



Youth Work, Youth Studies, and Co-design: Sustaining a Dynamic Nexus to Progress Youth Participation

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Abstract

Youth work practitioners and youth researchers both share a keen interest in the lives, experiences, and well-being of young people; however, the skills and expertise held by practitioners and researchers have not always been mutually valued leading to tensions and a research-practice gap. The rise of co-design methods that prioritise relational skills and ethics appears to mark a moment for closing or reducing this gap. Rather than accepting this convergence at face value, in this paper, we examine some of the key tensions around (1) relational ethics and decision-making, (2) holding multiple roles and expertise, and (3) structures that constrain or sustain participation to argue for sustaining a dynamic research-practice nexus. Drawing on our experience and practitioner-researchers, we argue that rather than simply overlooking the practical and ethical tensions between practice and research, sustaining a dynamic nexus comprising of continuing dialogue and collaboration can foster and progress co-design methods in pursuit of the aims of youth participation.

Keywords Participation · Youth work · Youth studies · Research · Practice · Ethics

Introduction

While youth work practitioners and youth researchers both share a keen interest in the lives, experiences, and well-being of young people, tensions often emerge around the types of knowledge, expertise, and skills these professionals hold. Broadly, youth researchers are seen to hold knowledge that is informed by research

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and academic traditions. In contrast, youth workers hold more practical, applied skills suited for prolonged practice with young people. Despite the shared focus on youth, the tensions around this research-practice ‘gap’ have been noted by several authors before (e.g. Gormally and Coburn 2014; Loveridge et al., 2024; Ravn 2019) who point out that academic youth scholars are critiqued for being removed and not very useful to young people themselves. In contrast, youth workers are critiqued for using intuition and improvisation (Davies, 2010, in Gormally and Coburn 2014) but are less well-informed by youth research. Furthermore, at times youth workers are sometimes described as ‘unethical’ in their research practice (see Bessant et al. 2013; Brooks and Riele 2013). The growth in popularity of youth participation and co-design marks a moment where these tensions and the ‘gap’ between youth work and youth research may be somewhat reduced. The highly attuned relational skills of youth workers are suddenly in demand to achieve the goal of getting alongside young people in a sustained and collaborative way to achieve successful co-design and participatory research. It would seem, on the surface, that this potentially represents a meaningful coming together of Youth Work and Youth Studies methods.

In this paper, we interrogate the Researcher – Practitioner ‘gap’ that has traditionally existed in youth studies to identify the tensions and productive possibilities associated with youth participation. In doing so, we argue that if we engage with this gap, rather than simply overlooking its existence, we can foster, progress, and sustain co-design methods that align with the relational context of practice and the theoretical aspirations of research. As practitioner-researchers (i.e. academics with experience and/or interest in practice) with a sustained interest in participatory youth research, we were keen to explore how sustaining a dynamic research-practice nexus may usefully support more effective participatory research. Alongside Gormally and Coburn (2014), we agree that “finding [the] 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” (883). In this paper, we explore some of the tensions that have helped shape our professional identities as practitioner-researchers that have defined the productive possibilities for how we stand with young people methodologically.

The paper begins by outlining key components of co-design research and practice with young people from existing literature. We pay attention to the practical and ethical issues of co-design in academic and practice contexts. Following this, we borrow from Ravn’s (2019) approach to exploring the complexity of working with young people through critical self-reflection and reading the cues in the spaces we occupy. We outline our positionality and critical moments in our researcher/practitioner careers, emphasising “moments that caused reflection, doubt and hesitation ... but eventually also fostered deeper insights into the research process” (171). We draw on these experiences to investigate the tensions and complementarities between Youth Work practice and Youth Studies research and how they can inform co-design.

Utilising the critical moments in our researcher/practitioner careers, we explore three significant points of tension between the professional relational priorities of Youth Work and the theoretical aspirations of Youth Studies co-design methods. These tensions were summarised expertly in a recent provocation from Loveridge et

al. (2024) emphasising, amongst other issues, the (1) process of negotiating participation, (2) the multiple roles held by researchers and practitioners, and (3) the influence of processes and systems on sustaining participation. Finally, we argue that attuning ourselves to these moments of reflection and conflicting priorities, or the research-practice nexus, offers opportunities for progressing co-design and young people's participation. While the tensions held by researcher-practitioners between the priorities of Youth Work and Youth Studies may be, to an extent, unresolvable, negotiating these tensions can promote a dynamic nexus comprising of continuing dialogue and mutual benefit in pursuit of the aims of youth participation.

