

# ‘Youth club is made to get children off the streets’: Some young people’s thoughts about opportunities to be political in youth clubs

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## Abstract

*This article presents a ‘bottom-up’ view of a theoretical debate that is currently occurring about the nature of youth work practice. It is located in contemporary discussions about the individualisation and depoliticisation of youth work, and claims around the political apathy of young people. However, it explores these debates from a unique perspective; that of some young people themselves. From this perspective it becomes apparent that far from being a politically progressive practice, youth work is sometimes seen as a space where young people are actively discouraged from being political. It develops this argument by presenting findings from original research, conducted by young people. A small scale peer-to-peer research project was undertaken in London over 2014, and involved young people setting a research agenda, moderating focus groups, administering surveys, analysing data and, finally, co-authoring these findings. This research explored young people’s sense of political efficacy, and where they felt they were able to be political. Sadly, youth work was not described as a space where young people could be political agents: in fact, it was often quite the opposite.*

**Key words:** politics, youth work, progressive practice, critical pedagogy, democracy

PRACTICES THAT fall under the ‘youth work’ banner are complex and diverse, emerging from different backgrounds and value systems, and often oriented towards unique goals (Williamson, 1997; Furlong, 2013). Acknowledging this diversity, Furlong (2013: 245) suggests that four distinct pedagogies underpin the array of practices we currently call ‘youth work’; pedagogies that centre around controlling young people, work that aims to socialise young people appropriately, practices that aspire to deliver informal education, and finally professional endeavours that aim to realise and reinforce youthful citizenships. But there is a long history of thinkers attempting to categorise and understand the myriad of practices that came to be called ‘youth work’. Over two decades ago, Banks (1994) identified four distinct, but not discrete, praxes: personal and social development, preventative work, leisure based work, and youth social work. Way back in 1978, Butters and Newell (in Smith, 1988: 48) proposed three competing models of youth work: character building youth work, social education, and emancipatory youth work. Suffice it to say, youth work practice is and always has been a broad pursuit.

However, despite this immense diversity, a number of contemporary arguments suggest that current practice, through one means or another, is converging around a singular pursuit. Current day ‘youth work’, it is argued, is becoming a practice that orients solely towards controlling and regulating individual young people. Gone are the emancipatory, social/community developmental and citizenship pedagogies identified in the past, says these arguments; they have been superseded by practices that see individual young people as problems to fix. That is, some arguments suggest that where ‘youth work’ used to address social issues and identify collective solutions, contemporary practice has narrowed its focus down to atomised young people. These arguments have been presented in a number of different forms, by different authors, but below we synthesize six to outline the broad trend in thinking.

Firstly, as an example, there are arguments that suggest the dominant policy framework that guides much contemporary youth work practice – neoliberalism – undermines notions of community and community development. Under neoliberalism ‘youth work’ becomes stripped down to providing individual services to individual young people (Nicholls, 2012: 52). In response, the role of young people, as citizens, is reshaped and reformed into simple consumers of services provided by (or increasingly commissioned by) a minimal state (MacDonald, 2006: 74-76). For example, the failed attempt to introduce *Connexions Opportunity Cards* in the UK was an attempt to reduce youth work to the provision of individualised, personal services (Nicholls, 2012: 52; Bunyan and Ord, 2012: 22).

Secondly, it has been argued likewise, that the role of youth workers is transformed by this neoliberal turn. Their role becomes to promote self-reliance and enable responsibility among individuals; to undertake youth work ‘projects of the self’ (Jordan, 2004:9; Kelly, 1999) rather than projects of the social. For example, it has been suggested that one of the symptoms of a neoliberalising practice – the rise of managerialism – runs ‘counter’ to some of youth work’s core values (Fuller and Ord, 2012: 54), including the notions of youth workers as ‘activists and campaigners’ for social change (Miller, 2010 in Fuller and Ord, 2012:133). Undermining youth work’s capacity for campaigning, via the introduction of managerial techniques such as targets, reduces the ability of youth workers to act as political change agents. It instead forces them, for example, to focus on delivering a set schedule of personal developmental services to individual young people.

