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Resisting the professional turn: revisiting youth work as a covenantal process

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Abstract

Youth work in England has its origins in the mid-industrial period (c. 1800–70). Characterised as a social movement, youth work, in line with social pedagogy practices on the continent, formed part of collaborative familial and community processes that supported young people's upbringing within a range of informal social activities. Following the publication of a Government Circular in 1939 called *The Service of Youth*, a youth service was born in recognition of the value of youth work to support young people's social and physical development. The pedagogical relationship with young people has since become subject to professionalisation, led by the imperatives of policy rather than by the interests and needs of young people and community members. The introduction of contractual practices further positions young people as clients where desired outputs between the youth worker and young person are pre-agreed to meet funding criteria.

We argue that positioning young people as clients to youth workers within contractual relationships can disembody the young person from the collaborative processes of upbringing situated within their family and community relationships. Grounded in a youth work project called 'Beyond the School Gates', we revisit the origins of youth work in England to conceptualise the youth worker/young person relationship more centrally within covenantal, open-ended processes of communal and familial upbringing.

Keywords youth work; professionalisation; professionalism; covenant; upbringing; relationships

Introduction: a hidden history of youth work

According to the National Youth Agency (NYA, 2025), youth work 'is a form of education that usually happens outside of school through informal and nonformal activities and experiences, starting with young people's interests, goals and experiences, helping them grow personally and socially by building on their strengths' (p. 6). Here, adults work with young people aged primarily between 11 and 18 years old; the youth work 'requires a distinctive commitment to particular ethical behaviour from the adults involved' (Davies, 2016, p. 1). Essentially, as Williamson and Basarab (2019) have argued, youth work needs to be seen as a relational activity that fosters relationships between young people and between young people and society. In this sense, youth work 'is always walking a line between an agenda of working for the emancipation and autonomy of young people on the one hand and promoting the conformity and integration of young people on the other' (Williamson and Basarab, 2019, p. 193). The NYA (2025) summarises these processes within its purpose statement that currently frames youth work as a practice that 'Enables young people to ... develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential' (p. 6).

Historically, youth work in England and across Europe emerged as a distinct spectrum of practices (Furlong, 2012; Williamson and Basarab, 2019) around the mid-industrial period (c. 1800–70). Characterised as a social movement, it involved a mix of voluntary, often (at least in England) faith-based community activities that focused on adolescent social and moral character development alongside some political education – in the broadest sense. Essentially, youth work formed part of collaborative familial and community processes that supported young people's upbringing within a range of informal social activities (Davies, 2013).

Although young people's agendas, needs and concerns were, to some extent, subordinated to familial, community and faith-based mores, these priorities were largely characterised by familial and community relationships of trust within primarily youth-led agendas. However, more recently, youth work practices, policy initiatives and debates have increasingly become subject to the professionalisation of these activities. In England – the context of this article – the pedagogical relationship with young people has come to be led by the imperatives of policy rather than by the interests and needs of the young people and community members participating in the processes of their upbringing. Coinciding with this process has been the introduction of contractual practices that position young people as clients of a youth service, where desired outputs between the youth worker and young person are agreed before intervention in order to meet funding criteria.

In this article we revisit this largely hidden history of youth work in England that conceptualises youth worker relationships with young people within covenantal processes of communal and familial upbringing. We demonstrate that these qualities can be enhanced by drawing on one of Freire's (1972) frameworks. Here, the young person's identity and sense of belonging within community sites and spaces are supported within and beyond the school gates. We situate our discussion within current practices in youth work that position young people as clients of youth workers in contractual relationships. In line with Davies's (2013, 2016) assertions and broader claims related to social pedagogy practices (Cameron, 2013; Charfe and Gardner, 2020), we argue that this focus on predetermined outcomes can disembody the young person from the collaborative processes of upbringing situated within family and community relationships.