Co-design: Bridging Youth Practice and Research?

Approaches to research and practice that emphasise children and young people working alongside adults with emancipatory aims have gained popularity in recent scholarship and practice. There have been various terminologies to describe the “family of approaches” (Loveridge et al. 2024, 8) included within participatory methods. This terminology includes Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) as well as co-design and other methods with social justice outcomes—such as participatory design (PD) which has been developed and applied in the design of technology (Collin and Swist 2016) with similarities to PAR and coproduction which emphasises the participants' involvement across the whole project (Hartworth et al. 2021). In this paper, we have chosen to use the term ‘co-design’, recognising that this term itself illustrates one of the researcher practitioner ‘gaps’ in youth studies, with youth workers tending to use this term over ‘participatory’ or citizenship approaches in youth research. Co-design has elsewhere been described as a subset of participatory design and compared to Cooperative Inquiry (Bowler et al. 2021, 15), and in a practice context, has been described as being more holistic and similar to community development (Corney et al. 2020). We found the term useful as it explains immediately the desire for mutual cooperation between young people and adults. The merits of such participatory processes are well-established. For example, Collin and Swist (2016, 308) argue that PD privileges the participants' knowledge over the design outcome. In other words, it is not simply the product being designed that is the outcome, but rather the relationships and contribution to “shaping a future that promotes safety and well-being” (308). As such, the family of participatory methods contains not just practical inclusion but is underpinned by valuing people and the priority placed on “how people relate to each other during the research process” (Abma et al. 2019, 7). It is not simply good enough to create space for people to *be* heard, participants also need to *feel* heard.

Responding to this participatory turn, co-design and participatory methods are rapidly becoming the gold standard for research with young people (Loveridge et al., 2024; Collin and Swist 2016; Hartworth et al. 2021; Ravn 2019). Similarly, young people's participation in service delivery and design remains a persistent concern of Youth Work practice (Sapin 2013; Hart 2013; White 2007; Martin 2002; Hall 2020). Hence, in the following sections, we briefly trace the use of participatory and

co-design methods in both academic research and Youth Work traditions to compare their origins and contributions.

Co-design in Academic Youth Research

Literature encouraging greater participation in children and young people's research has been traced back by many in the Global North to the *United National Convention on the Rights of the Child* [UNCRC] (UNHCR 1989), in particular Article 12, which helped to position children's citizenship as an essential component of children's rights and ability to contribute to society. At a similar time, a body of academic work set out a 'new paradigm' (James and Prout, 2015) that became known as the 'new social studies of children' (James et al., 1998), which drew on sociological theory to approach the study of childhood. Drawing a sharp distinction from developmental psychology approaches, these authors called for children to be recognised as social actors, shaping their own and other lives around them, as well as being shaped by their circumstances. Since then, these ideas have been rapidly applied to young people as well as children and led to a growing academic interest in youth civic participation, co-design, and youth participation (Wood 2022).

Since this time, principles and practices for participation have been developed in academic, government, and practice contexts, creating similar but distinct obligations and expectations. For example, the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action and National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (2022) in the UK offer a summary of fundamental ethical principles for community-based participatory action research, including (1) Mutual Respect, (2) Equality and Inclusion, (3) Democratic Participation, (4) Active Learning, (5) Making a Difference, (6) Collective Action, and (7) Personal Integrity. There have been various well-cited attempts to detail models for greater levels of participation of children and young people, including Hart's (1992) and Arnstein's (1969) ladders of participation and Anderson's (2017) model emphasising social context. In these examples, various governing frameworks and obligations are visible, including justice, equality, democracy, rights, and accountability.

Theoretical insights have helped to shape this expanding field of interest in children and youth participation. For example, Freire's (2005) notion of praxis and a feminist ethic of care has also been influential in the development of PAR, underscoring the need for less hierarchical and ethical relationships in research (Loveridge et al., 2024). This kind of orientation counters "one-off snatch and grab research" (5) approaches and instead prioritises sustainable relationships between researcher and participants and encourages a degree of reciprocity. In this context, the key attributes of a participatory researcher are "relational virtues, such as trustworthiness (reliability and not letting others down)" (Abma et al. 2019, 266). Hartworth et al. (2021) argue that these approaches encourage and develop empathy in researchers and participants, and indeed, mirror the commonly held professional characteristics and relational aims of an ethical Youth Work practice (see Sercombe 2010; Martin 2002; Cooper 2018; Batsleer 2008, 2010).