Thirdly, it has been suggested that some policies and guidelines are veering towards ‘authoritarian’ models and methods of practice. For example, in evaluating children’s well being, workers in the UK are required to ask deeply normative questions, such as if a ‘parent teaches [their children] respect for the law’, reflecting an emergent ‘fixation’ with the personal behaviours of families and service users (Garret, 2003:445). Likewise, on the first page of *Youth Matters*, a British governmental youth policy document, was a claim that positive opportunities for young people should be denied to those who behave anti-socially (DfES, 2005:1), twinning access to youth services and youth workers to the behavior of young people themselves. This, we suggest, also

reflects an emergent focus on the behaviours of individuals, rather than social concerns like inequality or discrimination.

Practices that are now called ‘youth participation’ often replicate this authoritarian focus on individual young people’s behaviours. It has been argued that ‘participation’ too often aims to ensure that individual young people comply with agendas set by decision makers, rather than giving them their own independent voice to air their own ideas and concerns (Bessant, 2003; 2004). Many youth policies blur the intentions of ‘participation’ with the desire to make individual young people ‘fit in to’ government policy agendas (Farthing, 2012), conflating ‘youth participation’ with the concept of ‘social inclusion’.

Fourthly, the language and discourse of youth work, it has been suggested, has been shifting more towards words that describe youth work as individualised service delivery, and young people as problems. For example, the language of ‘youth justice’, which linguistically implied a focus on fairness and reasonableness, has moved towards the language of ‘youth offending’ (Sharland, 2006) which foregrounds the actions of already criminalised young people. Likewise, the word ‘empowerment’ within youth work has been increasingly co-opted to describe a personal form of empowerment, where individual young people are ‘empowered’ to achieve positive outcomes already defined by adult decision makers (see, for example, Bessant, 2003), rather than a focus on empowering young people to challenge their own marginality.

There are also arguments that imply that youth work is increasingly moving towards targeted interventions, rather than generalist service provision. This is our fifth example, and suggests that if the practice is ‘inextricably tied up with the construction of social problems it is supposed to solve’ (Bradt and Bouverne-De Bie, 2009), youth work, then, becomes a tool to ‘fix’ the problem of ‘excluded’ or ‘vulnerable’ young people. It orients itself towards seeing young people themselves as ‘problems’ waiting to be cured (see, for example, Bunyan and Ord, 2012).

Finally, it has been suggested that youth workers, and workers with young people are becoming inherently ‘moralised’ (Garrett, 2003:448; Deacon, 2000:11). Their practice relies increasingly on enforcing social moral codes on young people. As ‘moralised’ agents, youth workers must implicitly focus on the moral ills of individual young people, rather than generating social change.

While these are six quite disparate examples, they are unified in suggesting that youth work is shifting focus away from working with young people as unproblematic members of a problematic society – which may require a focus on progressive social change – to working with young people in order to fix their own, individual problems – an inherently conservative pursuit. While emancipatory and socially focussed youth work may have never been a dominant focus of the profession, these arguments all point to a further shift away from these sorts of practices. Youth work, these arguments contend, is becoming less about helping young people to realise their

rights, less about empowerment and tackling social development, and more about controlling and regulating young people so they ‘fit in’ (Coussée et al, 2009) to an established social order.

Nowhere was this claim more powerfully articulated than in an open letter penned by a group of British youth workers in 2009:

*Thirty years ago Youth Work aspired to a special relationship with young people. It wanted to meet young women and men on their terms. It claimed to be ‘on their side’. Three decades later Youth Work is close to abandoning this distinctive commitment. Today it accepts the State’s terms. It sides with the State’s agenda (IDYW 2009).*

Youth workers are not alone in these broader debates. For example, social work, often affected by the same policy and funding forces, has been having similar debates about the co-option of its practices and the move towards becoming the ‘tutelary bureaucracy’ (Pease and Fook, 1999; Sharland, 2006) and replacing the ‘social’ with ‘individualism’ (Wallace and Pease, 2011). As Jordan (2004:6) cuttingly put it, social work has shifted from:

*... being at the cutting edge of policy innovation in the post-war welfare state, to identification with many of the themes of personal liberation and anti-discriminatory collective action in the 1960s and 1970s, to the implementation of government policies for risk assessment, rationing and enforcement in the past decade.*

Likewise, it has been argued that community development work has changed to emphasise depoliticised versions of development, over adversarial forms of change (Bunyan, 2010).

