Finding Nexus: connecting youth work and research practices

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Participation in educational and social research helps to develop understanding of how young people learn and to consider wider aspects of their lives to enable their voices to be heard and acted upon. Research also facilitates the articulation and sharing of methodologies across a range of professional practices. We assert that theory and practice in educational youth work offers a position of strength from which to undertake research. In making this assertion, we suggest cross-disciplinarity between youth work and research practices in order to build research mindedness among youth workers who, through this nexus, are well-placed to engage in practice based research. Drawing on discourses about young people, youth work and youth participation, we identify five elements of youth work practice that can be aligned with research processes: reflexivity; positionality and bias; insider cultural competence; rapport and trust; power relationships. The article examines how these elements are present in youth work and a range of research settings. We identify youth work methods and dispositions as enhancing research capacity which could also be useful in building participatory research methods in disciplinary areas beyond education. Yet, in making these connections, we also identify a range of factors that show this nexus as complex and contestable. Reflecting on the lessons learned from our experiences as youth work practitioners and academic researchers, we propose that finding nexus, which in this instance is between youth work and research paradigms, could inform educational research practices and contributes to developing a meaningful praxis.

Background

Together, we bring 30 years of youth work experience and 16 years of academic teaching and research to the question of how practices in youth work might be aligned to practices in academic research. It is this experience that we will draw on to illuminate the nexus between youth work and research paradigms, and to consider potential challenges and inherent tensions in our assertions. Through our research experiences and collaborations, we have noted that methodological distinctions between youth worker and researcher sometimes become blurred. Time and again, our understanding of the context of young people's lives, our disposition not to prejudge young people, our practitioner knowledge and experience, our interests in, and capacity to deal with relationships of power, all contributed to our research capacity.

In thinking about an alignment between youth worker and researcher practices, we have drawn on Mertens' transformative research paradigm. Researching with groups that have been identified as marginalised, Mertens (2005) offers four characteristics that frame our alignment between research and youth work practices:

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(1) The research places central importance on the lives and experiences of groups that have traditionally been marginalised.
(2) The research analyses how and why inequalities exist and are reflected in asymmetric power relationships.
(3) The research examines how the results of social enquiry on equality are linked to political and social action.
(4) The research uses transformative theories to develop the research approach and to develop a theoretical framework (adapted from Mertens, 2005, p. 23).

These four characteristics are important in: focusing on young people as a marginalised social group; analysing the power relationships inherent in research settings; generating findings that may be used to inspire or underpin political social action using transformative theories to develop research projects. These characteristics are also consistent with educational youth work that actively seeks to: engage the most excluded; tip the balance of power in their favour; build on peer relationships as a means of taking social and political action to change the world; and, engage in transformative education (see, for example, Davies, 2005, 2011; Batsleer, 2008; Wood & Hine, 2009; Coburn & Wallace, 2011; Sercombe, 2010). This article is the culmination of our deliberations on this potential alignment. We believe it will resonate with others whose academic practice involves researching an area in which they have also journeyed as professional practitioners.

Introduction

Young people are routinely represented in one of two ways, either as a threat to popular culture and problem to be solved or as the future hope of a generation, yet, vulnerable due to their lack of experience (Bessant, 1993). The prevalence of negative views of young people legitimates state control and intervention in their lives (Wyn & White, 1997; Mizen, 2004) and combines the routine practice of surveillance with a lack of unsupervised places for young people to hang out (Coburn, 2011). Our starting point here is to suggest that the values and principles of educational youth work are often ignored as an under-researched practice that operates in the shadow of schooling education.

Yet, literature suggests that, 'social justice is the core value of youth work' (Crooks, 1992, p. 20) and that youth workers commit to, 'the Freirian notion… of remedying social inequality' (Corney, 2004, p. 522) within a context for learning that is conversational, critical and informal (Ord, 2007; Batsleer, 2008; Jeffs & Smith, 2010; Coburn & Wallace, 2011). In this sense, informal educational youth work can be an alternative or compliment to mainstream schooling education offering additional educational experiences that promote and develop what Kemmis (2012) identifies as 'double purpose education… in terms of "living well" and helping to create "a world worth living in"'. However, educational youth work might also be regarded as a 'best kept secret' in that a lack of critical mass of research intelligence leaves it open to misinterpretation (Davies, 2005) and in danger of being ignored or marginalised in policy discussions (Spence, 2007; Taylor, 2010; Davies, 2011).