Co-design in Youth Work Practice

Youth Workers have had a long-standing interest in youth participation as a key part of youthwork practice. There is various Youth Work practice literature outlining principles and practices of participation with young people, including Martin's (2002) *The Invisible Table*, Sapin's (2013) *Essential Skills for Youth Work*, and more recent dialogues such as Corney et al. (2020) *Approaches to Youth Participation in Youth and Community Work Practice*. Empowering young people by necessity requires promoting equitable relationships and participatory practices to contribute to greater self-efficacy, ownership, and more transformative outcomes (Hall 2020). To achieve such outcomes, Youth Workers require high levels of relationality, empathy, and working "alongside" (Sapin 2013, 158; Cooper 2018, 7) skills.

Batsleer (2010) argues that essential tasks, like asking questions in participatory research, are built on the "skills of listening and engagement that Youth Workers use" (179). These skills are taught within formal professional qualification programs, but they are usually honed through hours upon hours of practice just "hanging out" (Daughtry 2011, 29) with young people. In addition to skills, this type of practice also provides a kind of wisdom about what works and how to make ethical decisions in relational contexts (Loveridge et al., 2024). In contrast, many researchers are located in an institutional environment that promotes rule-following, whereas practitioners must constantly "read youth cues and interpret attendance" (15) and reflexively consider their positionality and power. Youth Work practice embodies the idea of being "well prepared and highly disciplined, yet improvised" (Davies, 2010, p. 6 in Gormally and Coburn 2014, 875), and youth work often draws its principles from critical pedagogies (Batsleer 2008; Corney et al. 2020; Cooper 2018; Jeffs and Smith 2005).

Finally, praxis models like *Youth Partnership Accountability* (Stacey 2001) outline the necessity for adults to be held accountable for their actions when working in partnership with young people, including maintaining reciprocal decision-making processes, being held accountable for actions even when young people are not present, and being required to justify their actions if they act in contradiction to young people expressed wishes. Relationships, accountability, and care are central to co-design in research and practice; however, how these ideas are taught and outworked is connected to the qualifications and expertise of the researcher and practitioner. Yet despite these strengths in relational practice, research remains somewhat marginalised in youth work code of ethics. It is often regarded as "ancillary work" (Corney 2014, 8), as informing practice, and Youth Workers are therefore positioned as consumers of research rather than producers (Ara Taiohi 2020), or it is simply absent altogether (Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc 2008; the National Youth Agency 2004; Institute for Youth Work, n.d.), thus undermining the potential for youth workers to contribute to discussions.

Sustaining Participatory Practices

We suggest that the growth of participatory approaches and co-design marks a moment in youth studies that could enable greater alignment and cross-fertilisation between practitioners and researchers. The need for sustained participation

between young people both ethical and relational requires research-led and practical approaches. Batsleer (2010) argues that “the dilemmas of practitioner research mirror the dilemmas of informal education practice” (179) and points to the persistent challenge about the purpose of knowledge gathering about young people (by practitioners and scholars) being for “social improvement or social control” (180). Loveridge et al. (2024) highlight these challenges by posing a series of questions for researchers at the end of their paper to promote reflection on practical and ethical issues in co-design that typically fall outside the formal ethics process, including (1) developing relationships; (2) sustaining collaboration; (3) maintaining respect; and, (4) continuing care.

Loveridge et al. (2024) provided a starting point to reflect upon our positionalities and knowledge gathered in the practice or organisational spaces we have occupied. We selected these questions to consider the “everyday ethical moments that surface in more relational, participatory, collaborative, and emergent research” (21). We found the following three questions to be particularly important for our reflexive process:

In a sustained project, how will you re-negotiate how participation or non-participation can realistically happen?

Have you thought about how the multiple roles you may have in relation to the children and young people may contribute to creating ethical issues at different phases of the research?