Grounded in a youth work project called 'Beyond the School Gates' (BSG) delivered across the south-east of England (2018–23), we assert that covenantal relationships offer a more substantive ethical basis for youth work practices than contractual ones. We demonstrate what this might look like and consider how it might be promoted in youth work training. Methodologically, we draw on Freire's (1972) decoding model (ch. 3) to frame the initial stages and focus of this practice. We consider ethical goods, which Aristotle (2020, p. 4) argues are the behaviours, characteristics and activities that support 'eudaimonia' (that is, flourishing or well-being) which emerged from these processes. We then consider some of the limitations and challenges encountered when enacting this model.

This discussion is contextualised within a growing interest in England in social pedagogy (<https://sppa-uk.org/>) and youth work practices. This follows the global economic collapse in 2008 that saw the statutory Youth Service shrink dramatically. However, a subsequent drive by central government towards supporting local social enterprise and community-based projects (see David Cameron's Big Society speech, 19 July 2010; Gov.uk, 2010) created a point of divergence between the voluntary sector, the NYA and the influence of central government control.

However, as the NYA re-established itself as a charity it found itself increasingly positioned in tension between government policy directives embedded in much of its funding streams and the needs of an increasingly eclectic mix of youth work organisations who sought autonomy from central government intervention linked to funding and its policy initiatives. Here, although not new to the youth work sector (Siurala et al., 2016), balancing autonomy through dependency became essential as a means to negotiate youth work spaces and multi-agency practices. Subsequent revisions to the NYA training programme and curriculum (NYA, 2025) have attempted to address these concerns by bringing youth work under the umbrella of national occupational standards that re-assert and define the ethical behaviours expected of youth workers.

We believe that this juncture of policy, social concerns, further devolution of central control over youth work activities and its synergies with social pedagogy as an emergent practice provide a timely opportunity for discussion and further debate.

Historical context: the professionalisation of youth work

Davies (2013) has argued that in England *upbringing* was historically the discourse of family and communities and their concerns around raising their children into adulthood, for which:

Communities/extended families sought to support their children; in doing so they recognized the need for more than just an ad hoc, if dedicated, approach to childrearing. The result was a concern with educational activity that enhanced both the community's and their children's lives ... This educational activity reflected both what was deemed to be worth knowing and what were the relative responsibilities of the community and its young. (p. 7)

Intrinsic to this process was the relationship between the youth worker, the young person and ties with their wider family, friends and community members. Here, both in youth work in England and social pedagogy practices across Europe and Latin America, relationships with young people were led by the needs and concerns of the young people and their families rather than the broader political context, policy directives and their citizenship concerns.

Significantly though, and central to our discussion, it was within the processes of upbringing that covenantal relationships were established: 'the worker listens to the young person and works in the young person's best interest, and the young person trusts the worker to do so. This is a particular relationship which reflects the social characteristics of the young person and their community' (Davies, 2016, p. 9). These relationships were largely managed with existing, trusted family, extended family and local community members who had a vested and collective interest in the upbringing of the young person. Intrinsically, the relationship focused on establishing and maintaining the young person's identity and sense of belonging within community sites and spaces – a process that extended beyond formal education provided by schools. Although voluntary, faith-based groups and wealthy elites extended this work (Furlong, 2012), a common feature remained in English youth work and wider social pedagogy practices – that is, the work was carried out primarily by adults from within local communities in which they lived and with whom they had relational ties (Cameron, 2013; Davies, 2016; Williamson and Basarab, 2019).

Hence, upbringing related to family and wider community concerns about raising adolescents into adults, and included girls' and boys' group work, leisure activities and mentoring carried out by wider family and community members (Davies, 2013). These activities coincided with wider social pedagogy practices that also emerged during this period across Europe and Latin America. Corresponding with notions of upbringing in England, mutual responsibility for connecting groups of people (particularly those who were marginalised) was placed on families and communities to create a just society (see Cameron, 2013).

However, although remaining within the broad definition of youth work presented earlier, the ethical behaviours and focus of interventions previously associated with family and community notions of upbringing shifted significantly in England in response to a Circular (1486) called 'The Service of Youth' and the 1944 Education Act. The government had recognised the value of youth work as a means to support young people's social and physical development during the Second World War as they faced social disruption and displacement. This process was galvanised in the Albemarle Report (Ministry of Education, 1960) that recognised the intrinsic value of youth work as a potent political tool to address post-Second World War social issues faced by young people at the time. These included a teenage population 'bulge' that would follow a post-war baby boom, concerns about delinquent young people who had the potential to disturb the social order and, more generally, young people's increasingly narrow spending habits based on perceived consumption-for-pleasure that was seen to limit their horizons by encouraging narcissistic attitudes.

