate understandings of participation. Arnstein (1969) has been significant in positioning participation as a political and power-based process whereby citizen and community capacities are drivers for the transformation of political power within societies (Arnstein, 1969). Participation here is defined by the purpose of transforming the everyday realities of peoples' lives, especially those who are seen as the most marginalised.

> It is 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)

For Arnstein the scope and purpose of participatory practice is to fundamentally transform lives through the redistribution of societal power, recognising the inequalities and injustices that shape lived realties. This position powerfully locates participation or 'citizen power' as an expansive and developmental political project informed by structural realities to understand the context of those most marginalised (ibid, p. 216). This also locates responses to the issues people face within a structural agenda, which seeks to reshape political, social, economic systems to foster fairer distribution of benefits from society to all. Arnstein's Ladder typology provides a visual, albeit simplistic, representation of a complex process. The laddered process provides a framework where increased opportunities for participation are facilitated and encouraged. Arnstein clearly recognised the tensions within initial steps and portrays these as non-participatory, referred to as 'manipulation and therapy' highlighting the ongoing challenges of the 'empty ritual of participation' which continues to impact on contemporary practice where genuine participation is compromised or absent (Arnstein, 1969, p.216).

This ladder metaphor has been further applied through Hart's work, specifically within the context of youth participation (Hart, 1992). Similarly to Arnstein, Hart represents participation as a staged, developmental process whereby increases in engagement, involvement and decision-making are recognised and promoted. Hart also identified steps on the process that were deemed 'non-participatory', through language of 'manipulation, decoration and tokenism' (Hart, 1992, p.8). Conjecture of the typology, from Hart himself, regarding the challenges of the metaphor include the misrepresented ease of sequential thinking and the diversity of everyday participatory experiences of children and young people (Hart, 2008). Within youth work, 'Hart's Ladder' (1992, p. 5) became, and remains infamous (Corney et al, 2020). Participation is defined by Hart as;

> The process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives. It is the means by which a democracy is built and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured. Participation is the fundamental right of citizenship.(Hart, 1992, p. 5)

Within Hart's definition (1992) we can understand that participation is, similarly to Arnstein (1969), also located within broad parameters of people's lives, and further, within collective community life and focused on democratic principles. Participation is recognised as both central to democracy and within the context of human rights, however, this is less overtly political and social justice orientated towards liberation. There is much critique of both Arnstein and Hart's typologies, of the sequential nature of the presentation of participation, the inclusion of 'consultation' as a legitimate step with participation (Podd, 2010, p.23) and

the debate regarding adult vs youth leadership as an ultimate goal (Hart, 2008, Cooper, 2009). The application of Hart's, from Arnstein's, Ladder (1992) within youth work has focused on the developmental process to move young people's engagement and involvement to the higher rungs of the ladder, to demonstrate that young people's involvement is at the heart of their youth work process. The fundamental principle being that the 'highest level' of participation will bring the greatest benefit for all involved (Corney et al, 2020).

Subsequent models of youth participation, of which there is a proliferation, built following the frameworks of Arnstein and Hart attempted to reshape and resolve some of the critiques of the previous models (Karsten, 2012). For example, Treseder (1997) removed the hierarchical structure from his model of participation, recognising the framework as 'Degrees of Participation' based on the readiness of the young people to work from a particular starting point of their choosing. The priority within this model was the appropriateness of the participatory methods based on the context, group and task (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018). Shier's 'Pathways to Participation' Model (2001) presented a model of youth participation that prioritises adult positions on structural terms to create specific pathways for young people to participate within the context of the organisation. The shaping of 'openings', 'opportunities' and 'obligations' presented as markers to depict increasing levels of empowerment, however, have been criticised for limiting such routes for empowerment for young people based on adults' readiness to perceive and provide them (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018).

The focus on the evolution of models of participation, I contend, is orientated towards increasing control and efficiency of the participatory process, rather than purposeful efforts towards liberation and social justice for those involved (Batsleer, 2008, Taylor, 2008b, 2010, Barber, 2009, de St. Croix, 2010). It could be argued that consistently presented through ever more models of youth participation are constructions of a form of 'technical rationality' in relation to the application of participatory processes to solve perceived problems of practice, rather than of politics (Bunyan and Ord, *in* Ord, 2012b, p. 19). The models less so define participation, but more attempt to demonstrate the steps or levels in the process to promote access to decision-making. The assumption is that by its very nature this involvement will lead seamlessly to empowerment (Farthing, 2012). Drawing on the work of Wolin (2016) who recognises 'this kind of institutionalization has the effect of reducing democracy to a system while taming its politics by *process*' (p.601).

With this is an increase in the 'technologies of participation', which are more focused on how to 'do' participation, from mechanistic managerial means, rather than providing an understanding of what participation is, its purpose and what it is seeking to achieve (Cockburn, 2005, Farthing, 2012, Taylor, 2010). Youth participation within youth work has, I contend, become entangled within this neoliberal drive as processes of 'technical rationality' are inflicted. This reduces the purpose of youth participation to actions of performativity that regulate, quantify and determine quality services (Raby, 2014, de St. Croix, 2016). A significant

early example of this is demonstrated through the requirement of an annual user satisfaction survey by young people of their youth services as set out in Transforming Youth Work (DfES, 2002. p.25). This reshapes youth participation from forms that are located broadly within young people's lives to routine and limited forms directed towards 'the specification, governance, management, delivery and quality assurance of youth services' (DfES, 2002, p. 9).

This perception of limiting parameters of youth participation is consistent with positions to reshape rights and responsibilities taken within recent eras of government policy, characteristic of New Labour [1997 – 2008] With young people encouraged to engage and make decisions primarily connected to their experiences of services, promoting them as good consumers (Clarke et al, 2007, Taylor, 2008, Barber, 2009, Bessant et al, 2024), as outlined here,

> Asking children and young people what works, what doesn't work and what could work better; and involving them in the design, delivery and evaluation of services, on an ongoing basis. (DCSF, 2010, *in* Farthing, 2012, p.97)

This tension between perceptions of what affects young people's lives, and who decides, is one of the central challenges in understanding and enacting meanings of youth participation and raises questions regarding its purpose. The development of participatory endeavours, it can be argued, have been shaped by multiple strands. One strand evolved from the increasing recognition that economic, political, social stability and success were impacted by the involvement, or lack of, by young people in their world in terms of capitalising on the energies of young people (Morgan, 1939, Eagar, 1953, Davies and Gibson, 1967, Leighton, 1972, Davies, 2009). A further strand is associated with increasing concerns regarding [the myth of] the 'apathetic' young, giving rise to discourses of disaffection and disorder (Shukra et al, 2012, Shukra, 2017, Bessant et al, 2024). It is postulated that by increasing engagement, young people will become active and responsible citizens (Yanar et al, 2016, Shukra et al, 2012, Shukra, 2017, Bessant et al, 2024).

The purposes of youth participation have been considered and articulated through a number of frameworks to attempt to provide clarity as to the rationale and potential outcomes from participatory processes (Sinclair, 2004, Taylor, 2008b, Tisdall, 2012, Farthing, 2012). Common perspectives across key frameworks highlight both personal and political factors, including the recognition of the development of skills, confidence, self-esteem, along with greater awareness of the democratic process, upholding young people's rights and radical empowerment for social justice aims. Central to understandings of purpose are also factors connected to service improvement and notions of consumer feedback (Tisdall, 2012, Tisdall, 2015). Within youth work, it is argued, the connection to the social, political and economic contexts that drive commitments to create change that fosters social justice are key.

> It is the powerlessness associated with the social and political marginalisation of young people that links youth and community work to social justice, to human rights and, more broadly to the concept of participation embedded in the area of active citizenship. (Corney et al, 2020, p. 5)

Meanings of youth participation appear conflicting between multiple purposes, the first positions youth participation as focused on young people taking part and having a say, often limited to their project or service in the spirit of improving its suitability for young people (DfES, 2002, DCSF, 2010 *in* Farthing, 2012). Secondly, youth participation is focused on a more expansive and political perspective, as illustrated by Farthing (2012) and others (Hart, 1992, White, 1996, Cornwall, 2008, Percy-Smith, 2010, Checkoway, 2011, Shukra et al, 2012, Walther et al, 2019) which recognises youth participation as defined by matters that affect young people's lives, which includes interests and injustices external to the boundaries of club or project. Farthing (2012) defines youth participation as,

> a process where young people, as active citizens, take part in, express views on, and have decision-making power about issues that affect them. (Farthing, 2012, p.73)

Definitions of youth participation highlight the diversity of meanings which are shaped essentially by their remit to come to power (Farthing, 2012). At the heart of a radical participatory practice is the desire to create change that seeks to eradicate discrimination and oppression from people's daily experiences and to foster a world centred on social justice (Freire, 1972, Ledwith, 2020, Bessant et al, 2024) and 'human flourishing, (Banks, 2010, p.36). Starting points for fostering youth participation are in the development of an embedded and authentic practice that involves processes of engaging, listening and hearing young people across all dimensions that effect their lives.

2.4.1 Human Rights Perspectives of Youth Participation.

It is important to recognise that throughout history, especially working class histories, children and young people have *participated* in their communities, demonstrating their rights on social, political and economic terms (Johnson, 1970, Davies, 2009, Taylor, 2010). Such participation has been demonstrated in diverse ways and often from young people's own agendas, for example, within the history of student school strikes dating back to the late 19th century (Cunningham and Lavalette, 2016). Whilst it can be claimed the UNCRC has been impactful in recognising and progressing children's rights, the declaration from the UNCRC cannot be perceived as the starting point for youth participation (Cuevas-Parra, 2021).

The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) has been cited, since its adoption, as a legislative mechanism to bolster the requirement on human services to take seriously the call for young people's participation in decision-making (Lundy, 2007, Lundy and McEvoy 2009, Tisdall, 2013, 2015, Corney et al, 2020, Templeton, Cuevas-Parra and Lundy, 2022). The UNCRC was ratified in the UK in 1991, and came into force in 1992 as a legally

binding agreement for the provision of children's rights and applies to all those under 18 years of age (UNCRC, 1989). Through the 54 Articles rights of the child are recognised covering social, educational, economic, legal and political factors. The UNCRC Articles are often grouped into three key categories, of Provision, Protection and Participation to highlight the core ambitions of the Articles. Article 12 is particularly relevant in the discussions regarding youth participation and decision making and has been central to the development of increasing participatory policies, processes and practices, especially within services for children and young people (Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021).
Article 12 states;

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law. (UNCRC, 1989)

Perhaps in response to the inconsistencies, perceived tokenism, and 'the illusions of voice' in the development of participatory practices within youth work, conceptualisations have been more robustly located within a children's rights framework (Barber, 2009, p. 26). Whilst Article 12 does not define participation, a definition has been articulated by the UN Committee (2009)

> A widespread practice has emerged in recent years, which has been broadly conceptualized as "participation", although this term itself does not appear in the text of article 12. This term has evolved and is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes. (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, para. 3)

The work of Professor Laura Lundy (2007) has been particularly important within contemporary debates regarding children's rights and particularly in terms of participation. Notions of 'voice' (Lundy, 2007, p. 931) are theorised and expanded beyond what is characterised as a 'cosy' commitment to the participation of children and young people, primarily determined by, and at the bequest and benefit, of adults (Lundy, 2007, p. 931).

In critiquing conceptualisations of Article 12 through legislative lenses Lundy purposefully moves the discussion from the reductionist ideas of 'voice', where tokenism triumphs to principles of a determined 'Duty' (Lundy, 2007, Lundy and McEvoy, 2012). Here processes of engaging, listening, hearing and responding to children and young people's views 'is not just

a model of good pedagogical practice (or policy making) but a legally binding obligation' (Lundy, 2007, p. 930). Lundy (2007) and others researching in this field (See Farthing, 2012, Tisdall, 2013, 2015, Cuevas-Parra, 2021, Templeton, Cuevas-Parra and Lundy, 2022) recognise that for too long practitioners have considered children's rights as optional.

These rights, where offered, are perceived to be *gifted to* young people within the context of professional practice and fundamentally in terms of adult assessment of the 3P's of Protection, Provision and [where possible] Participation (Roche, 2004). Justifications to restrict rights often positioning young people as deficit in their capabilities to decide, or unfavourably perceive the shift in power relations as damaging to adult authority or requiring of significant additional effort or resource (Lundy, 2007). In (re)articulating the importance of the UNCRC, and specifically analysing Article 12 in the context of professional duty, Lundy (2007) seeks to eliminate this adult-based *gifting* of participatory opportunities.

The development of the Lundy Model of Participation (2007) through a more comprehensive understanding of Article 12 [and in association with other Articles] offers four key factors that represent the meaning of Article 12, articulated as 'Space, Voice, Audience and Influence' (p. 932). Unlike other models of participation that depict hierarchy or mechanistic steps, Lundy's work presents the four focusing factors primarily as a chronological process in the decision making relationship between young people as 'rights holders' and the responsibilities of adults who are 'duty bearers' in this context (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012, Cuevas-Parra, 2021).

> When children are viewed as *rights-holders* they are not just recognized as *able* to but also as *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. (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012, pp. 129-130)

The Lundy Model is presented, not as a model focused on the 'technologies of participation', but as a tool to create the space for thoughtful consideration, reflection and action, demonstrating practitioners' duties to secure young people's rights. The mechanics of best practice sit underneath each quadrant as a framework for critical questioning and good practice examples to enable adults to facilitate environments conducive to positive rights-based practice (Ward and Lundy, 2024). Whilst the legislative framework of the UNCRC is, for some, depicted as 'radical and innovative' (Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021, p.1). The UNCRC has certainly changed the landscape of children's rights and driven forward policy and practice regarding youth participation, however, there is much work yet to do to ensure children's rights are fully witnessed. The reality for many children and young people is challenging as rights remain unrealised (Tisdall, 2013, Farthing, 2012, Tisdall, 2015, Johnson, 2017, Walther et al, 2019, Corney et al, 2023, Cuevas-Parra, 2021, Corney et al, 2022, Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021).

2.4.2 Challenges of Youth Participation

The challenges within the landscape of youth participation are well documented (Smith, 1984, Bessant, 2003, Lundy, 2007, Cornwall, 2008, Taylor, 2008b, Farthing, 2012, Shukra et al, 2012, Cooper et al, 2015, Walther et al, 2019, Bessant et al, 2024, Ward and Lundy, 2024). The assurance of children's rights remains stubbornly entrenched in the dogma of adult determinism (Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021, Lundy, 2007, Taylor, 2008b, 2016). Where participation is present, efforts are often limited and procedural, adult and professionally dominated and often short-term. leaving children and young people dismissed and disillusioned (Barber, 2009, Lundy, 2018). This section will provide a brief summary of the central challenges of youth participation exploring **three core strands** of the debate. The first is focused on constructions of youth, including the oppressive nature of adultism. The second is focused on modes and structures of practice and how participatory practice takes place and the third is focused on the depoliticisation of the participatory purpose.

2.4.3 Constructions of Youth

Claims are made repeatedly in the literature of youth participation that position young people in a variety of deficit or deviant ways, often as either 'apathetic' or 'not adult' or 'competent enough' to be able to take on the responsibilities of participatory decision-making (Bessant, 2003, Cornwall, 2008 Yanar et al, 2016, Cuevas-Parra, 2021, Bessant et al, 2024, Raffini, 2024). This is especially relevant for young people with disabilities who face additional barriers to access participatory opportunities. These challenges, it is argued, are often based on perceived ideas of deficit, unwillingness or a lack of knowledge from adults regarding promoting access and a lack of resources to support accessibility for them (McNeilly et al, 2015, Franklin and Sloper, 2009). This perception, a key driver for adult inaction, overprotection and limited provision for participatory practice and political education. For example, campaigns for lowering the voting age blocked by discourses that suggest young people are disengaged, disinterested and disaffected (Shukra et al, 2012, Farthing, 2012, Tisdall, 2015, Shukra, 2017). The debate about voting age is once again present, a part of the Labour Party Manifesto in the 2024 General Election (Labour Party, 2024). The government, now in office, have outlined it is;

> […] committed to act in during this Parliament to give 16- and 17-year olds the right to vote in all elections, strengthening our democracy, empowering young people to participate and building an informed and empowered electorate. (Johnson, 2025, p. 6)

Youth participation is also perceived as a solution to the 'democratic deficit and alienation of young people from party politics' (Shukra et al, 2012, p.41) and has led from 'moral panic' (Cohen, 2011) to the prolific expansion of participatory rhetoric into policy and practice to stem the tide (Tisdall, 2015, Davies, 2013). This perceived 'crisis of democracy' located on traditional voter turnout terms gives rise to the notion that the very heart of liberal democracy is collapsing (Bessant et al, 2024, Farthing, 2012, Shukra, 2012). The contemporary

social, political and economic landscape is increasingly characterised by growing authoritarianism and political polarisation leading to uprisings of violent rhetoric and reaction (World Economic Forum, 2025). Increasing violence, of attitudes and action, have been witnessed both locally and globally in response to significant change in the global order which, while not new, has reinforced participatory mechanisms as a placatory force for restoring order (Shukra et al, 2012, Bessant et al, 2024).

Youth participatory mechanisms are positioned and utilised as tools for the management of young people's behaviour, another way to promote responsibilisation via notions of *active citizenship* and justify demonization of those who fail to conform (Crick, 1998, Taylor, 2008b, Shukra et al, 2012, Bessant et al, 2024). Youth participation has been aligned with an agenda of social control of young people and increased governance, whereby young people's opportunities to participate are 'stage managed' (Barber, 2009, p. 28) by adults to ensure approved forms of participatory practice are endorsed, within existing adult defined structures (Cunningham and Lavalatte, 2004).

> While strong civic participation was encouraged, independent activism was met with the full force of the law. (Shukra et al, 2012, p. 42)

The recognition of adultism and its impact within the landscape of youth participatory practice is growing (Corney et al, 2022, Lundy, 2007). Adultism has been defined as:

> A belief system based on the idea that the adult human being is in some sense superior to the child [or young person] or of greater worth, and thus the child, by default, inferior or of lesser worth. The term also describes social structures, practices and behaviours based on these beliefs. These beliefs find support in a persistent view of the child as an object, and not a human rights holder. (Shier, 2012, p. 9)

Adults are central to the realisation of youth participation, and children rights, irrespective of what mode or model is employed (Lundy, 2007, Tisdall 2015, Lundy, 2018, Corney et al, 2022). The nature of professional youth work practice, including youth participation is based on relational terms where professional adults seek to collaborate in action with young people to bring about change, especially in terms of social justice endeavours (Davies, 2021, Jeffs and Smith, 2010, Taylor, 2010, Taylor, 2008b, Batsleer, 2008). Youth workers understand to be on guard against the pervasive nature of oppression, with adultism understood on the same terms as other forms of oppression, for example, ableism, sexism or racism and commit to anti-oppressive practice through rigorous reflective practice (Taylor, 2008b, Batsleer, 2021, Corney et al, 2023).

Adultism, it is argued in this context, prevents opportunities for young people to participate on equal terms based on norms and stereotypes that reinforce characteristics perceived of entire age-based groups, both in terms of adults and young people (Corney et al, 2022,

Bessant et al, 2024). The perceived duality of impulsiveness and vulnerability of young people collides with the grounded and sensible discourse surrounding perceptions of adults, especially in terms of professional adults (Corney, 2022, Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021). Adultism is said to foster a 'governance model of youth participation' (Bessant et al, 2024, p. 24).

> A governance model is what governments and NGOs use when claiming to encourage young people's political participation while actually preventing young participants having *any effective engagement in political deliberation or decision-making*. (Bessant et al, 2024, p. 24)

Under the guise of involvement and power sharing within the decision-making process, adultism and adult governance of the participatory process, it is argued, maintains adult positions as power holders and marginalises young people's voices and capacities and this is a fundamental challenge for youth participation (Bessant et al, 2024, Tisdall, 2015, Bessant, 2003).

2.4.4 Modes and Structures of Practice

Opportunities for young people to be involved in and engage with decision-making processes through their youth work are often structured through a plethora of specific strategies, projects, or mechanisms that have been developed within agencies to locate this work (Shukra et al, 2012, Farthing, 2012). In contemporary practice youth participation has been organised through the provision of designated modes including, youth forums, school councils, leadership groups, Youth Parliament [UKYP], Young Mayor appointments and enacted through 'mystery shopper' processes, surveys, workshops, meetings with and between young people and adult decision makers (Matthews, 2001, Kirby and Bryson, 2002, Shukra, 2012, Fusco and Heathfield, 2015).

Tisdall (2015) recognises the challenges from the 'evangelical proliferation of participation methodology' (p. 384) which, it is argued, obscures the lenses though which youth participation can be considered, especially in terms of its impact on creating change (Hart, 2008). In critiquing modes of youth participation it is important to identify and scrutinise power dynamics between young people and adults as a result of these modes and structures (Lundy, 2007, Tisdall, 2008, Lansdown, 2010). The perception is that young people have clear roles, are involved in all elements and are taken seriously through these mechanisms, when in reality, as Batsleer (2008, p.141) argues, '…more and more young people involved in less and less'. Young people are often left frustrated by the cursory status they hold within these perceived participatory structures, realising the limitations of their voices (Batsleer, 2008, Percy-Smith, 2010, Lansdown, 2010, Taft and Gordon, 2013, Tisdall, 2015, Bessant et al, 2024).

Further impacts of adultism are prevalent in these modes of participatory practice. These are seen to be organised through structures that 'mirror adult systems' of formalised participation which can exacerbate unequal power dynamics maintaining adult control.

> A common practice in democracies that enact a concern for youth voice is to establish sequences of youth representatives in various decision-making and policy forums in elongated hierarchies of power. It can also be common to establish parallel youth structures of representation that mirror those of their adult world. (Fusco and Heathfield, 2015, pp. 25-26)

Modes of participatory practice, in the form of youth councils, advisory and leadership groups are often structured by adults, from adult strategic design, with young people invited to participate in formalised processes (Tisdall, 2008, 2015). One of the central challenges of this work is that these modes are *board-room based*, with a chair, agendas and minutes which demand particular skill sets from young people. They are often exclusionary of both in diversity of young people and agenda (Wyness, 2005, Turkie, 2010, Amin et al, 2022).

There are two key injustices here, the first is the recognition that these modes are not representative and inclusive, it is argued that they promote the 'articulate elite' (Tisdall, 2015, p. 399). These mechanisms can seemingly reinforce inequalities that 'advantage the already advantaged' (Tisdall et al, 2008, p.347) strengthening, rather than eliminating, the very oppression that shapes wider society and working in ways that are contrary to youth work values (Davies, 2021, Taylor, 2010, Cooper et al, 2015, Cahill and Dadvand, 2018). Secondly, through this exclusivity the views of marginalised groups are silenced and excluded, maintaining the status quo and limiting prospects for change for those most in need of it (Lundy, 2018, Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra 2021). This impacts all marginalised groups, however, within the context of this study recognition of the impact for disabled young people is a priority (Brady and Franklin, 2019).

The final modal challenge to explore in this section is focused on notions of 'participation fatigue' (Cornwall, 2008 p. 280). This is relevant in two central ways and connects with issues of representation and inclusion. Participatory practice is, by its nature, sensitive and ideally focused on fostering relational spaces that enable people to connect through dialogue. I argue, engaging in processes of 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1972) and take action based on the collective visioning for shared futures. Where inclusion and representation are inconsistent and flawed the demand on certain groups to increasingly contribute or 'be consulted with' becomes a burden of time, energy and labour leading to notions of 'participation fatigue' and potential withdrawal (Tisdall, 2008, Johnson, 2017).

The second contributor to 'participation fatigue' relates to the frustration and disillusionment felt by those involved where change and impact fail to materialise (Bessant, 2003, Tisdall, 2015). The struggle to determine real change with young people as a result of youth

participatory processes is well documented. Young people and committed adults can feel disempowered when efforts to create change are mere bluster, blocked or barred (Sinclair, 2004, Taylor, 2008, Barber, 2009, Shukra et al, 2012, Lundy, 2018, Bessant et al, 2024). By prioritising *influence* as one of the four quadrants to Lundy's Model offers a resolution to this challenge in part by ensuring that young people gain information about outcomes of their efforts (Lundy, 2007). The importance of feedback regarding the outcomes of young people's voice is significant to build understanding and to hold adults to account, providing a transparent rationale for the decision-making process which seeks to reduce this frustration (Lundy, 2007).

2.4.5 Depoliticization of Youth Participation

The depoliticization of youth participation is the final challenge to be explored in this section. I argue that definitions, models and purposes of youth participation [and the practice of youth work more broadly] has been transformed over recent decades from the impact of neoliberal directives and consequentially become depoliticised (Raffini, 2024, Garasia et al, 2015, Farthing, 2012, Jeffs and Smith, 2010). The process of depoliticization is striking and represented through the articulations of the functions and purpose of the youth service through history. For example, threatened with the implementation of a Core Curriculum during the 1990s sector representatives made considerable efforts to articulate the purpose of the youth service at this time, recommending that;

> The purpose of youth work is to redress all forms of inequality and to ensure equality of opportunity for all young people to fulfil their potential as empowered individuals and members of groups and communities and to support young people during the transition to adulthood. (NYB, 1991, p.16)

Stating further, opportunities offered for young people through youth work are:

> Empowering, supporting young people to understand and act on the personal, social and political issues that affect their lives, the lives of others and the communities of which they are a part. (NYB, 1991, p.16)

This contrasts with the current NYA statement of the purpose of youth work which reduces political ambitions to voice and influence:

> Enable young people to develop holistically, working with them to facilitate their personal, social and educational development, to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential. (NYA, 2020, p.7)

It is argued that youth participation within youth work has changed significantly to reflect the new political discourse of the individualised neoliberal agenda and through this process problematises young people and positions youth work as a state sponsored agency seeking to fix the problem of young people (Bright et al, 2018, Taylor, 2008a, Davies, 2021, Garasia et

al, 2015). It can be argued that this depoliticization of the youth participation agenda is a result of the increasing professional pressure on youth workers to adhere to dominant doctrines of targeted youth work funding formulas (DfES, 2002, HM Gov, 2005, HM Gov, 2011) and increasingly performance-based practice with outcomes determined by the state (de St. Croix, 2018, Taylor et al, 2018, Hughes et al, 2014). The relationship between youth work and the state has become acutely coercive, there is less space for radical and political practice that challenges the state mechanics without creating conditions that make organisations and workers precarious in the landscape (de St. Croix, 2010, Davies, 2013, Taylor et al, 2018).

Increasingly through youth work, young people are engaged with areas that are less concerned with creating political, social and economic change in their communities, as workers, forced to narrowly position young people as effective consumers of services, seek their feedback on individualised programming (Tisdall, 2008, Taylor, 2010, de St Croix, 2016, Bessant et al, 2024). This limiting of the agenda ensures adults maintain parameters regarding both what matters young people can come to voice about and the mechanics of how young people achieve this (Shukra et al, 2012, Batsleer, 2008, Taylor, 2010, Garasia et al, 2015, Hughes et al, 2014). This increasingly contemporary depoliticization of the participatory agenda in youth work acts by 'hollowing out' practice and reframing young people's involvement to the parameters of regulation and control (Jeffs, 2015, p. 85).

> Gone are the emancipatory, social/community developmental and citizenship pedagogies identified in the past…they have been superseded by practices that see individual young people as problems to fix. (Garasia, Begum-Ali and Farthing, 2015, p. 2)

In order to survive the challenging austerity agenda political practice comes at a cost where attempts to disrupt the status quo are resisted by professional practitioners in favour of conformity to a secure state agenda (Cooper, 2012, Garasia et al, 2015). This process of depoliticization contributes to forms of 'symbolic violence' highlighted within youth work as workers fail to practise in ways that uphold the values and principles of youth work because of their professional precariousness (Cooper, 2012, p. 55). One of the central consequences of this depoliticization of youth participation is recognised through the limiting agenda and tokenism that is embedded within some current practice (Tisdall, 2015, Batsleer, 2008, Farthing, 2012). Youth workers are hesitant to engage with young people in demonstrations of overtly political activity, fearing consequences from funders, employers and managers (Bright et al, 2018, Cooper, 2012, Batsleer, 2013, Cooper et al, 2015).

2.4 Conclusion - Meanings of Youth Participation

Through this section definitions, models, purposes and challenges of youth participation have been explored to raise awareness of the tensions between academic conceptualisations of youth participation. The discussion moves from notions of taking part to more developmental

decision-making practices that encourage greater involvement and to include power sharing with young people to fully foster their human rights. Models of youth participation have been presented to highlight the diversity in the landscape over time and to bring in contemporary academic discourse through the widely acknowledge work of Professor Lundy with the development of the rights-based Lundy Model (Ward and Lundy, 2024).

Youth participation is perceived to be a malleable concept (Cornwall, 2008, p. 269) and this impacts on the perceived purpose and utilisation, from personal development, behaviour modification and control to the more radical context of political education, empowerment and liberation. The purpose of youth participation is recognised as being within the context in which it is ascribed. In terms of the challenges for youth participation, three key debates are presented. The first an exploration of constructions of youth and adultism, the second, an analysis of the modes and structure practice of youth participation and the third an exploration of the depoliticization of youth participation. The challenges are pervasive and give rise to mechanisms where young people are motivated and empowered to act in alternative spaces and without adult interference.

2.5 Meanings of Political Education

Having explored meanings of youth participation through the previous section it is important to provide some discussion and clarity regarding the meaning of political education within this research project. Whilst interlinked, I contend there are differences between the concepts of youth participation and political education. The nature of political education is, I argue, connected to the specific understanding of youth participation. This research project seeks to advocate for the adoption a model of youth participation grounded in political perspectives that recognise the impact of power imbalances as illustrated by Arnstein (1969). Alongside this understanding, the daily practice of youth participation is expanded through the process of coming to voice, to shape decision-making about matters that matter to young people, building an understanding of youth participation incorporating Farthing's thinking;

> a process where young people, as active citizens, take part in, express views on, and have decision-making power about issues that affect them. (Farthing, 2012, p.73)

Connecting with the work of Wolin (2004), Bessant et al, (2024) devise a framework of 'political youth participation' (p.32) to illustrate the importance of *the political* within youth participation, to move past tokenistic and 'governance models of participation' (Bessant et al, p.24). The relationship between youth participation and political education here lies in the expansive perception of young people as equal value and thought in democratic society conceptualised as;

> Political youth participation begins when young people recognise themselves as free and equal to other people, and others recognise young people as equal in value to

> other citizens. Young people demonstrate the capacity and assert their right to determine what they think, say and do. (Bessant et al, 2024, p. 32).

Similarly to youth participation, political education is contested, ascribed multiple meanings and challenging to define. In many ways I would argue that political education is the intention for what *could be* learnt and experienced through the process of youth participation as outlined here, political education has been defined as;

> Activity within youth club organisations designed to broaden (or narrow) young people's awareness of political processes, of ways in which power is attained, held and used (both inside clubs and in the wider community), and of how they may involve themselves in these processes so that, given greater understanding, they can exercise a stronger influence on the forces that shape their lives. (Bunt and Gargrave, 1980, p.48)

Political education in this context is a process which enables young people to become more conscious of their own and others' lived realties and the structural basis for inequalities and injustices that impact on their lives and to come to action to create change. This draws on the perspective of Smith, (1984) which encompasses a broader understanding of power relations within societies as the expression of political education.

> Political education is a conscious process of helping people to gain for themselves the knowledge, feelings and skills necessary to understand and exercise power in and between societies. (Smith, 1984, p.10)

More recently the ambiguity within political education has been framed as;

> Education that enhances understanding of politics and the implications of being a member of a democratic society is referred to variously as 'political education', 'civic education', 'citizenship education', or 'education for democracy'. (Tam, 2025, p. 4)

The importance of political education has been recognised by educators for decades (QCA, 1998) and focus in this area has been directed to a number of key strands. Firstly, interest in political education is concerned with issues of democratic decline in terms of voter engagement and highlights specific concerns for young people's antagonistic, apathetic or anti-social approaches (Tam, 2025, Farthing, 2012, Shukra, 2017). Secondly, the Citizenship Curriculum (DFE, 2013) introduced into schools in 2002 in response to the perceived 'concerns about civic disengagement, political apathy and pessimistic projections of the levels of active citizenship of future generations', it is argued, focuses too heavily on responsibilities, rather than rights in democratic society (Tonge et al, 2012, p.578). It is argued these key perspectives have sought to reduce notions of political education to processes of responsibilisation of young people, seeking to indoctrinate them on principles of being a 'good citizen' conforming within government systems, rather than foster critical thinking and

education for emancipation (Coburn and Gormally, 2017, Shukra, 2017, Farthing, 2012, Taylor, 2010, Freire, 1972).

> In England political education is to be avoided. Throughout their schooling young people are rarely taught about politics. Instead, they are provided with a citizenship education where the focus is often on a depoliticised curriculum of personal 'responsibilisation' that concentrates on building character and social capital rather than political literacy and active citizenship. (Reay, 2025 *in* Tam, 2025, p. 17)

The focus for the Citizenship National Curriculum (DFE, 2013) is built on three central pillars of 'social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy' (Tonge et al, 2012, p. 579). What is reflected over time since the introduction of the citizenship curriculum is an imbalance in the focus across the three pillars leading to an over emphasis on the 'social and moral responsibility'. This 'neoliberalising of citizenship education' (Reay, 2025, *in* Tam, 2025, p. 17) focuses on the promotion of individualised responses through volunteering, social action or charity, rather than collective political engagement or action. The call now for 'informed political education' is clear as levels of dissatisfaction, distrust and discrimination accelerate under the doctrines of contemporary dictators (Reay, 2025 *in* Tam, 2025, p. 19). Forms of educational censorship, yet another form of 'symbolic violence' (Cooper, 2012, p.55) are further illustrated through attempts by government to curtail the progressive debates of contemporary political issues within school settings through renewed guidance on the political impartiality in Schools (DFE, 2022).

As a process within youth work, I perceive a clear developmental link between youth participation [as engagement and experience], political education [as consciousness-raising and learning] and social justice [as values and action]. The educational element of political education is crucial if change is to arise.

> The extent to which democracy can help or hinder a society in governing itself in the interest of its members ultimately depends on how well citizens understand political claims, and what they know about using their civic influence on the basis of that understanding. (Tam, 2025, p. 4)

The work of Paulo Freire (1972) is significant throughout this doctoral research project. Freire provides a clear theoretical underpinning for the development of political education in youth work. Fused within Freire's own struggles, his theoretical orientation to education, cultivated through dialogue, problem-posing and conscientisation, towards liberation, provides a road map for a critical pedagogy necessary for political praxis (Freire, 1972). Critical pedagogy brings inequality and injustice in to sharp focus through collective knowledges and experiences of marginalised communities. Through a process of coming to voice and 'name the world' (Freire, 1972, p.61) collective struggles become exposed, not on individual terms, but as factors that impact across communities provoking both awareness and action against

the oppressive machinery operating within society. Fostering the legacy of Freire, contemporary critical pedagogues illustrate how, under increasingly neoliberal tenets, opportunities for young people to develop their criticality are controlled, especially within environments for education. The work of Apple (2013), Giroux (2008, 2011, 2025) and Kincheloe (2010) challenge us to realise how, as educators, we have been subjugated to adopt a position of 'obedient technician' delivering what's required to continue the culture of conformity (Giroux, 2025, p. 6).