This is perhaps explained by differing perspectives on youth work. Youth work appears to be in a constant state of flux where it is suggested as occupying 'an ambivalent space… appearing to be under threat… [but also]… valued and in demand, on condition that it constantly reinvents itself' (Batsleer, 2010, p. 153). Thus, youth work is often caught between an inclination towards a critical stance that challenges the status quo and one that is compliant with prevailing social discourse. This apparent threat has underpinned interest in defending and rearticulating its social and democratic purpose (Smith, 2002; Davies, 2005; Young, 2006; Jeffs & Smith, 2010; Taylor, 2010).

Youth work often becomes important to young people 'at that particular moment in their lives when they are developing their awareness, seeking answers and, crucially, beginning to explore their beliefs, values and choices (Young, 2006, p. 28). Thus, it is unsurprising that they seek new relationships on which to test their ideas and for some young people, engaging in youth work is an important aspect of their developing self where, according to Harland and Morgan (2006, p. 10), 'the process of youth work [is]… contingent on the quality of relationship between a young person and a youth worker'. While Banks (2010) argues that generic youth work might be discounted, to avoid confusing a broad range of leisure time pursuits with youth work as a distinct disciplinary area, she continues to suggest that youth work as a specialist occupation involves, 'work with young people with an informal and/or developmental approach and purpose… by people who are qualified as youth workers or who consciously adopt the identity of youth worker' (Banks, 2010, p. 5).

Thus, it is a fallacy to describe all informal work with young people as youth work, simply because of the age of the people involved. For example, a summer programme or midnight football league may be more usefully described as positive or active leisure, configured as 'functional youth work' (Coburn & Wallace, 2011, p. 13). Such activity involved young people in diversionary or life-enhancing youth service, offered or 'delivered' by non-qualified youth support workers, as distinct from the process-based iterative 'critical youth work' (p. 15) methodologies of professionally qualified youth workers. There are also professional distinctions between practices in education, social work or faith-based settings.

Central to our understanding of youth work, is the premise that the primary client is always the young person (Sercombe, 2010). When the young person is the primary concern of practice, 'this places youth work in radical distinction to most other forms of engagement with young people… [where often the role]… is to balance the various interests of different stakeholders' (Sercombe, 2010, p. 26). This offers clarity and focus to understanding youth work as, 'a professional relationship in which the young person is engaged as the primary client in their social context' (Sercombe, 2010, p. 27).

The kind of high quality, professional youth work that we are talking about in this article is therefore critical, cultural, educational, social and political. It involves the young person as the primary client in an endeavour that is grounded in values for equality, social justice and democracy.

A growing literature about researching young people's lives emphasises an interest in hearing the voices of young people, which have previously gone unheard (Conteh *et al.*, 2005; Blackman, 2007; Walford, 2008; Heath *et al.*, 2009). We believe that

youth work methods and youth workers can contribute to this literature and it is important to develop practice based research in order to ensure that the voices of the young people are heard and enacted upon, as loudly and clearly as possible. As academic researchers and youth and community work lecturers, we feel a self-professed responsibility to ensure that young people are given the chance to express their views. We are also concerned with building a critical mass of empirical research about professional or critical youth work practices to ensure these are maintained and also because we believe that educational youth work enables young people to flourish, even in times of recession.

While our focus here is on young people and youth work, the same values and engagement practices could as easily be drawn from community development practitioners and adult educators. As researchers and community workers, we are engaging in constructed interactions that should not replicate nor promote power imbalances, but rather should be reflected upon and critiqued, in order to enhance research practice and positive social action.

Thus, our purpose is to draw on the best of both practice worlds in order to create new possibilities and help build research mindedness. This is particularly cogent among practitioners who currently appear to shy away from conducting research because of scientific traditions that bear little or no relation to their experiences of practice. Yet, they are ideally placed to undertake the kind of research that is needed in order to hear the often silenced voices of young people. This article argues that day-to-day practices and underpinning values in youth work are useful in undertaking research with young people. Too often these practices and values are overlooked and taken for granted. Our aim is to disrupt this trend. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that there are apparent tensions and contradictions. Although the central focus of this article is to map the nexus between these practices, there will also be a discussion about the variations, what differentiates youth work from research and what the implications of these differences might be.

The remainder of this article is developed in five sections. First, it discusses aspects of youth participation and then considers possibilities for methodological coherence in youth work and social research. Next it outlines five areas of alignment between youth work and research theory and practice and discusses how these contribute to development of a meaningful praxis. Finally, it analyses the tensions and contradictions between youth work and research and their impact upon the discussed nexus.

