

Exploring young people's and youth workers' experiences of spaces of youth development: creating cultures of participation

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The paper focuses on the emergence of 'positive youth development' and its impact on older, more established practices of working with young people, such as youth work. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in England between 2004-2006, in particular young people's and youth workers' accounts of participating in youth work, the analysis engages with the social spaces in which youth work takes place and asks key questions about why young people might participate in youth spaces, what they get out of participating and how such spaces can promote cultures of participation. The analysis shows that such spaces provide young people and their communities with biographical continuity and time becomes a key component for sustaining such spaces. The argument is made for a more nuanced understanding of what *young people* get out of their participation in youth spaces, and for an epistemological approach to youth praxis that embraces the messiness and inequalities of lived experience.

Keywords: youth development; youth work; liminal spaces; ethnography; participatory video research

Introduction

Youth work, a value- and relationship-based practice that relies on young people's voluntary engagement in such relationships (Davies 2005), is an international phenomenon with diverse roots (Coussée 2008). Social education philosophies underpinning youth work have been described as oscillating between liberal and radical models of social action (Bradford 2004) with policy-makers demonstrating a preference for the former and practitioners embracing the latter (Davies 2005). It is argued that neoliberal influences in current policy making in the UK and elsewhere are 'closing off opportunities for progressive ways of working with young people' (Cooper 2011, p.53) with some practitioners increasingly feeling like radical practices are in danger of extinction (Nicholls 2012).

This paper engages with these practice challenges drawing on empirical material from ethnographic fieldwork carried out on an English youth development programme; it focuses specifically on a youth centre involved in delivering the programme. As well as engaging with the social spaces in which youth work takes place, the paper raises key questions about why young people might participate in youth spaces, what they get out of participating and how such spaces can promote cultures of participation. At the same time as providing a qualitative evidence base for the developmental and biographical relevance of such youth spaces, the analysis invites readers to make connections with literatures of youth transitions and youth (sub)cultures as a way of creating a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of youth development both as experience and programmatic practice.

Shifting policy and practice landscapes

Internationally, over the last ten years (Coussée *et al.* 2009), the practices of youth work, and the social spaces in which it takes place, have fallen deeply out of fashion with policy makers. Research that has positioned traditional youth work as largely ‘unstructured’ and disorganised (Feinstein *et al.* 2006; Mahoney *et al.* 2004), has fed into policy making in England resulting in the provision of more instrumental forms of working with young people that focused on *structured, positive activities* (HM Treasury 2007).

The focus on structured, positive activities has its roots in the US policy, practice and research traditions of Positive Youth Development (PYD) (Sukarieh & Tannock 2011). PYD is an ecological, strengths-based approach to understanding and working with young people which challenges the view of ‘broken’ young people in need of psychosocial repair (Lerner *et al.* 2005).

PYD programming emphasises young people's physical and psychological safety; the provision of appropriate structures, supporting relationships and positive role models; opportunities to develop self-efficacy, to build skills, to form positive associations and to make societal contributions (Eccles & Gootman 2002, p. 19). Instrumental in its focus, such programming is deployed in addressing a range of youth problems including educational outcomes, substance misuse, delinquent behaviour and civic orientation. Furthermore, the emergence of PYD has generated a strong interest in outcomes monitoring and evaluation, and experimental and quasi-experimental approaches to assessing programme effectiveness. Yet the results of such endeavours, paint a mixed picture and recent calls have been made for qualitative systematic reviews to explore processes and contexts of youth development (Morton & Montgomery 2011).

It is arguably the promise of social accountancy that 'structured' programmes offer that appeals to policy makers, far more than the riskier and messier sounding language of relationships, identity and belonging that is found in more critical youth development literature (Fine & Sirin 2007) and in radical youth work traditions (Belton 2010). The 'positivity imperative' of PYD has been robustly criticized (Taylor 2012; Sukarieh & Tannock 2011). Central to these critiques is the fact that PYD fails 'to recognize adequately the broader nature of youth stereotyping in society' and the 'doubling' of youth as a social category onto which society's hopes *and* fears are projected (Sukarieh & Tannock 2011, p.688). Instead, PYD promotes a decontextualized approach to youth, youth leisure spaces, and young people's developmental trajectories, ignores the socioeconomic landscapes that impact on young people's leisure practices (Shildrick & MacDonald 2006), and continues to universalise and individualize personal change.