Whilst this doctoral research is not located within formal, school-based education the relationship to young people's lives and informal education is two-fold. Firstly, young people's critical thinking capacities through the development of values and knowledge are broadly understood to be neglected, not nurtured within formal education (Apple, 2013, Giroux, 2011, 2025 and Kincheloe, 2010). It is argued that youth work *could* and *should* provide space for nurturing criticality as it has been positioned in the past through policy and practice (Jeffs, 2015, Taylor, 2010). Secondly, the danger is that youth work is also becoming a site for an educational dogma based on control and conformity with the state agenda. As the landscape shifts to cut youth works contribution to behavior modification and economic productivity, the new meaning of neoliberal citizenship emerges (Taylor, 2010, Davies, 2013, Jeffs, 2015, Coburn and Gormally, 2017, Giroux, 2025).

In response to this context and the growing concerns regarding the divisive contemporary doctrines in the social, political, economic and technological world, the need for renewed efforts to create places and spaces for a critical pedagogy that fosters new 'thinking and doing' in response to the challenges communities face is urgent (Ledwith, 2020, p.5). What is proposed within formal education is the construction of an 'emancipatory curriculum' (Giroux, 2025, p. 173). Such a curriculum that supports teachers and students to form alliances to challenge the dominant discourse and promote critical, political education through the exploration and re-formulation of the mechanisms of power in society.

> This approach to critical pedagogy would be based on a dialectical notion of what counts as really useful knowledge and school practice in the building of an emancipatory curriculum. It would be developed around knowledge forms that challenge and critically appropriate dominant ideologies, rather than simply rejecting them outright; it would also take the historical and social particularities of students' experiences as a starting point for developing a critical classroom pedagogy; that is, it would begin with popular experiences so as to make them meaningful in order to engage them critically. (Giroux, 2025, p.173)

Within youth work Davies (2021), once again reminds us of the value of core principles, specifically in 'starting where young people are starting' (2021, n.p.). This is reflected in the notion of an 'emancipatory curriculum' (Giroux, 2025, p. 173) where young people's

biographies and lived realities can be explored within relationship with practitioners to cultivate a culture of trust, mutual respect and dialogue.

> Therefore within any democratic society, especially one such as the United Kingdom, where the central state rigidly controls both what is taught and the types of pedagogy teachers must employ, there exists a self- evident need for settings where young people, in the company of others, can acquire and rehearse the arts of democracy. (Jeffs, 2015, pp.85-86)

One of the central approaches for the reinvigoration of youth work is the recognition of the contribution youth work makes in fostering political education and critical thinking through a curriculum of critical pedagogy (Jeffs, 2015, Taylor et al, 2018, Giroux, 2025). Young people need spaces to think and consider, to develop and express their opinions in the context of their own lives and to build their understanding of the structural systems within their world that hold them in positions of oppression. From this development and understanding young people are then able to decide what action they wish to take in response to seek the change they need to flourish and bring about a world that is free of injustice and inequality.

2.5 Conclusion – Meanings of Political Education

Through this section meanings of political education have been expanded and explored to draw out differences from conceptualisations of youth participation. Political education is understood to be framed on the educational process for the analysis of power within communities. In order to understand how and why decisions are made, in whose interests and to what effect. The starting points for the development of political education is through knowledge and understanding of how systems of power work, both formally and informally, and in whose interests within communities. Communities are then able to utilise this knowledge to generate change in power relations to foster a more inclusive and equal space for decision making that benefit all.

Through the discussion, significant challenges have been highlighted as to the provision for political education within youth work, where overly political education is in retreat and through the Citizenship National Curriculum (DFE, 2013) which is thought to engender conformity. It is argued that young people are taught to understand their responsibilities more than their rights through the contemporary citizenship curriculum (Reay, 2025 in Tam, 2025) further exacerbating notions of depoliticisation within this work. Through the theoretical work of Freire (1972) and the recognition of critical pedagogy, opportunities to promote a reinvigorating ‘emancipatory curriculum’ are offered to build a critical and political youth work (Giroux, 2025, p. 173).

2.6 Meanings of Social Justice

Social justice is the final of the three academic concepts that will be explored within this theoretical section of the literature review, having explored youth participation and political

education in the previous sections. The importance of social justice is recognised throughout this research project and, I contend, commitments to social justice should ultimately be the focus for all youth work (Ward et al, 2024, Taylor et al, 2018, Coburn and Gormally, 2017, Cooper et al 2015, Davies, 2005). The language within both the practice and professional standards of youth work recognise the centrality of commitments to elements that contribute to social justice, including education, empowerment, participation and equality (NYA, 2020). In considering social justice I seek to draw on key theoretical thinking give shape to what social justice means, what it practically involves within youth work and how this can be fostered, challenging contemporary practice.

In exploring social justice there are multiple definitions which seek to give focus to the central meanings of this contested theoretical concept (Jamieson, 2025). Core elements of social justice include 'equity, access, participation and rights' (Wright et al, 2022, p. 5). In broad terms, notions of justice are built on a foundation of rights (Ward and Lundy, 2024, Wright et al, 2022). This is important in both the provision of education to build knowledge regarding rights, and the mechanisms that exist to ensure rights are enacted.

> Where human rights are recognised, valued and respected, there can be a basis for just societies. Where these rights are negated, ignored or violated, society cannot be seen to be just. In this sense our starting point asserts universally accepted human rights as central to the concept of social justice. (Corburn and Gormally, 2015 in Cooper, Gormally and Hughes, 2015, p. 66)

Early understandings of social justice offered by Rawls, (1971) provide a foundation for more contemporary perspectives. Justice is defined by Rawls as;

> the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social co-operation. (Rawls, 1971, p.6)

This sets the basis for social justice to be considered on distributive foundations, with clear starting points for social justice reflective of the need for fair distribution of society's stock (Rawls, 1971). Interestingly, for Rawls, inequality could only be tolerated in the instances that it sought to benefit those most disadvantaged within society, perceiving justice to include;

> All social primary goods – liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect – are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these goods is to the advantage of the less favoured. (Rawls, 1971, p. 303)

For Fraser, (2008) justice is determined as;

> …parity of participation. According to this radical-democratic interpretation of the principle of equal moral worth, justice requires social arrangements that permit all to

> participate as peers in social life. Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction. (Fraser, 2008, p.16)

These elements are framed from a realisation of the wider structural forces that act on all of us, but take the greatest toll on people most marginalised in society.

> Social justice is further about identifying and attempting to address structural disadvantage, discrimination and inequality by refocusing on process, participation and collective rights. (Corburn and Gormally, 2015 *in* Cooper, Gormally and Hughes, 2015, p. 65)

The debates concerning the articulation of social justice are focused on key dimensions that reflect notions of people's everyday lives, their access to material resources, their position in society and their ability to live freely, as they choose (Lister, 2007, Fraser, 2008). The complexities within the long-standing debates regarding the conceptualisations of social justice principally rest on finding consensus in meanings of equality, well-being, sufficiency or responsibility, which vary greatly (Craig et al, 2008). It is challenging to provide clarity on what it means to share in the collective resources of society in order to live a good life and how this is determined. Indeed, infinite perspectives exist of meanings of a good life and ways to achieve such living (Jamieson, 2025, Craig et al, 2008).

Within theoretical perspectives of social justice central factors are evident, often cited by theorists as principles of *redistribution* and *recognition* (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, Fraser, 2008, Craig et al, 2008, Lister, 2007, Young, 1990). These can be understood, in the first instance, as 'how the good and bad things in life should be distributed among the members of a human society' (Miller, 2001, p 1). This argument proceeds that injustice occurs where particular groups are denied opportunities or burdened with more disadvantages which impact their ability to participate on equal terms. Understandings of social justice are much contested in the relationship between key principles, however, have consistently been built from perspectives of redistribution and recognition (Miller, 2001, Honneth, 2004, Lister, 2007, Fraser, 2008). Redistribution is often attributed to economic resources that are afforded, or not, and which can result in the inclusion or exclusion of specific groups and individuals to participate in the social life of their community.

> One key element of a socially just distribution of income and wealth in any particular society is that all its members have sufficient material resources to live with dignity and to flourish. (Lister, 2007, p. 114)

Social justice principles of redistribution seek to challenge the economic systems that create and maintain the disparity of economic resources across societies so that wealth is more evenly shared and benefits all. In this context there are growing concerns after more than a decade of austerity economics that have inflicted 'great misery' in the UK (Alston, 2018, p. 5).

These measures continue under a newly elected government bringing further inequality and precarious economic health of the nation (Pickett et al, 2024). However, in terms of realising social justice, wealth is one of a number of elements that require redistribution, moving beyond economics to more inclusive understandings of redistribution. Increasingly, consideration has been given to the redistribution of non-material elements, such as valuable rewards and status for working in particular sectors, social mobility and opportunity that includes other factors, in addition to financial (Fraser, 2008, Craig et al, 2008, Lister, 2007). Fairer distribution of time, for example, is cited as important in terms of achieving social justice on gendered terms (Lister, 2007).

> There is an unequal distribution of working, caring and disposable time between and within households. (Rutherford and Shah, 2006, p 39 *in* Lister, 2007 p. 115)

Climate justice is a further significant issue that must be explored within the discussion of redistribution. Social justice cannot be imagined without the inclusion of climate justice (McGregor and Christie, 2021). Within the global context of environmental justice there is a clear focus on the nature of the inequality of impact from the environmental destruction across the globe (Gorman et al, 2024, Ledwith, 2020, Lister, 2007). The most marginalised and deprived communities face the brunt of the environmental erosion as privileged countries exploit assets, extract materials and export waste.

> Human activities have exacerbated climate change, leading to significant environmental impacts which will increase threats to health and wellbeing, disproportionately affecting the most poor and vulnerable. (Kavanagh et al, 2021, p. 4)

The second element that underpins theories of social justice is focused on recognition (Lister, 2007, Fraser, 2008, Coburn and Gormally, 2017). Notions of recognition are postulated to be central to social justice as they concern the very nature of people being visible in society and this visibility, of all people, being met with respect and not with 'humiliation and social disrespect' (Honneth, 2004, p. 134). The challenge with the principle of equality within perspectives of redistribution is in the interpretation of *sameness*. This challenge, it has been argued, can result in fundamental differences between people being ignored and rendered invisible, as the same treatment is provided for all people (Lister, 2007, Young, 2008 *in* Craig et al, 2008).

According to Honneth, (2004) 'the recognition of human dignity comprises a central principle of social justice' (p.352). Social divisions, and resultant inequality, are borne from discrimination and oppression of difference and relations of power that determine superiority or inferiority amongst groups within society (Thompson, 2020). Important yet, socially constructed factors that shape lived experiences include age, class, disability, faith, gender, race and sexuality. It is argued that fundamental acknowledgement of, and action to eradicate

the impact of these differences is necessary if social justice is to be advanced (Young, 1990). The importance of the recognition principle is increasingly understood within contemporary societies as identities become influential, Fraser highlights the necessity of social justice on recognised terms;

> Today, however, we increasingly encounter a second type of social-justice claim in the 'politics of recognition.' Here the goal, in its most plausible form, is a difference-friendly world, where assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect. (Fraser, 2003, *in* Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p. 7)

The importance of the interplay between notions of redistribution and recognition has been extensively considered by theorists exploring social justice with conflicting approaches often witnessed in the prioritisation of one factor over another (Honneth, 2004, Fraser, 2008, Lister, 2007). For Young, (1990) the starting point for social justice resides in issues of oppression, similarly for Fraser and Honneth, (2003) in experiences of 'social disrespect' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p.171). This, it could be argued, drives the inequality experienced in the unjust and unfair distribution of resources, which are characteristic of the principle of redistribution.

Within the evolution of Fraser's theoretical development of social justice the two dimensional formulation has been expanded, to a more recently determined, tripartite arrangement (Fraser, 2008). The consideration of redistribution [economic dimension] and recognition [cultural dimension] firmly advocated with Fraser's notion of social justice (Fraser, and Honneth, 2003, Fraser, 2005, 2008). Alongside these principles a further, third dimension of *representation* [political dimension] is included, raising the profile of the political nature of social justice in relation to understandings of who is included in benefiting from the dimensions of redistribution and recognition and who is involved in deciding such benefits.

> The political in this sense furnishes the stage on which struggles over distribution and recognition are played out. Establishing criteria of social belonging, and thus determining who counts as a member, the political dimension of justice specifies the reach of those other dimensions: it tells us who is included, and who excluded, from the circle of those entitled to a just distribution and reciprocal recognition. (Fraser, 2008, p. 17)

This political dimension connects significantly to the participatory agenda within this research project, dealing with matters of 'membership' and mechanics of political inclusion [and exclusion] (Fraser, 2008, p. 17). Principles of representation are central to the fostering of social justice and further impact on perceptions of voice and participation in terms of decision-making. To apply Fraser's theoretical position to young people's participation and to their political rights it can be seen that injustices of representation are clear in that the political 'decision-rules' (Fraser, 2008, p.18) exclude young people, as members of communities, under the age of 18 from holding voting rights within the political system.

> Misrepresentation occurs when political boundaries and/or decision rules function wrongly to deny some people the possibility of participating on a par with others in social interaction – including, but not only, in political arenas. (Fraser, 2008, p.18)

What is clear for the purposes of this doctoral project is that the principles of social justice, incorporating redistribution, recognition and representation are fundamental in the promotion of critical, emancipatory and anti-oppressive youth work. There are many theorists within youth work that frame critical and social justice ideologies as the foundation for practice, for example, Batsleer, (2008), Davies, (2005, 2013, 2019, 2021), Jeffs and Smith, (2010), Cooper et al (2015), de St. Croix, (2010, 2016) and Coburn and Gormally, (2015, 2017). Within youth work, it is argued, practitioners have a distinct role in supporting both the educational understanding regarding human rights and the development, or challenge, of mechanisms to foster human rights (NYA, 2020). Injustice lies at the site of the disregard of rights and this relationship is central to the dynamics of cultivating a critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2025, Taylor, 2016). Social justice is an important concept on which to orientate youth work practice, to remain connected to lived realities and to strive to create change though the dimensions of redistribution, recognition and representation.

What is also recognised, especially in the contemporary, neoliberal agenda is the prominence of, what can be positioned as, the *practice of accountability* (Bradford, 2000, p. 49). Such a practice prioritises and promotes the *activity* of youth workers, rather than the *values* of youth work and, it could be argued, is driven by a ferocious target-outcome domain (Coburn and Gormally, 2017). In this process, youth work values and commitments towards emancipatory and social justice practice are reduced and framed as 'hidden knowns' (Coburn and Gormally, 2017, p. 33). These are perceived to be central elements of practice, but are side lined, hidden and left unshared with others, by demands of other, everyday mechanistic factors. As a result the importance of social justice in practice is reduced by practitioners;

> …who articulate social justice and equality as their main focus, but who are routinely and often unconsciously complicit in maintaining the status quo. (Coburn and Gormally, 2017, p. 36)

One of several dangers resulting from the continuance of 'hidden knowns' in practice, is the potential impact on a new generation of youth workers, who, if stories of social justice endeavours remain unshared, can conclude their enterprises are firmly located in activity and diversion (Davies, 2021, Taylor, 2016, Jeffs, 2015, Davies, 2013, Cooper et al, 2012). I contend, an element of what is required to counteract the impact of the neoliberal, target-outcome doctrine is to advocate a form of professional re-connection within youth work that restores the union between 'thinking and doing' (Ledwith, 2020, p.5), making visible 'hidden knowns' in professional practice (Coburn and Gormally, 2017, p. 33).

2.6 Conclusion - Meanings of Social Justice

Within this exploration of social justice a range of definitions and theoretical perspectives have been considered portraying its nature and importance within professional youth work practice. Social justice has been central to ideas about what it means for all to live well and notions of 'human flourishing' being realised (Banks, 2010, p. 12). Discussions of social justice locate this within the parameters of justice and rights, depicting social justice as a fundamental rationale in the endeavour of humans to equally and harmoniously co-exist (Miller, 2001, p. 1). Starting points for social justice rest on understandings of sharing society's resources and respect, both material and moral to create parity across the population (Fraser, 2008). However, this demands substantial consensus on what is right and just and understandings of who decides.

Fraser's theoretical thinking is key to delineate social justice through drawing out tensions and associations between dimensions of redistribution, recognition and representation (Fraser, 2008). The application, in practice, of these dimensions seek to support professional, anti-oppressive practice in that workers can more critically recognise their role and responsibilities towards social justice efforts. Building understandings of social justice supports youth workers to recognise the mechanisms within society that maintain systems of oppression and inequality, restricting opportunities and reducing life chances (Coburn and Gormally, 2017). Youth workers are more astute and assured then in their assessments as to the nature of the struggles facing communities, recognising the areas of lives requiring further support and attention. Utilising social justice theory in practice enables workers to cultivate relationship based in collaboration with communities in response to these challenges.

Literature Review Conclusion

Through the three parts of this literature review I have explored, firstly the origins of youth work tracing the early development of 'youth leadership' (Davies and Gibson, 1967, p. 65) and specifically central formulations of youth participation, and understandings of political education and social justice. Within part two I have navigated the social policy developments relevant to youth work exploring the articulations of youth work policy and motivations for changes of purpose within youth work. This is shaped particularly in relation to participatory processes and the evolution of mechanisms that seek to include young people in the discourses and decision-making of the day and on what terms. The third and final part explores the theoretical grounding of the central concepts that frame this doctoral research focusing on youth participation, political education and social justice in turn to explore definitions and models, purposes and challenges.

The demands of the industrial revolution through the mid-1800s set the context for support and succour for young people during the tumultuous period as they navigate significant social upheaval (Russell and Rigby, 1908, Leighton, 1972, Davies, 2009). This is rooted in the philanthropic efforts of middle class moralisers, motivated through fear and faith to offer

sustenance to the perceived 'deserving and undeserving poor' (Young and Ashton, 1963, p.68). The theoretical recognition of a new phase, termed adolescence brought increased attention for this group and the realities of their lived experiences. Through the early stirrings for youth work methodologies expectations were drawn with young people themselves as leaders of their peers and tensions as both collaborators and conformers in the decision-making processes of communities. The nature of participatory and political endeavours evolved within this era and in contested forms with clear divergence in the meaning and methods of participatory and political practice. It is argued that understandings and responses regarding the impact of the wider, structural issues were more fully comprehended at this point than within individualistic contemporary practice (Urwick, 1904, Russell and Rigby, 1908, HM Gov, 2005).

Through the expansive social policy changes over a period of the next hundred and fifty years both the state and society have been central in the fortunes and fluctuations of the growth of professional youth work practice. State, voluntary sector, and the informal groups within civil society have contributed to the shape and purpose of youth work over time (Davies, 1999a, 1999b). Youth work has been a site for interest and investment as it demonstrates its contribution to the management of moral panics (Cohen, 1973) through both a commitment to control and care for young people. Through periods of war and wither, the state has utilised youth work to foster efforts to re-shape both national pride and prejudice as attitudes altered, especially under the pressure of racist rhetoric (Hickson, 2018). Increasingly during this time youth work positioned itself as on the side of equality and workers took a stand in orientating practice with the campaigns in support of inclusion and diversity with radicals and radical practice coalescing (de St. Croix, 2010, Taylor, 2010, 2016). The youth service at this point centred on creating 'opportunities for young people to discuss matters of controversy' (DES, 1969, p.80) and opportunities for political participation encouraged and emphasised in policy and practice (DES, 1969).

With the onset of the neoliberal agenda public services, including youth work, turned towards efficiency, evaluation and evidence as tools to justify investment (Davies, 1999a, 1999b, Sercombe, 2015b). A reformulation of 'traditional values' (ableist, racist, heteronormative, gendered and class-based) saw devastating action against the promotion of equality and opportunities for participation and voice reduced as *the lady was not for listening* (Davies, 1999b). The rationalisation and regulation of services to suit the short term demands of government focused on re-shaping responsibilities from state to self has been the status quo (Harvey, 2007, Davies, 2019). Youth Participation, political education and social justice ideas and actions have been buffeted by these contours of history seeking to traverse the landscape between control and change in relation to youth participation, political education and social justice (Farthing, 2012, de St. Croix, 2010, Davies, 2005).

The final section of the literature review provided space for the exploration of theoretical meanings of youth participation, political education and social justice, the central concepts within this research project. There is a diversity in understandings of youth participation that spans articulations from notions of attendance and involvement to more developmental shapes, positioning young people as decision-makers. Across this range of interpretations are influential models and methodology that seek to substantiate participatory practice through systematic steps (Arnstein, 1969, Hart, 1992). At the heart of this debate is the extent to which young people are free to decide on matters that effect their lives (Hart, 1992, Farthing, 2012).

The work of Professor Lundy has expanded notions of participatory practice as one premised on rights, utilising the UNCRC to recognise professional duties held within this context (Lundy, 2007, Ward and Lundy, 2024). Tensions within perspectives regarding political education are discussed, highlighting both conforming and critical mechanisms that have the capacity to dominate or liberate young people through their political education and the role of youth work within this space (Kincheloe, 2010, Giroux, 2011, Apple, 2013, Ball, 2013, Bamber and Murphy, 1999). In exploring social justice, Fraser's tripartite model is significant in bringing together the dimensions of redistribution, recognition and representation to foster a more comprehensive perspective on social justice. This is essential in connecting with practice and making 'known' commitments to social justice in professional, anti-oppressive youth work (Coburn and Gormally, 2017, p.33)

Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this methodology chapter I outline the research approach and methodology employed within this doctoral study. Starting with the philosophical position by exploring matters of ontology and epistemology which purposefully and powerfully plant the research philosophy and framework I have adopted and my rationale for this. I connect with and explore the roots of Action Research (AR) and the configurations of *a participatory paradigm* which includes Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a branch of this action research orientation to research (Cook et al, 2019). In doing this, I articulate and justify the specific PAR approach I have applied within this research and provide an exploration of the key dimensions, applications and challenges of PAR in practice with young people. I highlight the importance of seeking connectivity throughout the research strategy between professional values and professional practice, which I believe, includes research. I also highlight and consider the tensions within this endeavour (Davies, 2015, Young, 2006). The methodology includes an overview of the ethical tensions and challenges experienced through this research project and an exploration of the mechanisms employed to navigate the challenges.

I present through this methodology chapter the range of methods utilised for data collection, details of the research sites and information regarding the young people and youth workers involved in this research. The chapter ends with an overview of the process of Thematic Analysis applied (Braun and Clarke, 2006), to analyse the data gathered.

3.2 Ontology and Epistemology

Matters of ontology and epistemology are central to research in both the social and physical world in providing a framework through which the nature of knowledge regarding the world can be examined and explained (Macionis and Plummer, 2012). Demands for truth and knowledge have dominated the human experience in the pursuit of clarity of the phenomena we witness and experience in our everyday lives (van de Sande and Schwartz, 2017). Ontology is focused on determining;

> Claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other. In short, ontological assumptions are concerned with what we believe constitutes social reality. (Blaikie, 2000, p.8)

This motivation for understanding the nature of reality has driven discoveries across the globe to reconcile perspectives universal (Slattery, 2003). Through history, the purpose of this understanding has evolved, shifting from the immediate need for knowledge as a means for survival to the more contemporary disciplined desire for global presence and power (Klein, 2008). Exploring and questioning philosophical perspectives of thinking and research provides

an opportunity to gain insight into the nature of knowledge, determining what is knowable and to articulate, how it can be known (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The philosophical roots for such questions date back to the origins of thought and reason and have been fundamental in generating both answers and questions in relation to matters of truth and reality (Macionis and Plummer, 2012).

The pre-Enlightenment period of the ancient Greeks was characterised by the competing positions between reason (Plato 427 – 347 BCE) and observation (Aristotle 384 – 322 BCE) within the natural world that sought to generate understanding. The battle of perspectives between Plato and Aristotle forming the foundation of philosophical thought and the development of modern scientific enquiry as Aristotelian, empiricist thinking prevailed (Hyland, 2003). However, the discoveries brought by these innovative perspectives on knowledge and truth were perceived as direct challenges to the spiritual and religious foundations of the Christian faith, wedded to reason (Hyland, 2003). Many key thinkers at the time were made to recant or face persecution as the dominant world order sought to re-establish its authority (Hyland, 2003, van de Sande and Schwartz, 2017). History provides witness to an enduring, relevant and repeating pattern regarding the relationship between power, authority, and truth that continues to dominate within a contemporary era. It could be argued that those *with* and *in* power continue to determine and dictate truth (Foucault, 1980).

3.2.1 Ontology – 'Being and Becoming'

Consideration of ontology also helps us to explore meanings of positionality recognised within an evolving professional identity situated as 'being and becoming' (Hughes, 2013).

> Learning to become a professional involves not only what we know and can do, but also who we are (becoming). It involves integration of knowing, acting and being in the form of professional ways of being that unfold over time. (Dall'Alba, 2009, p. 34)

The development of professional identity is significant within this educational doctorate and fundamental within the professional construction of selves as practitioners, working in the field of youth work (Smith, 2020, Price, 2018). This, for me, is situated in two ways, the first relates to recognising the importance of our own experiences and biographies in the formation of how we think and 'see' in the world. This is not only based on the values held, but furthers understanding of how values are drawn and fostered though our biographies. Within this concept of *a* 'being and becoming' ontology the importance of reflection is highlighted (Dall'Alba, 2009). It is argued that through reflection and meaning making we can begin to understand the impact of our own life experiences and how they shape our thinking and 'seeing' in the world as a person and practitioner (Smith, 2020, Hughes, 2013).

The second aspect for consideration is the focus on how our evolving professional identity is shaped by our personal biographies and through the emersion within the professional field as a realm of reality (Hughes, 2013). Through being in practice, professionals adopt the professional identity as a *situated self* within this professional field.

> […] the physical performance of a practice powerfully shapes the identity of the practitioner. Especially from the perspective of the identity and subjectivity of the practitioner, the performance of a practice has much more significance than might be suggested by what the practitioner has learned in order to perform the practice – competences and capacities whose significance is that they are elements that come into play in the performance, that are brought into play as needed, with judgement and discretion as part of the "orchestration" of the professional practitioner's practice with this client, in this setting, under these particular circumstances. (Kemmis, 2011, p.151)

We can appreciate that 'becoming' in this context is shaped by the values and expectations within the professional sphere (Davenport, 2012).

> Not only do human beings have a range of possible ways to be, but also our being is an issue for us; it matters to us who we are and who we are becoming. We are 'a being who takes a stand on its being and is defined by that stand'. (Thomson, 2004, p. 453 *in* Dall'Alba, 2009, p. 36)

3.2.2 Ontology *in* Practice

Given the challenging and changing circumstances of the youth work landscape as neoliberal demands and evidence-based practice disrupt and dominate over relational spaces, it is important to connect and understand the interplay between the personal, political and the professional in order to assert commitments to social justice (de St Croix, 2018, Davenport, 2012, Ord, 2014). How values are developed and demonstrated within practice is central to this practitioner research and it is argued that professional practice 'requires that we bring our own 'being' into the situations we find ourselves in' (Smith, 2020, p. 2). Increasingly concepts of professionalisation and professional development within human services are structured through frameworks that prioritise technical knowledge and skills, which, it has been argued, diminishes the role of values and ethics as professional rudders necessary to steer our work (Reid and Oliver, 2014, Smith, 2020).

> Ongoing attention to ethics and values is needed to question and counter the reductionist 'what works' approach with its focus on outcomes and outputs, as 'the technicist view threatens to empty practice of its moral dimension'. (Kemmis, 2011, p.163)

Youth work operates within the changing, relational, 'average everydayness' (Dall'Alba, 2009, p. 35) of peoples' lives. This is often depicted as working 'on the wing' (DES, 1987 *in* Davies,

2021 n.p.), demanding workers think 'on their feet' (Smith, 1994, p. 76) to highlight the improvised and momentary nature of practice. The realities of youth work in terms of this improvisation mean that it is necessary for workers to rely much more on themselves, their values, and ethics to guide them within everyday interactions with young people, rather than sets of rules and procedures which are inadequate for managing the sensitive nuances necessary for practice (Smith, 2020).

The application of theory in practice as *praxis* is significant here as principles of considered thought, action and reflection connect to shape a moral and just practice, not simply mechanistic, bureaucratic action that drives in the neoliberal context (Cooper et al, 2015, Ord, 2014, Ledwith, 2020). Praxis is described as a central root within youth work that encompasses authentic and principled thought, action and reflection that seeks to challenge and create new opportunities for consciousness raising (de St. Croix, 2016, Ledwith, 2020, Davies, 2021). Connecting with Aristotle's ideas of *phronesis* has been usefully, but limitedly applied within youth work (Ord, 2014, Smith, 1994, Young, 2006). Framed as 'practical wisdom' (Smith, 1994, p. 76), phronesis is used to recognise the association between moral standpoints, integrity and action, based on notions of what is conducive to living a good life. Connecting with phronesis in this way positions such action and decision-making as 'the disposition to act truly and rightly' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 34).

The challenge for youth workers in practice is to use interrogations of ontology to support professional development learning within the complexity of contemporary practice, akin to,

> […] the swampy lowland where situations are confusing 'messes' incapable of technical solutions… struggling to make sense of the ethical complexity at the heart of much practice and with little to fall back on beyond who they are and what they bring to a situation. (Smith, 2020, p. 2)

3.2.3 Ontological Reflexive Analysis – Professional Development Journey

Through the doctoral journey I have reflected on key moments within my own life that have shaped and challenged my understandings of the world and hence shaped my values and ethics, emerging within practice as professional efforts towards anti-oppressive practice and social justice. It was not until I was an adult and moved to Liverpool in 1993 from my family home in the South, did I fully realise the impact of structural oppression and inequality on people's life chances and to a large extent my own. Growing up with dad, a self-employed, mechanic and home-based mum who voted conservative and who failed to see any of the structural forces that impacted on our lives, or anyone else's, taught me a thing or two. The political message was one of self-sufficiency or so they thought.

I watched through the 1980s and 90s as subsequent recessions hit and work ceased for dad. Too proud to take back money he had paid in, he diversified and kept going. He brought Nan's council house and reaped the rewards, not recognising the impact of this for subsequent

generations. It was not a political house hold when we were young, it was only as grown-ups that dad and I debated politics and the resultant impacts. Surprisingly, we held very similar views about the world we wanted to live in, we just had very different ideas of how to get there. He was my training school over the past thirty years as we tussled over the latest political ideas, a particular favourite season given to Brexit.

Moving to Liverpool has been the most significant move for my political awareness, latterly I would add the university field trips to Palestine to this as one of the most impactful experiences of my life. Politics matters and we need to know something about the rules of the game. I guess the line connecting my research interests are clear in my efforts to work with young people to help them to recognise those factors that shape their lives, as they do mine. I watch now how young people are still having to navigate class, sexuality, gender, just as I did back in the day, and wonder how far we still have to go with this divisive discourse.

The congruence in finding a professional environment that connects with my personal beliefs and values is enriching and provides, it is argued, a sense of 'ontological security' between principles, purpose, and practice. Giddens (1990) defines ontological security as

> The confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of their surrounding social and material environments of action. A sense of the reliability of persons and things, so central to the notion of trust, is basic to feelings of ontological security. (Giddens, 1990, p.92)

I can now recognise occasions where my ontological security has been tested through my practice experience, where compromises in integrity are forced by dominant outcome agendas (Davies, 2021). I resonate with Hughes, (2013), in understanding these critical moments have similarly captivated my research curiosity.

> Changes in the architecture of my practice fuelled the push for me to reconnect with the moral foundation upon which my practice is based. (Hughes, 2013, p. 339)

My interest in youth participation and political education was sparked through practice as the balances of power tipped away from young people towards a practice more centred on achieving pre-determined outcomes and professional survival in a restructuring landscape (Davies, 2021). This created 'ontological insecurity' as I reflect on my 'being and becoming' at that stage in conflict with my beliefs and values. Interpreted here as a sense of inner conflict or incongruence, causing disharmony, where values and principles are unable to be reconciled and demonstrated in action.

3.2.4 Epistemology – Interpretivism

The development of sociology from the thinking of Auguste Comte [1798-1857] as the science of society, transferred positivist principles used to explore the natural world as default

mechanisms and applied to the science of the social world (Crotty, 1989). The positivist paradigm dominated social research throughout the twentieth century and was shaped by distinct objective and distanced research processes of experimentation and observation (Cohen et al, 2018). Interpretivism, the basis for this research project, developed as an alternative perspective to objective positivism, to reflect the diversity of knowing other than that gained from mechanistic observation. Kant [1724 – 1804] was particularly influential during this period with his seminal text Critique of Pure Reason (1781).

Kant postulated that,

> Our knowledge of the world is based on 'understanding' which arises from thinking about what happens to us, not just simply from having had particular experiences. (Snape and Spencer, 2003, p.7)

This construction of a set of beliefs that formulated qualitative understanding is an important discovery in the articulation of the difference between *knowing* and *understanding* and how research can be shaped in this way to promote understanding, beyond reason. The prioritisation of human experiences is central to a qualitative epistemology, recognising that constructions of meaning are made in diverse ways, influenced by wider social, political, economic, and historical contexts (Scotland, 2012). This recognises the active and reflective perspectives that highlight multiple realities, that involve an engagement with our senses to interpret and ascribe meaning from lived experiences occurring within a particular historical time and space (Snape and Spencer, 2003, Marsh and Furlong, 2002). This gave way to the recognition that subjective ontologies existed, that realties can also be relative and are constructed by the interpretations made by people through reflecting on their experiences (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The development of these counter ontologies has widened perspectives and scope for research practice, encouraging a diversity of thinking that has occupied academics for many decades and continues to involve significant debate, progressing understanding and research practises (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

As a youth and community development worker, academic and researcher there is something significant in the connection and interplay between the principles and values of our practice. These values connect to a familiar relativist ontology perceived to be 'hard-wired' into youth work which seeks to highlight the importance of individual reality and experience, interpretation and meaning making (Young, 2006). This is manifested in practice through the centralisation and prioritisation of experience and the relationship between experience and learning (Dewey, 2008, Ord, 2014). Youth work practice is based on seeking to utilise experiences of the 'everyday taken for granted-ness' of peoples' lives as a source of informal education and learning, through reflection (Ledwith, 2020. p. 4). What this provokes is the recognition of subjective and multiple realties, that people's lives are diverse, and experiences differ in relation to how we are enacted upon by social, political and economic

forces within the world. This perspective, it is suggested, is inherent within youth work and is the central ontological position of the researcher and this research project.

Understanding positionality is central in both research and practice fields within professional youth work (Gormally and Coburn, 2014). Recognising the steadfastness of this positioning, I would argue in research, just as it is for practice endeavours is also of fundamental importance. Our positionality, thereby our ontology, remains consistent, as this is concerned with our beliefs regarding reality. Our interpretations of the world, incorporating those units of matter that make up the social world, are deep-rooted and connected to our beliefs and values, rather than something flexible and changeable (Blackie, 2000).

> Each social scientist's orientation to their subject is shaped by their ontological and epistemological position…They are like a skin not a sweater: they cannot be put on and taken off whenever the researcher sees fit. (Marsh and Furlong, 2002, p. 17)

Through history, policy and practice distinct values have been demarcated to demonstrate how they underpin, shape, and locate the profession (Jeffs and Smith, 2010, Batsleer, 2008 and Davies, 2021). Even withstanding the discourse on the tumultuous challenges facing the profession in recent decades (Davies, 2015, de St. Croix, 2018), the longevity of expressed professional values remains, these include ongoing commitments to social justice, anti-oppressive practice, participation, and empowerment (NYA, 2020). All these values, evident in professional documentation, I contend, predicate that lived realities across communities are diverse (NYA, 2020).