What broader processes or structures are needed to support children and young people’s sustained engagement in the research? (16)

In our discussion below, we respond to these questions, drawing from our narratives, with a focus on (1) the relational ethics of negotiating participation, (2) the impact of qualifications and expertise in shaping the roles we play, and (3) governance obligations that support or hinder participation. The shared concern in Youth Work and Youth Studies for knowledge to be ideally created with young people is an important point of connection between practice and research. We explore this connection further through a short analysis of the critical moments in our experience in youth research and practice, focusing in particular on negotiating participation, holding multiple roles, and structures that shape participation opportunities.

Author Positionality

While participatory research is often, rightly, focused on young people, what the researcher brings to the encounter is equally important (Ravn 2019) including assumptions, motivations, and social and symbolic hierarchies (Lohmeyer 2020a, 2020b; Farrugia 2016). In Ravn’s (2019) work, we witness a researcher reflexively grappling with “hanging out” (177) in the organisation while maintaining the appearance of being an objective or separate individual detached from the service resulting in a blurring of boundaries. While we largely construct a binary between youth workers and researchers for the purposes of this article, we acknowledge that some youth studies researchers are also accustomed to following the cues that are required

in participatory research methods. In the following section, we draw from critical moments in our practice-academic biographies, and, in first person, describe where we had to consider how to sustain co-design through the tensions of working across practice academia.

Ben

As a Youth Worker turned academic, I am conscious of the marginality of a practitioner-researcher in both the Youth Work and Youth Studies fields. My undergraduate education was a BA with a major in Youth Work in a faith-based higher education provider; that has been the only degree-level Youth Work qualification in South Australia for almost 20 years. This qualification is routinely, and somewhat fairly, received with scepticism as to its emphasis on ministry over secular practice. After 10 years of practice experience in the non-government Youth Work sector, I completed my PhD in Sociology. I was supervised by neither Youth Work nor Youth Studies specialists, but my thesis was examined by two globally esteemed Youth Studies scholars. My educational and professional marginality tends to displease both Youth Work and Youth Studies purists.

My PhD project (and others since) included wrestling with the research methods and ethics I encountered in practice and literature that assumed marginalised young people were essentially unwilling participants, requiring some sort of creative method to engage them. Based on my practice experience, my position was that young people might be enthusiastic participants but for reasons that were not necessarily the same or the expected motivation by practitioners or scholars (see Lohmeyer 2020a). This approach received mixed responses. Practitioners routinely expressed that I was unlikely to get any participants without using the customary methods of providing food and other incentives. Conversely, on one occasion, I received public criticism at an academic conference for ethically compromised research practice for not reporting young people's legally questionable activities (i.e., drug use and violence) discussed during data collection. My research methods have aimed to approach young people as active and capable participants and provide space for their agency. Yet, I remain convinced that participation and co-design are messy practices full of ethically grey areas, including the role of incentives and the potential reliance on young people's free labour, as well as, multiple legal, ethical, and institutional obligations.

In my experience, the Youth Worker-academic position is neither fully acceptable to the frontline practitioners nor Youth Studies scholars. Practice can be critiqued for its role in the "carceral network" (Foucault 1979, 301), but equally, research is part of the production of knowledge used to govern young people (Kelly 2010). Yet, both contemporary practice (Emslie 2019; Lohmeyer and McGregor 2021) and research (Connell 2019; Fraser and Taylor 2016) operate within the confines of neoliberal rationales. In my experience, while Youth Work and Youth Studies can have different institutional obligations and purposes, there are at least as many shared aims. Navigating these twin orientations has provided many opportunities for critical insights and methods, particularly in the pursuit of participatory aims and co-design methods.

Joel

My interest in practice peaked during my doctoral project (McGregor and Farguía, 2019; McGregor, 2018; McGregor, 2017) when I was studying how the relationship between a case manager and a young person would influence the young person's desistance journey. The practitioners I talked to worked directly with young people and had a significant influence on their decision-making and biographical pathways. However, what struck me was how case managers, from different disciplinary backgrounds, emphasised their personal motivations for working with young people. Practitioners were quick to share their personal motivations for the work that they do, and in many cases, these motivations outranked their professional qualifications and knowledge.

After completing my PhD, I was invited to work with a team on the Name.Narrate.Navigate program (Blakemore et al. 2021), a trauma-informed and culturally responsive program tackling youth violence, which included a steering committee, a practitioner working party, and a practice component. Here I was introduced to the term, and work, of practitioner-researchers. While my role on Name.Narrate.Navigate was largely research-focused, and I had the opportunity to work directly with practitioners in the practitioner working party and to deliver the program at a local high school. The practitioner working party acted as a community of practice where we shared insights with the practitioners to encourage shared learning opportunities and peer-to-peer professional development and mentoring. The practitioner working party aimed to break down the barriers between practice and research, practitioners and academics, non-government, government and policy, and universities.