In response to instrumental approaches to working with young people, debates

have focused on the need to reconnect with the more radical roots of youth work practice (Davies 2010; Batsleer 2010, both cited in Cooper 2011, p.55). While the lack of historical introspection in the youth work field has been lamented (Coussée 2008), where such accounts exist (c.f. Coussée *et al.* 2012; Gilchrist *et al.* 2001) they demonstrate the centrality of communities of place and identity practices in the development of youth work. Informal learning spaces can facilitate identity work and the radical youth work tradition emerged from, and is tied to, local milieus. Within these communities the youth club is a key space in which critical praxis takes place.

These youth spaces signal the rich and heterogeneous context in which youth work practice is embedded. Failure to account for this richness, which often provides a thread of biographical continuity for workers, young people and communities alike, risks the marginalisation, or even abolishment, of these spaces and practices. At the same time, the absence of empirical research on youth work practice that captures the perspectives of young people and youth workers themselves, means that the challenges facing youth work can only be addressed through rhetoric and outcome-driven research methods (Coussée 2008). As such, there is a need for an approach that situates culture, and therefore meaning making, at the heart of both research and practice (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

Culture, community and identity

The present research was informed by the writing of French cultural theorist Michel de Certeau's (1984) whose ethnographic work in urban spaces reminds us of the role played by communities of place in the inner city and of the distinctive flavour, or identity, that each such community represents. Furthermore, his writing provides a way of understanding the dynamics of participation in such communities by honing in on the

inter-subjectivity of joint action and by focusing on the strategies and tactics deployed by dominant and subjugated groups in creating meaning in everyday life.

By using a cultural practice lens it was possible for the research to create a ‘third [contact] space’ (Cohen & Ainley 2000) in which to engage young people as social actors who negotiate their identities across a multiplicity of political landscapes (Katsiaficas *et al.* 2011). In this respect, the research enacted some of the practices of radical youth work by creating meaningful contact between young people, and their communities, who were supported to intervene in the politics of their everyday lives. These improvisational spaces enabled them to more “consciously perform [...] identity rather than unconsciously enacting a set of unreflective identifications” (Watkins & Shulman 2008, p. 171). These processes were documented and analysed through a methodology for critical reflection that drew on ethnographic and reflective practice (Nolas, 2011a).

Methods

The research took place within the context of evaluating a youth development programme (Play On, a pseudonym) with a youth inclusion focus. The programme was aimed at youngsters aged 10-19 who were deemed by their local authorities to be at-risk of drug abuse and criminal behaviour (Humphreys *et al.* 2006). The Play On programme used a relationship-strategy, as well as leisure and cultural activities, in order to engage young people and support them in (re)-establishing themselves in employment, education, and/or training.

A total of six groups across England were selected to participate in the research based on group demographic characteristics, crime profile of the area and diversity of organizational arrangements for delivering the programme (Humphreys, Nolas & Olmos, 2006). From the six groups a total of 18 young people participated directly in

the research activities over a 9-month period. This group comprised eleven (11) young men and seven (7) young women. The young people were 13 to 18 years of age, and of English, African, Middle Eastern and Caribbean heritage.

The focus of this paper is on one of the participating groups, a youth club with a longstanding history in the local community. The youth club was selected for further analysis as it provides an opportunity to challenge the youth policy discourse in circulation at the time, and in doing so to offer further qualitative evidence for the developmental and biographical relevance of such youth spaces.

The youth club, which was spoken about with fondness by young people and staff alike, was situated at the edge of a building estate in a busy urban area. The centre provided a range of leisure spaces for children and young people including football sessions in the park, snooker, table tennis and trips to the countryside, as well as a physical space where youth could go to 'hang out'. At the time of the research the club was buying in activities from the Play On programme.

Young people at the youth club were approached to take part in the evaluation activities. The membership of this group varied over a period of 18 months and we worked consistently with 3 core members and engaged with a further 3 peripheral members. The two core members were a 15-year old young man and two 17- and 18-year old young women. All the participants were of African or African Caribbean heritage.