3.2.5 Epistemological Positioning – Connecting Critical Theory

Within this research project the application of critical pedagogy is applied recognising the importance of seminal educators Paulo Freire, Michael Apple, Henry Giroux and Joe. L Kincheloe. This critical lens is applied within the philosophical positioning of the researcher, drawing together theoretical articulations from the literature review and applying them to the research practice. The *critical* in critical theory presents itself as taking on an inclusive perspective, of not just the subjectivity of the lived realities for people involved, but further through the understanding, impact and consequences of injustices and oppression for people's lives and growth (Freire, 1972). Moving beyond the exploration and interpretation of experience, to make explicit the social, political and economic factors that limit life for communities, for example, in relation to the social constructions of gender, 'race' and class and their intersectional impact (Crenshaw, 1989).

Critical Theory regards positivism and interpretivism as 'incomplete accounts of social behaviour by their neglect of the political and ideological contexts' (Cohen et al, 2011, p. 31). The complexities of refracting interpretations of lived realties through the lenses of politics, economics and social contexts provides a wider, more complete picture in which research members can create some distance between themselves and their context. Much of the

growing individualisation agenda intentionally locates blame conveniently in our own hands with little regard to the significance of structural oppression and the resultant harm causing inequality it promotes (Davies, 2013, de St Croix 2016).

Critical theory as applied within this research context is grown out of emancipatory and empowering aims and traditionally connects with the position of marginalised groups, for example, young people, [dis]abled people, those identifying as women or from a diversity of LGBTQIA+ identities. Operating as a mechanism for the exploration of power, critical theory seeks to destabilise dominant discourses and encourages researchers to push the boundaries of process to more fully represent the underlying philosophy. PAR is an example of this collaborative stance between 'researchers and the researched' (Ritchie and Ord, 2017, p. 16).

Given this connectedness between critical, interpretivist research and youth work, I have sought to make a further connection with the specific Participatory Action Research (PAR) orientation towards research that has been adopted within this doctoral project. PAR, I argue, powerfully correlates with the core beliefs present within youth work, that seek to prioritise participation, education, equality, and empowerment by those involved and is therefore well suited for this research project (NYB, 1991, Young, 2006, Yanar et al, 2016, Taylor, 2019b, Davies, 2021).

3.3 Methodology - Participatory Action Research (PAR)

In undertaking this research I sought to work with and alongside young people to support them in 'creating themselves' along with reflection on my own professional practice and understanding in relation to youth participation, political education and social justice (Young, 2006, p. 4). Working through cycles of considered thought, action and reflection intentionally prioritised within PAR questioning my own principles of practice, exploring the potential for youth participation and political education in youth work and within the sector. Through this research project I sought to develop a youth work practice that explores commitments to social justice, supporting young people to explore the structural forces that shape their lived realities. The central principle for this research is to support young people's questioning of their lived realities and develop alongside them, the skills and knowledge for them to take action to create change in the world.

3.3.1 History and Growth of Participatory Action Research

The history, evolution, and growth of Action Research [AR] and PAR is extensive. Key authors attribute the origins of AR and subsequently PAR growing from the work of Kurt Lewin emerging in the 1940s in the Global North, through the US and UK. In the Global South, the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil is central to AR and PAR, promoting approaches to research that fostered empowerment and challenged systems of oppression (Warwick-Booth et al, 2021, Macaulay, 2017, Reason and Bradbury, 2008). Lewin, driven by a determination to use his theoretical understanding to 'build a better world' (Burnes and Bargal, 2017, p. 93).

Lewin was focused on the way in which research could build self-esteem of those marginalised, seeking to foster 'independence, equality and co-operation' with those involved in action research (Lewin, 1946, p. 35). Lewin developed cycles within action research, akin to the 'problem solving process' (Burnes and Bargal, 2017, p. 97) detailing specific steps of planning, action, and evaluation to focus on the impact of the action taken which guided subsequent cycles. Central to Lewin's theoretical and practical model of research was the participation of the people involved in the process, prioritising their engagement and evaluation.

Whilst the exploration of PAR may well be equally messy in its evolution, much like its practice, what does seem prevalent within PAR are connections to revolutionary movements. PAR has a history of critiquing the status quo and the drive for connections with grassroots developments and action that start from a perspective that;

> …ordinary, underprivileged people will collectively investigate their own reality, by themselves or in partnership with friendly outsiders, take action of their own to advance their lives and reflect on their ongoing experience. (Rahman, 2008 *in* Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p.49)

A foundation common across all action research endeavours is the centrality of curiosity and questioning, which seeks to expand knowledge and understanding, and which also translates into purposeful action and change (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). As part of the examination through PAR, this process must fundamentally explore and expose the influence and impact of both local and wider social, political, and economic forces have on the context of the lived realities of people's lives. As is illustrated through contemporary literature, the possibilities for 'human flourishing' (Banks, 2010, p.36) can be found to be limited by such structural forces (Wilkinson and Picket, 2009, 2019, Dorling, 2015, 2019). This is the starting point for my own understanding and connection to the notions of *critical* in relation to this research project and as an ontological and epistemological position by '…questioning everyday life's taken-for-grantedness to see the contradictions we live by more starkly' (Ledwith, 2016, p. 7).

One of the key elements of the PAR research process that represents this professional congruence between thought and action was based on the idea of building the research as it progressed, '…learning to do it by doing it…' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2014, p. 2) The rejection of formed and fixed ideas from my academic-researcher perspective as to what the research project would, should and could look like, by their very nature, close off opportunities for young people to direct, shape and 'come to voice' within the research process (Batsleer, 2008, p.10). Frustrations surfaced during the ethics phase as these participatory principles clashed with the regulatory authority of approval governed by the university ethics committee (Yanar et al, 2016). This will be further explored in the ethics section of this chapter.

It is no surprise that a philosophical and methodological home within PAR was found given its diversity, its connectedness through collaboration and its commitments to action and change that frame my own ontological position. Just as youth work operates within the social, political, and economic life and is committed to action and reflection, PAR is explored as a 'social practice, a practice-changing practice' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2014, p. 2). I contend that youth work and PAR are uniquely aligned in principle and practice that fit my own philosophical positioning (Gormally and Coburn, 2014). PAR is positioned as working from a strengths and knowledge base, focused on what people can do rather than 'deficit models' which oppressively frame professionals as experts of others' lives and embarking on 'banking' educational practices seeking to fill empty heads with prescribed, examinable content (Freire, 1972).

3.3.2 What is Participatory Action Research?

There is a diversity of practices and approaches within the broad definitions of PAR. There is no one rigid or specific way of engaging with PAR research frameworks, and this recognised in part, as one of the central strengths of the approach.

> Action research is a family of practices of living inquiry that aims, in a great variety of ways, to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing. It is not so much a *methodology as an orientation to inquiry* that seeks to create participative communities of inquiry in which qualities of engagement, curiosity and question posing are brought to bear on significant practical issues. (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p. 1)

Action Research [AR] and PAR are characterised by a set of core values and principles that frame the orientation to inquiry from the perspective of curiosity, collaboration, challenge and change (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011, Reason and Bradbury, 2008).

> PAR is a philosophy of life as much as a methods, a sentiment as much as a conviction. (Fals-Borda, 1997, *in* McIntrye, 2008, p.61)

Fundamentally political and located within a questioning approach focused on the lived realities of those involved, action research is increasingly common in practice fields as professionals seek to develop knowledge of themselves in their own working fields (Hawkins, 2015, Warwick-Booth et al, 2021). The core values and principles set the premise for inclusive engagement *with* and *alongside* those who are part of the research project directly, moving away from traditional research approaches which position research participants as *subjects* of the research (Macaulay, 2017).

Central to AR and PAR is the determination of the research questions, drawn from dialogue and often developed and shaped by non-academic members, including adult community members and young people.

> For some, PAR is more than a mere methodology, it is an approach to research or an "epistemology" – a theory of knowledge – that radically challenges who is an expert, what counts as knowledge and, therefore, by whom research questions and designs should be crafted. (Fine and Torre, 2019, p.435 *in* Lenette, 2022, p. 1)

This seeks to locate the research firmly on an emancipatory footing, in the issues and interests of those involved, which sparks motivation and engagement for collaboration (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011). Having set research questions, members embark on cycles of systematic observation and questioning, development of action and reflection on action to formulate further questioning (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, McNiff and Whitehead, 2011, Warwick-Booth et al, 2021). Through this process action and reflection are connected which fosters deeper analysis and understanding between 'thinking and doing' (Ledwith, 2020, p. 23).

3.3.3 Young People and Participatory Action Research

The signing of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into law in 1989 heralded a shift in focus for principles, policy, and practice in relation to children and experiences of childhood and participation in decision making processes in the UK (Lundy, 2007). In relation to research there has been an increase in interest and application of participatory and creative methodologies within social science research involving children and young people, including disabled young people (Kara, 2020, Christensen and James, 2000, Punch 2002, Conolly, 2008, Alderson and Morrow, 2004, Liddiard et al, 2019, Percy-Smith et al, 2019a, Percy-Smith et al, 2019b, Walther et al, 2019, Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021, Lundy, 2007). This growth and diversity is attributed to an increase in awareness regarding the moral and ethical tensions of research with children and young people, moving beyond tokenism toward a movement based on 'values and voice' in research practices where young people are regarded and valued as 'experts of their own lives' (McIntyre, 2000, James and Prout, 2005, Lundy, 2007, Taylor and Percy-Smith, 2008, Kellett, 2010, Percy-Smith et al, 2019a, Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021).

For too long, traditional positivist research approaches sought to position young people as 'mere objects to be studied' within the social world, lacking in agency, with research focused *on* them rather than *with* them (Barker and Weller, 2003, p. 35). Research was also thought to be dominated by adult directed agendas which excluded and silenced young people's voices within the process (Christensen and James, 2000). Similar justifications of protectionism are levied in relation to young people within research spheres as they are in decision-making practices. Young people are, it is argued, considered to be 'incompetent, unreliable and incomplete' and therefore not able to engage, understand and contribute seriously to research in a meaningful way (Fargas-Malet et al 2010, p.175).

Historically, research has, and continues to exclude young people based on such powerful discourses of being 'not fully adult' or 'apprentices or incomplete citizens' (Matthews, 2001, p. 299) and this has been particularly significant for the most marginalised young people,

including disabled young people, those who are care experienced, members of LGBTQI+ communities and young people from global majority communities (Oliver, 1992). Research practices are perceived to be changing and over the past twenty years research has been increasingly focused on participation and levels of inclusion of young people, including disabled young people (Punch, 2002, Fargas-Malet, 2010).

The use of participatory approaches in obtaining the views and experiences of those with a learning disability is extending (Brady et al, 2023, Povee *et al,* 2014). Collaborative research within which disabled people, including those with a learning disability, are seen as partners in the research process is recognised to be pivotal in maximising their involvement and control within the research process (Brady et al, 2023, Curran et al, 2021, Knox *et al*, 2000). Whilst there is a growing body of more inclusive research practices, it is widely acknowledged that researchers need to move beyond conventional research methods when working with disabled people and PAR is seen to be an appropriate orientation to facilitate young peoples' inclusion and ownership (Liddiard et al, 2019, Bailey et al, 2014).

This shift in the research landscape is in part recognised as a mechanism to counterbalance the power differentials between 'those researching' and 'those researched' (Johnson, 2017, Morrow and Richards, 1996). The landscape of research involving children and young people has transformed, from research *on* to research *with* and *by* children (Garasia et al, 2015, Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021). This is particularly evident within practitioner - research which seeks to explore local practice contexts to drive forward change and improvement at a local level. Practitioner research bridges the gaps with traditional research to incorporate models and methods that are value based and promote appropriate ethical standards and inclusion (Bradford and Cullen, 2012).

The principles of PAR are particularly connected to research agendas that seek to foster engagement and connectivity between researchers and community members, to explore localised concerns and work together to find collective solutions (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, McIntyre, 2008). Increasingly advancements in research involving notions of 'co-production' between researchers and communities have grown (Percy-Smith et al, 2019a). PAR can be utilised as an effective tool in research with young people as parameters of equality and collaboration are inherent and commitments to voice and engagement of 'co-researchers' are centralised (Tzibazi, 2013, Garasia et al, 2015, Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021, Lundy, 2007).

In recent examples of PAR projects with young people, researchers depict honest accounts of the motivations, mechanics and mind-fields faced within PAR projects and the utility of PAR in promoting challenge and change (Tzibazi, 2013, Percy-Smith et al, 2019a, Percy-Smith et al, 2019b, Walther et al, 2019, Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021) Through presented case studies of PAR projects the complexities of power between adults and young people are

navigated, negotiated and nuanced, rather than dictatorially youth-led, which can leave young people unsupported (Punch, 2002, Percy-Smith et al, 2019b). There are familiar instances where group formation is difficult and dynamic, and where young people's interest in the projects wane and where adult roles are more akin to 'co-inquiry' (Percy-Smith et al, 2019b, p. 268). Through this doctoral research project, I have experienced some of the challenges outlined above and had to navigate particular routes to develop the PAR project in practice. These will be further explored in following sections of this chapter.

3.4 Challenges within PAR Projects

Whilst a PAR orientation to research offers much in the way of connectivity to social justice values and operates with commitments to emancipatory and transformative action, it is not without risks and challenges both in principle and practice. This is particularly significant when working with young people in PAR Projects (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, Aldridge, 2016, Percy-Smith et al, 2019b, Lenette et al, 2019, Lenette, 2022). Some of the challenges acknowledged, it could be argued, are evident within all research projects that engage children and young people, notably ethical concerns regarding the safeguarding of young people's and their data (BERA, 2024).

The unique set of relational and radical principles involved in PAR frameworks, 'that prioritises disruption and uncertainty' (Cook et al, 2019, p. 463) gives rise to a number of additional factors that create challenges and tensions within the research process, which have certainly been experienced through this research project. Three key challenges within PAR projects will be explored here including issues of relationships and trust, levels of participation and power, and creating collective change (Grant et al, 2008, Lenette et al, 2019).

3.4.1 Relational Challenges of PAR

The prioritisation of collaboration across all aspects of the PAR project mean it is necessary for practitioner-researchers and community members to actively explore and negotiate the research landscape. This exploration should include generating the research questions and focus for the inquiry from the concerns and struggles of those involved (Freire, 1972, Grant et al, 2008, Percy-Smith et al, 2019a). The dilemma here is that much of the initial decision making and direction for the research project is undertaken prior to gaining ethical approval and therefore, leaves little room for young people's voices to be included at this developmental stage (Yanar et al, 2016).

The relationship between external adult researchers and communities, including young people, is such that often external researchers initiate research based on areas of interest that they seek to explore with little opportunity for initial engagement with those they are seeking to work alongside (Reason, 1994). This creates a pressure point in practice where the adult-researcher agenda unintentionally dominates and can reduce young people's place at the heart of research to simply being recruited to a pre-designed project (Burke et al, 2017).

This has been experienced through this research project, even where I had some relationships within the research sites. As a practitioner-researcher working in the field of both academia and professional youth work, I brought both a theoretical and practical awareness of some of the broad issues within the lives of young people. However, I felt the constraints of the research bureaucracy, which limited the capacity I had to engage young people in the development of specific research questions as this is part of the research process and governed by ethical approval, which was not in place at this stage.

The relational nature of PAR poses challenges for the 'outsider' researcher and exposes the need for careful and considered entry into the field with transparency and consent (Grant et al, 2008). PAR is a complex and nuanced research process, often without clear markers, which makes significant demands on professional, ethical judgement and reflection (Lenette et al, 2019). In recognising this there is growing acknowledgement of the time and additional 'emotional labour' (de St Croix, 2013, p.34) needed to invest in the building of relationships to enable open dialogue to develop the research with and alongside communities (Pain, 2004, Lenette et al, 2019). Much of this relationship building is demanding in ways similarly understood within youth work, as the dynamics of groups evolves, 'without guarantees', through the research and groupwork experience (IDYW, 2009, n.p.). Throughout the research project in both research sites young people drifted in and out of the research project as their interests shifted and other demands encroached.

3.4.2 Participation and Power Challenges of PAR

The relational challenges detailed above further impact on the degree of participation and power young people can exercise from the start (Percy-Smith et al, 2019b). It is argued that the research ethics process stifles the collective engagement and development of PAR projects (Fouché and Chubb, 2017, Yanar et al, 2016). This creates challenges for co-design and co-production as researchers are unable to work face to face with groups to generate research projects without ethical approval (Blake, 2007, Yanar et al, 2016). The onerous demands of ethics committees are seen as a significant challenge with PAR projects, as detailed assessment of the research process is required at the start to gain ethical approval (Blake, 2007, Yanar et al, 2016).

I found the ethical approval stage particularly demanding as others have documented within PAR projects (Percy-Smith et al, 2019a, Percy-Smith et al, 2019b). PAR intentionally seeks to disrupt the status quo by fostering spaces for mutual, transformative dialogue, action and change between people committed to explore issues of injustice and inequality. By this very nature, PAR projects are concerned with participation and power and how the balance between adults and young people is created, shared, and practised through the research journey (Hawkins, 2015, Percy-Smith et al, 2019a, Cook et al, 2019). It is argued that the dynamics of power within PAR projects ultimately lies with the adult researcher, positioned as both *adult* and *researcher*, provides a duality of dominance based on perceived position,

knowledge, and experience (Reason, 1994, Burke et al 2017). Irrespective of the mechanisms in place supporting opportunities for young peoples' ownership, the impact of imbalances of power is difficult to reconcile (Cook et al, 2019, Lenette, 2022).

3.4.3 Creating Collective Change Challenges of PAR

Serious consideration of the roles adults hold in PAR is regarded as necessary in order to occupy facilitator and supporter roles, rather than leadership positions. This creates transparency and space for power sharing between groups and extends levels of participation and ownership by young people (Percy-Smith et al, 2019b, McMahon et al, 2018). At times within this PAR project young people did occupy increased power sharing spaces with adults as they raised concerns about the social, political and economic world that they observed in their communities and sought to act to create change. Adults taking a facilitator role, with practice being driven by the agendas of young people as members of the PAR Group.

An example of this is demonstrated through the development of a fundraising event to support homeless people in the city which originated and was driven by young people as part of the research project. This concern raised by young people resulted in a range of consciousness raising opportunities developing through dialogue (Freire, 1972). I would argue increased participation and political education, within and through the issues of homelessness was generated. As a result of this young people took the lead to design and host a fundraising event in their community raising over £300 for a local organisation supporting homeless people in the area. What was fostered in parallel to this *product* was the development of experience, attitudes, skills and understanding for young people involved as they recognised their potential to enact their power (Batsleer, 2008).

3.5 Research Ethics

Research ethics is a significant consideration for all research projects as researchers go in faith, balancing the principles to (a) do good (known as beneficence) and (b) do no harm (known as non-malfeasance) (LHU, 2022, n.p.) The research ethics process acts as a risk assessment to ensure the steps and stages of the research approach are thoughtful and provide a robust and legally compliant framework for the practical management of the research project (BERA, 2024). This is especially important when working with children and young people, who are now, positively, much more actively engaged within research projects (Punch, 2002, Yanar et al, 2016, Tisdall, 2012)

As is the case for all UK university based research projects consideration and planning for high standards in ethical practice must be demonstrated and in place to gain ethical approval before any research can be started (LHU, 2022, BERA, 2024). This is rooted in the valid protection of people, especially those deemed as 'vulnerable', who have been, and continue to be most at risk (Punch and Oancea, 2014). However, the application of ethical principles in practice are explored here to demonstrate the challenges faced within this PAR project,

raising questions regarding the 'harm' created through excessive 'moralism' (Hammersley and Traianou, 2011, p.380).

Through this ethics section I will explore the tensions and challenges faced in both gaining approval and working ethically throughout the research project. I will discuss three significant areas within this section, the first, the ethics approval process, the second, the challenge of consent. The final section will explore axis of power and positionality for young people within the PAR process. This is not to suggest these are the only ethical dimensions relevant to PAR, these are highlighted as they presented the most determined of challenges faced within this research.

3.5.1 The Ethics Approval Process

Within the institutional Research Ethics Policy children and young people under the age of 16 are automatically determined as vulnerable and therefore required a greater level of ethical consideration and safeguarding. During the period of the research phase the age was set at 18. This has subsequently reduced to 16 years within LHU Policy. However, it is argued that PAR with young people is by its nature ethically stronger given the levels of exclusion young people face from research about their lives (Yanar et al, 2016).

In completing the ethics application, questions are asked as to the research focus and aims, the methodological design of the project and the methods for data collection. Given the very nature of PAR which 'seeks to maximise the participation of the people whose lives it researches' (Yanar et al, 2016, p. 122), these are all areas where the involvement of others, the members of the PAR Group, is essential. However, due to the constraints within the institutional research ethics policy engaging with members of the PAR Group prior to ethics clearance could result in academic misconduct.

> **18. Breach of this Policy**
>
> 18.1. ANY BREACH OF THIS POLICY MIGHT BE DEEMED ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT AND THE STAFF OR STUDENT CONCERNED MIGHT BE SUBJECT TO THE RELEVANT DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES.
>
> 18.2. IN PARTICULAR, WHERE THE RESEARCH INVOLVES HUMAN PARTICIPATION, NO APPROACHES TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS MAY BE MADE UNTIL ETHICAL APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED. (LHU, 2022, pp. 25-26)

This was problematic and clearly impacted on the opportunities for collaboration in the developmental stages of the research, presenting a number of ethical challenges within the PAR process. As the adult researcher I had to make decisions regarding the research that should have been the collective responsibility within the PAR Group. The ethics process demanded a level of 'knowing' in a deliberately unknown territory. Requiring numerous additional details and amendments resulting in twelve versions and reaching over ten

thousand words before ethical approval was granted. The space left for young people to engage with meaningful decision-making was limited and disheartening. Ironically, curtailing the opportunities for young people to shape and inform the research from the start and, it is argued, undermining the integrity of the project and claimed values (Yanar et al, 2016, Blake, 2007).

During the time taken to gain ethics clearance, some young people who I sought to work with had moved on with their lives, into further education, work, and within their families, as other demands became important. As a researcher committed to social justice, I understand the importance of working ethically, however, I would argue that university regulations need to find a more appropriate balance between protection and the promotion of authentic participation of young people within research (Yanar et al, 2016).

In working with these tensions, within the ethics application I outlined intentionally broad parameters for the research project, through the development of a menu of methods to operate within. I detailed the use of a range of creative activities that could be incorporated within the research as stimuli to generate themes for the PAR. This served to offer the ethics committee insight into the range of possible options as to how the research phase would run. For example,

> […]work together through focus groups and small workshop-based activity sessions utilising a range of art, sport, music, dance and creative activities as stimuli to generate questions, debate and reflection of relevant key themes generated from the activities. (Ramsey, 2020, p.4)

This framework, through a menu of data collection options and opportunities, sought to provide the ethics committee with knowledge of the parameters of the data collection methods. I was able to determine what methods would be ruled in and ruled out which enabled the ethics committee to make an assessment of risk factors. This menu also sought to create space for choice and decision making by others within the research project once ethical clearance had been achieved. Young people were able to choose, albeit within a menu, of the ways in which they wanted to shape and experience the research project.

The second challenge within the ethical approval process was focused on the demand to use clinical, neo-liberalist language by the ethics committee to describe potential members of the PAR Research Group. The language of 'participant' was frequently highlighted as the appropriate terminology within the ethical application. I found this demeaning and disingenuous to the ethos of PAR and to the intention and integrity of the research project and rejected all attempts to demand this change of language within the ethics application. This small act of resistance became pivotal within the research project as a representation of broader dismissive attitudes towards young people, towards qualitative research, and towards youth work practice as a second class profession, which I could not tolerate.

3.5.2 The Challenges of Consent

As is necessary within research projects with young people under a certain age, usually 16 or 18, signed, informed consent is required, in most instances, from parents or carers. This was necessary within this research project as part of the requirements for ethical approval process. However, in the enacting of this requirement, it can be argued that it undermines the potential empowerment within the research project and draws young people into a conflict between the words and deeds demonstrated within the project (Whittington, 2019). From the researcher-practitioner perspective young people are positioned as 'experts in their own lives' (Coyne and Carter, 2024) and from the regulatory ethics perspective young people are in need of parental approval as a gatekeeper to their participation (Pickles, 2019).

The central notion within the research project was one of participation, that young people can take action themselves as autonomous agents. However, the way that parental consent can be seen to curtail young people's genuine and authentic participation is a challenge within PAR projects (Cullen and Walsh, 2020, Yanar et al, 2016). There is a paradox in perspectives attributed to young people, the tension between understanding and application, of agency and protection. Young people are often positioned as a group in need of protection from the complexities of the adult world which they are not ready or able to understand or occupy (Alderson and Morrow, 2011, Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010).

This can be acutely exacerbated for disabled young people, who can witness opportunities to come to voice to articulate their demands for social justice dissipate under the discourse of protection (McNeilly, Macdonald and Kelly, 2022). The duality of positioning for young people as both vulnerable and expert is challenging to navigate (Fargas-Malet et al, 2010). Within the research project this tension between the protection and participation of young people was explored with the participation group. Attempts to navigate were presented through the ethos of information and empowerment. Parental consent was attained through the presentation of knowledge, information and recognition of the roles young people can have in the projects. Young people's consent was promoted on the basis of agency and authenticity, to promote their decision-making practice to engage or not on their terms. The discussion of this tension of age-based power was used as an example of the structural difficulties young people face in the world and discussed through the research project, using it as a learning experience for the young people.

3.5.3 Power and Positionality in PAR

The formal ethics approval process raised a number of questions about the importance of positionality for young people and practitioners involved in the research. The idea of a 'being and becoming' ontology is also considered from the young people's perspective (Young, 2006). There are two key strands, I content professional dichotomies, that are relevant to bring into focus here. Firstly, young people, are as seen to be in the 'process of creating themselves' (Young, 2006, p. 4) whilst also pathologised as 'deficit' and in need of 'fixing'

(Jeffs and Smith, 2010, Cooper, Gormally, Hughes, 2015, Davies, 2021). Secondly, that youth work is positioned as 'an exercise in moral philosophy' (Young, 2006, p. 3), a practice with educational intentions, including matters of political education and social justice. In opposition, youth work is increasingly positioned as part of the neo-liberal, commissioned State agenda that seeks to 'fix' perceived individual 'deficits' to enable young people to live State determined 'good lives' (DfES, 2003, HM Gov, 2011), rather than 'wasted lives' (Bauman, 2004). To facilitate this process, it is argued, through neo-liberalism, the State deftly shifts responsibility for all matters to individuals, creating a toxic relationship between self-worth and the realities of our own lives, locating our fate in our hands as 'new forms of government – self-government' (Ball, 2013, p.130). This intentionally excludes structural analysis of the 'public and social causes of private pain' (Lavalette, 2011, p.1) as personal responsibility for life chances are internalised and 'depoliticization' of the role of the State achieved (Ball, 2013, p.134).

> [w]hilst once neoliberalism might have been about economics, and premised on an ethos of 'small government' and liberalised opportunities for entrepreneurs and investors, it has more recently come to embrace desired modes of conduct in enterprising, self-responsible citizens. (Brown and Baker, 2013, p. 26).

The mechanisms of 'depoliticization' as the State retreats from its responsibilities for citizens gives a powerful perspective as to the context of human lives and portrays the structural as the personal (Ball, 2013). This is an ethical issue impacting on this research in a number of ways. The space that political education occupies within the landscape of youth work, it can be argued, has been both reduced and redefined to foster the inculcation of neo-liberal agendas under the guise of new, individualised versions of voice and participation, often adopted by practitioners under the banner of innovation or survival (Batlseer, 2008, Smith, 2005).

Contemporary youth participation and political education is actively directed away from structural 'matters of controversy' (DES, 1969, p.80) and re-articulated in forms akin to consumer feedback (DfES, 2002, Farthing, 2012). Within the research this is exposed for both workers and young people and creates tensions within the PAR process as they wrestle with their duality of positions as compliant change-makers (Taylor et al, 2018, Pimlott-Wilson, 2017, Cooper, 2012). For workers, believing ethically in youth work for social justice, whilst operating in the neoliberal framework of employment, targets and outcomes. For young people, seeking to highlight issues in the social, political and economic world which they then can subsequently be blamed for failing to navigate successfully (Taylor et al, 2018, Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). The concept of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1992, *in* Cooper, 2012, p. 55) is particularly powerful as a mechanism to reinforce the duty practitioners hold to operate in accordance with the values and ethics of the profession. To not, it is argued, that 'youth workers themselves constitute a form of social harm for young people' (Cooper, 2012, p. 55).

Through PAR young people and practitioners can gain valuable experience developing themselves as critical thinkers, explorers and actors within the social, political and economic world that both educates and transforms (Cooper, Hughes and Gormally, 2015). Through experiencing research that promotes voice and visibility (Lundy, 2007) young people and youth workers begin to see themselves as active, autonomous agents with renewed vigour to enact their power through participation and political action. However, this is in direct challenge to the State mechanics which seeks to promote individualisation of both opportunity and adversity for young people (Ball, 2013) and prescribed performativity for practitioners (de St Croix, 2018).

I contend that through this research navigation of sensitive ethical and ontological positionality is necessary. Decisions in practice can reinforce or challenge both youth workers understanding of who they are and young peoples' position as 'being and becoming' or 'youth as trouble' or youth in trouble' (Griffin, 2004, *in* Roche and Tucker, 2004, p. 14). In this context youth work can reinforce or challenge the dominate discourse perpetuating young people's oppression in the world. In practice Freire helps us to recognise the duality of education to either 'liberate or domesticate' (Ledwith, 2016, p.35). A central ethical challenge for practice is to reclaim practice spaces and practice language, fostering an empowering and engaged practice through youth work and research. Such ethical practice bringing into consciousness the context of structural inequalities which shape lived realities, and cultivating a determination for transformation and liberation.

The recommendations from previous research work in the field of children and young people's research practice is to adopt an iterative approach to ethics, where young people and practitioners understand 'the nature of ongoing consent…rather than a one-time agreement at the beginning of a study' (Cullen and Walsh, 2020, p. 376). Consent in this instance, meaning beyond the simplistic agreement to take part, but rather the consent to engage and practice in a way that is in keeping with professional principles and values at the heart of social justice work. This demands, not only knowing where you stand, but also the ongoing and detailed cycles of reflection to recognise and respond to the tensions and compromises felt in the dynamics of contemporary practice (de St. Croix, 2016).

This also works to strengthen the research foundation based on 'tipping balances of power' (Davies, 2021, p. 3) and the philosophy within the research project of sharing decisions with young people throughout the research project through iterative, critical reflection and dialogue. In order to work ethically processes of reflection have been essential to seek and maintain a clarity of purpose, position and practice. There are ongoing tensions within the research in terms of being a 'good enough researcher' in order to manage the complexities and compromises of participatory research within a neoliberal domain (Zielke, Thompson, and Hepburn, 2023, p. 46). I both recognise and acknowledge those challenges within my own research.

Chapter 4 - Methods

4.1 Introduction

Within this methods chapter I set out the research process undertaken within this research project exploring the application of PAR in practice. This includes details of the PAR Model applied, research sites, phases of the PAR process, an overview of the PAR group members involved and clarification of the methods utilised for data collection. Discussion of the data analysis process through thematic analysis is also detailed (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021).

4.2 PAR Model

McIntyre's PAR model was adopted as the framework through which the research was guided (McIntyre, 2008). This particular model connects with the researchers' understanding and process within both practice and research. Included in the PAR model are the core elements of problematisation, collective exploration and a recognition of the importance of 'building alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process' (McIntyre, 2008, p. 1).

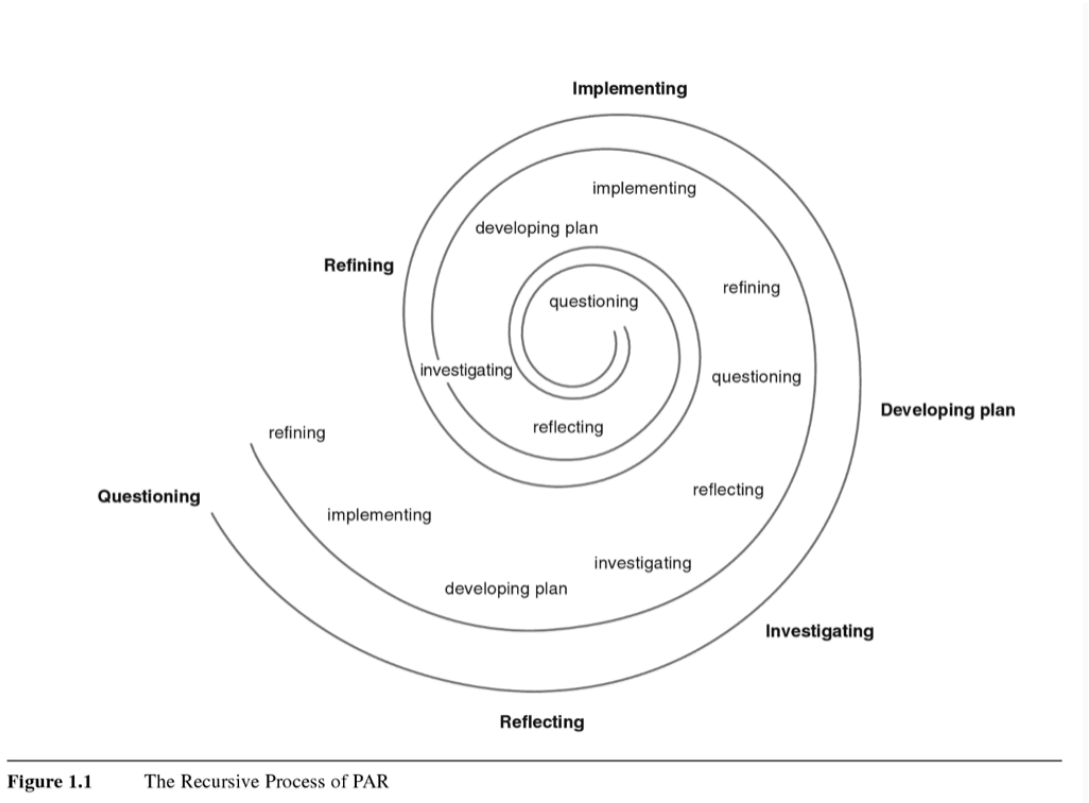

Figure 1.1 The Recursive Process of PAR

Fig. 1 McIntyre (2008, p.7)

Within this model, McIntyre (2008) sets out the recursive process of thinking, doing, and reflecting that is central to the PAR process and highlights specific elements within the cycles

of questioning, planning, investigating, and reflecting that I felt essential to explore with young people as part of the PAR process.

4.3 Research Sites

Throughout this PAR project I was employed at a university as a Youth Work and Community Development course tutor, having previously worked for the local authority youth service. Part of my role at this time was to connect with external partners to develop opportunities for student placements in the field as part of the requirements for gaining JNC [Youth Work] accreditation. This work led to partnerships developing between a local, open access youth centre and a referral only youth work project and myself within the university. Both projects and workers involved in this PAR project were known to me in my previous role at the local authority and we had worked together professionally in my role as course tutor since 2013. I worked on regular face to face sessions with both projects between 2017 and 2019 in which the PAR project was developed and undertaken to analyse the philosophy, practice and potential for youth participation and political education within each setting.

The city and the wards in which the Youth Projects are based, and operating are within a local authority with one of the highest proportions of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019).