This change arguably represents a deeply conservative tendency emerging within a profession that previously saw itself as having a progressive focus. Focussing on the individual in youth work is an inherently political act. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001: 40) put it, focusing on the individual:

*... takes sides in political debate in two ways: first, it elaborates a frame of reference which allows the subject area – the conflicts between individuals and society – to be analysed from the stand-point of individuals. Secondly, the theory shows how, as modern society develops further, it is becoming questionable to assume that collective units of meaning and action exist.*

An individually focused youth work, it could be argued, is part of the ongoing process of the relentless individualisation of policy and practice. This sees governments shift responsibility for social ills on to individuals themselves, so that individual young people become compelled to find ‘biographic solutions to systematic contradictions’ (Beck, 2007:685, see also Brodie, 2006; Bauman, 2001). For example, young people become compelled to find individual solutions to ‘sell’

themselves in the midst of a historically collapsed youth labour market. As such, the progressive potential of youth work becomes muted; it becomes a practice oriented towards ensuring that young people fix themselves so they fit in to the established social order.

This is potentially significant for the profession because ‘no professional practice can be apolitical’ (Lewis, 2003:143). By focussing on individual young people as problems, and seeking to ensure compliance with the established social order, it is argued that youth work practice has the potential to at best overlook, and at worst deny, the impact of social problems on individual young people (Coussée et al, 2009:434).<sup>1</sup>

Rather than confronting the social dimensions of their practice, youth work comes to support the status quo, it becomes *depoliticised*. As Freire (1985:122) put it, ignoring potential conflicts does not make professionals neutral, rather it sides them with the already powerful (see also Becker, 1967). This shifting focus, then, represents a political choice; it is a depolitical decision, not an apolitical decision. Youth work is actively stripping itself of its progressive political capacity and adopting an inherently conservative depoliticised approach. On a macro level, for example, it means that youth workers, for example, would need to rationalise and work within existing social hierarchies, such as social structures that discriminate against the young, ethnic or working class, rather than challenging them (Reisch and Jani, 2012:1132). On a micro level, it means that hierarchies between young people and staff, for example, would likewise need to be accepted as just ‘the world we operate in’ and set the stage for their practice (Reisch and Jani, 2012:1132). This means youth work passively aligns itself with whatever political discourses and practices already dominate, from neoliberalism to patriarchy and disabilism, rather than challenging them. Through this process of becoming depoliticised, youth work paradoxically becomes an inherently political and deeply conservative pursuit.

The above, however, are all contentions emerging from experts’ critical gaze. While there may be some overlapping consensus emergent around these arguments, from multiple ‘human service’ professions, such as social work (Jordan, 2004), youth work (Coussée et al, 2009) and community development (Bunyan, 2010), and from social theory (Beck, 2007; Bauman, 2001) and empirical research (Hopman, et al, 2012), this article instead aims to unpack this contention – that youth work has become depoliticised – using a small dataset generated by young people themselves.