Young people and participation

Although young people have been the focus of research for many years, their participation in research is often seen as a response to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (Holland *et al.*, 2010). This asserts young people's rights to participate in decisions that affect them. Reflecting Article 12, research engages young people as agents in collaboration with researchers in research processes rather than as objects of researcher examination. One consequence of this shift has been the emergence of a body of work on the practical and ethical implications of doing qualitative research with disengaged young people.

Within youth policy development, there have been an increasing number of strategies for involving young people in decision making, yet, these have been suggested as, 'ticking the boxes and missing the point' (Batsleer, 2008, p. 141). Indeed, popular discourse would still suggest that 'children should be seen and not heard'. The concept of participation is also open to various interpretations and occurs at differing levels within youth work. For example, measuring the value of participation in a one-off event is different from the potential benefits accrued through long-term engagement in an international youth exchange. Indeed, the kind of participation that Batlseer is talking about includes, informal decision making about programmed activity and strategic policy development and staff selection where: 'Participation means more than simply "taking part". It refers to young people's rights to have a say in ways that make a difference in decisions that affect their lives' (Batsleer, 2008, p. 149).

These are real decisions in a real world, not a tokenistic or patronising sub-adult world. Through youth work, young people develop social networks in locations such as clubs, cafés, on the streets and online. Young people engage in conversations that facilitate their participation in decision-making and in critical dialogue that models a social participatory approach (Freire, 1996). In this sense, participation may be regarded as a principle as much as it is a process and can be understood as the underpinning value base, which is distinct from the means through which such values are achieved.

In both youth work and research, participation involves those who take part in processes, through which, knowledge and understanding are constructed. Participation as a principle recognises that, 'young people are the most influential and active agents in the unfolding of their own lives' (Davies, 2005, p. 10). So, participation is not simply about taking part in youth work or in research, it becomes a requirement of any paradigm that articulates and represents authentic voice.

The concept of participation has also been attributed as having a 'mushrooming effect' whereby, once engaged, young people's involvement increases and so becomes a catalyst for future action (Hackett, 2004). Yet, while young people's participation has been extended across many areas of public policy, it has not facilitated changes in how society views or includes young people in democratic processes (McCulloch, 2007). Enhanced democracy and youth empowerment are often limited within the present social systems and structures (Podd, 2010) and so the need for research with young people becomes integral to the process of actions that are needed for social and democratic change.

This raises questions on the starting point for youth work. If young people are not the primary client, then in whose interest is social change developed? What kind of structural changes are needed to shift this starting point? What kind of youth work and youth research is needed in order to bring about the kind of changes that would bring an enhanced democracy?

The answers to these questions determine how young people participate in research, from contributing data to being fully included co-researchers (Beazley & Ennew, 2006). O'Brien and Moules (2007) suggest participatory research should involve full collaboration on every aspect of the research process, including the nature and purpose of the study, data collection, analysis and dissemination of findings. Yet,

the move from being participants in someone else's study to being co-researchers and co-creators of knowledge in their own study takes time, which is not always available (O'Brien & Moules, 2007). This resonates with educational youth work processes, where young people and youth workers collaborate, through critical and reflective dialogue, in the construction of knowledge but where sometimes the level of reflection and of knowledge constructed is curtailed by expedients of time or resources.

Working together as co-researchers can create opportunities for collaborative interpretation of data and meaning, while conversational relationships in youth work can create opportunities for collaborative learning between young people and youth workers. Thus, despite constraints, it is in this collaborative sense, that we propose youth work and research methods as closely aligned. Such connectivity could be further developed to enhance research capacity and contribute to understanding of both youth work and young people's lives. Our analysis of core aspects of this alignment illustrates a nexus between youth work and research methods in order to develop a meaningful praxis.

Considering epistemology and methodological coherence

In terms of the research and practice stance, we suggest an epistemological alignment with interpretivism, constructivism or constructionism. Both constructivism and constructionism define reality as socially constructed by people. Crotty (1998) differentiates between the two seeing the latter as placing importance on the social dimension:

> … constructivism is primarily an individualistic understanding of the constructionist position… social constructionism emphasises the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even the way we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world. (Crotty, 1998, p. 58)

In constructionism people act together to construct a social reality, while in constructivism, individuals seek to make sense of the social world they live in. The constructivist and constructionist perspectives are paralleled in youth work where there is a focus on the individual, as someone who is learning about themselves and their identities, but who is also part of a social group, in the social world, seeking to challenge stereotypical views and acting together to shape their version of reality. In this sense, by helping young people to live well and to co-create the world, youth work also appears consistent with a view of double purpose in education (Kemmis, 2012).