The research sites were:

1. Youth Project A - Open Access Youth Work Project
2. Youth Project B - Referral Only Youth Work Project

4.3.1 Youth Project A - Open Access Youth Work Project

This youth project is a universal, open access provision in a city in the North of England. The centre is open to young people between 11 – 18 years of age and primarily runs evening provision, on average four nights per week. The centre is based near to the city centre and has a long history as part of the local community, originating in the 1920s. The centre has been based at the current site since the 1970s. Traditionally a Boy's Club, with the centre welcoming young women in the 1960s. The centre has grown and been shaped by the needs of the local community and reflects the undulating fortunes of youth work over the last hundred years. Classically Albemarle in design of both building and programme, the foundations for the centre lie in association, welfare, and education (Ministry of Education, 1960).

The centre is a voluntary sector organisation, a limited company by guarantee and charity governed by a management committee of local people, including previous members. Governance is primarily adult-led and the centre did not have an active youth forum or any other structure that promoted the participation of young people within the centre and

community. The staff team is small and led by a full time, JNC qualified youth worker employed by the local authority and seconded to the centre on a full time basis. The local authority also provides a number of part time sessional staff to support the running of the programme. The centre employs an administrator, a cleaner and a maintenance worker directly to attend to the building issues.

The partnership between the full time worker and myself at the university had grown since 2013 and in 2015 there were developments towards a specific skills training programme for students located within the community that the university was seeking to base at the centre. This development of ideas was shared and discussed in collaboration with the centre management committee. Part of the motivation for myself and the university at this time was to support a local youth work project in relation to the damaging budget cuts and reduction in resources during this time (Unison, 2014, 2016).

During the period in which the PAR project was running from 2017 to 2019 the centre faced some particular challenges. The full time youth worker, who had been in post for over ten years, retired and the local authority recruited and appointed a new full time worker who joined the centre in late 2017. Alongside this change of leadership, like many youth work projects during this period, the challenges of funding and resources were evident as Government imposed austerity measures continued to impact locally (Unison, 2016, YMCA, 2020).

4.3.2 Youth Project B - Referral Only Youth Work Project

Youth Project B is a referral only youth work project working with disabled young people. The project is a partnership project between the local authority and a local voluntary sector agency which supports a wide range of projects for young people across the city. The project has been running since 2006 and is delivered as a supported youth club night for disabled young people. The project grew locally from a recognised lack of specific youth work opportunities for disabled young people and was supported initially as part of the Aiming High for Disabled Children initiative (DfES, 2007). Through this Government policy local authorities could access funding to support families and young people by providing short breaks, where young people engage in social and developmental clubs and activities, including residentials, with their peers, learn new skills and build friendships, whilst also providing some respite for families.

The project is framed on a reverse-inclusion model that ensures disabled young people form the majority group within the sessions, with non-disabled peers being invited into the group where appropriate. This promotes young people's needs being met and staff focused on their development. Working from local youth centres, there are four project nights in different areas of the city to support young people to access provision local to their communities. Within each project young people access personal and social development opportunities

through a mix of group work and 1:1 activities, including sport, music, art and craft, cooking and trips and visits.

Young people are encouraged to take a lead in the sessions, and do, shaping the programme and through taking on additional responsibilities and support for other young people within the groups. Within this project, some of the members have formed a Young Women's Disability Football Team with the support of the coaches from the community strand of a local premiership team. During the period of time the PAR project was running, the football team were training weekly and played fixtures in a local football league. The young women's football team were part of the PAR project as is detailed in the PAR Group Members Section.

The project is led by a full time, JNC qualified, local authority youth worker. They manage and oversee all four project nights across the city, supporting referrals and liaising with partner agencies to engage with parents and young people. In previous years young people from Youth Project B have engaged with the local authority, city-wide Disability Advisory Council [DAC] Group to enable them to participate within decision-making structures, however, this structure has subsequently ceased as a result of a reduction in resources. The staff team is made up of local authority staff, voluntary sector staff and volunteers. There are a number of senior members in the projects, young people who take a lead within sessions.

Similar to Youth Project A, Youth Project B faced a number of challenges during the period of the PAR project. The pressure on resources at this time was difficult, with staff having to demonstrate particular dexterity to maintain sessions and opportunities for the young people. The pressure created from the shifting nature of, what was once a youth service, to a targeted youth support service presented additional difficulties as local authority resources were increasingly directed towards those perceived to be causing anti-social or criminal behaviour.

4.4 PAR Group - Members of the PAR Research Project

As part of the PAR project three particular groups of people were engaged and active in the research project during the period 2017 – 2020.

1. Young People aged 11 – 18 years - Youth Project A

2. Young People aged 11 - 25 years – Youth Project B

3. Youth Workers – Three JNC qualified, full time youth workers in the region working at senior practitioner level in their organisations. Workers were recruited from local authority and voluntary sector settings.

4.4.1 Young People from Youth Project A

With the development of the PAR project in this setting a small team of young people were recruited who were interested in exploring factors that were important to them. The PAR Group worked together during weekly youth club sessions and within distinct research sessions outside of the youth club times as the project grew. The PAR Group utilised creative activities as stimuli to generate themes young people highlighted as significant for them, to open up spaces for dialogue and questioning (Freire, 1972, Kara, 2020).

Over the duration of the PAR project a total of 14 young people were engaged and involved at different points. They were all aged between 11 - 18 and lived locally to the centre. They had all been members for varying lengths of time, with some quite new members and others very long standing members. The group members attended regularly, generally more than one evening a week for the youth club sessions. The young people identified themselves in relation to gender, sexuality and ethnicity and within the PAR group there was a diversity of identities which reflected the broad youth club membership.

The group membership was at times predictably inconsistent and young people were transient, which is reflective of the nature of open access youth work, the age of the PAR Group members and the demands on the young people's lives at this time. During the PAR Project some young people were studying for GCSE exams, seeking employment, starting or ending relationships and managing the range of transitions, opportunities and challenges typical for young people during these years. The undulations within this research project are consistent with the literature from other PAR research projects engaging young people (Percy-Smith et al, 2019a, Percy-Smith et al, 2019b, Walther et al, 2019).

4.4.2 Young People from Youth Project B

Within this project, I worked closely with the full time youth worker to structure specific research days with the young people. This decision was based on the reality that the young people were accessing youth club nights for two-hours, with some young people attending only one session per week. It was felt more appropriate to develop this PAR Group outside of the usual youth club sessions as it would be less intrusive to young people's access to their regular youth club provision and promote engagement with the research project.

Young people were recruited to the PAR Project in the same ways as Youth Project A, the PAR project was optional for the young people alongside their youth project sessions and young people could engage without coercion or consequence. The young people were presented with information regarding the research project in that we [Myself and the lead youth worker] highlighted that we were interested in exploring the impact of the youth project. The full time worker in this setting operated informally as the gatekeeper between the young people and the research project, highlighting the research days for the young people and making the practical arrangements where sessions took place at different venues.

Young people were engaged across eight research days between 2018 and 2020. The research days were planned in collaboration with the young people and took place in a number of youth centres across the city and on the university campus. Each of the research days included at least 15 young people and some days up to 20 young people were involved. The young people were aged between 11 and 25 years of age and had attended the youth club for varying lengths of time. Some young people being new to the group and some long standing members, who were taking on senior member / volunteer roles in the project. All of the PAR Group within this research site are disabled young people and had been referred to the project on this basis, however, engagement with Youth Project B is optional.

4.5 Phases of PAR Process

The initial development of the research project was formed through three phases, seeking to apply learning from PAR literature in the design, attempting to offset known challenges within PAR projects drawn from the research literature (McNeilly, Macdonald and Kelly, 2022, Chiu, 2003). The three phases sought to provide shape for the project and to make this manageable within the timescales for the educational doctorate. The phases worked in both vertical and horizontal application, whereby all three phases were present during each session and across a group of sessions over time, as is recognised in PAR. The phases were not implemented in order to maintain control or prescribe order within the research, but to apply recognised elements and facilitate development within the PAR project. The phases were also reflective of the specific research contexts and my relationships with the sites at the start of the research journey.

The three phases were broadly configured as *Building, Generating and Evaluating*.

1. **Building** – This first phase included a focus on engagement and recruitment of young people and the development of relationships between the PAR Group. The development of ground rules and ways of working together were explored and agreed in each Youth Project, recognising the need for ongoing review of the ground rules and consent throughout the research process. Discussions also took place as to the parameters of our interests within each of the research sites, drawing on the EdD Pilot Project undertaken previously.

   During this phase research tools were trialled within the PAR Group across the research sites, for example, small focus groups, music, team games, photography and art and craft activities to open spaces for dialogue and explore our lived realities. Partly also to build an understanding for the broad concepts involved in the project, for example, participation, political education and social justice. Much of this phase was spent within the regular evening youth work sessions in Youth Project A, spending time, talking with young people and learning about life experiences to build our

relationship. I undertook the pilot project in Youth Project A with some of the members remaining engaged with this second phase of the research.

Within Youth Project B specific research days were scheduled with the young people, making the sessions more structured. Within this structure, the first research days were formulated around a particular types of activities including sport and art which we knew young people enjoyed. Other days were organised around themes that the young people had discussed, for example, the young people said they would like to have a party and for this day we developed our research activities through party games. The focus for the first set of three research days was orientated towards this building phase, in order to build relations, develop ground rules and understandings of the potential for the research project from young peoples' motivations, concerns and interests.

2. **Generating –** The PAR Group worked together through focus groups and small workshop-based activity sessions utilising a range of games, art and creative activities, conversations and debates as stimuli to generate themes young people highlighted as significant for them (Kara, 2020). For example, in Youth Project A, the young people created a 'Chill & Chat' space, informally, but intentionally to hold the debating of 'serious issues' in their words. Within Youth Project B, we used party games, sports activities to wrap around research questions through the playing of the games. Taking time to debate responses before playing continued. I sought to adopt a facilitation role, developing activities with other youth workers and young people to foster conversation using a questioning and 'problem-posing' approach to encourage young people to explore, question, debate and reflect on the context of their lives (Freire, 1972).

   In terms of stimuli used during this phase to open dialogue, a range of materials were utilised, being suggested and accessed by both young people and adults involved in the research project. Materials included local newspapers, photographs and photography, using Photo-Voice (Wang, 1999) and their own observations of their city. Discussions over flipchart paper were frequent, often spontaneous and starting points for future plans. Young people created posters from conversations about 'what it's like being a young person in the city', and used music to express their ideas about the challenges in their lives, in terms of violence, opportunities and futures.

   Some of the materials were accessed intentionally and with consideration, other materials were used organically, as they were immediately available in the busyness of the research phase. For example, on one occasion I found a box of 1,000 plastic cups at work and took these to Youth Project A. The young people spent time constructing towers and buildings which opened conversations regarding their own

spaces, youth club spaces and spaces they felt should be provided in neighbourhoods for young people. As I become more immersed in the academic framing of the research project through reading, I attempted to apply frameworks within the research sites. For example, utilising Chambers' model to highlight the tension between 'The world as it is' and 'The world as it should be' [2003, p. 13] for young people to use, map and offer perspectives.

In Youth Project B the structured research days gave a focus to the time spent together, however, young people's industry during the research days was self-directed and driven. Using sport, music, art and creative activities, including comics and zines, young people were able to explore issues of identity and the impact of the 'referral only' project on their identities as disabled young people and learning. We used direct quotes from recorded dialogue generated from young people on previous research days to dig deeper into meaning making. Young people spoke and drew on experiences of their school lives and through the research project planned training sessions for trainee professionals to learn about how to work inclusively. Feelings of exclusion and 'difference' were common across young peoples' stories of their school lives in Youth Project B.

The PAR Group in each research site, chose through negotiation and consensus, those issues that they felt strongly about to explore and take action on as part of this research project. The PAR Group at times decided to have more than one focus. For example, some young people felt strongly about homelessness and others felt strongly about issues within their own youth project. The PAR Group explored how these issues could be explored collectively and the ways in which they would like to do this, taking action to respond to the issues raised. The PAR Group were invited to collaborate through opportunities to co-research, co-present and co-author with the researcher, if they chose, to share the learning and findings from the research project with others. Some of this potential was interrupted due to the outbreak of SARS Covid-19 Pandemic in March 2020.

3. **Evaluating -** During this phase the PAR Group brought the data together and worked through processes of evaluation. This worked through two axis, the first evaluation of the research data generated in relation to the research questions and sites. The second axis was in relation to what has been learnt and experienced through the research process itself from the perspective of the PAR Group. Through the PAR project the PAR Group were exploring both the ***process*** of learning created through the research project and the ***products*** created as a result of the PAR project.

   In Youth Project B we worked with the data in a number of ways through the research days. We used transcribed data in the form of quotes from the initial research days

into the shape the subsequent research days. This provided young people with further opportunities to explore and explain the context of the data and how they might want to respond to the issues that they raised. On other occasions we printed off photographs of the previous research days showing what had been created during those spaces and as a collective sought to 'visually' thematically analyse. Using the photos as data young people explored and 'coded' connected images creating meaningful themes, for example, of friendship and confidence.

In Youth Project A evaluation and reflection occurred regularly through the immediate comments and at times, both apathy and anger from young people where they recognised our collective lack of power. We also had specific evaluation focus groups to reflect on the impact of particular *products* / pieces of work undertaken by the PAR Group. For example, following the Homelessness Fundraiser Event we met to reflect on the event with the young people involved, who were already planning the next one. Incorporated into the research was both evaluation of the *products* created and the *process* engaged in to further understand if youth work can be a site for political education and how this could be navigated.

Through the PAR project young people identified particular directions that they wanted to follow in relation to the development of *products* that would be reflective of the issues they were raising. For example, in Youth Project B, the training session designed and led by young people for trainee professionals came as a response to the issues of inclusion and oppression raised by the PAR Group. Processes of evaluation were embedded in the PAR cycles that unfolded through the sessions and between sessions over the life time of the PAR project.

4.6 Methods of Data Collection

As has been detailed previously, the nature of this PAR project, like most PAR projects, involved a diversity of data collection mechanisms to promote participation, perspectives and power sharing beyond other research orientations (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, McIntyre, 2008, McNiff and Whitehead, 2011). Such mechanisms evolved from the use of a menu of stimulus material, reflecting everyday lives, for 'extraordinarily re-experiencing the ordinary' (Shor, 1992, in Ledwith 2011, p.9). The research was located in two research sites, working with young people in face to face youth work settings. The ambition was to, as much as possible, maintain the experience of everyday youth work. It was a priority that the mechanics of the research did not become the focus and interrupt the youth work processes the research was seeking to explore. As a result of the creative methodology applied materials and data were collected in a variety of forms as shown here.

4.6.1 Table 1: Summary of Methods within the PAR Project

Research Phase – Building						
PAR Method Activity	**Site**	**Data**		**PAR Activity Details**	**Site**	**Data**
Group Ground Rules – Dice	A & B	Audio		**Research Quotes –** From Previous Sessions	B	Audio
Sports Activity Day - ZINES Research Questions – Sports & Gender	B	Audio / Visual		**Art and Craft Activities –** Build your youth club. Design Issue-based Posters	A	Audio / Visual
Research Phase – Generating						
PAR Activity Details	**Site**	**Data**		**PAR Activity Details**	**Site**	**Data**
Party Games Activity Day	B	Audio / Visual		**Agree, Disagree -** Run around Activity	B	Audio
Me and My Map	B	Audio / Visual		**Flip Chart Discussions**	A & B	Audio / Visual
Photography and Photovoice	A & B	Audio / Photo		**Chambers (2003)** 'The World as it is' and 'The World as it should be'	A	Visual / Photo
Diamond Ranking – Factors in Life	A	Audio		**Brick Walls** – Exploring Barriers	B	Audio / Visual
'Chill & Chat' Conversations	A	Audio		**Life Journeys –** Mapping	A & B	Audio / Visual
Comics ZINES – Sharing Stories	A & B	Visual		**Project Strands –** Drama, Music, Drawing, Talking	B	Audio / Visual
Fundraiser Event – Supporting Homeless People - Mobile Planning Tool	A	Audio / Visual		**Development of Disability Awareness Raising Session for Trainee Youth Workers –** PowerPoint, Quiz, Scenarios.	B	Audio / Visual
Semi-Structured Interviews - with Three JNC Qualified Senior Youth Workers.		Audio				
Research Phase – Evaluating						
PAR Activity Details	**Site**	**Data**		**PAR Activity Details**	**Site**	**Data**
Evaluation – Sessional / Focus Groups	A & B	Audio /		**Visual Coding**	B	Audio / Visual
Paper Plate Evaluate	A & B	Visual				

4.6.2 Diversity of Data Collection Methods

In keeping with the inclusive and emancipatory intensions of PAR, this research project reflected a diversity and creativity of methods to promote inclusion and engagement for the members of the PAR Participation Group (Burnes and Bargal, 2017, Reason and Bradbury, 2008). A foundation for PAR is through the analysis of power relations within research and within society. The prioritisation of a wide range of methods and the inclusion of creative methods reflects this aim to explore and address power imbalances within the research and beyond and to open more democratic spaces for expression of views (Warwich-Booth et al, 2021).

In order to demonstrate integrity to the values of PAR, a broad menu of methods was designed to support young people to share stories and experiences throughout the research sessions (Conolly, 2008). This menu of methods was constructed based on the knowledge and experience of working with the two Youth Projects and the range of interests and needs of the young people. Young people were able to choose the methods by which they shared their experiences and understanding. Some of the methods were created by young people themselves as they explored and constructed spaces, generated themes and committed to action their ideas to 'investigate their own reality' (Rahman, 2008 *in* Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p.49)

4.6.3 Audio Data Collection Methods – Workshops and Focus Groups with Young People

Throughout the research project, data was collected during the PAR cycles of questioning, planning, action and reflection through audio recorded focus groups. In some sessions multiple audio recorders were used to record different group workshop activities and discussions, especially in Youth Project B. Focus groups are recognised as a particularly appropriate method of data collection with young people as this context is most in keeping with young people's everyday realities within their peer groups. (Bradford and Cullen, 2012, Bagnoli and Clark, 2010, Heath et al, 2009). Focus groups are seen to expand the opportunities for more inclusive group debate and discussion, 'they have the potential for depth, richness or illuminating material in the data' (Warwick-Booth et al, 2021, p. 89).

Working with young people through PAR demands significant consideration regarding the inclusion of all young people who choose to be involved. This is especially important, in this research, to promote the inclusion of young people with additional needs and disabilities to ensure that the research site is not disabling (McNeilly, Macdonald and Kelly, 2022). The responsiveness of focus groups is seen to be one of the central advantages for research of this nature, whereby clarification can be sought at the time to ensure understanding is maximised (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010). This leads to more collective envisioning of subsequent direction and action, which has been highlighted as central within the PAR process (McIntyre, 2008).

This method also aims to reflect efforts to work with and through an analysis of power, seeking to 'tip balances of power in their favour' (Davies, 2021, p. 6). Focus group methodology also responds to, and seeks to avoid, the overt demonstration of power that plays out in dominant one to one encounters between adults and young people (David, Edwards and Alldred, 2001). This is acutely experienced by young people within school environments and is most often characterised as negative and disciplinary (Spencer, 2013). Avoiding this association with school-based, adult directed discipline was important in the research project to foster an inclusive, respectful and collaborative research project.

Young people were engaged in the research through the menu of stimulus activities and discussions about both *products* and *process* were explored. Focus groups were utilised in an informal, yet deliberate manner through the research. They were largely framed in terms of specific planned questions grown from the analysis of the data from the previous research session. This was particularly relevant for Youth Project B as there was more time between research sessions to consider the data. Quotes from the collected data were used as prompts to generate deeper understanding with discussions evolving organically from the 'dialogical' research process (Freire, 1972).

4.6.3b Audio Data Collection Methods – Semi-Structured Interviews with Adult Youth Workers

As part of this research project I interviewed three full time, JNC qualified youth workers through 1:1 semi-structured interviews to gain their perspectives in relation to developing youth participation and political education with young people across the variety of youth work settings. All three workers have over fifteen years' experience of youth work, each leading projects with young people, managing staff, buildings and budgets. The three workers were all practising in the same city as the Youth Projects during the PAR project. One youth worker was from the voluntary sector and had a senior role within a community anchor organisation across the city. The other two youth workers were from the local authority, one was the lead worker for Youth Project B and the other youth worker was a senior manager in a Targeted Youth Support Service with responsibilities in commissioning and building partnerships across the city.

Semi-structured interviews were deemed most appropriate in this context reflecting the needs and practical demands on workers in terms of time and confidential space for practitioners to explore their own work, values and tensions privately rather than amongst peers (Heath et al, 2009, Bradford and Cullen, 2012). Semi-structured interviews are embedded within interpretivist and qualitative social science research projects (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, Kvale, 2007). They offer opportunities for knowledge production and meaning making through dialogical engagement as world views are explored and realities exposed (Kvale, 1996). The semi-structured nature of the interview provides both a framework and scope to respond flexibly to the immediate responses to generate greater

depth of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The research interviews were undertaken in 2020, during the SARS Covid-19 pandemic and conducted on the communication platform Zoom and audio recorded.

4.6.4 Visual Data Collection Methods – Photography, Drawings & Diagrams

Throughout the research project sessions in both Youth Projects A and B, digital cameras were available for young people to use freely as they determined. The cameras were utilised as a device for engagement and as a tool for promoting voice and expression in the form of photovoice methodology (Wang, 2022, 2006, Molloy, 2007). Photovoice is a creative method frequently incorporated into participatory qualitative research. Grounded in critical, Freirean pedagogy as a process for consciousness raising, particularly applied within communities who are traditionally silenced by inequalities and barriers to access (Sutton-Brown, 2014). Photovoice has a history of application over many decades since its introduction by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris (1997).

The method involves offering community members cameras to take pictures that reflect their experiences, views and opinions often on and within their local communities (Molloy, 2007). The goals of photovoice overlap with PAR in that photovoice seeks to enable communities 'to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns' (Wang, 2022, p. 205), to promote critical exploration and dialogue and to bring forward social change (Sutton-Brown, 2014).

> It oscillates between private and public worlds in its attempt to publicize and politicize personal struggle via photography, narratives, critical dialogue, and social action. Thus, photovoice broadens the nature of photography from being a fine art form to being central to socially and politically engaged praxis. (Sutton-Brown, 2014, p. 170).

This method has been particularly utilised in participatory research with young people and particularly young people with disabilities (Cluley, 2016, Jurkowski, 2008). Photovoice enabled young people to explore their own lives in a way of their choosing. Cameras and photography were used in two ways within the research project. Firstly, young people used the cameras in the research sessions and secondly, young people were provided with disposable cameras to take home and into their communities.

Using cameras within research sessions was popular with young people, across both research sites. Young people used the cameras as a way of documenting and recording the research process, celebrating and recognising their achievements within the sessions. They also used the cameras to document the challenges within their own centres and projects, for example, taking pictures of the material condition of the building in Youth Project A to highlight issues. Within Youth Project B disposable cameras were provided for the young people to use in their homes and communities, with guidance, to generate themes from 'lenses into lives' providing

freedom for young people to decide what is shown and shared. Discussion about young people's wider, social, political and economic lives and experiences, grew from the images.

4.6.5 Drawings and Diagrams

Alongside the use of cameras and photography, drawing and creating diagrams, including mapping and life journeys were options on the menu of creative, participatory methods young people engaged with to generate data (Grant, 2017). Drawings and diagrams are seen to promote engagement and articulation for young people, especially those with additional needs or disabilities (Bezzina, 2023, Kesby et al, 2005). They are also seen to be more empowering and effective in reducing the power differentials between adults and young people (Allan, 2012). In both Youth Project A and B, drawings were used for expression, for example, a picture created depicting the growing of confidence for one young person through the project, drawings were used within the life mapping workshop to share young people's life journeys and experiences and they were used at the start as tools to build and connect the group of young people with portrait drawing.

The 'Draw and write' technique is presented as 'non-threatening and child-friendly' (Warwick-Booth, Bagnell and Coan, 2021, p. 16). This approach has a history of application within research in the UK, dating back to the 1980s and builds on the growing literature that positions young people as active, knowing social agents which has shifted the discourse and involvement of young people in research over recent decades (Wetton and McWhirter, 1998). Drawings and diagrams as methods for data collection are seen as a universally accessible means through which to share views and opinions, information and experiences. Within Youth Project A and B diagrams were used to show maps of the local area to facilitate discussions about safety, accessibility and community.

Zines were also used across both research sites with zines developed by young people to represent ideas about their stories and as a planning tool, for example, for the Homelessness Fundraiser as part of Youth Project A. Drawings and diagrams were used across the research sites as tools to explore, explain and express ideas and thinking, planning and action within the PAR group. At times young people worked in teams and at other points young people produced a piece individually, all contributions were welcomed and this sought to demonstrate the principles of inclusion and equality across the research project.

4.7 Data Analysis - Thematic Analysis

The research sessions were dynamic and flexible spaces, where young people had autonomy to create and respond to the research stimulus in organic ways. For example, some young people created zines to reflect their journeys, others developed a training workshop to help educate trainee practitioners understand life from a disabled person's perspective. Sessions were busy, loud and messy as is often reported for PAR projects (Cook, 2009, Percy-Smith et al, 2019b). Audio recorders were used to record the dialogue generated through the research

sessions. They were used in the workshops and focus groups with young people and to record the one to one interviews with practitioners. In many of the research sessions with young people multiple audio recorders were used to capture the discussion and dialogue in different parts of the research process.

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts coded and arranged in themes through the six-stage Thematic Analysis [TA] process detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021, 2023). TA is one of a family of methods of data analysis used by interpretivist, qualitative researchers seeking to explore meaning from data (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The process of TA is bound by the same rigour and attention to ethics and values as have shaped the entire research process. Commitments to foster voice, reflection and action in seeking to create change and moving towards a social just society are central to the research engagement. (McIntrye, 2008, Cook et al, 2019, Percy-Smith et al, 2019). Working with the data to systematically and respectfully re-experience the data to draw meaning and to represent the voices of the PAR Group is a significant responsibility and involved significant investment of time.

The six-stage process for coding and analysing seeks to explore the data in a rigorous, but flexible and situated way, building from a familiarisation stage to a detailed and in-depth understanding across the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2013, 2021). Making connections between initial codes, indicating a collection of ideas or patterns across the data set. The collection of connected codes is then applied to meaning making from broader themes within the data.

> A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. (Braun and Clarke, 2006. p. 82)

Coding developed within one transcript can be considered and compared across other transcripts to bring into focus the researcher's active interpretation of the central themes within the data. Moving backwards and forwards through the data and reviewing, renewing or removing themes as the data analysis demands (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Each element of the data was analysed in turn to produce a matrix of codes and themes that could be considered across the full data set. This process produced six central themes which are presented and discussed within the findings chapter. The themes are *Role, Cuts & Money, Youth Work Values & Principles, Youth Participation, Power & Political Education, Contemporary Challenges Impacting on Young People's Lives* and *Opportunities, Outcomes & Impact.*

Chapter 5 - Findings and Discussion

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter I present and discuss the key findings from the research project, drawing insights to both the *process* and *products* that have been generated through the PAR project. This research sought to explore youth participation, political education and social justice within youth work, with the central research question framed as '**Is youth work a site for political education – can it be?'** Underpinning this central research question, sit a number of associated questions as outlined here;

1. What are the experiences of youth participation, political education and social justice for young people engaged with youth work?
2. What factors affect both young people and youth workers engaging with youth participation, political education and social justice in youth work?
3. What are the barriers and challenges to developing participatory and political practice in youth work?
4. In what ways can youth participation, political education and social justice practice (re)-emerge and exist within youth work settings?

5.0.1 Data Analysis

As detailed in the methodology chapter, data has been collected during the PAR process, working with young people and youth workers through a menu of creative methods to express and discuss experiences and ideas in response to the central research questions. Examples of visual data is included within the relevant thematic discussions to highlight the creative, participatory and engaged nature of this project. Data have been transcribed verbatim and analysed using Thematic Analysis as espoused by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2023). This rigorous process of analysis seeks to draw meaning and understanding from the data. Data was analysed through listening to the audio recording and by detailed, line by line coding. Processes of checking and confirming themes was adopted between the research data, moving back and forward from transcript to analysis to ensure thorough deliberation.

5.1 Presentation of Findings

'Taking Part to Taking Apart' Spectrum - A Contribution to the Discussion

Through this doctoral journey I have been challenged by the nature of contemporary professional practice and academic ambiguity within the discourse of youth participation, political education and social justice. There are endemic difficulties within the sector at this juncture, for example, in foundation and funding, and in purpose and practice (Lockyer-Turnball, 2025, Davies, 2021). I further assert that we are once again witnessing a transition of youth work purpose as we embark on further consultation by a new administration who present the development of the National Youth Strategy under the strap line 'Deliver You' (HM Gov, 2025). The marketing of which, clearly complicit with capitalism and positioning young people as customers, ordering fast food, rather than fostering futures.

In considering a means to make sense of the current landscape, applying new academic knowledge and to stay critically rooted against the undulations of practice, I have sought mechanisms that both challenge and connect this discontent. This means connecting with tools that encourage us to remain focused on enduring distinctive features of youth work practice (Davies, 2021, Jeffs and Smith, 2010). Through this process of conducting the research I have developed a framework that seeks to articulate the complexity in participatory perspectives. This framework strives to support both an understanding and expansion of youth participation to include and recognise the progression towards political and social justice practice. I have framed this spectrum on what I perceived as a polarity of positions across a spectrum of youth participation, political education and social justice practice from 'Taking Part' to 'Taking Apart' [Fig.2].

Having explored the historical development, meanings and practice of youth participation, political education and social justice through the literature review, I have been struck by the diversity in understandings. Ranging from participatory ideas that have been formed on the basis of being present and 'taking part' (Walther et al, 2019, p. 16) in a youth work activity at one end. Extending to more developmental, decision-making involving the 'redistribution of power' (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216) at the opposite end. This spectrum reflects our responsibilities to attempt to 'take apart' structural systems that maintain discrimination and oppression. The 'Taking Part – Taking Apart' Spectrum seeks to foreground youth participation, political education and social justice as a developmental and transformative spectrum seeking movement towards to the goal of social justice. This intension becoming an explicit known, rather than 'hidden known' (Coburn and Gormally, 2017, p. 33) Youth work can be (re)positioned as a practice contributing to the creation of a 'difference-friendly world' that is highlighted by Fraser, 2003, (*in* Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p. 7).

The – and + symbols that sit alongside Youth Participation and Political Education on the spectrum draw distinction to the variety of understandings and practice within each of these elements of practice. What is evident is that both limited [-] and liberatory [+] practices of youth participation and political education exist within youth work. I have intentionally avoided plotting particular practice shapes, for example, youth forums onto the spectrum as these mechanisms, I recognise, can range in their scope from limited [-] to liberatory [+] depending on the workers involved and the design and delivery of this process. For example, the literature review has highlighted such tensions within political education, where young people's political education can be limited to approaches conforming to current political systems or liberatory through the advancement of an 'emancipatory curriculum' constructed to foster a more critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2025, p.173). The Taking Part – Taking Apart Spectrum was used to analyse the findings from the research project and to shape future opportunities for practice.

'TAKING PART - TAKING APART' SPECTRUM

YOUTH PARTICIPATION → POLITICAL EDUCATION → SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTICE

- YOUTH PARTICIPATION +

- TAKING PART IN ACTIVITY WITHIN A CLUB
- GIVING FEEDBACK ABOUT ACTIVITIES
- CONSULTATION ACTIVITIES
- BEING INVOLVED IN 'HAVING A SAY' ABOUT THE CLUB
- HAVE DECISION MAKING POWER ABOUT ISSUES THAT EFFECT THEM AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

- POLITICAL EDUCATION +

- KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HOW POLITICAL SYSTEMS WORK
- ACTIVITY THAT BROADENS AWARENESS OF HOW POWER IS UTILISED WITHIN COMMUNITIES
- EXPERIENCES AND ACTION THAT CONNECTS YOUNG PEOPLE WITH POLITICAL ISSUES TO CREATE CHANGE
- DIALOGUE AND DEBATE FOCUSED ON LIVED REALITIES
- CRITICAL RECOGNITION OF STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES

SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTICE

- RIGHTS-BASED EDUCATION
- RECOGNISING MECHANICS OF OPPRESSION AND PROMOTING INCLUSION FOR ALL
- SEEKING TO TAKE APART SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES OF DISCRIMINATION AND OPPRESSION
- PRACTICE CHALLENGING REDISTRIBUTION, RECOGNITION AND REPRESENTATION NORMS

Within both the data analysis process and presentation of findings, I recognise the responsibilities I have within the PAR Group to represent their knowledge, experience, and reflections and, through this research, enable their voices to be heard. This is an ethical issue and one that has demanded a rigorous process of analysis. Following extensive immersion in the data, six core themes have been drawn from the data. These are ***Role, Cuts & Money, Youth Work Values & Principles, Youth Participation, Power & Political Education, Contemporary Challenges Impacting on Young People's Lives*** and ***Opportunities, Outcomes & Impact.***

Each theme will be explored in turn, presenting data from the PAR Group members, discussing the implications of each theme in relation to theoretical and professional practice. Recognition of the overlap between themes is highlighted and connection, rather than duplication, is promoted with the discussion. Within each thematic discussion, data will be presented from across the data set along with visual data of material created to emphasise specific areas of the research *process* and *products.* The Educational Doctorate has a clear focus on professional development through the application of new knowledge in practice. This will be central to the discussion of the findings and conclusions.

5.2 Theme One - Role

Role is the first theme to be explored through this findings section. Consideration is given to both adult practitioners and young people in terms of the roles occupied within their centres and projects. The focus is on how these roles connect with youth participation, political education and social justice in practice and either expand or limit the capacity for thinking and action in practice as explored through the Taking Part – Taking Apart Spectrum. Within the landscape of contemporary practice, youth work has changed exponentially. Fuelled by a decade of austerity and budget cuts within local authorities the youth work profession has been reshaped by short term, commissioned services dominated by a fixing philosophy (YMCA, 2024). Significant demands on workers in relation to funding, management and achievement of targets become the new reality under a neoliberal doctrine (de St. Croix, 2018). It can be argued that these external forces have curtailed the space and professional autonomy for the development of a participatory and political practice. Instead, the State demands evaluation of service delivery, reducing notions of youth voice to 'customer feedback' (Clark and Percy-Smith, 2006, Smith, 2005, n.p., Percy-Smith, 2010, Walther et al, 2019). This is a limited form of youth participation more akin to [-] Youth Participation within the Spectrum as opportunities for participation are adult orientated and service focused.

> Young people are asked to contribute to improving the 'doing more with less' efficiency of public services, to 'youth-proofing' government policy. Specialist teams such as Young Advisors are now employed as trained young consultants, commissioned to help organisations and local services improve their products and delivery, to make them more young people friendly. In this form participation is

> commodified, narrowed to the input of young entrepreneurs selling themselves as the voice of young people. (Taylor et al, 2018, p.189)

5.2.1 The Role of Practitioners

It is argued the impact of austerity and neoliberal ideology has forced changes in youth work that shift the focus from relationship-based and social justice orientated practice, to individualised and deficit-directed interventions (Davies, 2021, Taylor et al, 2018, Sercombe, 2015a, Jones, 2014, Jeffs and Smith, 2010).