During 2014, a group of young BME women from areas with high levels of deprivation in and around East London, worked alongside academics to explore political efficacy, and the ‘spaces’ in which young people felt they could exercise political agency. One of the ‘spaces’ interrogated in this peer-to-peer research project was youth clubs and other places with youth workers. Our findings, we argue, triangulate with the contentions raised above by critical youth work scholars, that contemporary youth work practice is inherently depoliticised in orientation, and therefore an agent of the status quo and conservation. We do not postulate, as others have, however, that

this represents a shift from earlier foci, or any other dynamic exploration, as our aim was to explore ‘spaces’ for political efficacy at one moment in time, in our lifetimes right now. Instead, we aim to present one on-the-ground view of the depoliticised nature of the youth work practice we experienced. While we appreciate its limited methodological scope, both geographically and temporarily, we suggest that this glimpse into young people’s lives provides a meaningful insight in to the experience of some young people and some youth work practice. Moreover, we suggest that this perspective, the perspective of the ‘youth workees’ and their experiences, perhaps enriches the current contestations being offered around ‘youth workers’ and their practice.

Below, we outline our methodology, which was peer-to-peer and involved focus groups and surveys, and our findings. We present our broader findings around youth work and youth clubs as spaces to exercise political agency, and include a case study that emerged as part of our research as an illustrative example. We then turn to reflect on what these small-scale findings might mean, and how they might connect with literature around the depoliticisation of youth work and of young people.

## Methods

This research was conducted by 12 young women from East London, who used peer-to-peer research to explore how young people utilised political ‘spaces’. We explored what spaces were available to young people to be political within, and if and how these ‘spaces’ were used. We developed our research aims independently, and subsequently co-developed our research questions with academics from Oxford University. We had a very exciting day in Oxford University, where the academics were able to advise and provide feedback, without dictating what should be done, therefore allowing us, young people, to lead the research. The academics were able to answer all our questions and guided us with practice on how to ask questions without being biased or leading in different situations.

We began by identifying potential ‘spaces’ for young people’s politics which we could explore, established from previous literature and inductive ‘hunches’ based on our own life experiences.

The spaces we decided to interrogate were:

- traditional political spaces, specifically national politics,
- a further traditional space, in local politics,
- schools,
- family,
- social media, and
- youth clubs and with youth workers.

Establishing these spaces as specific sites to explore aided our research as it allowed us to narrow down our questions and investigations, which added clarity to our data as our research became

focused. Previous literature suggested this could be a very broad topic, so focussing on six potential spaces helped focus our work.

Having identified these specific spaces, we then turned to co-develop our methodology. We decided to use focus groups and survey as our methods, as we felt these matched our research questions. We developed a focus group schedule that began with asking some more open questions, in order to introduce the political theme in general, and then lead on to specific questions about each space. These allowed us to explore what young people define as politics and how they express their political views, if any, as well as if and how they were using each space.

We ran five, two hour focus groups with 27 participants, who were recruited at schools, youth clubs and within our families. Participants ranged from 12 to 18-years-old, although the majority were 15 to 17. They were of mixed genders, and extremely ethnically diverse. Only two of our participants identified as ‘white’, with one of them recently migrating to the UK. Our sample included many young people who identified as Bengali, Pakistani, Turkish and Iranian. They were also all from three inner London boroughs with extremely high levels of deprivation (see table one). Our findings then, come from young people who we could imagine are doubly disaffected from politics, firstly by ethnicity and secondly by deprivation.

**Table one:** The relative child poverty and multiple deprivation rates across the areas we worked in (End Child Poverty 2014, DCLG 2011).

|                 | Child poverty rate in 2014 <sup>2</sup> | Index of multiple deprivation, 2010 – number of ‘small areas’ that rated in the top 10% most deprived across England |
|-----------------|---|--|
| Hackney         | 41%                                     | 42%  |
| Tower Hamlets   | 49%                                     | 40%  |
| Haringey        | 36%                                     | 29%  |
| England average | 25%                                     | 10%  |

We ran our focus groups in a location we felt was suitable for young people – Nandos. We felt Nandos was a relaxing environment, it was well known among participants and in east London, serves Halal food. Also, for some of the young people, Nandos was a motivating factor that encouraged them to participate in our focus groups! The young researchers moderated each focus group, as we felt that focus groups of exclusively young people created a more safe and conducive place for participants to speak freely. An academic and a youth worker were present at Nandos, but after collecting consent forms and checking recording equipment, returned to their own tables. Focus groups were recorded and later transcribed, a task we handed over to supporting academics. We found the transcripts invaluable; we were able to go back to the answers of the participants, which added reliability to our findings as we did not have to extract conversations

through memory that is not always accurate, whereas the recording is the actual voice of the participant.