Drawing on interpretivism, research is an interpreted *representation* of a constructed reality. Thus, an interpretive epistemological perspective may also be applicable in both research and youth work practices, as knowledge claims are based on the interpretation of young people's constructions of their internal and external realities in a particular space and time. Together, this suggests that knowledge claims could be regarded as constructionist, contructivist and interpretive, which for ease of communication, we have called, constructo-interpretive epistemology. This epistemology underpins our assertion that an alignment between youth work and research theory offers an inductive and iterative process for facilitating voice and agency among young

people. Both inductive research and youth work begin with participants, putting people and their experiences first, rather than privileging existing ideas.

Making the assumption that there is no singular universal or objective truth suggests that research is only one view of the studied phenomena and as such has led to questions about validity. However, in countering a relativist standpoint, where nothing has any real meaning but everything is an interpretation of something else, we suggest that a constructo-interpretive epistemology usefully recognises that multiple views are sought. In this epistemology, the researcher's role is to interpret views from different perspectives in order to make it clear that no single perspective offers a complete picture of the phenomena being examined. For example, understanding the impact of involving young people in decision-making will depend on the criteria on which such judgements are made and who sets those criteria. Further, while the methods used to engage with young people are not always pre-defined, they are dependent on a range of factors such as whether they have chosen to participate or been required to as part of a restorative justice programme. Thus, while we assert the possibility of this nexus we acknowledge that alignments are complex and contested. This is also the case in using both youth work and research methods.

Edwards and Talbot (1999) in discussing research methods suggest:

> There is no single method and design that can act as a catch all for all studies. Rather the emphasis should be upon the selection of a variety of techniques that will enable you to explore your research questions in more detail. (Edwards & Talbot, 1999, p. 59)

This is in keeping with youth work contexts, where no single method of engagement is utilised, rather a variety of methods are used to create dialogue through which problems or topics are explored. Similarly, it does not follow that what works in one setting will be successful in another. The difficulty in ascertaining 'what works' and the truth of how learning has been developed is complex and multifaceted; aspects of what is actually learned may be rendered invisible by a smokescreen of learned outcomes that are more easily measured than for example, quality of life or feelings of esteem. Ord (2007) has called into question assumptions about the extent to which outcomes might be measured to produce anything more than an impression of the value of youth work. Davies also argues:

> Good youth work can be seen as having the same contradictory qualities of great jazz… well prepared and highly disciplined, yet improvised. And, while responding sensitively to the signals and prompts of others, it continues to express the workers own intentions, insights, ideas, feelings—and flair. (Davies, 2010, p. 6)

In research terms, Jeon (2004) suggests, 'A study is shaped by the researcher's guiding principles associated with a paradigm or world view, which encompasses ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions' (p. 249). Our analysis and experience suggests that, in both youth work and research settings, there is commonality in practice assumptions that suggest methods are built on a repertoire that includes planned-for-improvisation, and determined by a set of aligned values and practices.

In both research and youth work practices, methodologies are often shaped by personal predispositions and values, in addition to dominant cultural and social

discourses. We propose core values and practices as useful across a variety of educational and social research contexts in maximising research possibilities among young people identified as marginal, excluded or difficult to reach. This alignment suggests five key areas of commonality in values: reflexivity; acknowledging positionality and responding to bias; being insider and outsider; building rapport and trust; and shifting the balance of power.

Reflexivity

The concept of reflexivity comes from the anti-realist and post-modern strains of ethnography (Brewer, 2000). This means qualitative researchers seek to be reflexive, not only in terms of the experiences of people involved in the research, but also on their experiences as researchers and on their part in the research process. In youth work, practitioners reflect on their engagement, their values and their interactions with young people and how their values and dispositions may have impacted on those interactions. Both researchers and youth workers, critically question why they are engaging, the impact of that engagement and the outcome of the engagement.

Mertens (2005) noticed that research tended to focus on people's experiences of inequality and their lack of power, or incapacity to achieve particular positions. She argued that a recent turn in thinking shifted the research position to a more positive view that 'has led to reframing research questions to focus on strengths' (Mertens, 2005, p. 106). This shift in perspective is consistent with a shift from a deficit view of young people towards an assets view taken in youth work. Mertens' makes a case for examining young people's perceptions and experiences in an inclusive and empowering manner.

Taking an assets value base, rather than deficits approach, has led us to develop research questions on what works, rather than what is wrong. For example, taking an assets approach, one of the authors examined aspects of equality rather than experiences of inequality, to examine how young people learned about equality in youth work.