Participatory video was used as the main engagement and data collection method (Thomson 2008; Humphreys *et al.* 2006). Young people were introduced to participatory video and were trained by the researchers in using the digital video recorders. Young people were provided with a short interview schedule to structure their initial activities. The schedule contained questions asking young people to describe

their area, the positive and negative aspects of their area, what they would change, where they saw themselves in five years time, and what they thought of the Play On programme.

Young people were supported through weekly visits in which the author helped young people to collect and edit footage of their areas. Over a period of nine months the core group interviewed a further 15 young people of similar age, gender and heritage as the core group of young people. These informants also spent time at the youth club, and were filmed doing a range of activities that were meaningful to them such as sporting activities, making music, 'hanging out' around their estate, and group discussions. Four 15-minute audiovisual compositions about their areas and what the Play On programme meant to them, were created by the young people.

Following the completion of the audiovisual compositions, focus group discussions were carried out in order to reflect on both the content of the videos and the process of producing the videos. Building on the themes of the initial interview schedule, young people were asked to interpret their audiovisual compositions, as well as to provide critical feedback on what it was like to take part in the research. All audiovisual compositions and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In addition to participatory video and focus groups, formal and informal interviews were carried out with youth workers (all men in their twenties, thirties and forties) over the nine-month period. Nine relevant policy documents were analysed, as were 120 newspaper articles carrying coverage of the Play On programme. Finally, the author used field notes to record her involvement in the field as a researcher-practitioner. Fieldnotes focused on the informal discussions with young people and project staff, on the participatory research processes and on the author's thoughts,

feelings and reflections on working with the young people. Fieldnotes were written up at the end of each day with the final fieldnote record comprising of over 400 pages of word-processed text.

The analysis drew on the principles of grounded theory giving priority to processes, as well as ‘practical concerns, conditions, and constraints that actors confront and deal with in their everyday lives and actions’ (Emerson *et al.* 1995, p. 147). The analysis developed through constant comparison between the different perspectives represented in the data. Memo-writing was used to develop theoretical ideas through the coding and categorisation stages of the analysis. ‘Negative cases’ were sought out in the form of instances that challenged or contradicted the assumptions of theories of participation (e.g. that participation is necessarily empowering). Emergent theories were tested through further analysis of policy documents as well as published literature that focused on young people’s and youth workers’ experiences of participation. A full discussion relating to issues of the reflexive stance developed in this research are explored elsewhere (Nolas 2011a).

Findings

Key categories to emerge from the overall analysis were: defining the problem of social exclusion, creating innovative solutions to the problem of youth exclusion, assessing the impact of solutions to youth inclusion, the practice of youth work, and experiences of disruption, resistance and messiness in participation. The theory developed through this analysis suggests that practices of ‘youth inclusion’ in England at the time embodied, but did not always acknowledge, older practices of youth work. In the programme links were made with practices of PYD through the emphasis on positive activities and role models. In the creation of these ‘new’ practices, stories told by project workers, which appeared in the official programme publications, served the purpose of breaking from

tradition and were used to establish the innovative nature of the specific programme. In terms of the youth inclusion practices themselves, the analysis suggested that such practices were both inclusive as well as exclusive and that workers' experiences of facilitating young people's participation represented a number of challenges that are not always adequately accounted for in theories of participation (Nolas, 2011b). With this in mind the rest of the section focuses specifically on the analysis of the youth club case and the clash between older and newer practices of working with young people.

Shelter from the storm: Why did young people attend the youth club?

Some of the PYD literature, as well as popular conceptions of youth leisure occupations, suggests that youth spaces and youth activities provide young people with somewhere to go and 'something to do'. Far from being 'bored, unmotivated and unexcited about their lives' (Larson 2000, p.170) the analysis of young people's audiovisual stories emphasizes that they attend the youth club in order to get away from the everyday social divisions and tensions they experienced in order to achieve a sense of belonging.

Through their audiovisual compositions young people painted a vivid picture of social exclusion in their areas as they were experiencing it (Humphreys *et al.* 2004). A number of external pressures were identified by young people as worrying them or impinging on their lives, including drugs, their relationship with the police, racism and race relations, money and gangs. In this section these themes are presented through the audiovisual narratives of young people at the Haven Youth Centre (pseudonym).