The Albemarle Report attempted to harness youth work activities under a common values and skills framework and, as a result of the report, the National College for the Training of Youth Leaders was established. This was shortly followed by the establishment of the Youth Services Information Centre (YSIC) in 1964, located in Leicester. The aim of the YSIC was to raise awareness of innovation, identify topics for research and to collate materials for teaching. The YSIC later evolved into the National Youth Bureau and in 1991 was established as the National Youth Agency (NYA). Youth work now extended beyond the processes of familial and community upbringing. Although this framework was still characterised by notions of youth work as informal education carried out in community contexts where young people participated on a voluntary basis, youth work pedagogy was now led by and used primarily to address broader media and political concerns related to the social and economic stability of the state.

In particular, attention was paid to the welfare of young people and control over their social activities. Moreover, youth work agendas became increasingly aligned to the formal education and policing sectors (Jeffs and Smith, 1979) with their central authoritarian, neo-liberal, market-led education policies. Neo-liberalism, a political ideology with its origins in the 1930s in England (Davies et al., 2021, p. 1), placed responsibility for self-governance at the feet of the individual rather than seeing it as a community endeavour (see, for example, Ministry of Education, 1960, article 29). Specifically, state-endorsed ethical goods emerging from youth work interventions that were guided by neo-liberal agendas focused on developing personal characteristics associated with broader civic responsibilities that emphasised self-formation, self-assertion and self-improvement (see Bauman, 2000; Bauman and Raud, 2015). In doing so, these virtues were promoted as normative to youth work processes, not only extending but also replacing some of the collective processes and pedagogic practices of upbringing previously associated with communal and family responsibilities (Davies, 2013).

Youth work as a social movement had started to disappear and a new, politicised history emerged. That is not to say relationships between young people, families or their communities were apolitical, rather that emphasis had shifted towards the youth work relationship and pedagogic practices led by political imperatives rather than by young people. Moreover, by defining itself as a professional body, the NYA had attempted to create for itself a specialist knowledge base for which 'Claims were made, at a symbolic level, for the ownership of particular traits and abilities' (Tucker, 1994, p. 10). This definition perpetuated tensions among youth workers, who were concerned not only that the role of youth work was moving away from its focus on communal upbringing, but also that youth work was also now being characterised as a profession. It was questionable whose interests were now being met within the youth work relationship. Increasingly, as Davies (2005) noted, the new courtiers of youth work wanted its product but had:

much less patience with the process which generates these outcomes: with suggestions that for youth work, the medium is a crucial part of the message, that its hidden curriculum of

inter-personal interaction (especially young person with young person but also young person with adult) is as important for generating the desired outcomes as its declared and overt content. (p. 4)

Concerns among youth workers focused on the professional characteristics that a training programme might develop (Tucker, 1994, p. 10), as a new language of managerialism, customers and markets that had appeared in teacher-training programmes and practices was now defining the characteristics of professional youth work (Banks, 1994). Central to these concerns was the positioning of young people as clients in social contracts (Banks, 1994; Davies, 2016), a shift accelerated by the Transforming Youth Work agenda (Department for Education and Skills, 2002) that aligned youth work to police targets and made school sites focal points from which multi-agency hubs might operate and to whom state-funded youth workers would become partly accountable.

Central to this discussion was the premise that the relationship would be established based on an agreement between the youth worker and young person to act together in order that they would each gain desired ethical goods. The ethical goods for the youth worker were normative outputs led by political imperatives that included reduced crime rates, teenage pregnancies and homelessness, behavioural changes and increased attendance at youth provision or school. Hence, this relationship positioned young people as objects to be acted on in order to meet targets (Davies, 2016, p. 11) and characterises much youth work in England today.