After the transcripts were collected, we undertook training on data analysis, and coded our transcripts thematically. We used what we have called the ‘kitchen table’ method, involving multiple coloured pens, scissors and blue tack rather than computer assisted packages. This was a pragmatic choice; we did not have access to enough laptops or software packages and it allowed us to work together as a group, and using the ‘kitchen table’ method, we could physically see what we were all doing and deciding. Coding data consisted of reading the transcripts together, which took many hours, and then deriving key themes from the data. We then applied these key themes to all the transcripts, colour coding each transcript, in order to know understand what we had been told by participants thematically.

Once we had finished our focus groups, we used our initial findings, and the coding schema we had developed, to produce surveys that further explored some of our emergent findings. Surveys were handed out in a school and two youth clubs, both undertaking the National Citizen Service at the time. This allowed us to get a wider insight, as the school group and the young people from the youth club could have different perspectives; they were either studying politics or trying to be more active citizens. In total we had 42 young people taking part, again from the same inner London boroughs and, albeit unexpectedly, from a similar ethnic make-up to the focus groups. This two-stage process ensured we had a wide range of thoughts and ideas from young people who declared that they did not know much about politics (many of our peers in the focus groups), to young people who were studying or doing politics.

In total, our findings consisted of six key themes, two of which are developed below. We co-developed a dissemination strategy for these findings, which included presenting at three academic conferences, writing a report and launching it in parliament, and co-writing this article. We have handed over writing the introduction section of this article to supporting academics, as the task of summarising existing academic literature is immense (and academics love obscure words), but we felt these connections were necessary to highlight to add weight to our small-scale findings. However, writing that was not our current priority while we finish our A-levels and BTECS or work (and academics are paid to do this). Regardless, the arguments underpinning the introduction, and the words in the methods, findings and conclusions, and importantly, the research conducted, reflects a year’s worth of work together. The findings elaborated in this article are the findings around young people’s ideas about youth clubs and youth work as ‘spaces’ for youthful politics, and we believe, provide an alternative vision of the discussions academics and youth workers are currently having about their own practice. We have used as many quotes from participants as possible, in order to let you hear from young people themselves as much as we can.

## Findings

Our research uncovered six key findings that we could discern, two of which relate directly to youth work practice. Firstly, we discovered quite quickly that for the young people we spoke to, speaking about issues that were important to them, or ‘talking’ politics, was seen as a very different concept and process to being heard about important issues so we could try to make a change, or ‘doing’ politics.

This distinction was important, as it gave us a greater insight into what ‘politics’ young people felt they were able to engage in across each of the six sites we looked at, with some spaces allowing young people ample opportunity to ‘talk’ about politics, but few listening to and, therefore, providing much scope to ‘do’ politics.

This became our second key finding; that most of the spaces we explored did not, for our participants, provide the opportunity for them to be heard about issues that were important to them (see table two).

**Table two:** Our findings and indicative quotes about young people’s sense of being able to speak about issues, and being listened to about issues, in various spaces.

| Space                    | Can we talk about issues that are important to us?  | Are we listened to when we talk about issues?  |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| <b>National politics</b> | No<br><i>‘No, this is coming from experience. Normally, us the public have the chance to meet our MPs in charge, yet when (our MP) was in charge, she was rarely ever in her office or they would say they would call you back, but never did.’ 16-year-old</i> | No<br><i>‘No because again I do not have enough power to do so or importance.’ 15-year-old</i> |
| <b>Local politics</b>    | No<br><i>‘There are chances to volunteer, but that’s it.’ 16-year-old</i>   | No<br><i>‘I think I’m a bit alienated, but I don’t know what to say.’ 17-year-old</i>          |
| <b>Social media</b>      | Yes<br><i>‘It’s very easy to speak out on social media because everyone</i>   | No<br><i>‘I think we’re like a bunch of children screaming in a loud</i>                       |