Drugs was a central theme in young people's narratives. Drugs and drug dealing were spoken about in a number of ways including as a source of income, a waste of time or a stupid thing to become involved in, a form of relaxation and enjoyment, and something to do.

Young people described their relationship with the policy as problematic. They recounted being stopped by the police and spoke about excessive police presence in their neighbourhoods. Young people spoke about police presence in terms of harassment and the unfairness in which 'stop and search' took place.

It's alright, it's alright you know. Like there's too much police around innit? There is too much police around, holding man back. Accusing people of stupid stuff but I am not saying that there should have been no police because then it wouldn't be safe around the area. Like there's too much. (video, Haven Youth Club; young man describing negative aspects of his area)

Racism and race relations also featured in young people's audiovisual compositions. Some young people spoke about their experiences of racism and the complex ways in which race intersected with experiences of education, work and community cohesion. Other young people used the audiovisual composition to reflect their anxieties about the rapidly changing demographics of their area in response to migration.

The negative side is that all the rubbish [inaudible] and stuff. Kids, teenagers getting accused of stuff they ain't done like. Everybody gets stereotyped. If one teenager done something then everyone gonna think that all the teenagers around here do all the bad stuff. (video, Haven Youth Centre; young man describing the negative aspects of his area)

Do you know what it is yeah? It's all the asylum seekers yeah, that comes they take the houses... (video, Haven Youth Club; group discussion about the negative aspects of the area)

Money, the absence and the pursuit of it, also featured in some of the young people's audiovisual compositions. Money appeared in their narratives reflecting both shorter and longer-term aspirations, such as the desire to own material goods that were

trendy or the quest for independence. Young people also spoke about government investment, or lack thereof, in their various communities.

Finally, young people spoke about gangs in their areas, groups of young men, and sometimes women, who identified as belonging to a group from the same estate or post code area. Gangs were both sources of inclusion and exclusion for young people (Ralphs, Medina & Aldridge 2009). Identification with a gang provided young people with a group identity and the feeling of belonging. At the same time, those young people commenting on the subject as non-gang members, felt gangs gave their neighbourhoods a bad reputation and menaced communities.

It happens everywhere innit? That's my views. You got little kids... money... go fishing down the roads... no fathers... you join a gang innit? ... join the gang get that paper... get a little wrap on the sheet... innit? It's all about money and hoes. You see it? That's my view. (video, Haven Youth Centre; young person being interviewed about the area)

The young people participating in the research, who identified as non-gang members, used the audiovisual compositions to paint a more positive image of their area and to highlight young people's sporting and artistic talents.

This is a documentary about urban life and urban talent giving people insights into views on dance, gangs, money and abortion.... This is one of our urban talents which is basketball, streetball. When you do tricks like [name of boy]. (video, Haven Youth Centre; introductory voice over of fourth audiovisual composition)

Young people's choice to explore the theme of 'abortion' in the second round of videos, young women's repeated references to 'lack of father figures' in some young people's lives, and young men's aspirations of normative family life (a wife, some kids) suggest that at least for some of the young people the centre also provided a safe space away from that the stresses of intimate and family relationships.

Belonging: What do young people get out of attending the youth club?

The analysis of the four audiovisual compositions created by the young people at the Haven Youth Centre suggested that conflict and social divisions provided an organizing logic for young people's everyday lives. Young people spoke about the tensions they experienced between themselves and the police who they felt stopped them unnecessarily. They also spoke about tensions amongst groups of young people over drugs. Frustration was a theme that emerged in discussions about local welfare arrangements. Finally, conflict and tensions also characterized young people's accounts of pursuing employment.

Three strategies were outlined by the young people in response to the tensions and struggles they experienced. The first strategy followed by young people was to join a gang. Some of the young people interviewed by their contemporaries as part of the research identified themselves as or alluded to being, gang members. The second strategy pursued was to convert to a religion other than the one followed by their families (if at all). The third strategy discussed, and the one most favourably evaluated by the young people, was to attend the youth club. Some of the young people adopted a number of these strategies at the same time.

Young people saw all three strategies as an endeavour to belong and to experience a sense of cohesion and group identity, and explored these strategies in their audiovisual compositions.