> [So] my role, currently I set up an organisation called [Name of Organisation] at the end of 2015. And basically, it was around the development of personal education, training programmes and things like that with very much using sort of the youth work ethos within that kind of work…[YW3, Line 49-51]

> [So] not directly youth work I suppose, but obviously very related to youth work and informal education. [YW3, Line 53-54]

The consequences of budget cuts and individualised interventions to control contemporary 'ruffianism' through targeted work has changed the youth work role in practice (Russell and Rigby, 1908, p.9). Positioning the role of youth work as contributing to the agendas within wider social, political and economic spheres of human services as justification of funding from the public purse, without the structural analysis to understand root causes (Davies, 2013, Young, 2006). These include contributing to the reduction of anti-social behaviour, increasing the economic engagement of young people or promoting health and wellbeing perceived on individualised terms. It could be argued that the youth work role has been 'hijacked' (Ledwith, 2011, p. 23) to a form of 'soft policing' or 'second-class social work' (Hall, 2013, p. 77) which seeks to regulate young people's behaviour and opportunities (McCarthy, 2015).

> The role has changed a few times during the course of restructuring. So, the current role is Senior Practitioner. That is like the role within youth offending teams generally. [YW2, Line 75-77]

> [So] it's only as a result of a lot of anti-social behaviour, that we've been able to get some funding to put to, to put patchwork in place. [YW2, Line 115-116]

The link between budget cuts, targeted practice and role changes is expressed through the responses from practitioners as they outline the impact of austerity on both the size of the workforce and the shift in their roles (Unison, 2016).

> My role has changed over time. I started off as a mainstream youth worker running a busy youth club, but then when a lot of the cuts came into place and the service was significantly restructured down from a full-time workforce of about 65 youth workers, to a full-time cohort of about 8, there were targeted roles for youth workers, and my targeted role was the disability role. [YW1, Line 16-20]

> In my role, a lot of it is troubleshooting, so I might go, an example would be, since the cuts there's been no senior provision for young people in the [Name of ward]. [YW2, Line 111-113]

Practitioners reflect on the changing nature of their roles, with two of the three practitioners interviewed recognising their role has changed so fundamentally that working with young people is not part of their everyday practice.

> In my role I don't always get to work with young people. [YW2, Line 109]

> [So] it's a blessing when I do. [YW2, Line 111]

> We've got some stuff where we're working with young people on a regular basis, so we've got regular contact with young people. A lot of that has been sort of connected to other centres and building on other people's relationships with young people. [YW3, Line 81-84]

One of the fundamental principles within youth work is the relationship, espoused as a unique, 'key dimension' of practice (Young, 2006, p.2). It is argued, as a result of the inculcation of an austerity inflicted, targeted agenda, the relationship is no longer prioritised within professional practice, instead the management of behaviour through referral based, one to one youth work interventions is emphasised (Smith 2003, Davies, 2013).

> Pedagogic input is now increasingly dictated by funders – be they governmental departments, welfare agencies, local authorities or commercial concerns. Consequently, interventions are predominately concerned with behaviour modification rather than cultural or intellectual enrichment. (Jeffs, 2015, p. 81)

Targeted youth work was very much identified within the roles of youth workers in this study as they recognised the changes in the landscape and the tensions they experienced in their attempts to balance their workloads within youth work principles.

> I also do one-to-one support work with young people with additional needs when they're referred into targeted services, or targeted support, which is my area within targeted services for young people. [YW1, Line 72-75]

> The role a little bit, you've got a little bit of youth offending work, and trying to get your foot in informal work as we know it. [YW2, Line 84-85]

This is especially important in relation to youth participation, political education and social justice which is focused on creating change with and alongside young people in communities (Shukra, Ball and Brown, 2012, Farthing, 2012, Cooper, 2012). I contend the nature of targeted practice creates barriers to this orientation in practice through the delivery of short term and individualised interventions which are disconnected from community and from the

structural landscape in which young people lives are shaped (Freire, 1972, Cooper, Gormally and Hughes, 2015). I argue the impact of time and targeted framing of practice reduces participatory efforts to service agendas in keeping with a limited version of [-] Youth Participation on the Taking Part - Taking Apart Spectrum in practice.

> Youth work is about the relationship. [YW2, Line 176]

> So that very important piece of it goes missing then, because they get referred over to another stranger. And then they don't meet their needs, they might get referred again on to someone else. And young people don't like that. [YW2, Line 178-180]

There are two further areas for discussion which, it is argued, have a direct impact on the experience of youth participation, political education and social justice within youth work. Firstly, the understanding of the position of youth participation, political education and social justice within workers' roles and secondly, the busyness of professional practice, with competing demands and levels of administration that take youth workers away from face to face practice as paper [work] is prioritised over people [work] (de. St. Croix, 2016, 2018, Taylor, 2010).

5.2.2 Youth Participation as *'Add on'*

Participation is identified as a traditional cornerstone within youth work and considered fundamental to all youth work roles, settings and contexts (NYB, 1991).

> That's our role as educators, as informal educators, is to start young people off on their journey of understanding about the society they live in, and the communities they live in, and why things happen the way that they happen. [YW1, Line 355-358]

Similarly, commitments to anti-oppressive practice, these values work as pillars supporting professional practice. Increasingly, in practice youth participation is positioned as a separate 'project-based add on', external to the everyday experiences and locations of youth work (Cooke and Kothari, 2002, Yanar et al, 2016, Shukra, Ball and Brown, 2012). This can be experienced through a diversity of provision, including distinct youth forums, youth councils or structured groups where participation takes place (Farthing, 2012, Shukra, Ball and Brown, 2012).

As a consequence, youth participation can become dislocated from everyday practice as it is not perceived to be a role that all practitioners hold, but reserved for specialist workers. This is particularly evident within a targeted landscape and this perspective is highlighted with this research as youth workers interviewed reflect on their own roles and the roles of others.

> I am the one person, the one youth worker, who has a responsibility for commissioning services, supporting voluntary sector. Youth participation comes under me as well. And how come, like funding, sourcing out other funding. [YW2, Line 79-81]

> We are committed, within my team, the targeted support team, we're absolutely committed to youth voice and young people having a voice. And we're continually doing - although this isn't particularly my piece of work I will tie into pieces of work if an opportunity comes up. We do have a participation youth worker who was just appointed at Christmas time, who's just recently started, so in the strange new world of Covid, poor woman. [YW1, Line 321-325]

The recognition that by providing a designated 'participation worker' within an organisation, this somehow releases this responsibility from other workers. This dichotomy is further emphasised here,

> Yeah, well I manage the, we now we've got a part-time youth voice worker, he's only just started. And then I have a Range 1 worker, [Name of worker]. So, my role is to manage them, to help them get out and do part of the big picture, so I look at maybe the big picture. And I think we have been able to, like the Young Inspectors model. And the likes of the youth conference that we done at your place. [YW2, Line 243-247]

> I'm trying to, when we're doing the training to youth workers, trying to get them to understand that part of the notion [of youth participation] isn't like putting on a big youth conference, it's the everyday work, the everyday conversations with young people. [YW2, Line 248-250]

Part of the complexity is that the 'new normal of everyday youth work' is increasingly through one to one referral spaces, which are often task focused and time limited, leaving little capacity to expand in meaningful participatory and political ways (de St. Croix and Doherty, 2023, Cooper, 2012). Youth participation, political education and social justice practice evolves through relationship and shared reflection of lived realities, which demands dialogue, the likes of which is most often found in open access youth work spaces (Davies, 2021, Taylor, 2010, Taylor, 2016, Richie and Ord, 2017). Seeking to incorporate participatory practice into targeted spaces is challenging and often restricted to limited versions of [-] Youth Participation with the Spectrum of practice.

5.2.3 The Busyness of Professional Practice

One of the further consequences of the contemporary regime is the increasing and overwhelming levels of administration and managerialism that frame the domain of professional practice (de St. Croix, 2022, Taylor et al, 2018, Davies, 2013). This demand has been growing in the landscape of youth work professional practice for many years (Spence, 2004). Originating in part from New Labour's *Transforming Youth Work* (DfES, 2002) with associated metrics required to determine attendance and achievement within youth work settings. Not only does this reshape the practice experience of youth work, for both young people and workers, it takes time away from face to face practice as the demands for recording, reporting and regulating youth work become prioritised (Sercombe, 2015b, House of Commons, 2011).

> And then when you add that into all the usual paperwork, training, and all sorts of stuff that goes along with that post, it's a very busy role, very, very busy. [YW1, Line 76-77]

> But I suppose the biggest thing for me is sort of the pressure that organisations are under to meet the agendas that are set out before them by funders and the sort of legislation and policy that is being set. [YW3, Line 901-903]

> I had some very grandiose ideas about what might actually be achievable, which I had to scrap fairly quickly, and that was around making contact with every organisation working with young people in the city. Well there are vast numbers, so really I just focused in on the clubs that we have and ensuring that those clubs keep running. [YW1, Line 27-31]

Across all aspects of professional practice sits layers of regulation and responsibility as youth workers are forced to adopt the apparatus of accountability for money and metrics, health and safety and safeguarding, planning, programmes and promotion within their projects (Bunyan and Ord, 2012, *in* Ord, 2012b). Youth workers within voluntary sector organisations are also holding considerable responsibility as community anchor institutions for other organisations and distributing funding within neighbourhoods on behalf of the local authority.

> We manage the youth provider grants which are old youth service budget, and we help to distribute that to the vol. orgs. Across seven of the wards of the city. [YW3, Line 69-70]

Driven by a competitive commissioning context, youth work organisations are under significant pressure to determine 'proof' of achieved outcomes, to both justify funding given, and to secure future funding (Davies, 2013, 2019, Bunyan and Ord, 2012 *in* Ord, 2012b, Rose, 2010). The drive for standardised evaluation of practice has created a market for the 'measuring industry' providing commercial products to generate evidence of improved lives (McNeil, Reeder, and Rich, 2012). This shift in landscape takes a toll on the spaces and staff, through which, participatory and political education can flourish. Practice becomes limited to more mechanisms for gaining feedback regarding services, rather than changed realities.

5.2.4 Roles of Young People

Through the data set roles for young people were highlighted by young people from both research settings. Whilst to a lesser extent than for adult workers, young people recognised that they have roles, often informal and untitled, within their clubs and projects. Some young people could see the potential roles and opportunities they were seeking to support them with the next steps in their development. One young person from Youth Project A reflects on the youth work they engaged with and the opportunities, prior to the research to work with university students, preparing workshops to explore youth work practice. This demonstrates the importance of developmental informal education (Jeffs, 2017).

> Because it's just fun, isn't it? Because like obviously telling our perspective to other people that are older than us and that are actually listening to us and learning stuff from us, no-one actually - Like I feel that a lot of other people could learn from us but no-one listens enough to learn from us. [YP1 YPA, Line 9-12]

> I'd enjoy being a youth worker. I want to work in a secondary school though. [YP1 YPA, Line 198 – 200]

Young people also recognise the role workers have in supporting them to achieve their goals and ideas as young people take on roles to organise and plan projects within the centre from their own interest and experience. Through this practice, young people begin to recognise the political nature of the issues they face and the impact their voices and action can have in responding and creating change. This further highlights the importance of youth workers understanding their roles as political and critical educators in order to foster this with young people.

> Like some people in here, youth workers are just here for one night just so people can have a nice chilled out night without anything going wrong. But then some people, youth workers actually help them out with certain stuff. [YP1 YPA, Line 170-172]

> Like obviously when we've wanted to do charity events and that, we've come to you and you've helped us with that. [YP1 YPA, Line 174-175]

One of the projects young people initiated and led was the development of a fundraiser event to support homeless people in the city. The idea for this project was generated through conversations of the young person's daily life and increasing concerns about the levels of homelessness in the city. During this session I offered the 'zine' process as a creative tool for the young person to explore their ideas and to facilitate conversation about this important issue for them. This was the starting point for the development of the fundraiser event.

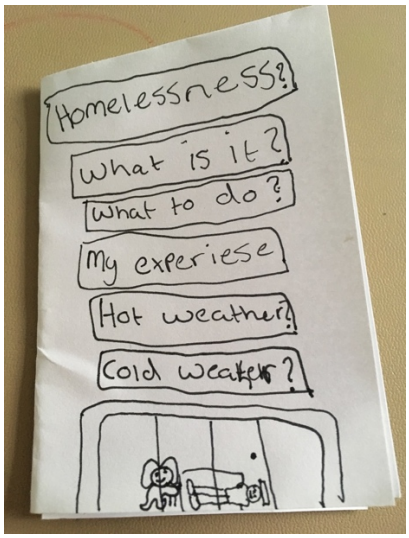

Image 1. Zine – Homelessness Event Planning Youth Project A

The young people reflected on the political process of this project and their roles in it, recognising the challenges, spaces for development and opportunities to celebrate success created from these projects. They learnt about how they have the right to utilise their voices, working with youth workers to bring their ideas and values to action.

> Because it's politics that decides what's going on [YP1YPA Line 449]

> It's a lot better than what I thought it was. [YPFG3 YPA, Line 13]

> Like before the event I thought it was going to be daft but then after it was all right. [YPFG3 YPA, Line 15]

> Because I have to stand up and speak. [YPFG3 YPA, Line 23]

> I feel I just got more nervous [YPFG3 YPA, Line 34]

Summary of Theme

Through this theme the data has highlighted a range of perspectives on the challenges faced by both adult practitioners and young people. The PAR Group have explored the roles they have, how they shape them and the tensions in practice. The impact of austerity, neoliberalism and managerialism is expressed and recognised as a significant factor in the contemporary landscape of youth work (YMCA, 2024, Sercombe, 2015). Targeted work through one to one referral processes are seen to curtail the capacity to build sustained relationships between workers and young people and to create the time and space for youth participation, political education and social justice. The challenges that people face are pathologised, rather than recognised as the impact of structural issues needing structural solutions.

Furthermore, it is argued the dominant 'fixing philosophy' that comes with sharper neoliberal agendas obscures the recognition of the need for an increased social justice practice, and cultivates a conformist, rather than critical practice, reducing the spaces for critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2025). Through the PAR practice example, young people have enacted their rights through dialogue to bring to the fore the issues they are concerned about in their community. Through this participatory and, I contend, political process, practice moves across the 'Taking Part – Taking Apart' Spectrum in attempts to demonstrate a practice seeking to foster political education and social justice.

5.3 Theme Two - Cuts and Money

Central government budget cuts to youth work have been well documented through academic research and public policy analysis over the last decade (Mullen, 2021, Unison, 2016, YMCA, 2020, 2022). Recent analysis highlights the context for local authority spending on youth services for the period 2011-2024.

> Real terms spending on youth services fell by 68% between 2011/12 and 2023/24, down from £1,074 million down to £349 million[]. The decrease over this period was more pronounced in universal services (-73%) compared with targeted services (-63%) (Abreu et al, 2025, p. 15).

As is highlighted in Theme One – Roles, the shift from universal services to targeted support is striking, with over 70% of funding for universal, open access youth work now removed or redistributed from the sector. In terms of youth centres and youth workers, this data offers a stark picture of the challenging and changed landscape;

> Between 2011-12 and 2022-23, the number of local authority-run youth centres fell by 53% in England, from 917 to 427. (YMCA, 2024, p. 3)

And further,

> Since 2012-13, there has been a 35% reduction in full-time equivalent (FTE) youth workers employed by local authorities in England, and 36% in Wales. (YMCA, 2024, p.3).

The implications for youth work, and in particular for participatory, political and social justice practice, are explored here through the research data, connecting with academic literature. The implications of cuts to funding in relation to the research questions are highlighted here through two key dimensions. The first is focused on staffing and spaces reflecting on the challenges of reduced open access, universal space for this work to be located. The implementation of austerity measures has changed the landscape of provision as well as the level of workforce. The second dimension is focused on the impact of cuts on the purpose and orientation of youth work practice under an austerity agenda delivered through targeted services.

Cuts and Money is a central theme across the data set, with both practitioners and young people experiencing the impact of local authority budget cuts. Youth workers and young people reflect on, as part of the research project, the realities of budget cuts in practice,

> […] youth services were extremely affluent there's no two ways about it. You could get money for pretty much anything, which was great, it was brilliant, and we did all sorts of amazing and wonderful things. And to be honest, when the crash came and the austerity came in in 2010, we just focused down onto the nuts and bolts of what we were doing and what we could do. [YW1, Line 372-377]

> […] to be honest, there isn't that many youth clubs going any more. Because funding and that sort of stuff's going by. [YP1YPA, Line 303 - 305]

> Because the government's a load of bull. [YP1YPA, Line 307]

> Well if they take all the money away I'm going to punch them. [YPFG011 YPB Line 33]

> Well they were full-time workers. But the ones who did sort of the co-ordinating in the wards, which, all the senior workers and all of that, you know. They've all gone, so. [YW2, Line 103-104]

This has been a long and challenging period for the youth work sector, particularly within local authorities. The financial crisis in 2008 led to significant austerity measures being applied to the UK economy, deemed necessary by central government under the auspices of balancing public finances (Mason, 2015, Mullen, 2021).

> But when you get up to the bigger picture, or of the city as a council, although it's not everything that we need, at least they kept a budget for youth work as it is. It's only £1m, but it gives us a platform to be able to use that to go and get other monies in. And it's a way of keeping us working together within the consortiums, and them as the lead. [YW2, Line 461-464]

In response to budget cuts, youth work shifted to targeted work, focusing on those dictated to be in most need. As has been discussed previously, it is argued that youth work is deployed as state sponsored intervention focused on correcting individualised deficits (Davies, 2013, Taylor et al, 2018). This is a reflection of the dominant social policy discourse where structural analysis of social problems is removed and replaced to present the impact of individual choices (HM Gov, 2011). It should be acknowledged that whilst budgets for youth work have been cut, there has been a significant redistribution of funding away from traditional youth work to the National Citizen Service, the flagship of David Cameron's premiership for work with young people, which challenges the argument that funding was not available (de St. Croix, 2011).

5.3.1 Implications of Budget Cuts on Staffing & Spaces

This reduction in budget is recognised in terms of its implications for staffing levels, in terms of numbers, but importantly, in terms of experience and qualified status. There are also implications for resources for practice in the provision of buildings where young people can access youth work. Workers are supporting projects to navigate the challenging funding landscape.

> Helping raise the funding to bring in the - because the youth projects just haven't got the time to do it, or the staff to do it. So, my role has been a little bit, bringing the money to the table, identifying the need, bringing the money to the table, supporting with recruitment and selection to get staff able in place. Helping with training of them staff, because youth work professionals are thin on the ground. [YW2, Line 119-123]

> With many youth clubs shutting down, a lot of these young people who would be in a safe space might have found their safe space on a car park somewhere. [YW2, Line 195-196]

> We were talking about the cheerleading project and now that's closed because there's not enough money – so what's going on then. [YWFG001 YPB, Line 108-110]
>
> It's because of the funding in it [YWFG001 YPB, Line 111]

It is no surprise that young people have an awareness of the funding situation within youth work that relates directly to their local provision. Young people were angry about the cuts to their local provision and demonstrated a level of engagement with politics, both local and national and reflected on their feelings about young people being a priority for government spending. This is an extract from one conversation in Youth Project A regarding government funding and support for young people.

> Because there's like obviously the government would rather do something like, I don't know, put a new park bench in and cut funds here, because they want to do something else that isn't actually needed. [YP1YPA Line 317 – 323]
>
> They're just not [young people as a priority], because they'd be doing more stuff for young people and they don't [YP1YPA Line 329 – 331]
>
> Boris Johnson, he's a big friend of Donald Trump, he's a divvy.[YP1YPA Line 334 – 340]
>
> He just is, isn't he? He's the whole reason this – we're just going bad. We've never actually had a Prime Minister that's actually done something for us.[YP1YPA Line 342 – 345]
>
> Boris Johnson's just causing murder, isn't he with this Brexit and all that.[YP1YPA Line 349]

In responding to the ways politics effects their life,

> It will do but it doesn't at the minute. Well it does, but it's not something that I can change. So there's no point me caring about it. Because I'm not allowed to vote. [YP1YPA Line 363 - 366]

This extract highlights levels of engagement and frustration for young people as they feel somewhat powerless to enact change because of their age.

Workers highlight how young people are involved with fundraising and bid writing within their projects as examples of engage youth participation and political work.

> We wrote a, we did an Awards for All bid, [names of workers] did an, it was a Reaching Communities, so it was a bigger one. And we basically, from the second -

> this was a refund, to refund the project. The young people, they wrote the bid. And I'm not saying, like again you know what participation looks like, and how much we shaped that and all that kind of stuff you could argue. But we took them away for a week. We sat - every question was sort of formulated by the discussion. And they actually worded the answers to the questions. [YW3, Line 909-915]

Given the contested nature of community spaces and the increased focus on anti-social behaviour, young people feel the reality of the lack of workers and safe spaces (Jones, 2014, Ritchie and Ord, 2017, Davies, 2019). The closure of available resources in communities has often resulted in detached work being deployed to fill a gap and to maintain a presence within areas. Detached work is perceived to be more cost effective, as there are no costs associated with maintaining physical buildings (Andersson, 2014).

Working with young people on the streets, through detached work has a long and proud history within youth work (Whelan, 2015, Tiffany, 2007). However, under a dominant discourse of austerity and neoliberalism detached work has been perceived as contributing to increased surveillance of young people's lives, given the streets are so powerfully seen as not a place for young people in communities (de St. Croix, 2016, Tiffany, 2012, *in* Ord, 2012b, Belton, 2009). Whilst traditionally detached work is located as a form of critical and relationship-based youth work where participation and political agendas are expanded and explored in context (Whelan, 2015). It is argued that contemporary detached work under a targeted service is characteristically short term and outcomes orientated, based on perceptions of 'youth as trouble' or youth in trouble' (Griffin, 2004, *in* Roche and Tucker, 2004, p. 14).

This impacts on workers being able to move past 'Taking Part', activity centric provision towards more engaged political practice. The potential for the street to develop as a site for social justice practice under these conditions is challenging. Even more so in terms of engaging with vulnerable or marginalised groups (Garasia, Begum-Ali, and Farthing, 2015).

> …I feel sorry for this, this last decade of kids, because for instance this girl's group. If they'd have had a youth club that they could have gone to all the time they may have been different girls. Because they've engaged with this brilliantly. They've done everything that they planned and said they were going to do. And they're hungry for it. Like once they got to see, this is what it's all about, this is what youth work is, we can do this and we can have a say and that, they're really, really hungry for it. [YW2, Line 851-856]

> They want to change their community so that they've got a provision. [YW2, Line 858] So instead of the very back wall of the car park where they choose to take themselves away from adults. [YW2, Line 860-861]

There are particular challenges for young people with additional needs and disabilities in order to access youth work provision within their communities, travel being a central one (Knight, 2022, Sylvester et al, 2014). Young disabled people's social life is framed within a school context and young people can feel excluded from opportunities within their own communities, especially in terms of building friendships and engaging with sport and physical activity (Sylvester et al, 2014).

> This is what I think and I've had a couple of weeks to think about it. Since the transport has been stopped [For Football Team] because there is not enough staff, it has made it a lot harder for people to get to training, a lot harder. [YPFG010 YPB, Line 249-251]

> They don't have the money, it's about funding and money [YPFG010 YPB, Line 281]

> My brother is going to football if you have lots of people in your family so have to take your turn as to when you can do stuff. [YPFG006 YPB, Line 52-53]

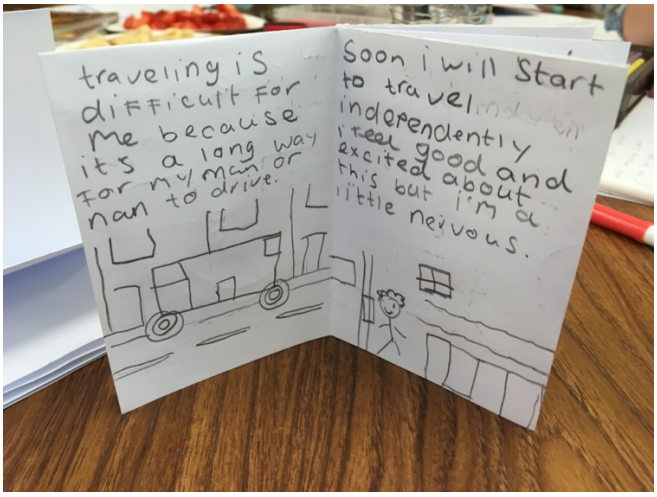

Image 2: Zine Travel Barriers Youth Project B

In this context the implications of funding cuts could further exacerbate the exclusion felt by members of this group where transport support ceases and young people can no longer access provision. This in effect limits notions of even 'Taking Part' as barriers to access are exacerbated by budget and service cuts.

5.3.2 Implications for Youth Participation, Political Education and Social Justice

In the framework of targeted services, it is argued that, young people are becoming increasingly pathologised and subsequent interventions are applied to resolve the perceived individualised issue (Taylor et al, 2018, de St Croix, 2016). Within this context, the focus for youth workers has been to keep projects running, driving the orientation of projects towards 'Taking Part' and off the streets, priorities of the funder and attempting to maintain funding security for the organisation.

> Everybody's on grants now, people are doing their own things, so that's a matter of personal choice for youth organisations. And youth organisations have a lot of pressure on them to deliver different things these days. A lot of youth organisations spending a lot of time and energy just keeping young people fed. [YW2, Line 334-337]

The research data presents a perspective suggesting opportunities for youth participation, political education and social justice practice during this period have reduced, changed in nature, or are perceived to be a luxury of time and staffing. Youth work as a professional practice is hollowed out as a result of the savage funding cuts, increased neoliberalism and managerialism which limits the remit of practice (Davies, 2015, 2019, 2021, Walther et al, 2019, Taylor, 2010, de St Croix, 2018, Giroux, 2025). It is argued that professional, social justice orientated practice has lost its way as a result of the disconnection from processes of 'moral philosophy' (Young, 2006, p. 3) and 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1972) traditionally experienced through group work, from the voluntary relationship and from fun and engagement on young people's terms (Ledwith, 2020, Davies, 2015, 2021).

> I think they don't have the same strategy as like we used to have a participation strategy for the year, and everyone would be able to come and get a - I think everyone's that busy doing their own pieces of work it's quite hard to get people to buy into it again. [YW2, Line 271-273]

> It was pretty much before the one-to-one referrals really came in. Certainly, perhaps I'm just speaking about myself here, but certainly I was focused in on my clubs and I wasn't really looking outwards to what was happening across the city. [YW1, Line 426-428]

> But I think we're picking up again now and doing, we've gone back to doing more political stuff. [YW1, Line 376-377]

The impact of austerity and neoliberalism, it is argued, has reshaped the participatory and political education agenda in youth work, reframing this critical and radical, social justice orientation to practice, into an ameliorative and somewhat empty practice conforming to the agendas of others (Cooper, 2012, Yanar et al, 2016, Shukra, Ball and Brown, 2012). This locates participatory and political practice within an adult approved space as adults determine what and how young people can 'come to voice' about. (Batsleer, 2008, p.10).

> […] to be honest, local councillors are always asking for, "Well we want young people to do this for us", or "We want young people to make a statement about this", or be engaged in something, and we want to do that work as well. It's a lot harder now we have such limited resources. [YW1, Line 327-330]

However, youth workers do recognise the skills they have to manage funding for multiple agendas, demonstrating a particular dexterity in practice and a commitment to participatory practice, even in the tightest of agendas,

> Well depends on which funding you're getting, sort of have to fit into their outcomes. And if you've got more skilled you can be a little more flexible, you can sort of keep both sides happy can't you, but that takes skill. [YW2, Line 426-428]

The boundaries for youth participation specifically are often firmly located within club and project and are seen to serve as a form of 'customer feedback' as young people are ferociously engaged regarding their satisfaction of their services (Batsleer, 2008, Smith, 2005, np). This is depicted as a limited form of [-] Youth Participation on the 'Taking Part – Taking Apart' Spectrum as opportunities are not expanded for young people beyond the remits of their club.

> And then the bigger picture of the Young Inspectors, young people going out doing their own participation with young people, asking young people what do they think of their club, what do they think of the youth workers? Feedback on it. [YW2, Line 286-289]

The final area of exploration in this section is focused on staff morale and survival. The impact of working through a decade of austerity is evident in the expressions from staff within the research project. The pressure, not only to practice under these conditions, but to compete with other providers in the youth work 'market' raises significant concerns for morale and motivation. Issues of short term roles for staff run contrary to the need for long term relationships for communities, which are problematic to reconcile (de St. Croix, 2013).

> But I think the funding, the way the funding is now, it does tie people down a little bit, it really does. Year by year they're looking for the next salaries and stuff like that. But I think sometimes people are working on keeping people in jobs, whereas we just used to be working on what did the young people need, what's their voice saying? [YW2, Line 563-566]

> [So] I think since the recession in 2010, but a whole of emphasis, what's happened to the youth services, the changes, the fact that young people's lives have been impoverished by the lack of youth services, and the way young people's lives have changed. [YW1, Line 885-888]

> It shows the very valuable work that youth workers and youth services used to do, and that dreadful gap in support for young people when they're at their most vulnerable really, because they're going out into the world, and there's nobody there really to just catch them and give them that bit of extra support. [YW1, Line 890-893]

Summary of Theme

The impact of budget cuts within youth work is evident within the research project in a number of ways. Firstly, the workforce has been reduced and reshaped, with the loss of full time roles and the prioritisation of part-time staff. And by a focus on targeted work based on deficit models of need, resulting in workers managing caseloads of one to one referrals.

Secondly, spaces for youth work to take place have been closed or closed off for young people as more cost effective detached delivery modes are adopted. It is argued that this further disconnects practitioners and practice from participatory, political and social justice orientations as intervention is often short term, correctional and individual. Focus is on 'Taking Part' in activities, rather than 'Taking Apart' the structural forces that create inequalities and oppression and bring opportunities for expansive and developmental practice. Young people articulate their understanding and frustration of the funding cuts faced by their clubs and projects and those in power they hold responsible.

5.4 Theme Three – Youth Work Values and Principles

Debates about youth work values and principles appear consistently throughout the data set, including in research sessions with young people. Often comparing their youth work experiences with other experiences of 'working with adults' and recognising differences in approach and opportunities. The presentation of findings in this section is offered through two key threads. The first explores understandings and reflections of the values, principles and the nature of youth work as experienced externally to the research project by the PAR Group members. The second thread seeks to explore how youth work values underpin the research project and the resultant impact.

The rationale for this is two-fold, firstly, the research question is located on a curiosity to research youth participation, political education and social justice through a process of engagement with participatory and political practice, the notion of researching 'through doing'. Secondly, the Educational Doctorate provides a platform for reflection and growth within professional practice, and the PAR orientation has been intentionally adopted to support this endeavour. Therefore, including reflections of what attempts at participatory and political practice, in this instance, has created is important.

Youth work is traditionally notoriously difficult to define (Jeffs and Smith, 2010, Batsleer, 2008, Davies and Gibson, 1967, Davies, 2015, 2021). This remains one of the most pertinent debates within the profession, especially given the struggles faced by the sector as a consequence of neoliberalism and austerity. Commitment to values and principles, perceived as a rudder necessary in stormy waters (Taylor et al, 2018). One of the central propositions that is offered in order to define and distinguish youth work from other professions working with young people is through a set of values or 'defining characteristics' (Davies, 2005, p.7), or 'elements' (Jeffs and Smith, 2010, p. 1). Youth participation is highlighted as a 'defining characteristic' enacted through conscious efforts to 'practice proactively seeking to tip balances of power in young people's favour (Davies, 2021, p. 8). This recognises that youth participation needs to include opportunities for the management of 'real power and real responsibility' through participatory experiences within youth work (Macalister Brew, 1968, pp.76-77).

Frameworks of values and principles provide a shape, albeit contested, through which ideas about youth work can be formed and fostered. Whilst it is acknowledged that the practice of youth work is buffeted by economics, social policy directives and funding, these 'defining characteristics' provide a foundation through which, the intensions of youth work can be explored and explained.

> it is a value-based practice, and indeed that some of these values are embedded in the methods it chooses to prioritise, what distinguishes youth work from other related and often overlapping practices is its methods: *how* it seeks to express those values, and particularly its *process*. (Davies, 2005, p. 4)

Central to the reflections from the PAR Group is the value and principle of relationships. This is seen to be one of the most important and defining principles, underpinning all youth work, particularly notions of the voluntary relationship where young people choose to engage. (Batsleer, 2008, Ritchie and Ord, 2017, Cooper, Gormally and Hughes, 2015, Young, 2006).

> If I was going to say one thing about successes in [Name of Project] and in my youth work practice, it's all about the relationships that you build with individuals, both adults and young people, that make the projects work. [YW1, Line 82-84]

> [So] the relationship is obviously key for me, in terms of everything I do. So, the sort of informality of that relationship. [YW3, Line 92-93]

> There is a voluntary relationship isn't it, that's the overarching principle, so we can only start at that starting point if they want to be involved. [YW2, Line 698-700]

For young people, relationship is recognised and experienced within youth work through their interpretations of how youth workers *are* with them, conceptualised at times as respectful engagement, youth work is defined by what youth workers do and how they work with young people (Davies, 2005).

> Like obviously when I first came, it was [Name of worker] and she was just - She always like, everyone liked her; everyone got on with her so like no-one really done anything that they shouldn't have. But when they did, it was sorted out properly and that. [YP1 YPA, Line 48-51]

> When people have had trouble in school, they went to people in here and spoke about it and it's been sorted out in ways like that. And then just - or like with [Youth Worker], I used to ask him questions about like different stuff like when the school wanted me to get tested for all stuff [ADHD], I come to him because he knew a lot about stuff like that. [YP1YPA, Line 177-180]

For young people knowing that youth work staff were there to support them was important and central to the process of working together, through both their youth work experiences and within the PAR Project,

> if you've got a problem, got talk to someone – If there's something upsetting or worrying, tell one of the staff. [YWFG001 YPB, Line 71-72]

Much of the discussion about relationships in youth work literature identify them as starting points. Meaningful informal education can only begin once a relationship is formed and that this takes time to grow between young people and their workers (Davies, 2005, Jeffs and Smith, 1999, Young, 2006, Batsleer, 2008). This model of youth work demands time, resources and professional knowledge as to the nature and purpose of professional practice. The promotion of relationships and decision-making within youth work can be perceived as methods youth workers use to demonstrate their commitment to decision-making, equality and social justice with young people 'as a partner in learning process' fostered through respectful, negotiated and supportive experiences (NYA, 2020, p.5). The discussion within the literature review highlighting the potential for 'symbolic violence' is fundamental here where workers deflect their responsibilities to practice from positions of values and principles in relation to young people's rights, potentially creating 'social harm' (Cooper, 2015, p.55).

> I think with the nature of our young people, it's really; we start where they are. [YW1, Line 106]

> The main one is equality. Equality of opportunity for young people with additional needs so that they don't get left behind or marginalised, they're not seen as 'other', and they're not seen as not having a part of play in society, because they have a part of play, and quite often they have skills which just need an opportunity. And that's what we particularly do at [Project], we give young people lots of opportunities to learn that they have skills, and to show and develop that they have skills. [YW1, Line 90-95]

> Some teachers don't even know what some conditions are, they know you've got them but they don't know what they are or how to deal with them. Especially in our school where there is a variety of different needs. They don't really know how to support people with different needs. [YPFG013 YPB, Line 166 -169]

5.4.1 PAR Project Practice Example

Young people recognised the impact of choices and equality in action. Through the PAR project they enacted their decision-making by responding to, or rejecting options, for how they wish to work together. Throughout the PAR project research plans have been shaped based on the core values of relationship, equality and participation, demonstrated in action through the promotion of dialogue and choice. This can be seen in the development of an

increasingly shared learning space, created by young people and workers with contributions generated from across the PAR Group.