Being reflexive is to place the self, bias and values as critical to the research process. Acknowledging the prevalence of these aspects and addressing them, adds depth to superficial reflection on methodological practice. This may include how research was conducted, why certain actions were taken and the impact of these actions. It can also incorporate reflections on the overall research process. Therefore, being reflexive is to be critical and conscious of tacit as well as overt assumptions, bias and prejudices which may be held. In this sense, the researcher becomes integrated into the research (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002).

Creswell (2003) also suggests that qualitative researchers are engrained within the study and have personalised views which can impact upon their interpretations where according to May (2001), 'the idea of research free from values is problematic. Indeed, value-freedom is itself a value position!' (p. 67). In mitigation of the impact of researcher values and disposition, a critically reflexive approach helps to foster understanding of knowledge claims and to account for researcher values in assessing contribution and challenging dominant constructions of reality.

Through a process of reflexivity in both research and youth work, personal values can be acknowledged. Indeed failure to be reflexive brings a risk of ignoring those aspects of ourselves and the social setting that impact on practices. Being reflexive in research terms acknowledges that findings are a selective account of phenomena: an interpretation from a personal viewpoint. As researchers we are in the social world which is being studied. Our views and acknowledged bias brings greater transparency of research process and offers justification for particular data collection and analysis methods. In a practice sense, being reflexive allows us to transform our practice through more critical understanding of the impact of our work from differing perspectives.

Acknowledging positionality and responding to bias

In research terms, positionality is about, for example stating the gender, race or religion of the researcher. Although this may not initially seem to be as important as acknowledging the values and epistemological standpoint; it can have a bearing on how the researcher and youth worker engages with, or is reacted to, by young people. Critically reflecting on positionality is an important aspect of the research process but is also an aspect that helps us to respond to personal bias.

At a micro and personal level, the importance of positionality underpinned our research and youth work practices. In both our experiences of research and youth work in the West of Scotland; we were routinely asked about what football team we supported. This brought advantages, by initiating conversations that may have otherwise been difficult. However, for one of us, who was brought up in Northern Ireland and retained a recognisable accent, this also raised awareness of bias, in struggling to listen to overtly negative sectarian sentiments from people who had no direct experience of living in areas affected by the consequences of such attitudes.

Once positionality has been critically assessed researcher bias may be examined as part of a reflexive process. Mantzoukas (2005) confirms a research tradition where studies which encompassed bias were seen as non-scientific and viewed in negative light, whereas those studies that did not include or deliberately obscured bias, were seen as rational, scientific and '*correct*'. During the Enlightenment period, a dualistic view to the world was adopted, with the objective, scientific approach being seen as the rational method and subjective, non-scientific being denoted as stemming from a religious paradigm, where:

> … subjectivity, individuality and value-laden approaches to explaining and knowing the world were scathingly stigmatised as biases that could only produce fictitious accounts or mythopoeia of primitive religious projections. (Mantzoukas, 2005, p. 281)

The positivist framework argues that bias should play no part in research. Yet, Ayer (1959) suggested that the researcher can separate their bias if they follow methodological canons correctly. More recently, Glaser (2002) also argued that if methodology was performed correctly then bias would simply become another variable which could be displaced through a constant comparative method. Glaser argues that to insert bias would be an 'unwarranted intrusion on the research' (Glaser, 2002, p. 3). However, drawing on Wittgenstein, Mantzoukas (2005) adds that bias is inseparable

from the researcher and should be acknowledged and accepted throughout the research process.

This stance is in line with the views of constructo-interpretive epistemology and serves to highlight the importance of researcher impact on the research project. Routinely, from the outset the researcher deciphers the questions asked, the areas studied and the data collection and analysis methods. However, once the idea of bias has been acknowledged there is further debate on how best to report and record this bias. Some researchers i.e. phenomenologists choose to acknowledge bias and then bracket it off, suggesting it should not influence the overall research. As Ahern (1999) states, 'The ability to put aside personal feelings and preconceptions is more a function of how reflexive one is rather than how objective one is because it is not possible for researchers to set aside things about which they are not aware' (p. 408).

Nevertheless, reflexivity can actively embrace and accommodate bias throughout the whole research process and being reflexive on personal, implicit values does not necessarily require that these are sidelined or bracketed. Rather an acknowledgment of such values and their impact upon the research will enrich the research process and enhance analytical argument.