Young woman 1: Yeah, they make up their own groups.

Young woman 2: Their own little gangs to unite. I think it's that they do that....

Young woman 1: ...because they are bored...

Young man 1: ...yeah and they feel that they need other people around them, it's like a big family innit? Because some kids have family problems around here...

Young woman 1: ...yeah lack of father figures...

(video, Haven Youth Club; group discussion about the area)

I explore this endeavour as it was discussed by the young people in relation to the third strategy.

Urban havens, liminal spaces

Haven Centre was set up by a Christian mission 25 years ago. At the time of the research the Centre continued to double as a place of worship on Sundays, although its religious roots were only noticeable in the messages emerging out of young people's artwork displayed on the walls. The centre provided a community space open to young people of all ages, with a large hall upstairs for events, sports, presentations and theatre. Trips were also organised by Centre staff to take young people to the countryside. Haven Youth Centre played a central role in the lives of the young people who 'hung out' there.

In the audiovisual compositions, and in the discussions about those compositions, young people regularly spoke about the youth club using the metaphor of home and family:

Young man 1: It's a good place where I get together with my boys, social innit? And socialize.

Young man 2: It's better than being on the road so the police can accuse you of stuff, innit? It's better to be in a youth club.

Young man 1: We've got Haven though...

Young man 2: Yeah, Haven, home of the (trails off)... You get me? That's the home. Only place looking out for man, Haven. But otherwise that's it really.

(video, Haven Youth Centre; two young men being interviewed by another young person)

The analysis of the fieldnotes suggested a further related metaphor that of the harbour. This second metaphor was implicit in the ways that youth workers talked about the Haven Youth Centre. For example, on one occasion and as part of the Play On

research, we had made arrangements to edit some of the footage collected by the two young people participating in the evaluation. One of those young people did not show up for the editing. On discussing this with the youth worker, he told us that it was also football training night and that our young person was probably there instead. He added: ‘at some point he’ll show up, everybody shows up at Haven Youth Centre at some point or other’ (fieldnotes, Haven Youth Centre).

The youth club’s pseudonym for research purposes (Haven Youth Centre) was an attempt to capture these two metaphors. Taken together these metaphors communicate the meaning and value of youth club attendance for these young people, especially the biographical continuity that the youth club provided for young people and the community:

Haven Centre that’s a main one where everyone goes to especially on Thursday night to link up, that’s been going on for years, I’m 18 now, and that’s been going on since I was born, before I was even born, since my mum was born and she’s even getting a bit old right now, it’s really good, a mix of all cultures, despite their ages they are all big men like 30 old some used to go to Have Youth Centre themselves as kids, but they all relate to the kids, we’re all on a level, there’s obviously a boundary of ages but we’re all talk on a level where we can understand each other, so it’s nice, you haven’t got this overpowering feeling, everyone is uniting as a family basically. (video, Haven Youth Centre; a young person being interviewed by a friend about the youth centre).

The two metaphors used to describe Haven Youth Centre were also used to determine access and membership at the Centre. Like a harbour, young people were free to sail in and out and like a family they were unconditionally accepted at the Centre. As such, and in contrast to other institutional and public spaces (school, streets) that featured in these young people’s narratives, neither age nor statutory obligation determined membership. In this respect the Centre operated on the youth work

principles of voluntarism. People present at the youth centre represented a range of ages and often interacted with each other irrespective of age gaps. Furthermore, young people described the Centre's geographical location, in the middle of a group of estates, as making it physically accessible to them and a space in which a variety of activities could be undertaken for their *intrinsic value*.

A further characteristic of the Centre, evident in the ways that young people and youth workers spoke about it, was the Centre's independence. Independence was spoken about in relation to maintenance of autonomy in funding and practice. It was this emphasis on independence, as well as the potential for youth development offered by this particular youth space, that prompted an analytical turn in the research towards exploring the ways in which the work at the centre related to the Play On programme.

Interruptions: Liminal spaces in transition?