One of the key projects generated within Youth Project B was a training session for trainee practitioners. Young people devised and constructed the training session to highlight the issues of inequality and oppression they had experienced, in order to promote equality and social justice in the practice of newly qualified workers. The idea was generated through creative conversations during a session planned using party games, using the games to question and discuss lived realities [See Appendix for Session Plan 11th August 2018]. These values were practically demonstrated through the bringing of ideas by young people, through the planning paperwork developed for research sessions and in the expansion of a menu of methods for expression within sessions.

Party Games - Example of PAR Data Collection Activities
Youth Project B Research Day 2 – 11th August 2018

Image 3 – Pin the Tail Activity
Youth Project B
Behind each door is a research question to promote discussion.

Image 4 – Pass the Parcel Activity Youth Project B
In each layer of wrapping paper is a research question, sweets and a prize

Through the discussion of the research questions, experiences were drawn from young people about how they were worked with, at school or in other settings, including youth work settings which resulted in discussions about disrespect, discrimination and action. This example highlights how practice expands across the 'Taking Part – Taking Apart' Spectrum from limited [-] to liberatory versions [+] as political and social justice practices are fostered. Within the PAR project opportunities have been created for young people to explore structural factors that shape their lives and further, make decisions about action they take in response in order to uphold their rights and create change.

> No matter if you've got a disability you can still play football or basketball or tennis' [YWFGA YPB, Line 87-88]

> Once my year head forgot I was Asperger's. We were having this like assembly thing where we brought our parents and mum asked [Teacher] about the new SENCO. Oh you have a diagnosis! I've had one since year 6 and she's been my year head since year 7. And I understand that she has a hundred and one other things to remember but still. [YPFG013 YPB, Line 167-171]

> In our school we've got something called The Haven, it's the autism dept where I have a pass and I can go if I need to and I went there in year 7 and I was upset about something and I was calming down, but crying and had my coat over my head and the teacher said 'stop crying you're not in primary school anymore' and that's someone who's trained to work with kids with autism. [YPFG013YPB, Line 199-203]

> Just because you have a disability doesn't mean that you should be separated from everyone else because you've got the same rights as everyone else. Depends on where you go and how much experience the staff have got of working with people with special needs. And some places have more training than others [YPFG010 YPB, Line 91-94]

These experiences were worked into scenarios for the planned training session for trainee practitioners over subsequent research days, with young people providing insight as to how they would like to be treated by youth workers, teachers and social workers. These were developed as valuable training tools for the workers to stimulate reflective practice and highlight the need to work for rights-based, critical, social justice practice. Through sharing their experiences young people encouraged the professional development of practitioners through the development of the training workshop they planned.

> If you are training to be a teacher, please listen to your students and understand that some may have needs that you do not know about. [YPFG013 YPB, Line 205 – 206]

5.4.2 Challenges to Youth Work Values and Principles

Young people and workers recognised that within contemporary practice there are multiple factors that challenge the prioritisation of values and principles and the relationship basis of youth work. Within this section two elements will be highlighted, the first is concerned with the nature of relationships between young people and youth workers and the second is the impact of targeted practice on youth participation, political education and social justice.

5.4.3 Challenging Relationships

Young people recognised the differences in the relationships they had with different practitioners and that this was challenging at times, as the adults they worked with behaved in ways not of their liking. Workers also recognised the responsibilities they hold to maintain safe and respectful spaces with young people. Whilst it can be a 'teachable moment' in relation to participatory practice, fostering opportunities to engage and negotiate resolutions, at times these positions can clash and erupt into demonstrations of 'power over' (Tew, 2006, p.36). This tension is highlighted within the discourse of rights-based practice in that adult workers can seek protective agendas that curtail participatory ones (Lundy, 2007). This is also reflective of the challenges of professional training and qualification which is also connected to budget cuts. Workers who have not accessed training may have less opportunity to understand and apply core values, principles and purpose of youth work and therefore, less likely to work from critical, political and social justice 'Taking Apart' orientations in practice.

> [So] that's why, yeah in school, the teachers sit and try and speak to you about it. Here [Youth Project A] they go just get out. [YWFG1 YPA, Line 146-147]

Young people reported their experiences of not being listened to by adults and suggested age and arrogance plays a part,

> Because they're arrogant and obviously they think because young people are obviously younger than them, they're like, "Yes, but-" They think we don't know but

> obviously if we're going to be living in the world probably longer than they are. [YP1YPA, Line 89-91]
>
> [So] we should be able to make decisions as well as them. [YP1YPA, Line 93]
>
> But then when [Youth Worker] was here, it was like, It was all mad because no-one really liked her. So no-one really, I think like one of the times like no-one actually like - What's the word? It's like no-one really cared what they done. Because no matter what you done; you were going to get a bad response out of her. Like she'd always, and it was always shouting and that. [YP1YPA, Line 53-60]
>
> And I think it was because, when [Youth Worker] was here, there's was not enough for us to do apart from doing stupid stuff. So, we were all, we all caused trouble and it was funny when she was here because we'd get a good response out of her. [YP1YPA, Line 65-67]

For a period of time during the PAR Project, Youth Project A was going through a transition as the full time worker retired and a new youth worker recruited. Having experienced the centre through the research at this time, this period was certainly unsettling for young people, staff and volunteers. Not that this is an excuse for disrespectful experiences, it highlights there was a change in the club values to more reactionary practice which was not enjoyed by young people. This can be experienced during uncertainty and increased emotional labour (Hughes et al, 2014, de St. Croix, 2013). This period of time also powerfully highlighted the importance of relationships with young people as crucial to the youth work process and the development of a meaningful, negotiated and engaging curriculum for informal education to foster opportunities for 'Taking Apart' dimensions of participatory, political and social justice practice. Managing professional responsibilities in practice requires careful navigation as is indicated here:-

> Absolutely you need the relationship, but you need to be trustworthy. I think that's the bottom line, young people have said this to me before. So they might not like some things that I've said, or actions that I've had to take, because it's not my job to be liked by everybody, it's my job to setup a provision where everybody can enjoy a safe provision, and sometimes you do have to take actions which young people don't like, because their behaviour's been unacceptable. [YW1, Line 239-244]
>
> That's what I used to like about school because some teachers, certain teachers, like we had years back, listened and teachers always used to – Some teachers used to say to me like, 'Can't wait until I see you on the telly because you're going to be the one changing the world', because I had such strong opinions. [YP1YPA Line 75-80]

5.4.4 Targeted Space

Appreciation of the youth work relationship is essential as a fundamental starting point within practice, it is recognised as more easily built within a voluntary, open access youth work. This

provides an additional challenge that youth workers face in translating this relationship-based practice within an increasingly targeted and referral space. Working from a principled perspective in youth work, it is argued, demands a commitment to the creation of space and time with young people. Open access provision is much more suited and can provide the time, space and freedom to connect through dialogue, fostering relationships and exploring young people's lived realities, moving across the 'Taking Part – Taking Apart' Spectrum towards liberatory political education and social justice. (Ritchie and Ord, 2017, Hill, 2020, Taylor, 2010, Hall, 2013).

This response highlights the difficulty in putting principles into practice within a contemporary landscape with the loss of some professional space recognised,

> Youth work is based on trust and congruence and not everyone's able to offer that like we used to do. [YW2, Line 182-183]

> Well for me it's all about, it starts with the young person starting points, which it's really hard when you're sitting round a table with a load of politicians and police and that, who's starting point is the community and making the streets safer from these hooligans. So that can be really hard, starting off something and making sure that the other professionals realise where you're coming from. And we've had some great pieces of work done, and joint with the Police, who realise that….And our relationships, we might have been working with these on and off for 10 years, since they were six hanging round on the streets. [YW2, Line 212-219]

And similarly, in this context of targeted support, a barrier for building relationships is created when information about perceived deficits of young people is shared without choice and negotiation with the young people involved:-

> I suppose my biggest sort of cornerstone if you like in what I do is around power. So I worked for [Child Sexual Exploitation Project] in the past, and really, throughout it really, struggled with how that relationship was formed, because it was formed on a very different footing to other relationships that I'd had with young people. And I think I spent - I've said this a lot of times, but I think I spent a long time trying to figure out how I can recreate sort of that level of power sharing within the relationship that wasn't natural within a relationship, where you're getting referral forms about quite horrendous things. So, I would say the sort of power around the relationship is key to me. [YW3, Line 93-100]

The impact of targeted and referral-based practice, it is argued, changes the basis on which relationships are created, sustained and the workings of power dynamics. In terms of developing practice through youth participation, political education and social justice, the reflection from the PAR project demonstrates how time needs to be protected in practice to explore lived realities in an expansive way and from the external demands of predetermined correctional agendas and outcomes (Hill, 2020, Hall, 2013). There is also an urgent need to

reintegrate knowledge of the impact of structural forces on lived realities in order to recognise the roots of the social, political and economic problems we see across the globe and within our communities (Pickett et al, 2024).

Summary of Theme

The data indicates that working from a value and relationship based position remains central to youth work, both in theory and in practice. Whilst the complexity of defining the profession continues, there are widely accepted defining features, and historical perspectives as to the values and principles that underpin youth work. The data acknowledges the importance of values and principles for workers and young people in how they are respected and identifies the tensions experienced in the contemporary landscape between fixing and flourishing. Targeted practice has fundamentally re-framed notions of relationship building in youth work through referral form disclosures which exist outside of the negotiated space with young people which is ethically problematic.

Young people clearly understand and feel the impact of positive and respectful relationships where workers are focused on supporting them in ways of their choosing. Young people have also identified instances where they feel they are disrespected, where their rights are infringed as adults do not work through core values of equality. Notions of 'symbolic violence' infiltrate practice under these conditions (Cooper, 2012, p. 55). Values and principles are eroded by the agenda of targeted provision which prioritises the achievement of pre-determined outcomes, this becomes the driver for practice rather than central principles of education and empowerment (NYA, 2020). The ambition for the 'Taking Part – Taking Apart' Spectrum is to enable workers to recognise their fundamental responsibilities to work in alignment to core professional values and principles.

5.5 Theme Four - Youth Participation, Power and Political Education

> Everyone can do something about what they believe in. [YP1YPA, Line 141]

> And I think it sort of links into having your right to say what you believe in and what you think should happen. So, it's sort of a right really than an opinion, I think. [YWFG2 YPA, Line 351-352]

Debates and demonstrations of youth participation, political education and social justice are articulated throughout the data set, with this theme being the most substantive across the PAR Project. Within the presentation of findings here, three key areas will be prioritised. The first is focused on understandings of youth participation and includes attempts at defining youth participation in terms of its remit and scope within youth work from the data. The second is shaped by the challenges within practice for working to participatory and political principles. This includes analysis of the precarious nature of youth work funding, targeted and

outcome driven services and wider understandings of the purpose of youth work as a social justice orientated profession. The final element is focused on practice efforts and experiences which create the conditions through which participatory and political practice can emerge and re-emerge.

5.5.1 Understandings of Youth Participation, Political Education and Social Justice

Youth participation is one area of youth work that has been extensively researched and explored, throughout its 'long and untidy history' (Smith, 1982, p. 17). Like many concepts within professional practice, an ambiguity remains as to the definition and remit of youth participation, political education and social justice within youth work. The development of the 'Taking Part – Taking Apart' Spectrum seeks to both reflect the diversity of understandings and reinvigorate political and social justice orientated practice within youth work. As expressed here, there is a recognition that politics shapes everything in people's lives and therefore, it is argued there should be increased political education within youth work to support young people to engage and create change.

> It's, it [political education] should be the core of our work, because everything young people do, from going to school, from any of the budgets being cut, to whether their Mums can access her Universal Credit, whether living in poverty, all links to a political education. So, the role of the youth workers is to try to get young people to understand that this is political education. [YW2, Line 316-319]

> You have to make young people aware that they're part of a, that they live in a country and there are processes and practices in place that have a direct influence, a direct impact on their lives and everything that happens to them. So a lot my kids will go, "Well I'm not interested, don't talk to me about that, I don't care". But you get benefits you know, so how much benefits do you get? That depends on who's in power, what Party's in power, you know. If you can get that particular medical treatment or not that you might need, that depends on who's in power and the politics. What the rates are that your Mum and Dad pay, or you know every part of your life is determined by politics. [YW1, Line 284-291]

Across the data set there are a number of different perspectives regarding youth participation, political education and social justice, in terms of a definition, its purpose and remit which is in keeping with the academic literature (Hart, 1992, Cooke and Kothari, 2002, Lundy, 2007, Cornwall, 2008, Shukra et al, 2012, Yanar et al, 2016, Walther et al, 2019).

> If you want to say something about it, yeah, you should be listened to and should be able to make a difference, cause you're living there and you don't want to see your local area getting worse. [YWFG2 YPA, Line 347-349]

> [So] youth participation I think for me is about, I'm trying not to just give the textbook answer from the stuff that we do in the course. But it's about engaging young people in their own lives and giving them - not giving them, helping them develop the skills

> that they can make decisions or impact on decisions that matter to them. [YW3, Line 287-290]

These positions, I contend, represent the ongoing challenges within the discourse of youth participation and political education. One perspective that recognises youth participation within limited notions of 'Taking Part' and 'having a say' and another which adopts a more radical and liberatory perspective positioned as 'Taking Apart' which recognises the impact of structural factors on lived realities and life chances and utilises participatory practice to engage with structural concerns. (Freire, 1972, Ledwith, 2020, Davies, 2021, Walther et al, 2019).

The spectrum 'Taking Part - Taking Apart' reflects the polarities between limited and liberatory versions of participation, where wholescale structural change is deemed necessary to foster liberation from oppression (Freire, 1972). This spectrum depicts a wide range of practice shapes which are presented and can be claimed as participatory or political, however, some forms can operate as an 'illusion of voice' (Clark and Percy-Smith, 2006, p. 3). Hence the [-] and [+] symbols to reflect a range of limited or liberatory practices on the spectrum. The increasing control of the participatory and political sphere by central government social policy directives over time reflects attempts to protect ideological positions, power and purpose in redirecting responsibility to our own hands and curtailing critical debate (DfE, 2025). The challenge for workers and young people is to find routes for engagement and action that are not mediated by governments, either local or national. It is worth remembering,

> The Master's tools will never dismantle the Masters' house. (Lorde, 2018)

Radical change is at the heart of participatory and political practice, where young people are fully engaged in processes of collective problematisation (Freire, 1972) by generating knowledge of the 'personal troubles and public issues' people face (Mills, 1959, p. 8). Through a radical and engaged process young people position themselves as activists and changemakers, taking action in the social, economic and political world. (Freire, 1972, Farthing, 2012, Taylor, 2010).

As a young person reflects,

> Well you've got your voice, obviously. It's like before we were saying with the justice system and that, if you know what you're speaking about and you know how to stand up for it and you know the right words and choose the right ways to say things or do things, you can do what you want. [YP1YPA, Line 144-147]

Models of participatory practice in contemporary youth work are often limited to interpretations within the boundaries of the club or project. This positions youth participation as a focus for the improvement of service delivery, rather than transformation of wider

society through a spectrum of practices seeking social justice (Smith, 2005, Ledwith, 2020, Cooper, 2012, Hughes et al, 2015).

These positions are reflected in the responses from workers and young people,

> Well youth participation is what it says on the tin, it's about young people getting involved in stuff. [YW1, Line 153-154]

> But we try to devolve power to young people. We have young people involved in planning what they want to have happen in their clubs, and we'll bend over backwards to try and make sure that what they want to have happen in their clubs, in their projects, is what actually happens. [YW1, Line 559-562]

> I think what we're doing, I think what we should be doing as youth workers and what I would class as political education and youth participation is creating critical thinkers and getting young people to question everything that happens. [YW3, Line 355-358]

> I think political education is challenging because it's not the sexiest or the most common thing on the face of the planet. So it's about encouraging young people to be more aware I suppose of the world that they're living in, and try and see that what happens, the decisions that are made in Parliament have a direct impact on their life. And it can be a real uphill struggle you know, so it's just about plugging away with it. [YW1, Line 697-701]

The differences are striking in terms of how explanations of participation from workers depict notions of 'Taking Part – Taking Apart'. Workers highlight limitations placed on the remit of participatory practice. Through historical analysis it is recognised that discussions of 'controversial issues' was encouraged and more prevalent in previous decades (Ministry of Education, 1960, p. 59). Much of contemporary youth participation work is located within a service feedback paradigm prioritising adult agendas. This fails to foster change at a community or political level and maintains the status quo of often life limiting structures for communities (Dorling, 2023, Bamber and Murphy, 1999).

> It's all very well saying it's participatory but it's participatory when young people are setting the research agenda as well isn't it, they are taking part in games and activities and that kind of stuff, but once they start to either come up with the questions themselves or question each other or decide how they want to take that forward then that pushes us on in terms of [the research] [RD2 YWFG, Line 41-44]

> And some of them might, like [Young Person] is, some of them might want to come and plan some of the research days with us, so we can push on with that as well as making the data a bit more substantial as well. [RD2 YWFG, Line 47-49]

5.5.2 Challenges to Youth Participation, Political Education and Social Justice

There are a number of challenges to the development of participatory and political practice. The perspectives held by workers can be a challenge if youth participation is merely understood as 'Taking Part', it is argued, youth work opportunities are unlikely to progress on the Spectrum towards 'Taking Apart'. This is dependent on the political consciousness of the workers to recognise the wider forces that shape lived realties and inequality themselves in order to support young people to engage and foster political change, exploring power dynamics and seeking social justice (Hart, 1992, Yanar et al, 2016).

> I think also it's about your own, it's about having your own moral compass. [YW1, Line 266]

> Go out and speak to them and make, tell them, make them understand about our disabilities and that. [YPFG016, Line 44-45]

> Make them understand what we want them to be like. [YPFG016, Line 47]
> To make our disability heard! [YPFG016, Line 55]

> And make our lives better and easier. [YPFG016, Line 57]

> But I think the main things are trying to get the new practitioners, the session workers, to realise youth participation isn't something like taking them on a trip, find the space on the trip. It's the processes that goes behind all that work. [YW2, Line 283-285]

There is a concern that significant shifts in the practice landscape have moved youth work away from a value and relational practice to more targeted work with short term interventions – and that youth workers are fostering and fuelling perspectives of individualisation which seek to locate life chances within a personal fixing frameworks (de St. Croix, 2016). This leaves structures of oppression unchallenged, which unintentionally, it is argued, can result in demonstrations of 'symbolic violence' (Cooper, 2012, p.55).

In this framing, it is seen as an imperative, a duty, rather than a choice, for workers to engage with political education, working from a rights-perspective (Lundy, 2007, Ward and Lundy, 2024). This radically repositions youth work as a 'Taking Apart', social justice practice. Data presented highlights the choices workers make, and challenges they face, which influence their abilities and vulnerabilities for engagement, or not, in participatory and political practice. This is difficult to reconcile within challenging funding environments and the fear would be that participatory practice becomes further tokenistic and 'tick box' as organisations struggle to find resources to commit effectively to this work.

> And then you've got organisations who just aren't doing that kind of thing, and you know some of them, because they're fighting for survival, as much as anything else. [YW3, Line 840-841]

Alongside this, there is also a concern regarding the development of workers in practice, through supportive mechanisms including training and supervision which would be characteristic of a youth work process (Ord, 2012b). In order for workers to understanding their role and the responsibilities in relation to social justice work, they need to engage with training to enable workers to recognise their political consciousness. Collectively workers can seek to resist external, pre-determined outcomes and re-orientate perspectives to agendas young people bring themselves, about their worlds, and their struggles, which can be sites to generate action and change.

> I think youth workers need to have some training to understand that we're not just there to do trips and activities, and know, so what participation is in the youth work world, I think it's important to get that. [YW2, Line 411-413]

> Yeah, I think my role is about educating new practitioners who are coming in. Them ones who might be a fireman but are doing two sessions a week as a detached worker. Making them, trying to get them to understand that participation is every single conversation we're having with young people, and putting it back to the young people, what do you want to do? [YW2, Line 265-268]

The final challenge explored in this section is in relation to structured participation opportunities through youth forum, youth council, steering group mechanisms. These are familiar and common structures and have a significant history within participatory and political practice (Yanar et al, 2016, Shukra et al, 2012, Percy-Smith, 2010, Cornwall, 2008, Kirby and Bryson, 2002, Mathews et al, 1999) Whilst these structures provide positive aspects, they are also widely challenged for the potential to replicate structural inequalities and for advancing the 'already advantaged' (Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021, p.7).

A youth forum was attempted within Youth Project A as part of the PAR Project as it was at the time seen to be the appropriate mechanism to bring young people into constructed participatory spaces. However, the young people within Youth Project A widely rejected this mechanism finding it broadly boring and disengaging. Forums are more challenging spaces to navigate the power balances between young people and adults as the more formalised experience the more this is associated with the adult determined landscape.

> Yes, so when everyone else comes they start messing about and all. [YP1FG1YPA, Line 15]

> You know, just activities but like obviously help other people. Like because to sit there and just have a chat for however long gets boring and people get bored and run around or throw stuff at each other. So if we were like doing teamwork exercises or communication exercises or anything like that, it'd probably bring more stuff out of us than if we were just sat there doing it. [YP1YPA, Line 124 – 128]

5.5.3 Impact of Youth Participation, Political Education and Social Justice

The central ambition within this research project has been to explore the potential youth work offers to be a site for participatory and political education, recognising the need for young people and workers to connect together in the endeavours of 'human flourishing' (Banks, 2010, p. 12) and social justice (Fraser, 2008). This ambition has grown from the realisation that spaces for engaged exploration of lives have been closed down and reshaped, resulting in a pandemic of individualised issues, including loneliness, mental health, poverty and unemployment disconnected from structural social, political and economic origins (Batsleer and Duggan, 2020, Barnardo's, 2024, JRF, 2024, The Prince's Trust, 2024, McDaid and Kousoulis, 2020).

The contention for this research is that youth work offers a unique and valuable space for the exploration and expansion of experiences mediated by the effects of structural issues on the lived realities of those communities we work with. It is argued that the 'Taking Part – Taking Apart' Spectrum enables the seeking out of further opportunities to foster collective, critical and socially just youth work practice.

> Within any democratic society, especially one such as the United Kingdom, where the central state rigidly controls both what is taught and the types of pedagogy teachers must employ, there exists a self- evident need for settings where young people, in the company of others, can acquire and rehearse the arts of democracy. Places that will 'enlarge their mentalities' and where they can engage in collective action and dialogue in order to learn to become 'completely human'. (Jeffs, 2015, p.86)

The PAR process applied for this exploration provided a number of key learning points of action and reflection through the journey in the two research sites. Through the cycles of building, generating and evaluating as outlined in the methodology chapter, this research demonstrates the capacity for young people and practitioners to work together to create change which is at the heart of social justice orientated practice. One example of a key action project will be shared to illuminate the possibilities within youth work to foster participatory and political practice. This example is offered as an unpolished and unfinished effort to promote engagement, 'conscientisation' and action within youth work (Freire, 1972). The example builds on the discussion about Homelessness in Youth Project A and resulted in the development and leadership of action by young people to contribute towards change for themselves and others.

5.5.4 PAR Example Youth Project A – Fundraiser for Homeless People

A young person attended the project one day having walked home from school and reflected on the growing number of homeless people on the streets. Through a conversation and the development of a 'zine' they explored their feelings and passion about this issue. Members of the PAR Group were recruited by this young person and the group worked together over

many months to develop a fundraiser event. The raised money would be donated to a well-regarded, local organisation working with street homeless people in the city.

The project motivated by the reflection of the precariousness that they felt about their own situation and a drive to care.

> I don't know. Just no-one really feels it's that close to them but like I've got-it's not that close to me. Like I've never had anyone in my family that were homeless or anything, it's just the fact that even in ours, if we are on like - we're not on like a big amount of money. We're only on a little amount of money so with Brexit and that coming up, it could quite easily change to one of us being homeless. [YP1YPA, Line 160-164]

> Because obviously it's different, isn't it? If Brexit does happen, it'll change a lot, like drastically. [YP1YPA, Line 169]

> And it's easy for people to become homeless now because no-one cares. [YP1YPA, Line 171]

> They just don't, do they? The amount of people that are on the streets and that in town [YP1YPA, Line 73]

> The thing about homeless, it's where – some of them, when you think about it, yes, it's not our fault, no, not in like our fault, like individual, like the government, they don't let anyone in the UK or whatever, they don't give stuff out or like they raise community. Like food banks, that's not the government, that's the community. And the government doesn't do anything else, it's always the community that helps. [YWFG1YPA Line 37 – 44]

The group worked in the youth project using creative, arts based methods to develop the plans for the event. They took the lead for the practical arrangements, visited local community venues to assess their suitability, booked acts and performers, and managed the promotion for the event.

> Because I know like I'm only a kid but like I act - Not act a lot older, because I don't, but I think older. So like kids now don't actually think about that and they're not thinking about what could happen next week or next year. Like in a few years, they could be homeless and then think about, "Oh, why is no-one helping me?" But then no-one's helping you. But you didn't help no-one when you were in a good situation and they were in a bad situation. [YP1YPA, Line 217-221]

Image 5 – Planning Mobile for Fundraiser Event Youth Project A

Image 6 – The Fundraising Event in Action Youth Project A

The young people reflected on the experience,

That was stressful. [YP1YPA, Line 252]

Because it broke down about 14 hundred times. We nearly never done it. About 14 hundred times. [YP1YPA, Line 254]

Because I just wanted it to go so well so when something was going bad, I was like, "Oh, well it's never going to happen." Then I was going to give up. [YP1YPA, Line 257]

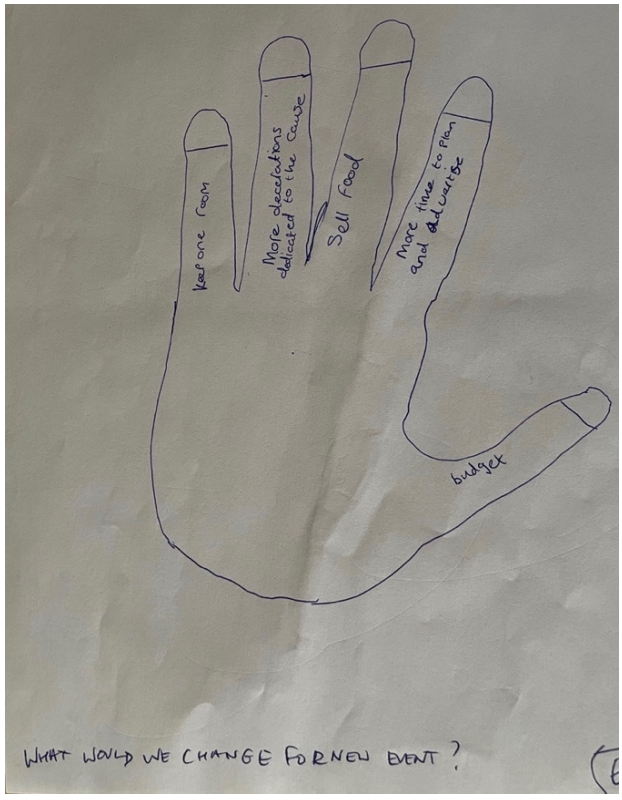

Image 7 – Evaluation - What would we change for new event?

Youth Project A

This was an interesting project originating out of the PAR Group in Youth Project A. The event took a considerable amount of time, it was 'messy' to organise as at different points the group relationships, 'broke down' [YP1YPA, Line 254] as they recognise, with tensions between young people and the responsibility of the event impacted on them. Also other parts of young people's lives needed to take priority, for example, school work and study (Percy-Smith et al, 2019b, p. 262). This example firmly challenges narratives to the discourse that

young people are apathetic and disengaged from political life (Yanar et al, 2016, Walther et al, 2019). Young people were clearly engaged and interested throughout the project, they had created it and felt passionate about it. Through the project they educated themselves and others regarding the political, social and economic context of homelessness.

The event was regarded as a success in terms of raising money, however, equally significant impacts from this project were in the form of,

> Team work, talking to each other and communication [YP1YPA, Line 273-275]

The legacy of this experience of leadership and decision making is perhaps far greater,

> I think the fact is young people come to a youth centre for a very, very short space of time, or engage with services potentially for a very short space of time, so a lot of the decisions that they make in there, the actual decisions are sort of not – obviously totally depends on the decisions and what they're doing, but they're not necessarily life changing decisions. But the power that making them decisions has is potentially life changing. [YW3, Line 390-394]

The development for young people and workers in experiencing some of the liberatory potential of youth work, moving between notions of 'Taking Part' to 'Taking Apart' was significant and professionally rewarding.

Summary of Theme

Within this theme youth participation, political education and social justice have been explored though three key frames, firstly through understandings of these concepts. The data highlights a spectrum of understandings that are in keeping with ideas of 'Taking Part' as a more passive act, through to understandings of how politics shapes all aspects of people's lives and structural systems of oppression and inequality need to be 'Taking Apart'. The second focus was in relation to challenges for participatory and political practice. The main factors highlighted within the data show the impact of a targeted landscape in which to work and how this impacts on both purpose and resources when working young people.

Training and support needs for workers was also highlighted, to help them develop their understanding and sustain critical and collective participatory and political practice (Bamber and Murphy, 1999). The final section looked at impact through an example from the PAR Project. This example seeks to demonstrate through dialogue engaged cycles of generating themes centred on young people's concerns and interests, bringing these to action and reflection to expand knowledge of impact.

5.6 Theme Five - Contemporary Challenges Impacting on Young People's Lives

The presentation of findings within this theme will be structured through two key strands. The first reflects the data from young people as to the issues and concerns they feel they are facing. The second strand considers the challenges reported by workers in relation to factors that impact on young peoples' lives, based on their knowledge and experience. Challenges within the youth work sector are also highlighted here acknowledging the associated impact for young people from such changes.

One of the central tenets for engaged participatory practice is focused on connecting with communities in order to locate their struggles in their existing contexts. The work of Paulo Freire [1921-1997] is significant and embedded throughout youth work literature as academics recognise the potential his theory brings to an engaged and liberatory practice (Freire, 1972, Ledwith, 2020, Warwick-Booth et al, 2021, Hughes et al, 2014). Based on processes of questioning to develop and expand 'conscientisation', this practice is situated *with* people as they explore factors affecting their lives and collectively seek to take action together to create change (Freire, 1972). PAR orientation is similarly located within this critical and social justice paradigm, through which cycles of exploration of 'average everydayness' are enacted to expose root causes of oppression (Dall'Alba, 2009, p.35). Through the influence of Lewin, the fundamental goal of PAR is to 'build a better world' (Burnes and Bargal, 2017, p. 97). I offer the 'Taking Part – Taking Apart' Spectrum as a way for practitioners to reflect on and hold their practice to account in terms of the transformative trajectory towards social justice.

5.6.1 Contemporary Challenges Raised by Young People

This PAR project was framed through three central phases as is detailed in the methodology chapter, including a *building* phase, a *generating* phase and an *evaluation* phase. In terms of this theme the focus is on presenting the data that highlights the range of contemporary challenges the PAR Group generated from their experiences. Building on the success of the Educational Doctorate pilot project the same Diamond Ranking activity was applied as part of this PAR project with young people in Youth Project A. Diamond ranking is distinguished as a 'talking tool' research method that 'is valuable for extracting constructs and facilitating talk' (Niemi et al, 2015, p. 140). This tool is regarded as particularly effective in research with young people, as increased levels of motivation, participation and engagement are promoted (Hopkins, 2008). This tool was utilised as a way of exploring structural factors that young people may wish to work on as part of the practice of 'Taking Apart' oppressive and discriminatory forces.

The diamond ranking activity was available for young people as an opportunity for the promotion of 'conscientisation', as has been discussed within the literature review, involving a process of building critical awareness through dialogue, action and reflection (Freire, 2013, Bamber and Murphy, 1999). Young people chose to engage in small groups or worked

individually to explore one or both central questions devised within the diamond ranking framework. The first question posed was *Factors that are important to you* and the second question was *Factors affecting my life.*

As part of the PAR project I worked with four young people who chose to get involved with this activity. [See Appendix for All Diamond Ranking Responses]

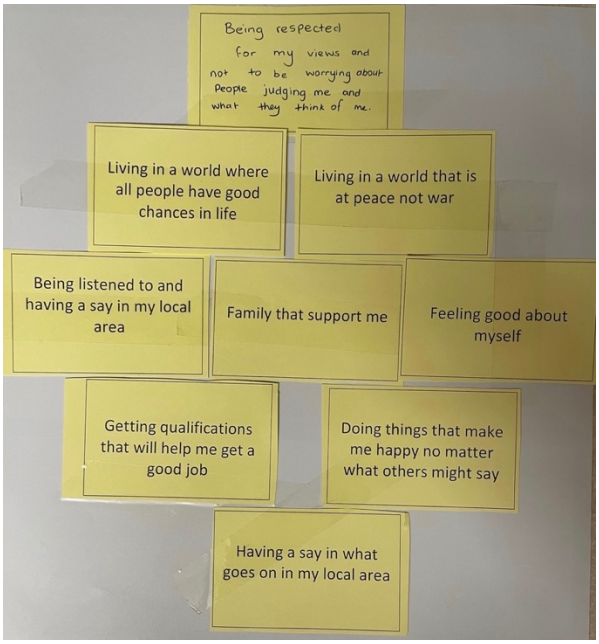

Image 8 - Diamond Ranking Example One Youth Project A

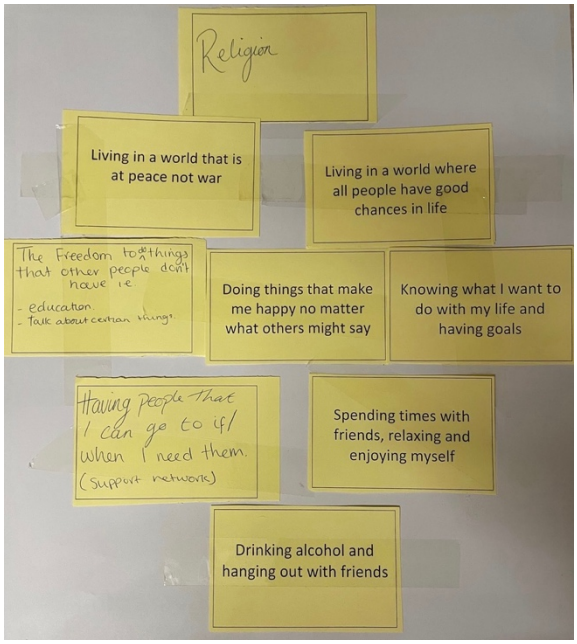

Image 9 - Diamond Ranking Example Two Youth Project A

The findings from across the data set highlight the complexities of contemporary life for young people. There are similarities in the chosen 'important factors' across the four young people in Youth Project A. Whilst this is not surprising that core factors would be significant for young people, especially in terms of the importance of family. The data indicates that young people feel under considerable pressure at this point in their lives as they navigate school, exams and career choices, relationships and 'doing things that make them happy no matter what others say', which appeared in all four diamonds (The King's Trust, 2025). The responses generated through this method highlight a range of pressures and oppressions that are felt by young people, including gender-based oppression and misogyny. The young people also recognised that these oppressive attitudes towards women have existed for many years, and remain powerful in how they shape women's lives, their bodies and expectations of themselves.