|                   |   |  |
|-------------------|---|--|
|                   | <p><i>has their own account, that they control.’ 17-year-old</i></p>  | <p><i>room, and they’re giving us free speech but they’re not really taking anything in to account. So basically, we’re just expressing ourselves, but none of it is getting taken in.’ 16-year-old</i></p>  |
| <b>Schools</b>    | <p>Yes<br/> <i>‘Yes at school in classroom discussions.’ 15 yo</i><br/>                     Debating groups were mentioned multiple times as well as places to talk about important issues, but tellingly, we couldn’t say what we believed, rather had to argue for the side we were told to.</p>  | <p>Mixed, mostly yes<br/> <i>‘I think that prefects, some of the prefects or some of the head boys or head girls they actually do make an impact on our school. For example, we’ve got lockers in our school now, and chips are back on the menu, finally, which is another good thing.’ 14-year-old</i></p> <p>But many nos as well<br/> <i>‘I don’t think schools give students much of a voice. While there is a student council, I think it merely window dresses the issues. Teachers are unwilling to compromise.’ 16-year-old</i></p> |
| <b>Families</b>   | <p>Mixed, mostly yes<br/> <i>‘My family and I discuss issues regularly’ 16 yo and ‘I argue with my little sister all the time! (about issues)’ 15-year-old</i></p> <p>But many nos as well<br/> <i>Yeah, it (talking to my family about issues) would be like ‘Shut up. Why are you trying to be smart?’</i><br/>                     16-year-old</p> | <p>Yes<br/> <i>‘If I gave good enough reasons, yeah (my family would listen to my views).’ 14-year-old</i></p>   |
| <b>Youth work</b> | <p>Mixed, generally no (discussed below)</p>  | <p>No (discussed below)</p>  |

What was notable was the limited number of spaces where young people felt like they were actively listened to when they talked about issues that were important to them. These were the spaces where young people felt like they were able to engage with decision-makers and those with power, where they could make changes and be effective political agents. Where people listened to them, young people felt able to be political agents and ‘do’ politics. The two spaces where young people felt they could ‘do’ politics were, perhaps happily, both institutions that, generally, young people engage with frequently – families and schools.

Being able to be heard, and make changes in these spaces, was often talked about as empowering and encouraging, in spite of the lack of political agency we have in other, traditional political domains. As one young woman put it:

*I've been political in school when I wrote a letter to my head teacher and I said 'you should make this teacher permanent and give him a permanent job' and they did it. Boris Johnson wasn't there! Alright. David Cameron weren't there. But it was just me, taking the power to, the rights I have and using them. 17-year-old*

What was disturbing and surprising, however, was these young people's responses when we asked them if they felt they could talk about issues that were important to them, and be heard, in youth clubs or other places with youth workers. All of the focus group respondents, and troublingly the majority of the survey respondents, said no. Youth clubs felt like disempowering spaces for our research participants.

As one of our focus groups outlined it:

*Amira, 16: But youth clubs, I don't think they do (make things happen). They will take your opinions, they will tell you to just gather around.*

*Salina, 16: They are just having fun.*

*Uma, 16: They will write loads. They will show you the way to do it, but then that's it. 'That was fun, now you learned'.*

*Amira: It's like we have it up for discussion but...*

*Uma: It's for show.*

*Salina: Yeah, nothing takes action.*

*Amira: They just try to make you practise. They try making you excited. They will be like 'One day you should become a politician.' No, I don't want to be a politician. You can get my opinion through ... you don't have to be a politician to get your opinion through, I don't think.*

Sometimes, this was contested by participants who had been involved in youth councils or youth forums, but the general perception was that youth clubs the participants attended, and other places

of youth work, were more to have fun than ‘do’ politics. They were seen as places where you may be encouraged to ‘do’ politics when you get older, but not as spaces to get active now:

*Aaila, 17: It's not even that, you know youth clubs don't even support you. I swear they don't even support you.*

*Naaz, 17: It's just letting off some steam, just to socialise.*

*Aaila: It's not even that. Youth club is made to get children off the streets.*

*Naaz: Yeah, that's what it is.*

*Aaila: That's what it is. It is what it is. They are making us do things. They are just trying to get us excited saying 'You are going to make change, you are going to make change' but where is the change at? Like how are we going to make change? They are like 'You will make a change'...*

*Tahani, 18: What about youth forums because...*

*Aaila: No, I have never used one in my life.*

*Tahani: ..for example like me, I have been involved in one. In Hackney there are like loads of youth forums and usually in youth forums...*

*Naaz: What's that?*

*Tahani: They are just like clubs but you do more of the campaigns and things that you care about. You just do campaigns and events.*

*Aaila: We do that in school but we didn't see a change for the last five years. I was in my (schools council). We didn't see no change.*

*Tahani: I saw a change.*

*Aaila: Yeah, they put blazers on us, but that's the change.*

*Naaz: The uniform changed.*

*Tahani: If you are proactive you can. Like I...*

*Naaz: Trust me, you can't.*

While Tahani did see a change through engagement with her youth forum, she had a difficult time convincing her peers of this, who all appear to have had very different experiences.

These perceptions were perhaps reinforced by a number of negative stories that had been circulating among young people about youth work not being a site of contemporary youthful political action. From discussions about young mayors who ‘do nothing’, to youth clubs that told young people not to ask this question or that question in a community event, the peers we spoke to were, to a large extent, all aware of stories that made them think of youth clubs as spaces where they weren’t able to be political agents, excluding a few who believed they were able to politically aware and active.

## A telling case study

Below, two focus group attendees describe their experience of ‘doing’ politics with a youth club

they previously attended. They described how an external research student had facilitated a few sessions, where they worked to develop a list of ideas to improve young people’s lives in their area. They were proud of their list, so had subsequently planned to write a letter to their mayor to share their ideas. However, for undiscussed reasons, their youth club did not want them communicating with their mayor:

*Zerina, 16: Our youth club didn’t want us to do it.*

*Meela, 16 (moderator): Oh yeah?*

*Zerina: They told us to like... if you want to do it, go do it in your time. So we got on time and we did it.*

*Tasnim, 17: And then we boycotted the youth clubs.*

*Zerina: Yeah, rebels!*

*Tasnim: They told us not to do it, but we wanted to do it so we just went and did it and then we left the youth club.*

*Zerina: Our own youth club didn’t support us. They took us to separate rooms and they told us if you want to carry on (and write to your mayor) the youth club can’t support you because we don’t support you, but if you want to do it... they just said you guys can’t do it. Then one of our other youth workers, she was really supportive in secret. She was telling us you should arrange your own. You should arrange your own time with (the researcher). That’s when we contacted (the researcher) again and (they) contacted us telling us that if we want to do it we should do it in our own time. That’s when we got the support from (the researcher) or else if we weren’t given the opportunity then we would not be participating in anything to do with politics.*

The young women went on to describe how, instead, they were offered cooking sessions at the youth club, but ‘boycotted’ out of principle.

Here, young people were actively discouraged from exercising their political agency within a youth club. While it was a youth worker who secretly encouraged the young women to remain engaged, it was done so outside of a youth work setting so their ‘own’ time was politically activated, while youth club time was placated with food.

However, these negative stories did not appear to be known by all the young people we spoke to or surveyed. Among many of our survey respondents, for example, there was an optimism about the potential of youth work, albeit among those who declared that they did not attend youth clubs; ‘I’m not sure if any changes happen in youth clubs. I suppose youth clubs listen to the youth’s issues’. Confusingly, while most of the young people who did not attend youth clubs were from our school survey, a number of young people who said they did not attend a youth club were surveyed within a National Citizen Service programme, which was being run by youth workers in a community

centre. This does raise questions about what participants thought youth work and youth clubs were, when they completed the survey.