Young people's descriptions of the centre and what they got out of it contrasted starkly with the way they described their areas. Instead of a language of social division and conflict, the emphasis when speaking about Haven Youth Centre was on safety and protection. The space provided by the centre allowed them to engage in those more subaltern activities that researchers identify as typical adolescent occupations (Hendry *et al.* 1993). In this respect the youth club appeared to offer what the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1958) referred to as the 'transitional space' between people's inner and outer worlds; what anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) liked to call the 'liminal' period offered by cultural rites of passage; and what youth worker and sociologist Howard Williamson (2011) refers to as a 'base camp'. In all these cases, such spaces offer young people the opportunity of identity development and the crafting of

biographical narratives, both in terms of *being* and to *becoming*, as old identities are shed and new ones were adopted.

At the same time, project workers and youth workers I came into contact with during the fieldwork made a number of throw away, ironic remarks in response to my formal and informal enquiries about their work with the young people. For instance, one youth worker described the relationship between the centre and the Play On programme as the centre providing ‘the grassroots’ and the programme providing ‘the manure, er, I mean the fertilizer’ (interview, Haven Youth Centre). In another interaction when I asked the same youth worker and another colleague of his whether they would call themselves ‘youth workers’ my question was greeted with a short verbal sparring in which they joked about the use of the terms ‘youth worker’ and ‘practitioner’:

Author: So have you always been a youth worker as well?

Youth worker 1: Yeah, I, I guess so.

Author: I mean is that what you'd call yourself?

Youth worker 1: Yeah, I call myself something like that.

Youth worker 2: Not a practitioner?

Youth worker 1: No, I don't call myself a doctor! Are you a practitioner Rob [turning to the electrician who was there fixing the heating]?

Electrician: Yeah, I guess so - I practice on some things and not on others.

(interview, Haven Youth Centre; discussion with youth workers at the Centre)

Conversely, adults from the other Play On projects that were part of the evaluation rejected the term youth worker preferring instead to call themselves project workers. These little asides led me to more formally reflect on the ways in which these men's work with young people had changed over the years and how they felt that their work related to the more abstract world of policy.

According to the centre staff, the core values of youth work, which centre ‘on enabling young people to make relationships with each other and with adults’ (Youth

Worker, Haven Youth Centre) continued to guide their work. At the same time however, contemporary demographic and technological challenges (Smith, 1999; 2002), as well as changes to the policy landscape, were impacting on these founding values. The dearth of funding, the increased focus on measurement and targets without appropriate training or resources for carrying it out, as well as the instrumental use of leisure activities, were some of the pressures identified by youth workers at the centre.

Over time I began thinking about the youth club as a liminal space itself in transition. The tone of the initial comments, and the strength of feeling about these changes, suggested to me that something was being threatened and that something was at risk of being lost. I started to take a closer look at the youth club and to analyze the way youth workers spoke about how they engaged with young people.

Creating a culture of participation: How do youth clubs engage young people?

The youth workers I spoke to described youth work as what happened in the spaces between school, family, training, and work. As noted by the same youth workers many societal, economic and cultural changes had transformed their occupational landscapes. Young people and their interests had also changed with youth club attendance waxing and waning during this time. Yet, the essence of youth work, its focus on ‘commitment’, ‘counsel’ and ‘self-determination’ (Albemarle Report, 1960), were largely identified as having remained unchanged, albeit with the more contemporary terms of ‘engagement’, ‘support’ and ‘empowerment’ being used.

A newcomer to the youth work tradition, I would term much of what I observed as ‘hanging out’. Often when we showed up at the centre there would be three or four adult men chatting amongst themselves or bantering with the young people. Young people would be playing pool, table tennis, kicking a ball around upstairs or just sitting,

chatting, eating crisps or sweets and drinking fizzy drinks, joking, and messing about, both inside and around the Haven Centre building.

The policy literature often refers to these activities as ‘unstructured’ and largely unsupervised time. Thinking about the youth centre from the vantage point of structured educational environment, such as a school, the reasons for such a perception are perhaps understandable. Unlike schools, youth centres tend to be noisy places without externally imposed time structures (such as lessons and breaks).