This premise sits at the heart of current tensions among practitioners and academics, as the NYA attempts to bring youth work under the umbrella of national occupational standards with a re-assertion of the purposes and ethical behaviours expected of youth workers. These tensions coincide with similar ethical questions posed of social pedagogy, which was recently established as a recognised professional body in England (<https://sppa-uk.org/>). Although largely applied in the field of social work, it also forms a branch of youth work in the NYA. Here too, the language and practices of managerialism and customer and client services embedded in its training programmes and practices have raised concerns about the quality of relationships developed with young people, which are leading to a deficiency in welfare services (Cameron, 2013; Charfe and Gardner, 2020).

It is with these concerns in mind that a youth charity called BSG embedded its youth work in what Davies (2016) and Cameron (2013) have argued are more substantive ethical practices in the form of covenantal relationships.

Revisiting covenantal relationships: the rationale

BSG was established as a youth charity in 2020, developed from a research project, ethically approved by the University of Portsmouth, England, that was carried out in 2018–20 to support young people who had been excluded from school to re-engage with their education. This coincided with Damien Hind's (Department for Education, 2018a) call for evidence into the processes of school exclusions. The processes applied to the research were carried through to the charity (see Edwards, 2023; Edwards et al., 2021). Data from this research support our discussion.

To foreground the discussion, we argue for a model of youth work that not only moves the youth worker/young person relationship beyond contractual relationships but also recognises broader claims that covenantal relations are actually core to all youth work (Sercombe, 2010). In line with Davies (2016) though, we argue the limitations to these claims are found in notions of professionalism and professional practice that extend to contractual relationships. Specifically, contractual relationships do not account for the substantive nature of relationships established within a covenant. Sacks (2008) elaborated:

A contract is made for a limited period, for a specific purpose, between two or more parties, each seeking their own benefit. A covenant is made open-endedly by two or more parties who come together in a bond of loyalty and trust to achieve together what none can achieve alone ... Covenants belong to families, communities, charities, which are arenas of co-operation ... Covenant is about identity. (para. 14)

This is not to dismiss that young people enter into a form of agreement with youth workers as Sercombe (2010) has claimed. However, in covenantal relationships Davies (2016) argues (particularly in the context of upbringing) 'trust and loyalty are "built in" to the definition' (p. 11). Cameron (2013) added that here

the relationship focuses on encounter; the here-and-now with a future orientation rather than end-goal outputs. Moreover, the relationship is open-ended and not time bound. Davies (2016) added:

What is central to the ethics of youth work, is not a profession, but a particular kind of relationship emerging over time, between young people and particular adults, all embedded in the same social milieu: families and communities ... The relationship is not concerned with the exchange of money for services, but collaborative acts with those with whom they are relationally close. (p. 11)

Youth work is not just made up arbitrarily 'on the fly' though. Rather, it is a practice built on experience improvised in the moment. Indeed, Harris (2014) beautifully applies the metaphor of jazz musicians to youth work to capture this process by arguing that extensive preparation is involved in acquiring the ability to improvise in the moment.

In this context and as a characteristic of BSG youth work, covenantal relationships can be closely associated with identity which recognises the value of community and family structures to support a sense of collective belonging. It is within these structures that routines of normality are maintained, which Giddens (1991) has argued is a necessary prerequisite for ontological security. Young people's relationship-building processes that sustain their self-narratives managed within family and community structures are therefore critical to this process. Moreover, these processes are managed and orientated through dialogue and social activities (Bauman, 2000; Bauman and Raud, 2015; Giddens, 1991) in relationships that have their genesis within family and community sites. However, according to Freire (1972, 2005), dialogue does not involve just an exchange of words but the whole person in a social process. This might be termed a social movement. Hence, the young person and the relationships into which the youth worker enters cannot be disassociated from the social and familial (however the young person defines *family*) contexts and ties from within which the young person's narrative emerges. The relationship between youth worker and young person must by necessity remain covenantal in nature.