> … in a sense, methodology is as much about the way we live our lives as it is about the way we choose to conduct a particular piece of research… Our research methodologies are (we would argue) rooted in our own personal values, which, in some form, inform our ethical and moral responses to problems and challenges. (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002, p. 68)

Thus, our bias is centred on a belief in social justice and the underpinning value of advocating for, and with, young people. These 'biases', or values, should be described, criticised and reflected upon, to help explain particular interpretations of data and to consider the engagement process in youth work. Reflexivity allows our moral and ethical decisions to be laid bare and our roles as both practitioner and researcher to be assessed and taken into account.

On being an outsider inside

While assuming too many roles in the research field can cause confusion, having prior youth work experience can also provide an excellent skills base for communicating with young people. Spence *et al.* (2006) suggested that wider participation in the setting is legitimate and ethical, so long as those involved are aware of the researcher's role. By differentiating between roles, as youth worker and researcher, and ensuring everyone understands these, the researcher can advocate for young people and ensure ethical processes that facilitate deep understanding without conflating roles. In this sense, the youth work—research nexus acts as a catalyst for crossing boundaries between youth worker and researcher roles but does not integrate them as a fusion of practices.

Kemmis (2012) also promotes the notion of 'educational action research' where researching praxis from within practice traditions promotes, 'research by practitioners in which they aim to transform their *practice,* their *understandings* of their practice, and the *conditions* under which their practice is carried out' (p. 890). Thus, not only can being a part of the practice support engagement strategies, it can also enhance the

creation of transformative theories (Merten, 2005) and transformative education within youth work settings.

The importance of cultural competence was noted by Mertens (2005) in researching the lives of minority groups, where insider cultural understanding and sensitivity were important. As qualified youth workers involved in researching with young people we suggest the concept of cultural competence as useful. Practice experience in youth work means we can draw on capabilities that help us to quickly understand what is happening in a research context. For example, a commitment to starting where young people are starting (Davies, 2005) and the use of informal conversation to facilitate learning through relationships built on trust and respect, also offers a useful starting point for research with young people. Having an insider's perspective provides a sense of comfort in the setting and a familiarity with young people's interests and ways of articulating their ideas. This is consistent with the capacities of 'discernment and appreciation' that Bridges (2009, p. 513) suggests as important characteristics in judging the quality of educational research. However, as a researcher you can also be an outsider, not employed as a youth worker in that environment, which means the starting point is often determined or constrained by external factors and so the nature and purpose of such discerning relationships may be different.

Being insider and outsider, youth worker and researcher, can be difficult to balance. For example, there is the potential for 'insider complacency', where assumptions of knowledge and/or understanding of the setting may occur, rather than seeing or interpreting what was actually present or reported through a more critical lens. Brewer (2000) suggests that non-insiders, may require a longer period to gain trust. Further, being an 'insider' does not guarantee better data and may result in young people feeling forced to answer questions in a particular fashion due to their perceptions of the relationship. Again, we suggest that being critically reflexive on positionality, bias and values can aid this potentially difficult balancing act. Drawing on youth work values of participation, empowerment and promoting voice, can also be aligned with participatory research that seeks to engage with some of the most silenced voices. In suggesting that research relationships mirror those in youth work the development of rapport and trust become paramount to engaging with the most silenced.

Building rapport and trust

Our argument is premised by suggesting an insider perspective as a means of facilitating connection with a research setting by using youth work skills interchangeably with research skills. We suggest that practical engagement and rapport building skills inherent in youth work are aligned with the skills needed to carry out effective, ethical and participatory research with young people. Specifically, this means using skills such as collage making, drama and animation, or digital storyboarding, as a vehicle for data collection while simultaneously creating rapport and building relationships (Finlay *et al.*, 2010).

In a recent evaluation of a Womens Aid youth service, we used animation as an informal participatory research method which produced a short film about the young people's feelings and experiences of the youth service and the impact this made on their lives. Producing the film helped the young people to work creatively to voice

their opinions and build rapport and trust with the researchers prior to more in-depth interviews. A participatory methodology made it easier to deal with emotional aspects of the fieldwork phase when they arose. By combining active listening and observation skills while engaged in activity with young people, issues were raised in the group setting (Robertson, 2005; Spence *et al.*, 2006; Spence, 2007). Developing trust with young people by taking an interest in them, spending time with them and engaging in conversations beyond the immediate research topic helped build rapport. As one researcher supported the young people to create the kind of film they wanted to make, the other engaged in informal conversation. This provided additional data that illustrated the complexity of young people's experiences and helped build trustworthiness into analysis of findings.