Youth worker: ...when everyone's together it's the sort of banter you get the humour and just the noise [...] I mean shouting and trying to put people off their game [...] but it's just like massive sort of thing we're banging the walls and stuff when we see something that we like, a bit of skill or put goal or something, or the arguments with the referee, the referee putting things into control sending people off. Erm, it's just humour that sort of thing...(interview, Haven Youth Centre)

Attendance was not mandatory and this often posed challenges to our externally driven research schedule. It was repeatedly emphasised to us by the senior youth worker that the only way we could ‘guarantee’ young people’s attendance was through repeated phone calls and text messaging to remind them about our meetings. Finally, with the exception of one occasion when we visited the centre and the young people had organised a ‘rave’ as a part of a business studies module at the local college, most of the Thursday evenings we spent there, were both ‘chilled out’ and loud, and echoed young people’s and youth workers’ description of the place.

However, despite appearances, it would be a mistake to deduce that such a space was ‘unstructured’; to the uninitiated and inexperienced eye perhaps, but a more longitudinal engagement with the centre suggested otherwise. What became apparent over time was the youth-centred and voluntary way in which activities were organised. Unlike formal education where time is organised around an externally defined

curriculum and attendance requirements, where children and young people are required to be present and expected to tune into that curriculum in order to succeed, in youth work the adults present needed to attune to the young people using knowledge modalities that go beyond the technical and epistemic, and which involve phronetic knowledge and the use of imagination and intuition, patience and perseverance, and judgement for acting under uncertainty (Nolas, 2011b).

Krueger (2005) has suggested that youth work is best understood through the analogy to modern dance. Drawing from his observations of youth work, the literature on child and youth care and his own 11-years experience as a youth worker, Krueger argues that youth work, like modern dance, starts with a general direction that is loosely prepared at the beginning of each day, but that gives way to improvisation in response to “a multitude of factors” that impact on adults’ interactions with young people.

As such, and in the case of Haven Centre, unstructured did not mean that young people could do whatever they wanted. The Haven Center manager referred to ‘rules’ in operation in line with Krueger’s themes of youth development. Such themes revolved around mutual acknowledgement, consideration, and respect for self and others.

Youth worker: We don't have any written rules but the assumption [...] the assumption here would be you don't smoke and you don't bring any drugs into the place and mmm, [pause], you don't steal anything, you don't damage property, you won't, you know, trouble other people. It's just basic getting on with people... (interview, **Haven Youth Centre**)

These tacit rules however should not be mistaken for disorganisation. These rules for relating with each other at the centre had been developed over the years to the extent that they did not need to be enforced through verbal gestures or signage. Instead, the sort of rules that the youth worker referred to represented an embodied set of

interactions and shared understanding between adults and young people in a particular context which, over time, created a *culture* for being together.

Discussion

In this paper I have reflected on the positive youth development turn witnessed in policy-making in England and elsewhere. Youth policies in England currently exhibit an assortment of values about voluntarism, nationhood, service, and morality (DfE 2011), whilst also demonstrating the perseverance of the belief that structured activity is good for youth development (cf. National Citizenship Service; DFID's International Citizen Service) and provides a solution to a range of youth problems. To give but one example: following the aftermath of the 2011 summer riots in London and other cities in England, as academics, the media, and policy makers alike attempt to make sense of what happened (cf. Reading the Riots 2011), we are witnessing a link *in the making* between youth development programming and the 'new' problem of 'youth violence' (Ilic & Puttick, 2012).

To understand these politics of youth, and young people's development, a more nuanced analysis of young people's experiences of spaces of development is timely and necessary, especially where such analyses highlight the importance of culture, community, identity, relationships, and time, elements of youth development currently missing in national and international youth policy discourses. Through the insights created by a critical, reflexive methodology that put young people at the heart of knowledge creation, this article analysed the dynamics of young people's participation in a longstanding space of youth development and has argued for the preservation of those liminal spaces in which young people 'truly become themselves' (Hendry *et al.* 1993, p. 2).

The analysis showed that participation in such liminal spaces can be understood as one of several strategies employed by young people in order to make sense of and manage the social divisions that characterized their everyday lives. In this respect, the youth club provided them a space in which they could experience a positive sense of belonging with other young people in their area, developing both personal and community biographical narratives. At the same time it was found that the very space that provided such developmental opportunities was itself in transition. In exploring the transition it was found that older, relationship-based youth work practices were being displaced by newer positive youth development strategies focused on problem-solving. In trying to understand what it was about the youth club, which operated using a youth work model, that kept young people engaged, the analysis suggested that creating a culture of participation requires above all time for authentic relationships to flourish and for a common language to develop between young people and youth workers alike.