I am a researcher with a focus on practice but without a professional practice background, who ended up doing some practice-based work and who has volunteered in mentoring programs with young people released from juvenile justice. This dappling in practice stems from my academic values; in particular, ensuring the knowledge I have, or produce, is useful outside of the ivory tower. In some situations, my knowledge as a researcher has been valued. For example, when I was undertaking training for a mentoring program with young people in the justice system, I was asked about key themes in the research. At another time, during the practitioner working party with the Name.Narrate.Navigate program, some practitioners were hesitant about having an academic at their table. One practitioner stated that I should not contribute because I was not working in practice. The expertise I brought as a researcher, and as somewhat of a practitioner-researcher, was denied. In this situation, for me, there was an inherent tension. What knowledge is valued? And how do you understand what different experts (practitioners or researchers) bring to the conversation?

From previous work, I knew that practitioners leveraged their experience in conversations about practice, yet my contributions—which could only come from experience—were not valued, nor was the research expertise. How can knowledge be validated without the two perspectives coming together? Talking to practitioners, I have often seen that they are doing what the research supports, but are unaware of this, and, just as important, researchers sometimes do not see what practitioners are doing, yet attempt to write about and critique practice.

Bronwyn

While I currently sit in an academic/researcher role, the reason I am here can largely be explained by a link to Youth Work. For all my years as a teenager, I regularly attended local outdoor youth camps and youth groups at a local church. The model of leadership in both of these was such that after some years we were expected to take up some responsibilities and leadership roles as part of our reciprocity to others. This meant that even by age 15, I was leading younger teenagers and attending workshops on how to relate with, teach, and lead young people. By 21, I had attended, led, or directed around 25 camps—and these were key to my decision to become a secondary teacher.

My academic trajectory, which began after a stint teaching, has, however, rarely named this Youth Work background—despite a persistent desire to be more ‘applied’ throughout my academic work. For example, when I began planning my research methodology for my PhD (on youth citizenship action), I quickly rejected most ‘formal’ methods I was presented with—such as interviews and focus groups. I recognised, as a result of working with young people for so many years (in both Youth Work and Teaching), that these were unlikely to elicit many genuine responses in the context of schools (which are highly regulated institutions) and with a relative stranger—me coming in to ‘research on’ a group of students. Drawing on my Youth Work and youth camping experience, I therefore developed a suite of everyday informal methods that intended to be slightly more authentic—even if not totally so. My paper on “everyday talk” (Bronwyn and Wood, 2024, 1) is the result of many years of trialling more informal ways to research with youth in schools. I also built up a host of work on the importance of informal and everyday contexts in youth citizenship (Wood, 2014, 2016), which also drew from a long recognition of the importance of community, family, and ubiquitous contexts in shaping young people’s lives.

The desire to create research that is relevant and ‘applied’, and able to link to wider agendas for public participation and knowledge exchange, also keeps me linked to practitioners—both teachers and Youth Workers. I attend conferences with practitioners annually and make it a practice to produce ‘double’ articles when possible—one for the academic journals and one for the practitioner journals (low impact factor)—to try and keep my work real and more accountable. Youth Workers’ expertise is rarely featured in Youth Studies conferences. Time spent with Youth Workers has also led to a strong interest in Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), which I have undertaken with postgraduate students and colleagues many times. An important tension I observe within the potential coming together of Youth Work and Youth Studies through co-design methods is whether these more innovative methods merely ‘serve’ to enhance an academic research imperative. Ideally, this convergence can speak to the depth of ‘expertise’ of deep insights that Youth Workers hold that deserves greater recognition.

Shared Tensions

Our experiences as practitioner-researchers have shaped our aspirations and attuned our awareness of the tensions in participatory methods with young people. Our narratives contain experiences that position us marginally within these fields, such as

our diverse practice experiences, qualifications, and research expertise. While for some, these might disqualify us from formal status as a Youth Worker or Youth Studies scholar, we argue this marginal status affords deep insights into the issues of boundary making (i.e. constructed distinctions between practice and research) and the implications for co-design. In the following section, we draw on these narratives to further explore the issues of negotiating participation, holding multiple roles and structures that shape participation opportunities, and consider how sustaining a dynamic nexus between research and practice can progress the shared aspirations of co-design.