In ensuring that the views of marginalised groups are articulated and conveyed it is also important that the voices spoken are effectively listened to and not in a tokenistic way. Clough and Nutbrown (2002) suggest that 'Radical listening—as opposed to merely hearing—is the interpretative and critical means through which "voice" is noticed' (p. 67). These authors suggest that radically listening to participants allows 'faithful interpretation' (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002, p. 82) of what is being heard. Encouraging participants to speak openly, providing verbal cues and non-verbal gestures to ensure they know you are interested and focussed on what was being said can also be beneficial. According to Holland *et al.* (2010) this is one way of shifting the inherent power imbalances in the researchers relationship with participants and maximises use of informal conversations with 'the advantage of responding to the young people's cultural forms of communication (informally and in short bursts) but the disadvantage of being less transparent as a research process' (Holland *et al.*, 2010, p. 369).

Spending time in a young person's environment and engaging in a range of activities that are routinely used in youth work practices can aid the development of relationships between young people and youth workers and also appear in researcher accounts (Robertson, 2005; Spence *et al.*, 2006). This includes sitting in café areas, playing pool, attending youth clubs, playing sports, going on trips, listening to a band rehearsal and using a process of 'hanging out' and engaging young people in relaxed conversation (Geertz, 1973, p. 5–6) over an extended period of time, this helps build rapport and trust. Youth work practice, where informal conversations in groups or with individuals, and often around a specific activity or issue, have been found to facilitate dialogue (Spence *et al.*, 2006) and can be drawn upon by youth researchers.

However, a researcher is not purposefully building long-term trusting educational or social relationships with young people and so, having a clear exit strategy and a clear understanding of roles is integral to ethical practice. For example, Bryman (2008) cautions that building too much rapport can result in the interviewee answering questions in a manner which they feel may satisfy the researcher's interest. Being critically reflexive on the engagement and acknowledging the importance of listening out for complexities and ambiguous or unrealistic statements (Watson, 2006) can help to prevent this from occurring. Similarly, the development of trust and rapport can also contribute to establishing and maintaining complex relationships of power.

Shifting the balance of power

Youth work is concerned with 'tipping the balances of power in young people's favour' (Davies, 2005, p. 10) and developing power relationships that are enshrined in personal and social rights and are influenced by economically and politically dominant groups (Baker *et al.*, 2004). Young people's experience of power is influenced by, for example, factors of lifestyle and economics. In responding to this, Davies (2005) proposals for the balances of power to be tipped towards young people suggests possibilities, through youth work, to challenge and change the dominant discourses where negative stereotyping has been problematic (Devlin, 2006).

However, 'tipping the balance' does not mean that adults give up power in favour of young people or that young people take power from adults. This negative view of power, suggests that power is exercised when people, who are regarded as superior, take control over others. Alternatively, viewing power positively is much more fluid, as control shifts from adult to young person and back again through their interactions with each other (Hill *et al.*, 2004). 'Power is a positive concept and is about having the ability or capacity to act' (O'Brien & Moules, 2007, p. 397), thus power may be exercised from both top down and bottom up.

However, the findings in a recent examination of participation in a youth council, showed that progress towards increased participation was achieved through hierarchical, adult-lead democratic structures. Adult youth workers directed much of the youth council development while young people had limited autonomy and control. For example, the youth councillors developed creative ways of engaging '*hard to reach*' young people and to identify issues of concern but consultations were framed by strategic priorities for the area and by policy discourse, for example, in regard to concern for 'anti-social' behaviour. Maintaining hierarchical power structures meant that opportunities for 'a more participatory form of politics' was reduced (Baker *et al.*, 2004, p. 39).

In research, power sits with the participant, who ultimately has the right to withhold information or withdraw from the study at any time. However, control can often be located with the youth worker or researcher, and so their role in facilitating an environment that enables or encourages power sharing becomes critical as part of a process that is complex, relational and situational. It does not mean that power or control is extended fully in one direction or another, rather, power is negotiated between young people and youth workers through dialogue and a problem posing approach to learning (Freire, 1996). Drawing on youth work values and practices, the inherent power imbalances that are present in all research relationships may also be reduced and as such, these values and practices create possibilities for shifting power relations and the development of new collaborative research practices. Yet, despite these five areas of commonality this alignment was not without problem.

Tensions and contradictions

While the focus of this article seeks to demonstrate a nexus between youth work and research, our attention must also turn to the differences and variations between the two and there appear to be four main areas where tensions exist.

These are the primary client, building rapport, exiting the field and the uniqueness of youth work.