Returning to the policy context referred to in the introduction, the analysis demonstrates that the distinction that has been drawn in the policy literature between structured (good) and unstructured (bad) activities is untenable in terms of what was on offer at the club, as well as in terms of young people's interpretations of that offer. The youth club described in the article provided both 'structured' (e.g. football sessions) and 'unstructured' (e.g. space to 'hang out') opportunities to young people. As such, not only can so-called 'structured' and 'unstructured' time co-exist, the analysis also demonstrated that a space, which from the outside appeared as 'unstructured', operated with what cultural theorist Michel de Certeau refers to as its own 'systems of operational combination' (1984), which over time enabled a long-lasting culture of participation to thrive.

More importantly perhaps, young people themselves were far less preoccupied with the activities on offer at the club and more interested in the opportunities offered by these activities to relate to each other and the youth workers ('chill, catch a joke, play pool, socialize, play a bit of football, table tennis, snooker, that's it really'). Finally, the analysis demonstrated that young people experienced exclusion as a series of conflicts created by the impact of different structural barriers in their everyday lives. Attending the youth club was, for these young people, *an end in itself*; it was something they enjoyed and which allowed them to temporarily escape the conflicts of everyday life.

The findings presented in this paper echo research and debates on young people's development in the youth studies literature. For instance, young people's experiences of attending the club were in line with research on young people's leisure time which suggests that such time is characterised by more subaltern forms of activity such as 'talking to friends', 'hanging about', and 'being alone to think' (Hendry *et al.* 1993, p. 3). Hall and colleagues (1999) demonstrate the ways in which such informal education and leisure settings can contribute to young people's 'identity-work'. Williamson (n.d.) and others (Merton, Payne & Smith 2004) have argued for the role played by youth work in fostering personal change, a prerequisite for positional change, and McLaughlin and colleagues (1994) have looked at the role played by urban spaces, such as the Haven Centre, in providing 'sanctuary' and 'hope' in the inner city.

Further connections are also ripe for the making with the youth studies literatures on youth transitions on the one hand and youth sub-cultural theories on the other. For example, between deficit policy definitions of socially excluded youth (NEETs) (Yates & Payne 2006) and the positive imperative of youth development (Sukarieh & Tannock 2011), there is scope to develop analyses and practices that, as

others have argued (Henderson et al 2007; Shildrick & MacDonald 2006), take an holistic view of young people's lives by paying closer attention to the times, context and processes of their experiences. Just as young people's leisure practices and sub-cultural projects require a lens that takes social inequalities into consideration and locates experiences in social, cultural and historical landscapes, so too is there scope for research and practice in youth development that accounts for the interplay between contexts/structures, processes and biographies young people's experiences of 'development' and in programming for young people (cf. Hartman 2001).

Moving forward, a more theoretically infused and reflexive understanding of youth development, especially one that embraced the longitudinal nature of personal, positional and social change (McLeod & Thomson 2009) and moved us beyond economism and culturalism (Cohen & Ainley 2000), would go some way in addressing the longstanding challenges of young people's participation in such spaces: namely, the desire to 'hang out' without 'dropping out' of the liminal spaces of adolescence and leisure alike.

The data presented in this paper was gathered through a cross-sectional design thus providing only a snap-shot of young people's experiences, and relying on youth workers' accounts to identify 'time' as a key component of creating a culture of participation. Qualitative longitudinal methods would be useful for capturing stories of personal, positional and social change, and thus the dynamics of participation in liminal spaces that this paper makes a modest and initial attempt to theorize. Future research would also benefit from engaging with larger samples of young people of different socio-economic backgrounds. A comparative element, such as the study of similar and different youth clubs in a variety of communities and geographical locations, within countries as well as across, would also contribute to understanding the conditions under

which a culture of youth participation is possible; how such a culture is made and remade; the possibilities and limitations offered by such cultural spaces in supporting young people's sociality and biographical trajectories; and finally, how global trends in supporting youth development traverse, are embedded and transformed in local settings through multiple intersectionalities.

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