> I don't feel good about myself. [YPFG4 YPA, Line 69]

> I don't know. It's just society [YPFG4 YPA, Line 111]

> Not trying to be funny or sexist in any way, but young females are more vulnerable. Not to getting kidnapped and stuff, but to words and bullying and stuff like that. Yes. You can't really call - I don't really want to say, but you can't really call a boy a slag, can you? [YPFG4 YPA, Line 112-114]

> Say, if you had a boyfriend or something like that, it wouldn't work. A girlfriend, because if you have a boyfriend and then it ends badly, and then they saw their mates start calling a slag and that, it - If that was said to the lads that it would be a good thing. [YPFG4 YPA, Line 115-117]

> I don't know. I think young women are viewed differently to boys [YPFG4 YPA, Line 149]

Young people are able to recognise the historical legacy of the position of women in society in comparison to young men and fear that this is how it will remain,

> Because it's been like that for years and years, centuries. It hasn't went away. It just stuck as the usual now. [YPFG4 YPA, Line 150-151]

Here the realities of the pressure that young people feel are evident as they consider their futures and the importance of the choices they make at this point,

> I don't want to mess around like mess up my life now and not be able to do anything when I'm older. I want to be able to have a good future, like a good job, good money, good house and just a good life and not just be like stuck in like, I don't know like a homeless shelter or anything like that, jobless or like working at Maccies or something. [YPFG4 YPA, Line 189-192]

This is reflective of the academic literature exploring young people's lives in contemporary society, where significant pressure is identified as a result of exams and future prospects, identity, relationships, bullying and wellbeing (JRF, 2024, The King's Trust, 2025). Contemporary data suggests that increased numbers of young people are reporting low levels of happiness and confidence in relation to their future opportunities (The King's Trust, 2025, Barnardo's, 2024, JRF, 2024). This also reflects the impact of pathologizing, where young people have been inculcated to believe they are entirely responsible for their life chances as wider structural factors that shape lives are overlooked. This highlights the need for political education to support young peoples' understanding of the structural nature of the issues they face. This powerfully positions youth work as the ideal training ground, with the tools needed for efforts towards 'Taking Apart' these oppressive mechanisms that are pervasive throughout society. This refection from young people provides rich data in terms of areas for collective action, where young people and adults work together to educate and seek to eradicate oppression within society to secure opportunities for all.

Within Youth Project B a series of activities were offered across the first four research days that were focused on the *generating* phase of the PAR. The activities were structured in creative ways, seeking to promote engagement and enjoyment. The themes for the Youth Project B Research Days were largely drawn from the young people, for example, the Party Games [Research Day Two]. Given also that members of Youth Project B were part of a young women's football team, much of the research activity was tied in with playing sport and being active. An example of Youth Project B data collection activities is detailed in Theme three of this chapter to illustrate how processes of 'conscientization' were attempted through playing party games.

Data generated from these activities highlight wider issues facing the PAR Group, for example, in relation to their social lives, within school and in relation to their disability and access to sport. Young people reflected on the context of their lived realities,

> [So] we can't watch the news in our house, because [young person's brother] gets too worried, if I want to watch, I have to look at my phone and I get worried anyway. [YPFG017 YPB, Line 37-38]
>
> I have meltdowns sometimes [YPFG017 YPB, Line 133]
>
> A build-up of stuff throughout the day and then one little thing could trigger it. Like at school or something and then if you go to a youth club after school or something, one more thing can trigger it. [YPFG017 YPB, Line 139-141]
>
> I go to the toilets and others' turn the lights off, giggling and laughing and thinking it's funny. [YPFG017 YPB, Line 615-616]
>
> The ones [Services] for kids with disabilities, it's more like understanding and that and if you like, if you don't feel comfortable and that or not feel like, actually help you out another one they just say just stop it, stop being silly. [YPFG011 YPB, Line 9-11]

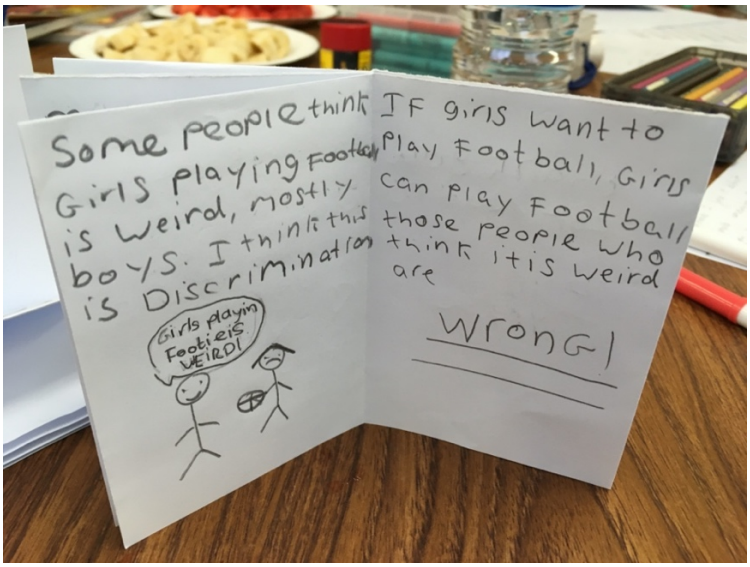

Image 10 – Zine exploring gender discrimination in football
Youth Project B

Young Person: What does discrimination mean? [YPFG009 YPB, Line 3]

Worker: Wow, that's a big question – what do you think it means? [YPFG009 YPB, Line 5]

Young Person: Like, if you've got it for free and some boys think it's weird for girls to play football and I said that's discrimination, but I'm not sure what it means. [YPFG009 YPB, Line 7-8]

These instances highlight worry generated from the news and current affairs, pressure and bullying during the school day and unhelpful approaches of support from adults. Through one of the discussions a young person outlined a time when they felt discriminated against.

One of the girls said miss can I put my coat on

And the teacher said – and then put her arm through it and said 'oh I think I'm autistic' [as an insult] [YPFG007 YPB Line 3 – 6]

Reflecting on the data collected from the research days *Life Journeys* were offered for young people as a way to continue to tell their stories through creative methods and consider future actions. The young people used these examples, working with them to create scenarios to use in the practitioner training session that they planned.

5.6.2 Life Journeys – Learning about Lives

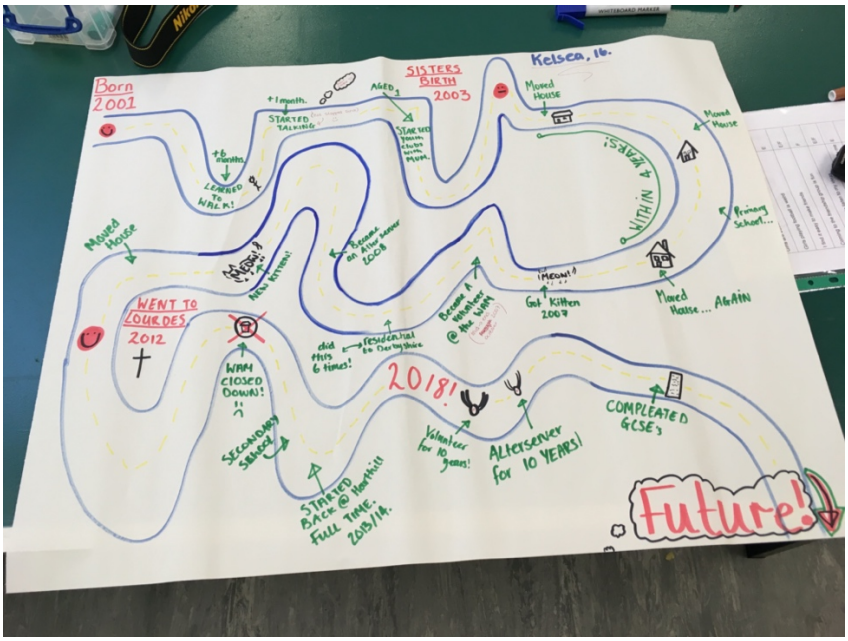

Image 11 – Life Journey Example Data Collection Method

The use of the Life Journey method expanded young people's discussion in ways of their choosing. It also powerfully connects with youth work values and principles in that;

> Through conversation we express concern – by spending time with others we show that we are interested in them as well as in what they have to say. We also display trust and respect we value the other person. (Jeffs and Smith, 1999, p. 31)

Through the Life Journeys young people shared important moments for them,

> The [Youth Project] closed down when I'd just started secondary school. [YPFG009, Line 377]
>
> [By] 2018 I'd been volunteering for 10 years [YPFG009, Line 385]
>
> I put F for [Name of Youth Project], but I've left that now so…because I'm 19, I was crying yesterday. [YPF009 YPB Line, 209-210]
>
> This is my house this is my sister's house. I work in Barnardo's in [Place], Put stuff out in the shop. [YPF009 YPB Line, 270-271]
>
> I am naughty at home, I keep annoying my mum, get a bit worried about change. [YPF009 YPB Line, 255]

These shared insights help youth workers to understand and connect with young people's lives, recognising their particular struggles and the collective struggles that young people realise they share with others. This can build understanding of the structural forces that shape lives, providing a catalyst for action, where young people and youth workers, and others, develop ideas as to how they might raise the issues and take action to create change (Freire, 2013, Chambers, 2003).

5.6.3 Contemporary Challenges Raised by Practitioners

The contemporary landscape of lives is challenging for young people and communities (JRF, 2024, Barnardo's, 2024, The Prince's Trust, 2024, The King's Trust, 2025). This research project was undertaken at a time shaped by a number of crises on a national and international scale. These included austerity and inequality (Pickett et al, 2024, Dorling, 2024), increased racism and far-right nationalism fuelled by Brexit, and political instability (Home Office, 2018, CERD, 2024), climate change (Watts et al, 2019, van Daalen et al, 2024) and SARS-Covid 19 (Burlina and Rodriguez-Pose, 2024). The ramifications of these crises reverberate through communities and increasingly impact is felt in the lived realities of people's daily lives. Practitioners reflect on the challenges global issues create for the young people and communities they seek to work with and how they have impacted on the youth work sector.

There are two key areas within this section to be included in this discussion, the first is focused on an acknowledgement from practitioners of the challenges facing young people and how they are trying to work with and alongside them, albeit constrained. The second area is directed to workforce systems and structures within professional practice that either help or hinder effective value-based, relational practice.

5.6.4 Challenges Facing Young People

There is some recognition by practitioners that young peoples' lives are shaped by the external forces of the social, political and economic world. There is a realisation that life chances for certain groups are different and more challenging because of the discrimination and oppression they face. The navigation of these struggles, for some workers is central to their professional practice. This is particularly acute for disabled young people who are positioned as particularly marginalised due to the 'rampant inequalities' in society that impact on inclusion and opportunities (Dorling, 2020, p.153).

> And quite often our young people are very insular and very insulated. And it's about trying to get them from looking inwards to looking outwards, and that really is a key role for me, to encourage that. It's also encouraging parents to change perhaps the way that they think about their young people and their young people's needs. Rather than seeing them just as a young person with needs, but as a young person who has opportunities and who has value, and who has choices in this life, and those needs are just the little part of who they are. And if you can meet those needs then they can move on and have fulfilling and satisfying lives. [YW1, Line 106-113]

> I think because disabled young people tend to live quieter, more marginalised lives there's, it [Youth Participation and Political Education] has been a bit on the backfoot I think for them. [YW1, Line 154-155]

> People who are isolated, quite often disabled young people are very isolated, they'll go to school, they'll come home, and they won't see the outside of their bedroom again until the next day when they go to school. Well that leaves them very vulnerable to all different types of mental health issues. Also leaves them very vulnerable to be predated upon via the internet. [YW1, Line 213-217]

> There was a time a while ago when you couldn't even walk up our [Street name] because of fireworks getting flung, and cars, and bricks, the kids would just be bricking. [YW2, Line 775-777]

At times youth workers recognise that they have a role and responsibility to engage and work within these issues and agendas, however, the challenges they face, within the changed and austere landscape are vast and reduce the capacity for radical responses. Often the driver for this work is less focused on social justice, but more on the achievement of outcomes desired by the funder or manager as mechanisms to secure services in a precarious landscape. As a reflection of the level of power within the political landscape it is striking how this precarity within human services more broadly creates conformity, workers have to be dextrous in enacting resistance against the political structures as organisations and workers seek to maintain survival. The 'Taking Part – Taking Apart' Spectrum seeks to provide a framework that unites practitioners with their responsibilities for participatory and political practice within youth work.

5.6.5 Structural and Systems Challenges

Within the sector youth workers are seeking to enact a value based and relational practice to support young people's personal and social growth and development (NYA, 2020). There are two key areas that will be explored in this section framed as *Time and Team, Training and Trajectory*. Each of these elements poses a challenge to practitioners working in the sector and can be traced to the ideological impact of austerity, neoliberalism and managerialism which has dominated youth work in over recent decades (de St. Croix, 2022, Sercombe, 2015b, Davies, 2019).

5.6.6 Time and Team

Time and Team in this instance is referring to both the time and staff team available for young people through youth work. This also reflects the busyness of professional practice to engage with and develop meaningful relationships with young people. My intention here is not to repeat previous discussions, but to connect the impact of these issues across professional practice.

> Because a lot of these people who work hiring, are only doing one or two sessions, they've got like another job, so full commitment. [YW2, Line 127-128]

> Well the main impact is, when we have full-time workers they're substantial workers. They get a patch, right. You'd go out and you'd do your work, and some issues would come up. And then the next day you'd work on them issues, like find an agency to support the child, linking with social services and stuff like that, whatever needs to be done. But there's none of that. So say, if a team are working two nights a week, they might work on the Monday night for a few hours, then they're not out again until the Thursday night. The impact is a lot of staff are doing things in their own time to be able to meet the needs of the kids. [YW2, Line 159-165]

> They'd have done a one-to-one with them and stuff, but there isn't the hours. [YW2, Line 172]

Given the time and team pressures, the knock-on impacts for young people accessing youth work are challenging. The implications for youth participation, political education and social justice are evident as workers find themselves without the time or focus to engage with these core areas of practice. This reduces youth participation and political education to a separate practice, disconnected from the 'average everydayness' of the worker and in effect contributes to the depoliticization within the sector (Dall'Alba, 2009, p.35).

> [So] my biggest problem with youth participation is I think it's a word that we now, has become, 'We do youth participation', and people will have a separate group that they have for 'youth participation'. [YW3, Line 295-297]

Youth participation here takes a form of 'Taking Part' in providing feedback on services or needs, is less so committed to liberatory forms so remains at the limited [-] Youth participation end of the Spectrum.

5.6.7 Training and Trajectory

The responses from youth workers within this research project highlight a fundamental problem within the contemporary youth work sector in relation to the training of workers and their understandings of the trajectory of the practice with young people. Within the sector there has been a significant decline in the numbers of full-time qualified workers (YMCA, 2024) This has contributed to a predominantly part time workforce, for whom professional development training has not been invested in. As a consequence, leaving them unsure of the central values and principles that underpin distinctive professional youth work practice. Youth workers may not be aware of the commitments to social justice within youth work and therefore, practice adopts pragmatic 'fixing' agendas (Hughes et al, 2014, Davies, 2019, Taylor, 2010).

> I think youth work training as well, because in my day most people came out with a DipHE, fully aware there this was an educational process. And I think as it's been diluted over the years, loads of youth workers probably a very, you've got an AQA introduction to youth work. I think that hasn't helped, you know it's the basic training of our workers should have, I don't think that is in place. [YW2, Line 597-601]

Through professional training youth workers build an understanding of the political, social and economic context of the professional with workers committing to their own process of 'conscientisation' as critical thinkers (Bamber and Murphy, 1999).

Summary of Theme

Through the discussion within this theme connections are made to the structural social, political and economic world in which youth work exists to demonstrate the impact these challenges have on the landscape of youth work. This is focused in two key strands, reflecting on the challenges for both young people and workers. Young people identified a number of factors that they found challenging, resulting in high levels of stress and pressure in terms of navigating their lives now and for fostering their futures. Youth workers identified the pressures they felt in seeking to demonstrate their commitment to young people through the issues of time, team, training and trajectory. The reduction of the workforce and re-articulation of purpose has exacerbated a pathologizing position under an austere and neoliberal doctrine. It is argued that within contemporary social policy structural analysis of social problems are largely absent. Governments consistently individualise responsibility for lived realities which direct professionalised practice. This creates difficulties for professional practice to challenge this entrenched orthodoxy.

5.7 Theme Six - Opportunities, Outcomes & Impact

The purpose of youth work has been throughout historical articulations of practice, framed on the basis of personal and collective growth and development leading to empowerment and action (Smith, 1982, Davies, 2009, Davies, 1999b, NYA, 2020). The latest definition of the key purpose of youth work highlights this, albeit, paler than in previous, more 'controversial' depictions (Ministry of Education, 1960, p. 59).

> Enable young people to develop holistically, working with them to facilitate their personal, social and educational development, to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential. (NYA, 2020, p. 7)

Youth participation, political education and social justice represented in the key purpose as 'voice', 'influence' and 'place' (ibid), are elements of a 'distinctive' practice that is seeking wholescale, radical change across multiple levels and layers of society (Jeffs and Smith, 2010, p.1). Within the presentation and discussion of this final theme, data from across the PAR group will be explored to offer a summary of the key opportunities, outcomes and impacts drawn from youth work experiences and especially in relation to youth participation, political education and social justice. The presentation of the findings will be framed through reflections from young people and youth workers in terms of their opportunities, outcomes and impact.

The 'Taking Part to Taking Apart' Spectrum of participatory and political positions is useful to apply here. The spectrum depicts the gaps between limited [-] and liberatory [+] models of participation and political education and has been introduced across the findings section. In application within this section the spectrum can recognise the range of impacts generated through 'Taking Part', in games and activities, and through options to 'come to voice' (Batsleer, 2015, p.151) for example, and through attempts of 'Taking Apart' the structures that hold and maintain oppression and inequality.

5.7.1 Opportunities

The starting point for youth work and the encouragement of youth participation, as a transforming, rather than conforming concept, is to create and facilitate opportunities for young people to shape, to decide and to act in a variety of guises that are meaningful for them. Youth participation can be positioned as a developmental process leading to increased empowerment (Arnstein, 1969, Hart, 1992). In the practical cultivation of participatory and political practice, youth workers need to enable entry points where young people can learn the initial skills of decision-making in local, familiar settings and then expand, scaffolded by workers to maintain security during this period of growth. In developing this practice, workers themselves need to recognise the liberatory potential through critical youth work practice.

Youth workers in the PAR Project highlight this initial participatory process of 'Taking Part' as they unfold opportunities for young people through intentional and crafted practice.

> I mean you're starting off with your basic activities in the youth club. They're like the foundation stones for the things that come next. So, you can get young people to engage with something, it might be music or it might be football, or it might be the artist project, that's an opportunity for them to participate in something, enjoy participating, and gain confidence around participation. [YW1, Line 180-184]

> But you have people kind of just take things over, which is great, so I'm quite happy to side-step to let them do that. And on the quiet they've taken over quite a lot of stuff, which is great, it's fantastic actually. So even from the signing-in on the door, I mean I used to sit there and do that religiously. Now I've got a couple of young people do it. [YW1, 503-507]

> Same in the kitchen, I've got a young person who runs the kitchen. [YW1, Line 510]
> But there's not much in that youth club that young people cannot run if they want to. They don't always want to. [YW1, Line 520-522]

What this illustrates is a host of starting points for 'Taking Part' versions of youth participation that exist within projects available to support young people. It is argued that these opportunities were the basis of traditional centre based youth work and are increasingly threatened under austerity and neoliberal directives (Macalister-Brew, 1968, Ritchie and Ord, 2017, de St. Croix, 2018, Jones, 2014). Youth workers demonstrate their skills and understanding by facilitating the transfer of power in this context to young people (Davies, 2021).

This opens up the potential for informal education and learning as young people develop their experience within practice (Hart, 1992, Jeffs and Smith, 2010, Batsleer, 2008). It is important to recognise the capacity for this kind of progressive practice to exist in centre-based, open access projects and the challenges faced through targeted experiences (Ritchie and Ord, 2017).

Opportunities created through dialogue, enable young people to consider their views, which can then be linked to action and onto further opportunities elsewhere.

> I'm not really interested in telling young people what to think, but I quite often say, "Well have you thought about ?" You know, and I say that quite a lot. And it's about just not letting things go past as well. If somebody makes a statement that you hear in the back of the room, I might walk over to them and say, "I heard you say that, but what about such-and-such? Or what about such-and-such?" It's not my job to preach or tell young people what their political views ought to be, but it is my job to make them aware of the different options that are available. [YW1, Line 267-273]

Dialogue works as a motivator to translate ideas into action, where people foster appropriate conditions for learning, can connect ideas together and create energy and belief in change (Freire, 1972). The impact of austerity and neoliberalism on the reduction of resources has vastly changed the conditions for learning that youth workers are operating within (Jones, 2014, Jeffs, 2015, de St. Croix, 2022). Through this research project and this findings chapter examples have been presented of action generated through dialogue with young people about their lived realties and experiences (Freire, 1972). The connection to values and principles is central here in order to see the potential opportunities for participation and political practice and also to firmly understand that this is at the heart of a socially just youth work (Hughes et al, 2014, Davies, 2021, Batsleer, 2008). This heightens the need for training and engaged reflection in the field to support workers understand and enact their role as critical pedagogues (Giroux, 2025, Apple, 2013, Kincheloe, 2010, Bamber and Murphy, 1999).

Moving across the Spectrum into 'Taking Apart' territory was particularly challenging. However, there was some experience of this social justice orientated work in both of the PAR Youth Projects. Two key examples of a form of politically engaged youth work have been generated through the research include, The Fundraising Event within Youth Project A and the Training Session for practitioners within Youth Project B. This work, I would argue, demonstrates the movement of practice along the spectrum beyond simply 'Taking Part', however, further connections to systems and structures of oppression need to be considered to embed a liberatory practice akin to 'Taking Apart'. However, it does highlight the potential and enthusiasm within youth work for this work.

5.7.2 Outcomes and Impact

Young people within the PAR Group recognised the opportunities clubs and projects provided for their development and learning through the outcomes they achieved as a result of their 'Taking Part'. For example, through meeting and making friends, playing sport and enjoying exercise, and in relation to their mental and physical health. Young people identified a number of ways they have grown and changed through their youth work experiences,

> Helping me overcome challenges, helping me with behaviour issues. [YPFG006 YPB, Line 86]

> We all know everyone in the team, get on with each other, make new friends, someone else joins and you talk to them and get to know them. [YPFG006 YPB, Line 91-92]

> My mum says it really keeps me healthy, football makes me happy and healthy – thanks. [YPFG011YPB, Line 48]

> I've become more happier, I used to be miserable, but I've become more happier and more confident. [YPFG004 YPB, Line 63-64]

> I met one of my best friends in friendship group and its helped me to speak to more people. [YPFG008 YPB, Line 8]

The range of outcomes expressed by young people are significant, especially in relation to the concerns and pressures that young people have reported in Theme Five of this research (The King's Trust, 2025, Barnardo's, 2024). Supporting young people to lead healthier and happier lives is fundamental to 'human flourishing' (Banks, 2010, p.12). However, recognising that flourishing is not an individual pursuit, contrary to the resilience revolution, flourishing demands a collective connection that seeks this to be realised for all people (Ní Charraighe, 2019, Garrett, 2016).

Youth work is an informal educational space, through which young people learn, to consider and ask questions of themselves about the kind of person they are (Batsleer, 2008, Young, 2006). This has been expressed as 'an exercise in moral philosophy' where youth work experiences are shaped with intention and purpose that enables critical questioning and reflection (Young, 2006, p, 3). It is through deeper questioning and processes of 'conscientisation' that we can support young people to understand the connections between structural forces and structural inequalities clearly enough to take action, to 'taking apart' those structures (Freire, 1972, 2013, Bamber and Murphy, 1999).

> I think it's that whole creating communities where people sort of question the lives that they're living and the decisions that are being made about their lives. Can only allow them to sort of hopefully improve their lives, and sort of prevent the more oppressive decisions that could be made. [YW2, Line 976-979]

> If we are part of creating young people who feel like they have control of their own lives, who feel like they are valued and they are listened to, and that they can contribute to the society that they live in, and that they are sort of seen. Then you know if you really want to look at it just from the negative side, is that they are less likely to be involved in anti-social behaviour. They are more likely to be healthy. They are more likely to check if their neighbours are okay and that, you know and to behave in a way that everyone else feels comfortable with in their communities, or whatever them things are. I think the nature of, you know the nature of feeling a part of something, it sort of brings all those positive thing to it. [YW2. Line 982-990]

Young people across the PAR group demonstrate their understanding of some of the more structured youth participation they experienced, including an annual Town Hall, Question Time Event. Young people were asked to prepare questions for city-wide decision makers.

> Yes, and I got my question read out so everyone actually said, "Well done, what a good question it was," and that was about homelessness. [YP1YPA, Line 20-21]

> And like everyone actually listened to that and it was answered quite well. [YP1YPA, Line 23]

> [So] like just to be able to go somewhere like that and ask questions and people listen and answer them, that actually can make a decision or change stuff. [YP1YPA, Line 25-26]

Young people valued these experiences to speak and be heard by adult decision-makers, however, they are notoriously challenging and can be perceived to be limited in terms of bringing about meaningful change and are criticised for maintaining the status quo (Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra, 2021). Within the PAR Project versions of participation have centred on developing young peoples' own capacity to question, act and review, to create change from their own head, hands and hearts (McIntyre, 2008). This contrasts with alternative understandings of participation that simply require young people to ask for something to change. The argument here is that participatory and political processes require young people to be fully involved in directing change and decision-making. They learn the skills needed through the 'practice of struggle', rather than simply getting what they ask for.

> If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation…want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters…Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. (Frederick Douglass, *in* Batsleer, 2008, p. 10)

There are wider outcomes and impacts that are generated through opportunities for youth participation and political education which can include increased empowerment for groups,

> The wider benefit is that people feel more empowered, which they're more likely to participate and get involved within their community, which gives them a sense of pride, and makes them maybe want to look after their community and its members a bit more. [YW2, Line 767-769]

Within the PAR there have been attempts made to connect with young people to explore the full cycle of an evolving participatory process, from thought and expressed concern to plan and action, and to review and reflect. In doing this young people can learn to apply the process for themselves, taking this forward as they continue to recognise their rights to challenge and change the world (Lundy, 2007).

5.7.3 Visual Coding with Young People

As part of the PAR project a process of visual coding was created using the photographs generated through the project across the first four research days in Youth Project B. The intention was to explore this space as a reviewing and reflective environment in which young

people could recognise their personal and collective learning, growth and development. The photographs were displayed and young people were asked to connect photos together around ascribed meaning or code, using wool and tape.

Where photos were connected, young people could indicate their rationale for the connection using small cards to write on or sticky foam faces to build differentiation. As a demonstration of values, the rationale for this activity was to promote inclusion and experience across the PAR Group of the range of research skills. This was complex for some young people, whilst they enjoyed looking at the pictures of themselves and the group, it was difficult to conceptualise meaning across the images. However, this is an area for future exploration.

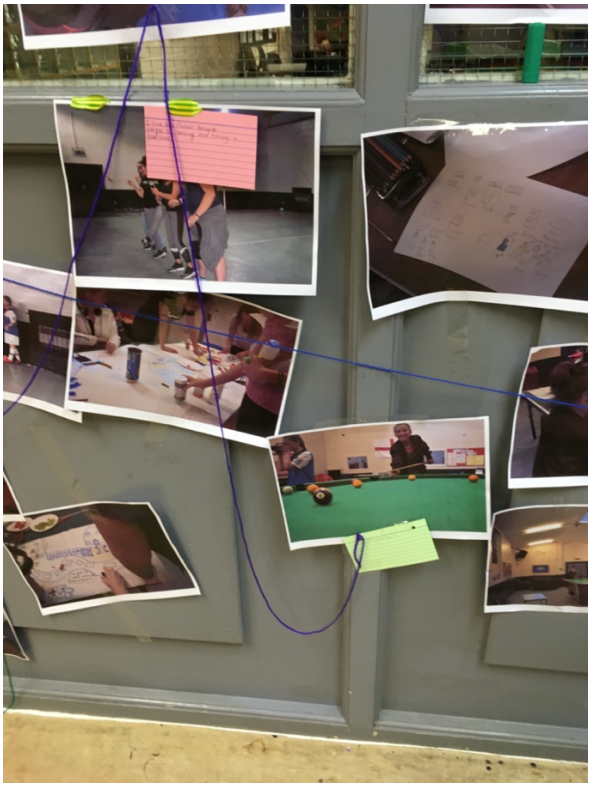

Image 12 – Visual Coding Example 1
Youth Project B

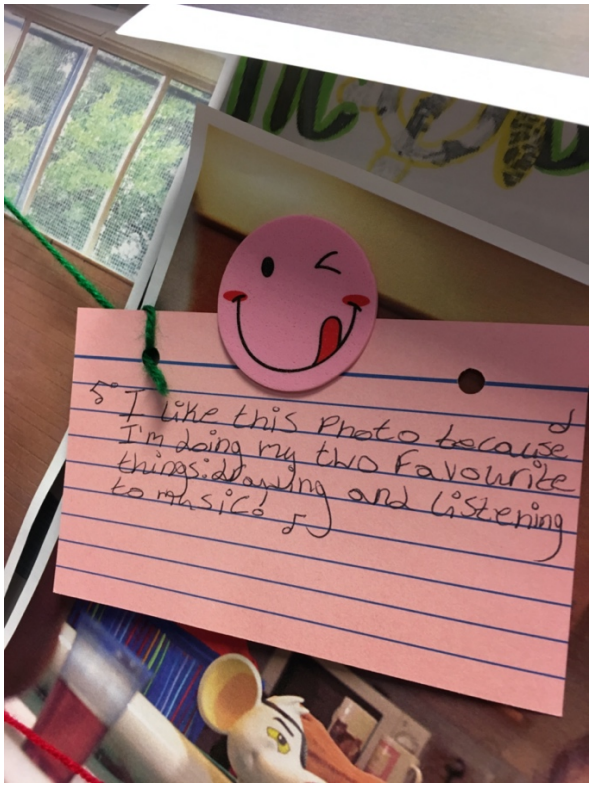

Image 13 – Visual Coding Example 2
Youth Project B

Summary of Theme

This PAR process sought to explore alongside young people, the potential for youth work to be a site for youth participation, political education and social justice. Research data has been gathered across two research sites through the application of creative methodologies to expand inclusion and expression. The PAR project sought to demonstrate learning 'through doing', with research taking place within a youth participation and political education process within each research site.

The spectrum of participatory practice tracing opportunities as 'Taking Part - Taking Apart' has emerged through the PAR project. This spectrum has been introduced and the findings have been explored through this spectrum illustrating both limited and more liberatory versions of youth participation and political education. The findings suggest that within centre-based youth projects there can be a number of productive entry points for the engagement with the participatory practice of 'Taking Part' in the running of the club. Moving to more detailed and expansive efforts of 'Taking Apart' and engaging with youth work for liberation are challenging but experiences of this practice has been demonstrated in both research sites.

Summary of Findings

Through rigorous Thematic Analysis of the data six central themes were drawn from the data to show the core findings from this PAR Project (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2023). These were ***Role, Cuts & Money, Youth Work Values & Principles, Youth Participation, Power & Political Education, Contemporary Challenges Impacting on Young People's Lives*** and ***Opportunities, Outcomes & Impact.***

Each theme has been presented in turn to show the findings from the research. A key overarching perspective is one of change and challenge within the youth work sector. Factors presented through this findings section include the changing roles, impact of cuts, and reduced resources for practice, the impact of a change of orientation to practice through targeted and referral based interventions and the disconnection of the workforce from the central values and principles of youth work. All of these areas impact on articulations of youth participation, political education and social justice. Drawing on the historical analysis within the literature review we can reflect on how changes to social policy and funding arrangements fundamentally alter the attitudes and capabilities of youth work to contribute within a participatory and political space. However, through the PAR project I believe powerful examples of an 'emancipatory curriculum' (Giroux, 2025, p.173) have been created by young people and workers to explore political and social justice dimensions in practice which I am both proud of and recognise as my future areas for learning.

Chapter 6 – Discussion and Conclusions

6.0 Introduction

This final chapter will present a discussion of the key findings from the research project. Conclusions will be drawn reflecting on the PAR process and detailing a framework through which learning from the research can be applied to professional practice. At the heart of the Educational Doctorate lies a commitment for the exploration and transformation of professional practice. I believe the fundamental change experienced in my thinking and understanding through this research project has generated significant practical utility within my own practice and contributes valuable knowledge within the sector.

In embarking on this research journey, I sought to facilitate a practitioner research project built on the principles of critical collaboration and transformation (Freire, 1972, Ledwith, 2020). The project fostered a joint endeavour, supporting opportunities for informal education and collective action to explore the potential and possibilities for a reinvigoration of a political youth work for social justice (Bamber and Murphy, 1999, Body and Hogg, 2018). The research focused on highlighting the impact of the social, political and economic world on the lived realities for young people. This research provides a catalyst for reflection and action in order to draw significant insights to both my own and wider professional practice challenges (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011, Reason and Bradbury, 2008, Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon, 2014, Thompson et al, 2025).

Reflecting on the research journey I recognise and appreciate the ambitions held for this research project and how the process has evolved in practice as the 'possibilities and messy realties' unfolded (Percy-Smith et al, 2019b, p. 255). 'Muddle' and 'mess' are particularly associated with Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Cook, 2009, Percy-Smith, et al, 2019b, Huntingford & Lewis, 2020, Fitzgerald et al, 2021). As is reflective of the practice of youth work, plans change as practice is reshaped to respond to agendas of local communities. Having explored the participatory and political nature of my previous youth work practice at MA level within the changing socio-economic and political context of both pre and post financial crash in 2008, I have been significantly troubled by the challenges facing youth workers in practice since. Workers who identify with, and trust in, the cornerstones of youth work practice as set out by Jeffs and Smith, (2010), Davies, (2005, 2015, 2021) and others. Yet, who in practice, struggle to live out these commitments to social justice in meaningful ways that genuinely support young people who are '…in the process of creating themselves…' (Young, 2006, p. 4).

Researching at doctorate level, I sought to further explore the philosophies, principles and processes, that are contested, however, claimed to be distinct and unique within youth work (Jeffs and Smith, 2010). I sought to be professionally curious, to build my understanding of and attempt to apply Freirean 'critical pedagogy' in action alongside young people to

collectively find alternatives to this destructive and demoralising deal (Ledwith, 2020, Freire, 1972). Through the research project I endeavoured to work towards a *socially just* practice that strives to pursue a shift of power in order to foster 'human flourishing' (Banks, 2010, p.36). Finding congruence between my personal, practical and academic spheres has been an important and a consistent dimension of this research project, demonstrating core practice values whilst navigating the realities of contemporary practice and research (Snape and Spencer, 2003). I believe it is just as important to honour commitments for social justice and anti-oppressive practice in research as it is in practice.

> Just as social work is committed to social justice and social change, that should be the aim of social work research. (van de Sande and Schwartz, 2017, p.1)

This is the rationale I hold for youth work as a practitioner, academic and researcher. The need for a congruence between all elements of my working world demonstrates a commitment to social justice values. It is critical to our work as both youth workers and as researchers to encourage and embolden young people's leadership to take, shape and remake research in their vision (Walther et al, 2019, Warwick-Booth, Bagnall and Coan, 2021, Bamber and Murphy, 1999). This is more often than not messy, evolving and unfinished. The campaigning group In Defence of Youth Work characterise and seek to defend a youth work 'that is volatile and voluntary, creative and collective – an association and conversation without guarantees' (IDYW, 2009, n.p). In researching the journey and orientation of practice it is reassuring to find a familiar messiness in the research of others as well as my own.