However, the question might be asked, 'do both parties expect, or even need to expect, goods from a covenant?' Given the definitions considered, this is not a prerequisite nor binding – but it can be. This is discussed using examples from BSG youth work practices later, but theoretically Davies (2016) cites Kolodny (2010) to explain that 'the characteristics of a relationship emerge from the characteristics of the experiences that, over time, compose that relationship. Thus, individual interactions between a youth worker and young people reflect the characteristics of such a covenantal relationship' (p. 11). Hence, the central concern within the youth worker/young person relationship, as pointed out, is 'the quality of the relationship, and it is from such qualities that goods emerge' (Davies, 2016, p. 11). Cameron (2013) adds this is an ethical encounter because of the 'primacy given to relations in the "here and now" and not to what might be achieved at some future point in time, the worker is positioned as having an expertise in "entering" a relation and allowing the relation to unfold on the basis of ethical principles' (p. 8).

Although not seen as unethical in itself, developing relationships with young people primarily to meet broader civic agendas falls short of more substantive ethical approaches encompassed within notions of covenantal relationships that focus on the process (rather than outcomes) and quality of relationships from which goods can emerge (Davies, 2016, p. 11). Here, goods in the form of personal characteristics, which include temperance, perseverance, patience and justice, emerge within the young person as a collaboratively produced ethical subject. However, these goods are not promoted as normative to policy-led youth work practices and pre-agreed outputs but, rather, understood as personal characteristics that can emerge from encounters in a covenantal youth work relationship. These characteristics support the young person's personal, social and academic development in the context of family and community. Consequently, the young person becomes subject in dialogue *with* rather than object to acted *upon*, within the context of family and community relationships.

It is with this rationale in mind that we explore the youth work-training process and the youth work practices carried out through BSG.

Training as part of the covenantal process

In line with this concept of covenantal relationships BSG's lead mentor's relationships with the mentors also preceded the context of BSG. BSG had been initiated by his responding to concerns raised nationally (see Department for Education, 2018b) and locally (via contact with alternative provision

leaders, parents/carers and former excluded students) about increasing numbers of permanent and fixed-term exclusions, particularly among secondary school students. The lead mentor had posted a question on his Facebook account asking how he might address this issue. Thirty respondents suggested that he train his former students and/or their parents/carers in the youth work processes that they had experienced in his role, either as local youth workers (voluntary and paid) or alternative provision managers. Youth work processes had allowed him to work with the young people who had become disaffected from the core national curriculum and helped keep the young people as close to formal learning as possible via an alternative curriculum (UK Parliament, 1998). He had maintained contact with these young people (once they reached 18 years old) for as long as between 10 and 20 years. He had also lived in the local community with many of these former young people and their families for 30 years.

Thus, the mentoring relationships emerged through the quality of the relationships already established in the local community, and the covenantal relationship processes embedded in participant action research (PAR) methods already remained open-ended. They were now being revisited within the framework of the initial research (2018) and BSG charity (2020).

Although the mentors experienced the lead mentor's approach through their previous encounters with his youth work practices, the mentors' understandings of the ethical behaviours expected of youth workers and Freire's decoding model needed development. That is, they needed to understand its explicit and broader conceptual framework and theoretical underpinnings to contextualise and frame their implicit knowledge and experiences. This training enabled them to orientate and signpost their own youth work practices within the boundaries of the ethical behaviours expected of the mentoring processes as they encountered new situations beyond their own lived experiences. Thus, it reflected two of Williamson's (2014) three critical learning points in that the reach of positive intervention was extended (negotiating educational and developmental pathways) while limiting the reach of negative interventions (that is, exclusions). This training was supported via (a) supervision and experiential learning (on-the-job) training with the lead mentor (who holds the NYA-endorsed JNC qualification); (b) peer support by experienced mentors; and (c) attendance at training days provided by a local NYA-endorsed umbrella organisation.

This training also signposted the boundaries of BSG activities to external organisations who were working with some of the young people and their families (that is, schools, police, children and young people's mental health services [CAMHS] and social services). Hence, BSG aligned its practices to nationally recognised ethical behaviours and notions of professionalism associated with the NYA (2019) national occupational standards framework and the benchmark standards for youth work (QAA, 2019). These standards include responsibilities and obligations aligned to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Children Act (2004), the Children and Social Work Act (2017) and Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018) and thus endorsed a broader set of ethical responsibilities that were bounded in the documents recognised by these organisations.