Sustaining Tensions and Finding Opportunities

In this section, we suggest that a closer engagement between researchers and practitioners has considerable potential to enhance co-design with young people. It is not an uncommon refrain in research methods literature, and in particular Youth Studies, for claims to be made by researchers that there is a need for more research, guidelines, and training on how to manage the research encounter. This includes the need for experience managing ethical issues, relationships, and power imbalances in situ (Loveridge et al. 2024; Brooks and Riele 2013). However, the time constraints on academic youth participatory researchers mean that significant periods of hanging out with young people are difficult to attain, and therefore experience fewer opportunities to build ethical and relational culture. As Andersson (2017) argues, models of participation “lack pedagogically grounded perspectives” (1348), and researchers typically operate within an institutional context that encourages following universal rules and guidelines with little guidance on how to navigate micro-ethical moments that arise moment by moment (Brooks and Riele 2013; Loveridge et al., 2024). Despite well-articulated principles, researchers are rarely equipped with the “practice wisdom” (Bastian et al. 2022, 94) needed to make ethical decisions in relational contexts. In contrast, the marketised nature of contemporary youth work practice contexts often leaves little space and time for critical reflection and emancipatory practices (Authors A and B). The governing institutions and contexts of academia and practice create obligations for youth researchers and practitioners that can clash with young people’s expressed desires and or unexpressed needs, countering the aims of co-design. However, these contexts also possess unique strengths that can complement the pursuit of shared co-design aspirations. In this section, we examine opportunities to bridge the research/practice gap and create a dynamic nexus through co-design drawing on our experiences.

Negotiating Participation: Relational Ethics and Decision-Making

With the growing application of participatory and relational research methods, researchers require a higher level of inter-relational and interpersonal skills to navigate the relational nature of research, the renegotiation of participation in the moment, and the practical wisdom to be ethically proficient in unexpected

circumstances and value-laden contexts (Banks et al. 2013; Loveridge et al., 2024). As the narratives from Ben, Joel, and Bronwyn all demonstrated, our experience in youth work supported the development of the type of highly attuned relational skills that are contextual, responsive, and built on social relationships characterised by mutuality and trust (Lawson 2007). Loveridge et al.'s (2024) questions about negotiating participation in sustained projects seem, to us, to hinge on relational skills and ethical judgements in the moment. Few researchers receive training in reflexivity and “ethics in practice” (Guillemin and Gillam 2004, 264), but instead are expected to have gained these skills instinctively or develop them, as we did, through life and professional experiences. There is rarely an easily identifiable solution to ethical dilemmas in advance. Instead, ethical decision-making is based on the researchers’ personal code of ethics. As illustrated through Ben’s experience of disparaging responses to ethical questions in data collection, it is apparent that not all researchers’ or practitioners’ personal codes of ethics are the same—but nor should they be. Rather than leaving this kind of expertise to chance or personal histories, greater intentionality through mutual learning between youth workers’ practice and youth researchers’ academic expertise would benefit both groups. For example, the time spent by youth workers hanging out with young people themselves, through teaching, mentoring, volunteering, or researching, has much to assist researchers in understanding youth, their needs, their voices, and preferred ways of communicating and being.

A Youth Worker, Eddy, in Loveridge et al. (2024), describes how these many years of experience helped him to read “youth cues” (11) to ascertain ongoing consent and plan activities for the day during his 18-month-long YPAR project. Such skills are not exclusive to youth workers and neither are they impossible for non-youth workers to attain. Yet, “the skill of ‘thick ethical description’, the ability to see events in their value-laden contexts, and judge accordingly” (160) is an asset that is commonly derived through years of connecting with and researching alongside young people such as in Bronwyn’s experience in youth camps and Joel’s experience in youth mentoring. Youth Work, therefore, can offer a position of strength from which to develop methodological and relational approaches that respect young people and work well for them throughout the process (Gormally and Coburn 2014). Equally, the formalised research process that enables critical reflection and articulation of ethical and relational principles and values that underpin practice also progresses the process of (re)negotiating participation through the interaction between intuitively held and formally learned knowledge.