6.1 Summary of Key Research Findings

6.1.1 The Landscape of Contemporary Youth Work

As is explored through the literature review chapter, and evident through the findings, the landscape of youth work seems to have been overshadowed and been absorbed by targeted and professionalised practice with young people (Davies, 2013). This has fundamentally shifted alignment from process to products, where the impact of professionalisation has resulted in working to the state agenda (McNeil et al, 2012). It could be argued that there is a duality of impacts that have been witnessed over the last decade. Firstly, the impact of state professionalisation of youth work by regulation through the controlling mechanisms of neoliberalism, austerity and managerialism have fundamentally reshaped youth work beyond recognition (Sercombe, 2015b, de St. Croix, 2016, Taylor et al, 2018, Abreu and Harker, 2025). This tightening of the state agenda has transformed a once creative, unpredictable and improvised practice to that of the workings of a correctional agenda of the state, as performativity prevails (de St. Croix, 2018).

> Thirty years ago, youth work aspired to a special relationship with young people. It wanted to meet young women and men on their terms. It claimed to be 'on their side'.

> Three decades later Youth Work is close to abandoning this distinctive commitment. Today it accepts the State's terms. It sides with the State's agenda. Perhaps we exaggerate, but a profound change has taken place. (In Defence of Youth Work, 2009, n.p)

Secondly, I contend we are witnessing a retreat from the fundamental principles and values at the heart of *praxis* (Batsleer and Davies, 2010, Davies, 2021, Taylor, 2019b, Ledwith, 2020, de St Croix, 2018). With youth work practice cut adrift and compromised from core principles and values, workers are forced to 'innovate' in order to survive (Muirhead, 2021). Much has been written recognising the context of the professionalisation of contemporary practice, perceived to be weighed down by a pervasive neoliberal system seeking objective, scientific rationality from the unpredictability of the *relational* and *dialogical* (HM Gov, 2011, Sercombe, 2015b, de St Croix, 2016, Taylor, 2019b). The demands for standardised outcomes and evidence from diverse human engagement is, it is postulated, eroding youth work principles and exposing ethical fault lines (Jeffs and Smith, 1999, Slovenko and Thompson, 2016, de St. Croix, 2018, Davies, 2021). Youth work is problematically positioned in a landscape of control rather than care, of problems, rather than possibilities (Davies, 2024, Jones, 2014).

6.1.2 Possibilities for Youth Participation, Political Education and Social Justice in Youth Work

Through the PAR process attempts have been made to research and practice in ways that demonstrates commitments to youth participation and political education to strive for social justice. In analysing the findings, a number of central themes have been identified in the exploration of value-based, relational and social justice orientated practice (Cooper, 2012, Davies, 2021, de St. Croix, 2016, Hughes et al, 2014). These include the roles youth work occupies, the implications of austerity and neoliberalism on the resources available and the reshaping of the purpose of professionalised practice on scientific, standardised, rather than supportive terms (Fusco, 2013). The findings also indicate a disconnection from the core values of practice, and whilst relationship was highlighted comprehensively in the research findings, this was used at times as a basis in which to seek compliance from young people of a wider agenda located within correctional spheres.

However, within the PAR project there were exciting examples demonstrating the possibilities within youth work for the evolution of an engaged and political practice. These examples were grown through dialogue and critical questioning of lived realities to explore meaning and fostering action. The findings illustrated a diversity of understandings of youth participation, political education and social justice within the PAR Group. These understandings are reflected in the development of the 'Taking Part' – 'Taking Apart' Spectrum. The spectrum recognises the range of practice that can be considered through limited parameters equating youth participation to 'Taking Part'. The spectrum also highlights practices that commit to liberatory forms of 'Taking Apart', efforts to connect with political

education to foster understanding and action on the structural systems that maintain oppression and inequality.

As is explored within the research there are multiple factors that impact the capacity of participatory and political practice. These include austerity, government and organisational agenda and professionalisation, targeted practice, outcomes, time, staffing, knowledge and training. Within the research workers frequently located participatory and political practice within the boundaries of club or project, operating as 'consumer feedback' in the marketisation of human services (Anstead, 2018, de St. Croix, 2018, Sercombe, 2015b). However, workers did explore their connections to developmental projects, albeit from a distance, as their roles were less embedded with working directly with young people. The practices detailed by workers highlight the ongoing political struggle for resources for youth work, including staff and spaces through which youth work can be delivered. In this context opportunities for participatory and political practice are explicitly connected to the betterment and sustainability of services for young people, which can be considered as a social justice issue in the demand for the redistribution of resources (Fraser, 2008).

Workers explored concepts of youth participation, political education and, less so social justice, through perspectives of 'add on' in the busyness of daily practice. Often others were charged with managing participatory agendas across organisations in practical terms and that enthusiasm, from 'superiors', for political practice had waned over time (Bamber and Murphy, 1999, p. 240). There was recognition of the importance of the voluntary relationship and equality as drivers for good youth work practice. Young people understood who the workers were in their clubs they could go to for help and support to get things that they were interested in done. They recognised the difference between workers approaches and who would listen to them, some of this was mediated through the frequency of part-time staff weekly sessions and quality of relationship.

Whilst there was acknowledgement of the challenging global circumstances in which lives are located, and recognition of the impact of politics on young people's lives, there was, however, limited capacity within the professional responsibilities within youth work to bring these issues and concerns to practice. Workers understood that the development of critical thinkers is central within youth work, however, they felt distanced from being able to enact that. Where matters of participatory and political practice were explored, this was shaped by demands from political leaders to consult with young people or through project based activity requests from young people. Practice depicted within youth work was framed in terms of leadership and decision-making within the projects young people attended, for example, through deciding on activities or running the youth club kitchen. Whilst this is important and developmental, this is limited in its potential for liberatory youth work practice. In order to overcome some of this, there was recognition of the need to invest in youth work more

broadly and invest in training for youth workers to build their understanding of political education in youth work through both theory and practice.

6.1.3 Young People 'as' Political

It is clear from the findings that young people are both connected to and concerned about the world and their own and others' futures in it. This runs contrary to the dominant discourse regarding young people's apathy towards political issues (Tam, 2024, Farthing, 2012, Shukra, 2017). Young people demonstrated interest, knowledge and passion towards a range of political factors that were explored through the research project. Young people demonstrated an appetite for exploring their own lives and how factors within the social, political and economic world impacted on them. They also highlighted how this took a toll on them and their wellbeing. Examples evident in both research sites recognising discrimination and oppression in their lives refracted through the lenses of age, class, disability, gender, race and sexuality as young people shared lived experiences. In terms of their capacities as changemakers young people, in both research sites, were clear on their commitment and responsibilities for action. They developed clear agendas to create change, as they 'recognise themselves as free and equal to other people' through the project examples developed in the PAR project (Bessant et al, 2024, p. 32).

Through the PAR project young people explored the landscape of their lives and questioned dominant ideologies, especially in relation to age and power, and their relationship to wider contexts of social, political and economic forces as they took roles as leaders and were listened to. Young people demonstrated an understanding of challenges for funding within their projects. They recognised the role of central government in this and voiced their views on political parties and their attitudes towards government support for young people. The realities for them were reflected in staffing levels, transport available, resources and opportunities within their projects and communities. In some instances they had seen their projects close as a result. Young people also demonstrated their passion for the issues within their communities, they understood the connections, for example, between education, opportunities, support and homelessness and recognised their own family's potential precariousness in terms of the level of household income and increasing cost of living.

Young people are, it is argued, afforded less opportunity and power for decision-making than their human-rights promote (UNCRC, 1989, Lundy, 2007, Heath et al, 2009). Increasingly, it is recognised young people's needs often fall secondary to the busyness of professional practice. The demands of the data that needs inputting, the funding that needs securing and the direction 'decision-making adults' dictate reflective of the contemporary landscape (de St. Croix, 2018). Youth work, I contend, needs to return to a practice where young people and their lives are at the heart of practice and work through a critical and 'emancipatory curriculum' (Giroux, 2025, p.173) to both generate and respond to social justice issues collectively. Young people reflect deeply on the role youth work has in creating opportunities

for them to belong, for making friends and feeling part of something they can contribute to, powerfully interpreted as what it means to exist. Other outcomes and impacts include ideas about empowerment and supporting communities to take control of their own agendas, fostering social justice through redistributing power and promoting visibility (Fraser, 2008). This was especially important in relation to promoting positive visibility of young people, and their contributions within their communities, to challenge the discriminatory stereotypes held more broadly about young people.

The spaces, albeit messy, for youth participation, political education and social justice that were created and explored with the research project, demonstrate a glimpse of the potential for youth work to be a site for political education. These spaces are created by the determination of youth workers and young people themselves engaged with the wider world struggles, recognising that our liberation is bound collectively with communities we work alongside.

> If you've come to help me, you're wasting your time, but if you've come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together. (Watson, *in* Russell, 2016b, n.p)

Through this research young people recognise the impact of political intervention, and lack of it, on their lives, on communities and on their youth clubs, in the capacity to foster positive, long-term relationships that form the heart of youth work. I contend that the landscape of professional practice has been essentially depoliticised by a biting neoliberalism demanding efficiency and evidence of individualised experiences of correction (de St. Croix, 2018, Hughes et al, 2014, Sercombe, 2015b).

6.2 Impact of the Research on Professional Political Practice

Throughout my practice career in youth work, I have advocated for, and been, involved with the development of youth forums and structured participation groups thinking that this was the way to build engagement and change. Using notions of adult *power to* in some way clear the path for others to walk (Tew, 2006, p.37). I began this research project with similar ideas, thinking that what was needed was a structure to mediate the structural challenges facing young people. However, having grown through this PAR research project, my thinking has changed and I reject that assertion, perceiving this to be tied to the problematic and controlling adultism that has been discussed in the literature review (Bessant et al, 2024, Corney et al, 2022, Lundy, 2007).

Through the development of the 'Taking Part – Taking Apart' Spectrum I have critically explored my own professional practice and recognise how pervasive tendencies to direct participatory and political processes can impact within youth work under the pressure of performativity (de St. Croix, 2018). I seek to engage with young people through thoughtful

connection to, and expansion of, their lived realities, utilising these as the starting points for relationship building and informal, critical education. This I believe can enable a participatory and political process to evolve through an 'emancipatory curriculum' shaped by young peoples' interests and passions (Giroux, 2025, p. 173).

6.3 Professional Political Practice under Contemporary Political Structures

Recognising the considerable tensions in practice that impact on the development of critical, participatory and political education within youth work is essential if efforts are to be made to challenge this reality, resist and rebuild. I have sought to do this firstly, through an exploration of participatory and political practice within the history of youth work. This journey has highlighted the legacy of the contested nature of policy and practice, along with a determined 'practice of struggle' (Foucault, 1982). This has been motivating and reinvigorating, understanding that contexts can change and equalities can be gained. This has shaped my commitment to contribute to this struggle with others.

Secondly, and pragmatically, I came to realise that, as a young person involved in the research highlights, 'everyone can do something about what they believe in' [YP1YPA, Line 141]. I believe in youth work, and that my own practice and practice across the sector can be reinvigorated to reflect commitments to foster social justice. I have learnt to just start somewhere, by 'finding the cracks', through which practice can emerge and making connections with others to secure support (Batsleer and Hughes, 2014, p.162). Through the research project I have experienced the challenging and frustrating contexts in which contemporary practice exists. I have also been able to try out new shapes within the practice sites that have developed my thinking and a new orientation to youth participation, political education and social justice.

Through the PAR project I have made multiple 'messy' attempts to *build, generate* and *evaluate* a version of a critical and political youth work and reflected with others on the impact (Percy-Smith et al, 2019b, Cook, 2009). From this PAR process two central frameworks have evolved that I believe can offer support for the development of political and critical youth work futures. The first is the 'Taking Part – Taking Apart' Spectrum which works as a framework to recognise commitments beyond activities, progressing into education and action.

The second is the development of a 'DEEP Learning Framework' [Dialogical, Engaged, Experiential, Pedagogy], presented here as an attempt to shape an 'emancipatory curriculum' (Giroux, 2025, p. 173) to embed participatory and political principles within youth work practice. This framework was borne from the PAR process, through reflection 'on action' and 'for action' (Schön, 1991). This new orientation to participatory and political practice is expressed through the DEEP Learning Framework that seeks to connect key principles of a changed way of 'thinking and doing' that fosters, increased potential for political and

participatory education (Ledwith, 2016, p.5). This framework has been generated through the PAR process offering a model of critical and political education for practice moving forwards. As an educator, within youth work, and within Higher Education as a tutor of Youth Work, this DEEP Learning Framework offers a contribution in both educational spaces and will be presented in the following section.

6.4 DEEP Learning Framework

This learning framework connects central principles of Freirean theory, including Dialogical, Engaged and Experiential to form a Pedagogy based on the exploration of lives in the 'average everydayness' (Dall'Alba, 2009, p. 35). The DEEP Learning Framework is a tool that promotes working through intentional, problem-posing and creative educational approaches to foster a critical and political education in practice (Fusco, 2013). The ambition is that this framework will facilitate an increased awareness, 'conscientisation' and engagement with the structural forces that impact on the realities of everyday life for people we are working with as well as for ourselves as practitioners (Freire, 1972).

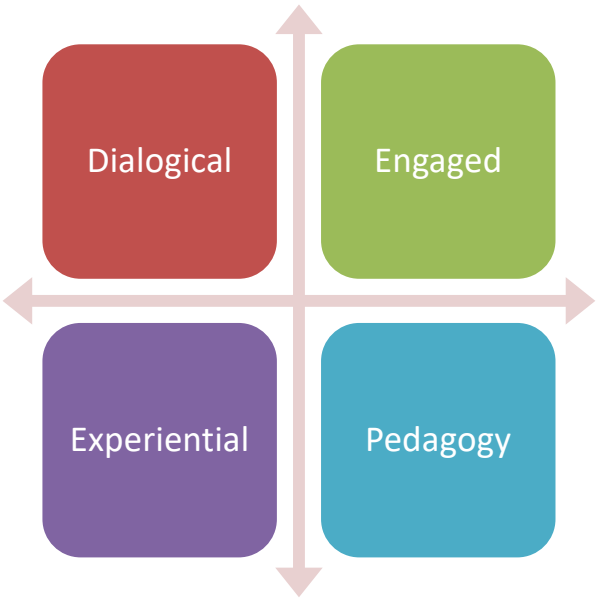

Fig. 3 DEEP Learning Framework

6.4.1 Exploration of the DEEP Learning Framework

This framework seeks to create learning spaces located within the realities of everyday lives. These spaces can open up opportunities to explore the impact of wider social, political and economic structural forces grown from themes generated by young people and youth work students themselves. It is envisaged that engagement through creative and developmental methodologies, as have been applied within the PAR project, can be utilised with young people within youth work and students within academia to construct an 'emancipatory curriculum' (Giroux, 2025, p. 173) and promote 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1972). The

realisation that within academia youth work students would benefit, in similar ways as young people within youth work, from a learning process that promotes critical and political thinking has been generated through reflection on the PAR Project. Fostering experiential learning through making connections to their own and others' lived realities and expanding existing knowledge of social, political and economic structural issues and oppression, within the practical space of engaged reflection and response.

The dominance of neoliberalism over the last four decades, and austerity more recently, has significantly impacted education within schools as they serve more broadly to reinforce the structured nature and position of certain groups (Kincheloe, 2010, Giroux, 2011, Apple, 2013, Ball, 2013, Bamber and Murphy, 1999). This impacts subsequent generations of young people and students and their capabilities as critical thinkers, as they approach each new learning environment expecting the same rote routine (Danvers, 2021, Clegg, 2008). The DEEP Learning Framework seeks to promote principles of both learning and 'unlearning' to challenge themselves to disconnect from dominant, often privileged perspectives and mechanisms for the measurement of learning and achievement (Giroux, and DiMaggio, 2024, Giroux, 2025, Illich, 2002, hooks, 1994, Freire, 1972).

6.4.2 Meanings of Dialogical

Conversation and dialogue have been, and remain, fundamental within youth work positioned as a central pillar to professional practice (Batsleer, 2008, 2013, Smith, 2005, Jeffs and Smith, 2010, Ord, 2016, Davies, 2021, Hammond and McArdle, 2024). Youth workers work informally to build relationships with young people connecting with their interests as starting points for this developmental approach (Davies, 2005). Working through conversation and dialogue is applied within this model from Freirean theoretical positioning (Freire, 1972). The basis of dialogical thinking is to recognise and expand the learning process through communication, in a non-hierarchical manner, where people can be changed by the process. This is not focused on simply changing people's minds, nor providing answers, but to use words intentionally to build and stretch thinking in order to expand understanding.

> Dialogue is a kind of necessary posture to the extent that humans have become more and more communicative beings. Dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it. (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 13)

Freire recognises that communication is greater and more meaningful than 'mere ping pong of words and gestures' (Freire and Shor, 1987, p. 13). Instead, positions dialogue in this way seeking to challenge the domination of knowledge as the 'sole possession of the teacher who gives knowledge to the students in a gracious gesture' but an act and engagement for 'mutual inquiry' (Freire and Shor, 1987, p. 14). Through this perspective Freire recognises the importance of the valuable contributions from all those involved, not the prioritisation of the adult worker and as a result power dynamics can be transformed. The respectful promotion

of mutual inquiry can be translated to the education spaces of both youth work and academia. Taking time to consider and create spaces for dialogue is a starting point for a reimagined world, where workers and young people are shaped and reshaped by the knowledge generated through the exploration of perspectives. This learning is based on taking a position as an educator, not as an owner of knowledge to be given. There is much capacity for the application of these principles to my professional practice. Irrespective of the tensions in professional practice I believe space remains for practice to reflect commitments for respectful and expansive dialogue with young people.

6.4.3 Meanings of Engaged

Building on dialogical education to foster an engaged educational experience connects to Freire's critique of 'banking education' (Freire, 1972. p.46) which, it is argued, dominates formal educational experiences in the UK and across the globe (Kincheloe, 2010, Giroux, 2011). Formal education is traditionally plagued with models of 'banking' education as,

> Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor…which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat. (Freire, 1972, p. 46)

As has been explored through the findings from this PAR project much within youth work connects through activity, as workers use activities to share space and time with young people (Smith, 2005, Davies, 2005, Sapin, 2013, Ord, 2016). These activities are built from the interests and needs of young people and often include music, sport, art, cooking depending on resources available. Through the development of activities workers are able to stimulate connections between young people and workers through the conversations that are generated through the active involvement with the activities.

Ideas of a curriculum in youth work have been rekindled in recent years (NYA, 2020), I contend, to compete in the 'marketopia' of human services through active advertising of the youth work 'brand' (West, 2016, p.161). However, positively, this highlights the capacity within youth work for the development of learning through exploring experiences and connecting with contemporary agendas (NYA, 2020). Recognising the professional pressure workers face in terms of the delivery of pre-determined outcomes there is a danger that educational processes within informal education take on didactic 'banking' (Freire, 1972) forms akin to formal education (Jeffs, 2015, Davies, 2013). This highlights the need to promote an engaged form of pedagogy within youth work. A form which promotes active and dynamic opportunities, through experience, to explore and reflect.

This is also relevant within the teaching and learning dynamic within university education. One of the challenges within university education is the rigid nature of courses and programmes, focused on the determination to get through the material (Danvers, 2021)

leaving limited scope for more dynamic and engaged approaches for learning. I believe there needs to be a reclaiming of education for learning and understanding, not simply to collect knowledge without the capacity to apply in action. Illich (2002) highlights how formal, school-based education distorts learning,

> The pupil is thereby "schooled" to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. His imagination is "schooled" to accept service in place of value. (Illich, 2002, p.1)

Enacting an engaged learning process demands a commitment to exploration and reflection which brings about, it is argued a more expansive and transformative learning experiences as people discover for themselves through processes of group work and dialogue, rather than simply given answers.

6.4.4 Meanings of Experiential

The third element within the framework connects with both dialogical and engaged through a share ethos for learning, comparable with Kerry Young's position, that youth work is an exercise in 'moral philosophy' (Young, 2006, p.3). Connections have been made to experiential learning within youth work throughout its history (Smith, 1982, Smith, 2005, Ord, 2012a). Experiential learning, it is postulated, is positioned on principles that highlight the importance of involvement, discovery and freedom within the learning environment (Ord, 2012a). Youth workers recognise that learning is an active process, whereby learning is drawn from reflection on encounters that are seen, felt, and experienced as part of real life, in meaningful ways.

Experiential learning has been part of the educational landscape within youth work, often applied in circumstances out of the ordinary, for example, through the outdoor pursuits residential experiences. Locating learning only in these spaces and taking away for the everyday opportunities for learning limits experiential learning and reflection (Ord, 2012a). The argument here is that through 're-experiencing the ordinary' (Shor, 1992 in Ledwith 2011, p.9) of lived realties provides rich opportunities to reflect on with young people to explore the social, political and economic dynamics that impact on their lives. Freire recognises the importance of both creating opportunities through which to generate themes and further using these as catalysts to create action for social justice.

Adopting a questioning and problem-posing approach in the 'average everydayness' has the capacity to create multiple opportunities for participation and engagement (Dall'Alba, 2009, p. 35). Reflective of the understanding that learning is most effective where others have opportunities to connect and shape what is learnt and how learning takes place, offering freedom and autonomy in this space (Ord, 2012a). This perspective, whilst traditionally embedded within youth work has less history within formal education (Smith, 1982).

However, given the contemporary demands and concerns for the student experience, the development of a more experiential learning environment may seek to impact on engagement, enjoyment and attendance which are central concerns for the university sector (Raaper, 2021).

6.4.5 Meanings of Pedagogy

The final part of the DEEP Learning Framework is pedagogy, in this case, critical in nature, which I contend is created where the concepts presented in the framework are brought together to shape a coherent, critical and collaborative philosophy for youth work informal education. One that is developed in association with learners, including young people within youth work. The notion of critical pedagogy, which is the form specifically relevant in this research, relates to an orientation to education and learning that fosters more than simply the sharing of facts between people. Critical pedagogy encompasses a more detailed and developmental process, where matters of ethics, values and social justice are central within the context of learning (Giroux, 2011). The position of youth work as a critical pedagogic endeavour has been well documented with recognition of youth work as a 'social pedagogy', making contributions to the landscape of educational development (Batsleer, 2013, p. 287), and further as a 'border pedagogy' (Coburn, 2010, *in* Batsleer and Davies, 2010, p.33) bridging between formal and non-formal learning environments. Youth work as an educational practice is depicted as 'distinctive' (Jeffs and Smith, 2010, p.1), shaped and underpinned by social justice values (Corney et al, 2023). The notion of critical pedagogy is framed through an expanded perspective of knowing, an orientation to learning and discovery that is connected to values, experience, dialogue and reflection that extend development of political, social and economic understandings of lived realities (Jeffs and Smith, 2021).

Summary of Conclusions

This research has been a challenging, critical and developmental experience, which I continue to reflect on in order to change my own and others'practice. Utilising the findings from the PAR project to create new shapes and ideas regarding professional practice within youth work and academia feels exciting and positive. Recognising that some of the grand challenges facing communities are bound up with dominant neoliberal systems that individually I can feel I have limited capacity to tackle. However, at this stage I see how the 'Taking Part – Taking Apart' Spectrum and the DEEP Learning Framework can offer a mechanism to reclaim and resist the dominant norms of a shifted landscape within my own professional practice. Applying these elements makes it possible to articulate a new version of practice to ensure the opportunities and possibilities of participatory and political practice persist.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Diamond Ranking – Responses from Youth Project A

Appendix 2 - Example of Research Day Session Plan

Appendix 3 - Methods of Data Collection Table – Extended Version

Appendix 1 - Diamond Ranking – Responses from Youth Project A

	YP1		YP2
1	Religion	1	Being respected for my views and not to be worrying about people judging me and what they think of me
2	Living in a world that is at peace not war	2	Living in a world where all people have good chances in life
3	Living in a world where all people have good chances in life	3	Living in a world that is at peace not war
4	The freedom to do things that other people don't have, i.e. education, talk about certain things.	4	Being listened to and having a say in my local area
5	Do things that make me happy no matter what others might say	5	Family that supports me
6	Knowing what I want to do with my life and having goals	6	Feeling good about myself
7	Having people that I can go to if / when I need them (support networks)	7	Getting qualifications that will help me get a good job
8	Spending times with friends, relaxing and enjoying myself	8	Doing things that make me happy no matter what others might say
9	Drinking alcohol and hanging out with friends	9	Having a say in what goes on in my local area

	YP3		YP4
1	Family and life at home	1	Feeling good about myself
2	Family that support me	2	Doing well in school or college
3	Doing well in school or college	3	Living in a world that is at peace and not war
4	Knowing what I want to do with my life and having goals	4	Family that support me
5	Having good friends	5	Doing things that make me happy no matter what others might say
6	Living in a world where all people have good chances in life	6	Being fit and healthy
7	Doing things that make me happy no matter what others might say	7	Having good friends
8	Living in a world that is at peace and not war	8	Living somewhere nice
9	Getting qualifications that will help me get a good job	9	Spending times with friends, relaxing and enjoying myself

Appendix 2 – Example of Research Day Session Plan

We Can Kick It

Research Activity Day 3 – 18th August @ St. John's Youth Centre

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Welcome & Intro

Start at 10.15am
• Circle time intro
• Name suggestions for the project.

Equipment – Taxis, stickers for name tags, pens</td></tr>
<tr><td>Multi - Sports Activities
Round 1 (10.30 - 11am)

Choice from Rounders, Dance, Dodge Ball, Basketball and Football.

Two teams of young people's choosing

Equipment: Bats, Balls (softballs – TR), cones, bibs, posts.</td><td>Crafty Session

C / Youth – visual minutes, comics
'Zines' – friendship group or EITC focused
Banner
Camera
Laptop / photos

Equipment - Art and craft materials, camera, laptop.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Data Collection (1) (11.15 – 12 noon)

Small groups x 2 (Debbie, Jo, Corrie, Rhiannon, Steve, Tracy, Karen)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Life Journey Activity (20 mins)

Focus the session on the life experiences of young people, connecting with key, significant moments that have been part of their journey.

Equipment: Paper, pens, life journey guidance sheet (TR to put together and circulate), Dictaphone – audio record discussion.</td><td>Agree, Disagree, Maybe? (20 mins)

Young people asked questions and then move to the place on the continuum that reflects their view, discuss.

Equipment: Masking tape for continuum, questions (DC to circulate), Dictaphone – audio record discussion.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Lunch (12-12.45pm)

Lunch – sandwiches, pizza buffet, new food – hummus, olives, something random?

Camera Challenge
Guidance sheet given, cameras at end of day, return in one week.
Equipment – Jo to buy lunch, box of cups from Centre, update camera guidance sheet (TR)</td></tr>
</table>

Multi - Sports Activities **Round 2 (12.45 – 1.15pm)** **Choice from Rounders, Dance, Dodge Ball, Basketball and Football.** Two teams of young people's choosing **Equipment:** Bats, Balls (softballs – TR), cones, bibs, posts.	**Crafty session** **C/ Youth – visual minutes, comics** **'Zines' – friendship group or football focus** **Banner** **Camera** **Laptop / photos** **Equipment** - Art and craft materials, camera, laptop.

Data Collection (2) (1.15 – 2pm)

Small groups x 3 (Debbie, Jo, Corrie, Rhiannon, Steve, Tracy, Karen)

You Said, What Next?

Using quotes from the young people from previous sessions to spark more detailed conversation and debate exploring in more depth the lived realities of the young people. Young people can create other ways they wish to express their views.

Equipment: Quotes from young people, You Said, What next? Guidance & Opportunities Sheet (TR to circulate)

'Drawing' **C/ Youth**	**'Jawing'**	**'Performing'**
Using comics, 'zines', art and creative wonder to express how young people feel.	Discussion group to explore the quotes and to draw out more from the group through conversation.	Use the quotes to inspire drama-based development sharing scenarios based on young people's experience.

Opportunities Run Around

Young people asked to express their interest in a number of opportunities available as part of the research

Would you like to?

1. Talk to youth workers about working with young people with additional needs?
2. Talk to trainee teachers (including PE teachers) about working with young people with additional needs?
3. Help us research with other people – parents, teachers, decision-makers?
4. Design a gallery of photos to share with parents, teachers, youth workers, decision-makers about how we feel about our lives and the support we have?

Equipment: Signs for each opportunity and space for other ideas.

Afternoon Tea Break (2pm – 2.30pm) Young people relax, have some space and can choose what they wish to do. **Equipment:** Juice, biscuits, fruit.
Review & Evaluate Activity Day (2.30 – 3pm) Paper plate evaluate – Today has been? Draw, write, or sing, dance, take photo? Finish at 3pm (ish) Taxis at 3.30pm **Equipment** – Paper plates, pens, music, cameras, Dictaphones.

Appendix 3 - Methods of Data Collection – Extended Version

PAR Activity Details	Research Site	Method of Data Collection	Rationale
Group Ground Rules – 1. Dice Question Stems, for example: I work best when…..? 2. Flip Chart ideas	Youth Project A and B	Focus Groups Audio Recorded	Generating and sharing ideas for how we would work together. Promoting choice and decision making across the group.
Sports Activity Day – Football Skills and Drill, ZINES - Research Questions – Sports and Games / Gender.	Youth Project B	Focus Groups Audio Recorded	Encouraging Young People to reflect on their favourite sports and activities. Explorations of ideas about the impact of disability and gender on access to sport.
Diamond Ranking – Two sets of Questions: 1. Factors important to me 2. Factors affecting me	Youth Project A	Individual or Paired Discussion Audio Recorded	Young People select the most important / relevant 9 cards from the pack to discuss. Generating Themes about Young People's Lived Realities.
Research Quotes – Using quotes from previous Research Activity Day to frame questions and extend understanding.	Youth Project B	Focus Groups Audio Recorded	Quotes taken from the Audio Recordings of previous Research Activity Days used to frame deeper / clarifying questions.
Party Games Activity Day – Musical Chairs, Pin the Tail, Pass the Parcel, Balloon Games. Research Questions in the games.	Youth Project B	Focus Groups Audio Recorded Photos of Activity	Young People wanted to have a party – one of the Research Activity Days dedicated to party games. Research questions embedded in the games.

PAR Activity Details	Research Site	Method of Data Collection	Rationale
Agree, Disagree - Run around Activity – Questions regarding their club, sports, projects, choice, participation and politics.	Youth Club A and B	Focus Groups Audio Recorded	Generating Themes about Young People's Lived Realities. Exploring different ideas and opinions within the group.
Me and My Map – Young people plot their map with key facilities and spaces in their neighbourhood.	Youth Project B	Individual Activity within Small Groups Audio Recorded	Barriers to Participation Discussion regarding the facilities and connections within local communities and barriers for access or engagement.
Brick Walls – Exploring Barriers What gets in your way? How do you get around it?	Youth Project B	Small Group Activity Audio Recorded	Barriers to Participation Young people identify barriers to their access and engagement within their communities. Young People offer solutions and examples of what they do to overcome the barriers.
Flip Chart Discussions – Would you rather? If you ruled the World? Questions and Discussion.	Youth Project A	Focus Groups Audio Recorded	Learning about Lives Considering what Young People perceived to be problems and potential solutions they see in the World.
Life Journeys – Mapping Add on events, achievements, challenges that you wish to share	Youth Project A and B	Individual / Small Focus Group Audio Recorded Photographs	Learning about Lives Young People developed their life journey reflecting on key moments of their choosing to share. Examples of highlighted areas family, school, friendships, youth project, careers.

PAR Activity Details	Research Site	Method of Data Collection	Rationale
Project Strands – Drama, Music, Drawing, Talking – Using quotes from Transcripts to explore meaning.	Youth Project B	Focus Group Audio Recorded	Enabling Young People to choose different forms to represent meaning and share their ideas through the use of drama, drawing, talking or music. For example, some young people acted out a scenario from School about discrimination.
Paper Plate Evaluate – Reflection spaces for activities and learning.	Youth Project A and B	Written Data from Paper Plates	Gaining feedback from Young People about the sessions, their ideas, challenges and opportunities.
Photography and Photovoice – Photos around the youth club, photos around our neighbourhood.	Youth Project A and B	Focus Groups Audio Recorded Photographs Taken by Young People	To enable Young People to bring to the fore what they see and want to highlight about the youth club / project or their local area.
Chambers (2003) 'The World as it is' and 'The World as it should be' Hoops – Post it notes.	Youth Project A	Hoops annotated with post it notes – photographs	Generating Themes and exploring ideas for creating change. Encouraging Young People to consider areas for change.
Art and Craft Activities – using plastic cups to construct spaces – Build your youth club. Posters to reflect 'What it's like being a Young Person in Liverpool?'	Youth Project A	Posters created from discussions Photos of towers and cups Discussion during the session and reflections.	Using physical / creative activities to facilitate dialogue about young people's worlds, learning about what they think and care about, both in the projects and wider world.

PAR Activity Details	Research Site	Method of Data Collection	Rationale
Comics ZINES – Discussion about the increase of homelessness in the city. Discussion regarding making friend within the project.	Youth Project A and B	Focus Groups Audio Recorded ZINE created / photographs	Used for young people to express their idea, issues or interests. Examples include - Youth Project A - Discussion of the issue of Homelessness. Youth Project B - Importance of Friendship and Impact of Discrimination in Sport
Visual Coding – Using photographs taken across the Research Activity Days to connect learning and explore meaning.	Youth Project B	Focus Group Audio Recorded Photographs, Post It Notes with Connections Written.	Fostering Young People's opportunities to be involved across the research stages. To develop deeper understanding of the impact of the research process.
'Chill & Chat' Conversations – Covering news and 'serious issues' from the day.	Youth Project A	Focus Groups Audio Recorded	Young People created this space to talk about social, political, economic news and issues from the day that was on their mind. Youth Project A – Discussions regarding people seeking asylum, issues of the Taliban and citizenship, **s**etting up a club football team.
Fundraiser Event – Supporting Homeless People Mobile Planning Tool	Youth Project A	Coat Hanger Mobile – Components of the event – Photos Notes, discussions flip chart planning	Facilitate Young People's ownership of the project, taking the lead to explore elements of planning. Working to strengths in the PAR Group. Opening space for Young People's ideas for the event. Sharing learning about the issue of homelessness through the event.

PAR Activity Details	Research Site	Method of Data Collection	Rationale
Development of Disability Awareness Raising Session for Trainee Youth Workers – PowerPoint, Quiz, Scenarios.	Youth Project B	Focus Groups Audio Recorded Quiz, PowerPoint and Scenarios from Young People's lives.	Creating Change in the education and learning of trainee Youth Workers. Young People developed a training day for Youth Workers to reflect on how they work with disabled Young People.
Evaluation Sessions – to reflect on specific elements or activities.	Youth Project A and B	Individual interview / Focus Group Audio Recorded Sessional Recordings	Evaluation and reflection embedded into Youth Project Research Sessions across the range of informal – formalised mechanisms.
Semi-Structured Interviews - with Three JNC Qualified Senior Youth Workers.	Youth Workers	Individual Interviews, on Zoom Audio Recorded	To explore understandings, practice and challenges of participatory and political Youth Work Practice for social justice in contemporary practice.