The mentors subsequently developed into the BSG team, referring to themselves as mentors who later peer-supported one another and trained new mentors. Hence, the term 'mentor' was understood as a knowledgeable other in (a) the processes of exclusion and developing the skills to renegotiate educational and developmental pathways; (b) the establishment of relationships with young people within the ethical framework of the NYA occupational standards; and (c) the processes of maintaining critical dialogue and covenantal relations with young people and family/extended family members using Freire's decoding model.

Theory in practice: methodological underpinnings

BSG mentoring primarily involved dialogue and relationship-building activities carried out with young people and their family members in their homes and local community sites. Initially, this mentoring focused on the young person's educational journey, experiences and perceptions of a good life.

Theoretically, the mentoring processes drew on Giddens's (1991) assertions about the construction of the self-narrative positioned within Buber's (1923, cited in Kaufmann, 1970) epistemological claims that education is the fundamental capacity by humans to encounter others and their environment as subject. Knowledge of one's self and the other is realised and emerges from realities within which each are immersed. Methodologically, the processes were framed by Freire's (1972, ch. 3) decoding model that created the discursive and relational conditions within which students could become critically

conscious of their realities; that is, to develop an understanding of their position in relation to the world and the conditions in which they exist. Freire called this process *conscientisation* for which the model stages are outlined below:

1. *Developing generative words*: the young person and their parent(s)/carer(s) are asked to write words on Post-it notes that come to mind when they see a range of pictures related to school and education.
2. *Totalising the issue*: mentors, the young person and parent(s)/carer(s) discuss the meaning of the words written on the Post-it notes.
3. *Decoding the issue and generating themes*: mentors discuss their understanding of the issue by drawing on their own lived experiences of school exclusion to 'split' the totality of the now-coded situation into themes.
4. *Re-codifying the issue*: the emerging and re-orientated narrative is discussed and clarified with the young person and parent(s)/carer(s), and the young person is asked to summarise their current situation and educational experiences in an image metaphor.
5. *Transforming the situational context (or conscientisation)*: the young person, parent(s)/carer(s) and mentors consider how they might act on the questions and issues that are now problematised by the totalising image.

During this process the mentors and young person encountered one another's presence, a subjective process that views the other beyond politically legitimised objective and bounded policy discourses that can separate *knower* from *agent*. Moreover, the young people's self-narratives were not seen as static, fixed or finitely, objectively observable, but rather managed indivisibly within the transitional and transactional relations with significant others (Braidotti, 2019; Giddens, 1991). Therefore, with the consent of the young people, the mentoring extended to supporting their parents/carers. The mentor now became significant to the young person and their parents/carers as a trusted other within the collaborative production of the young person's as well as their parents/carers' narratives (Giddens, 1991).

An underpinning question that guided these processes assumed the young people's perceptions of meaningful education and the processes of exclusion were located within wider familial discourses informing a future-orientated and collaboratively produced self-project (Farouk, 2017; Giddens, 1991). It asked: 'How do excluded young people and their parents/carers frame their experiences of education and the processes of exclusion in relation to their future aspirations and educational goals?' This question was raised via PAR methodology where active involvement is required by each participant in a problem or set of practices often conceptualised as a cyclical or spiralling process involving reflexive planning, observing, reflecting and acting (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2007). In line with these processes and the national occupational standards for youth work (NYA, 2019), the mentoring processes therefore involved stakeholders in every aspect of the intervention, including analysis, development of subsequent activities and dissemination of findings through presentations at conferences. Conscientisation became a process in which the young people, their parents/carers and mentors encountered one another in communion as beings in-progress.