Holding Multiple Roles: Qualifications and Expertise

The aspiration for equality between practitioners, researchers, and young people within co-design advances the best outcome in research and practice. Yet, adults bring multiple roles and responsibilities with varying elevated status to the encounter. This section considers the implications of Loveridge et al.’s (2024) questions about holding and recognising multiple roles in sustaining youth co-design methods. Drawing on our narratives, we observe the impact of our formal qualifications (Social Science, Education,

and Arts/Youth Work) on the role we embodied in promoting participatory practices with young people and other adults working in this space.

Juggling several hats as practitioners and researchers can help advance co-design with young people. Youth Work is a vocation that many “fall into” (152) having not achieved academic success in school. Yet, Tallon et al. (2022) argue that for established practitioners “returning to formal study instilled a new regard for evidence-based practice” (156), and how formal study “transformed their daily practice” (156). In other words, formal qualifications shape the role they play with young people. Bronwyn’s practice of producing double articles, when possible, one for the academic journals and one for the practitioner journals, holds the possibility for extending the connections.

Ben’s and Joel’s narratives included experiences wherein their positions as academics (with valuable practice experience) were not valued by frontline practitioners. Practitioners’ lived experiences can make them sceptical of individuals who reside within the academy and are seemingly removed from the challenges of day-to-day practice. Yet, we know that Youth Work has a mixed and messy history that still contains inconsistent qualification and expertise requirements across international jurisdictions (Cooper 2013, 2018). There are well-worn arguments that a profession needs a code of ethics, a qualification, and an association (Sercombe 2010, 2018; Corney 2021; Bessant 2011). Yet, evidence shows that practitioners routinely draw on their personal experience rather than professional qualifications to inform practice (McGregor 2018). The influence of personal experience over participatory practices raises questions about how expertise and qualifications shape our roles in relation to young people.

Walker and Walker (2011) suggest that practitioners “need to develop ‘practitioner expertise’ which draws on a combination of knowledge, skills and, in particular, judgment” (40). In this definition of practitioner expertise, qualifications are not explicitly mentioned, but are perhaps implied in knowledge. Tallon et al. (2022) argue that “degree qualification can be considered as necessary” (159) for Youth Work to be recognised as a profession. The formal training and education an individual has is an important marker of knowledge and practice endorsed in a given setting. Furthermore, Walker and Walker (2011) define practitioner expertise as “the sum, interaction, and application of the three intellectual virtues of scientific knowledge, technical skill, and practical wisdom” (42). While qualifications are a signifier of possessing the endorsed knowledge, a broader emphasis on expertise can encompass qualifications alongside skill and wisdom gained through practice. This approach promotes a creative nexus and the valuing of diverse roles to sustain participatory practices. There is much to be gained by people who have invested more heavily in knowledge in working collaboratively with those possessing technical skills and practical wisdom.

Structures Sustaining Participation: Governance and Obligations

In contrast to practitioner expertise that promotes social improvement, Youth Workers have been critiqued as being soft cops who are funded by governments and use their relational skills to control and manage young people through more humane means (Lohmeyer 2017; Wyn and White 2000). Conversely, the popular image of the ivory tower academic, as Joel encountered in some of his work in the Name.Narrate.

Navigate project, appears to be disconnected from the daily demands of professional practice. The processual and structural influences within practice and academic contexts are not always clear. While not explicit in our author narratives, each of us works with the impacts of marketised higher education. Yet, provoked by Loveridge et al.'s (2024) questioning, we argue that these influences offer enabling and constraining possibilities for co-design with young people.

Both sectors of youth work and tertiary education have been subject to growing pressures to find greater efficiencies amidst reduced funding. Under marketised neoliberal funding models, youth and community services compete for funding, promising ever more efficient returns (Emslie 2009, 2019). Ben's and Joel's academic work has included exposing where complex social problems impacting young people are reimagined as simplistic and solvable through short-term interventions (Lohmeyer and McGregor 2021; Smyth et al. 2013), and the practice of professionals is represented as routine, robotic, and standardised (McDonald and Marston 2005). Similarly, academic institutions are subject to a "free-market" agenda (Connell 2019, 2022) where success is measured on external funding, publications, and student evaluation metrics (Fraser and Taylor 2016). Both practitioners and academics are similarly constrained to invest in the relational virtues and time-consuming processes of co-design.