As noted earlier, Sercombe (2010) asserts that youth work is distinguished from other professions in identifying the young person as the primary client. Yet, researchers need to be explicit about whom the primary client is in any research project. Although the underpinning purpose of the research may be aligned to youth work values, the young person may not be the primary client. For example, PhD research places the institution and external examiner at the heart of decisions on whether a doctorate is awarded. While the researcher maybe committed to gaining the voice of the young participants the research report has to be written in a particular style, suitable for the purposes of a doctoral thesis. Consequently the examiners, the institution and the student are positioned ahead of the young participants as the primary client in the professional relationship. Similarly, for commissioned research and youth work, the researcher or youth worker could be committed to particular core values but arguably, the primary client is the commissioning agent. Thus, as researchers and youth workers, while commited to the rights of young people, and to using findings to inspire political social action, these commitments are often at odds with funder priorities. Thus, in research and youth work, the question of who the primary client is can sometimes be multi-faceted and distorted.

Further, although the building of rapport and trust is important in this type of research, the role as a researcher is not to build long-term trusting relationships. Instead, they need to be explicit about their purpose in engaging with young people. So a commitment to being reflexive should, we suggest, involve being open and transparent about the research process

There should also be an understood exit strategy that is known by all involved, to allow the researcher to enter and exit the field without any lasting attachment or responsibilities, beyond ethical considerations. The decision on when to exit the field is generally not based on when the work with the young person is completed, rather, it is often when a sufficient amount of data is collected for the purposes of the research. This of course can vary depending on the type of research being conducted but it is important that this is reflected upon and that decisions are transparent, in order to prevent tensions between young people feeling further marginalised or disempowered and researchers taking control or misinterpreting data.

Youth work, in its many guises, is a unique field of practice which has a distinctive way of working with young people (Davies, 2010). It trusts in the process, can start at the young person's starting point and can support young people to achieve what they want to achieve. It does not always have to produce a report with outcomes that are accepted or rejected by examiners, publishers or research funders. However, this is another area in which alignment is emerging, as youth work is increasingly subject to inspection and performance frameworks to ensure future funding. Youth work can be organic, instinctive, relational, challenging and completely focussed on ensuring young people are the primary client as the central reason for the work being conducted. It is unique in its unequivocal determination to strive for young people to be treated as full participants in our society and to do that alongside those young people who are the most marginalised. If we can incorporate a nexus whilst acknowledging these differences and tensions, as part of an ongoing learning dialogue, then

individually and collaboratively, there is potential to ensure that young people remain central to our aim of creating a more social democratic society.

Conclusion

We have shown a number of intersecting dynamics that align youth worker and youth researcher theories, values and practices, which can lead to meaningful praxis. Merten's (2005) transformative research paradigm provides a framework and a departure point for linking youth work and research practice and underpins the conculsions drawn here.

First, the theories, values and principles of educational youth work are often taken for granted. Yet, we believe they should be explored, utilised and given credit in wider research fields and among youth workers in taking responsibility for ensuring that practice is effectively researched and promoted.

Secondly, focussing on young people and their experiences of being labelled as a marginalised social group should be important to both practices. For youth work this is unquestionably a central focus, but for researchers this may not always be the case. In seeking a meaningful praxis, there needs to be a conscious effort that participation in research is real and useful, not simply consultative or tokenistic. Participation should be regarded unequivocally as an underlying value base in researching young people's lives. Participative research can contribute towards analysing power relations through being reflexive, acknowledging bias, ensuring effective listening and consciously seeking to tip the balance of power towards young people.

Mertens also guides us to assert findings that inspire or underpin political social action which aligns with youth work praxis in supporting young people to take social and political action. In its value base for equality and social justice, youth work not only raises young people's consciousness about injustices, but helps challenge these injustices. Similarly, research could be used to challenge dominant structures of inequality and to eradicate policies that are based on a deficit view of young people.

Finally, as youth work practitioners and researchers in the field of youth and community work, we see a coherent underpinning value base that is present in both practices. Moreover, we assert that 'practice from the inside' (Kemmis, 2012) can be incredibly useful in developing a meaningful praxis deriving from transformative theories and promoting engagement in transformative education. Despite the complexity in these inherent tensions, finding nexus between youth work and research paradigms challenges us to question who we are; what our purpose is; and whether we are clearly standing with young people to challenge inequalities though social action. If we can effectively utilise both youth work and research paradigms we can transform the contexts we, and the young people we work with, live and work in. It is in this sense that our work as researchers and youth work practitioners becomes an act of constructo-interpretive praxis in transforming ourselves, as social activists and the social world, in which we take action.

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