While more respondents in our survey than in our focus groups felt that youth work was a site where they could talk about issues that were important to them (perhaps reflecting the optimism of non-attenders or a positive effect of the National Citizen Service), very few suggested they would be listened to. For example, one respondent replied to the question ‘Can you talk about issues that are important to you in youth clubs or with youth workers?’ with ‘with friends and youth workers, yes’, but followed up immediately by answering ‘are you listened to when you talk about issues important to you in youth clubs or with youth workers?’ with ‘nope’. This was a familiar pattern in the data among those who indicated that they had been to a youth club.

## Conclusions

Above we have presented the on the ground experience of some young people’s experience of youth work in deprived inner London areas. Largely, they spoke about youth clubs as not being places where they felt they could be political agents, or occasionally, as spaces where they had been politically silenced.

However, there were some young people who felt they had been able to be political agents within youth work settings, such as youth forums, and not all of these young people’s experiences were negative. For example, in the case study we presented above, it was a youth worker who in secret encouraged these young women to push on with their letter to the mayor. What was troubling, however, was that this needed to happen in secret, and that the majority of our research participants told us they did not feel they were able to be political agents in youth clubs. This might suggest that, despite the best intentions of individual youth workers, the narratives outlined in the introduction, which suggest that youth work practice is becoming depoliticised, are being played out in some inner London youth clubs.

We are not suggesting that this research is generalisable, and there may be some youth clubs in inner city London and elsewhere that encourage young people to take part in political discussion and action, making the young people more aware. However, we hope this encourages pause for thought. If youth work is meant to be underpinned partly by empowering pedagogies, that encourage youthful citizenship, emancipation and socially focussed development, this small study suggests that it can potentially be depoliticised to a point where it becomes a politically conservative practice. It can be seen as a service just to ‘get children off the streets’ rather than a progressive practice.

Given that young people are so often criticised as the politically disinterested generation that will cause a crisis of democracy (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Farthing, 2010; Henn et al, 2002:167),

the potential depoliticisation of youth work is especially worrying. There has been much concern about young people’s increasing political disengagement, amplified by research documenting declining voter turn-out, declining party memberships, and young people’s increasing cynicism about the value of mainstream politics (Marsh et al, 2007; Harris et al, 2010; Henn and Weinstein, 2007). While we do not necessarily agree that young people are politically disinterested, and an alternate vision of young people as politically engaged is amplified in other research (Bessant, 2014; Dahlgren, 2005; Coleman, 2006; Bendicto, 2013) and indeed by many of the participants we spoke to, it is still troubling that youth work could be depoliticising. Where questions remain about the political aspirations of a generation, it might be a safer approach to ensure that a practice that works with young people encourages political efficacy.

Nicholls (2012:62) suggested that for young people, a retreat from politics might be a logical reaction to not being heard and not being able to make change: ‘if nothing you can do within the projected political system will make any difference, it can be a logical decision to do nothing within it’. If it is depoliticised, youth work might become a practice that (among many others practices) actively turns young people off politics, and inadvertently contributes to declining democracy. While youth work may have multiple underpinning praxes and pedagogies, we’re not too sure that decreasing the democratic potential of youth should be one of its outcomes.

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## Notes

- 1 It is worth noting here that a professional focus on individual young people’s problems may also reduce a practitioners ability to work on an individual level. As Rixon and Turney (2007) highlight, focusing on individual young people’s risky behaviours draws attention away from the ways poverty and social exclusion can contribute to abuse and neglect (Furlong, 2013:254).
- 2 According to the UK’s child poverty measure, 60 per cent of median household incomes, after housing costs.
- 3 A composite measure of deprivation that accounts for income as well as social and housing measures, for small ‘areas’ (Super Lower Output Areas)
- 4 Our other four findings can be found in our report ‘*Are We Being Heard?*’ (Garasia, 2014)