In these shared constraints, the contrasting governing institutions and obligations may offer opportunities to sustain participatory practices. University ethics review processes have been accused of representing a risk management strategy for universities, rather than being concerned with ethics (Connor et al. 2017; Gabb 2010). Academic accounts of ethics review processes include narratives of governance becoming the dominant story of a research project (Allen 2009). Ethics processes can produce counterintuitive and counterproductive processes (Connor et al. 2017) that reduce or prevent young people from expressing their voice on sensitive topics (Doyle and Buckley 2017; Allen 2009). As such, university ethics processes can be represented as a barrier to ethical and participatory research practice. By comparison, Youth Work practice includes regular practice supervision where ethical issues would ideally be regularly discussed (Sapin 2013, 187; Green 2010). This kind of supervision supports practitioners in navigating the complexities of practice. However, these kinds of critical and emancipatory practices are squeezed out under neoliberal funding models (Authors A and B). While both academic and practice contexts contain constraining influences, they also appear to offer complementary possibilities.

The institutionalised requirement in research to articulate one's ethical position and its application to a distinct project at the beginning (middle and end) of the project could serve in collaboration as justification to slow the rapid pace imposed on practice. Likewise, practice wisdom navigating the prevention of harm and promotion of risk might richly inform methods to promote or identify moments of meaningful participation. Bronwyn's experience creating everyday informal methods to offer more flexible research in part, demonstrates the potential to leverage the sustained relationships provided by the context of schools, communities, and families. In addition, her commitment to creating 'double' outputs is an example of creating return value for practitioners. This need not be inherently more work; for example,

Ben has a similar practice of creating podcasts featuring researchers, practitioners, and young people that then becomes a central resource for teaching. These examples demonstrate that the processes and structures that constrain practice and research individually, through collaboration can be employed to support young people to advance participatory research and practice.

Conclusion: A Dynamic Nexus for Progressing Youth Participation

Drawing on critical moments in our personal narratives, we have considered points of tension and opportunities within Youth Work and Youth Studies for (1) negotiating participation, (2) the multiple roles held by researchers and practitioners, and (3) the influence of processes and systems on sustaining participation. We have argued that Youth Work expertise offers a position of strength to respond to ethical issues, such as sustaining young people's participation as they arise in context. Subsequently, participatory aims with young people are aided by formalised qualifications but could be progressed even further by valuing diverse and specialised expertise amongst the multiple roles of those who work with young people. In other words, co-design principles apply to work with other adults as much as young people. Finally, we argue that the institutional contexts in which these specialised roles operate constrain, but also offer mutual benefit through collaboration.

As practitioner-researchers often with marginal status in both camps and inspired by the provocations of Loveridge et al. (2024), we have explored in this paper the potential of a creative nexus holding together multiple expertise, roles, and contextual structures can progress participatory work with young people. Sustaining the participatory aspirations of co-design in practice and research settings can be progressed through a creative nexus and highlighting the tensions and conflicts between the roles of the researcher and practitioner, rather than overlooking the 'gap' between Youth Work and Youth Studies.

We have examined both shared and individual critical moments in our biographies to analyse the benefit of valuing the procedural ethics prioritised in universities alongside the situational and relational ethics required for prolonged practice with young people. We have argued that the principles of co-design can counter a myopic focus on qualifications as the marker of expertise for working with young people, and instead remind us of the need to value the creative tension between knowledge, skills, and practice wisdom that can be held by multiple people in a collaborative space. Finally, we have considered the constraints of institutional context for promoting participation, however, critically, we have argued that collaboration between researchers and practitioners can also employ these constraints to promote youth participation.

Co-design does appear to offer a meaningful opportunity for collaboration and shared aspirations, closing the gap between practitioners and researchers. Approached critically, and through sustaining and valuing multiple perspectives and expertise, a dynamic nexus between youth work and research paradigms provides further opportunities to "clearly stand with young people" (Gormally and Coburn

2014, 883) by gaining deeper understandings and skills to support effective and meaningful co-design.

Author Contribution Lohmeyer was the lead contributor to the manuscript via conceptualising, a major contribution of content (literature review, biographical narrative, and analysis), and was responsible for the presentation and submission. He is the corresponding author.

McGregor contributed to the content via biographical narrative and analysis as well as editing and narrative consistency.

Wood contributed to the content via biographical narrative and analysis as well as editing and narrative consistency.

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Declarations

The authors declare no competing interests. No data requiring human or animal ethics approval was used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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