Considering professionalism

However, none of the mentors might be considered professional youth workers. Although the youth work was carried out in response to requests for support by young people and their parents, it was neither guided by state-funded policy initiatives nor led by political concerns related to the state or broader civic duties. Nor did BSG accept funding or referrals from external organisations in payment for services provided. Rather, BSG operated on a voluntary participation basis for which young people and parents/carers contacted the team via weblink, email, phone or word of mouth. They could also be signposted to BSG through organisations. Hence, BSG mentors acted with professionalism, operating within the NYA occupational standards but not within a framework of contractual, funded or targeted relationships. This is not to reject notions of professionalism within these frameworks, but we argue they place limits on the ethical goods that might emerge from the youth worker relationship. Moreover, it limits the capacity of community members to enact a sense of vocation emerging through their

lived experiences by objectifying and compartmentalising relationships with those whom they have encountered or are about to.

Hence, ethical behaviour boundaries were framed within particular youth work practices and safeguarding processes, but mentors were trusted to use their judgement (akin to virtue ethics) within the NYA standards framework and community values. For example, BSG mentors were trained to carry out dynamic risk assessments and contextual safeguarding to frame their youth work activities and responses to family and young people's concerns and issues. Moreover, for mentors not to feel overwhelmed or to be placed into situations that they were not prepared for, they worked in pairs, with new mentors placed alongside more experienced peers or the lead mentor.

However, mentoring was not something that any community member could do, as they needed to have the capacity and willingness to be trained in NYA national occupational standards and processes. Moreover, it was preferred that they had some lived experience and understanding of school exclusion and to have lived in and had understandings of the local community culture. This sensitised them empathically towards parents/carers and young people who had encountered similar experiences, enabling participants to develop high levels of trust. However, lived experience was not seen as static, finitely and objectively observable or generalisable. Rather, lived experience was seen as transient, representing significant moments providing a quality that supported this process.

Training therefore supported the development of mentors' existing skills as vocation that responded to and drew on the mentors' personal experiences of living in the community within which these relationships were being established. Vocation and covenant therefore coincided within a shared becoming that enabled the mentors to realise their concerns to address a community problem from within the community. It was in this context that social and personal change was enacted as a collaborative project.

Practising youth work in covenantal relationships

In this section we examine more closely the relationships managed between the mentors, the young people and their families within the mentoring processes. Of significance is the context of the relationships that sat at the confluence point of the aforementioned distinctions between youth work as state activity and youth work as upbringing (Davies, 2013, p. 3).

The relationships established between mentors, parents/carers and young people were not, as previously argued, contractual. However, Freire's decoding model was used as a framework to structure the initial relationship-building processes within dialogue. This was explained to young people and their parents/carers in the first meeting and a provisional time scale of 12 weeks was agreed. Mentoring could extend beyond this period until the young person felt that they had developed the skills and resources they needed to maintain their developmental journey without direct mentor input. Therefore, the relationships were unconditional and remained open-ended with some mentoring remaining in place for up to three years.

In concrete terms, the mentors facilitated Freire's decoding model in weekly sessions that lasted for approximately an hour. Young people, their parents/carers and mentors became critically aware of themselves in relation to each other. In doing so, conscientisation emerged. That is, participants (including mentors) became more aware of each other as subjects within their shared realities as they encountered each other in new ways. For example, in an evaluation (dated 15 February 2022) at the end of the initial 12-week process the dad of a young person called Leoni (this name is a pseudonym) stated, 'I learned how to back off.' Leoni's mum said that the process 'helped us communicate with her'.

The mentoring processes evidenced a mutual desire to maintain and rebuild relationships (ethical goods) that motivated some of the young people, their parents, extended family members and, later, schoolteachers, to renegotiate the issues that they had encountered and re-construct their shared narratives from new confluence points. For example, when asked about the benefits of BSG mentoring, Leoni's mum added: 'Just liaising with the school and just support as you are when I was panicking over the fine. You got the teacher to explain it' (evaluation, 15 February 2022). Critical dialogue between young people and their parents/carers became more collaborative and transformational within their shared future-orientated narratives (Giddens, 1991). Moreover, mentors became significant and trusted others within this emergent process of communal upbringing.

This process was evident when Leoni started to develop critical consciousness of herself as a subject within reciprocal relations that she had not previously recognised. Reflecting on an image metaphor that she had created at stage three of the decoding model she stated, 'I recognise the meaning of pictures' (session evaluation, 5 January 2022). This enabled her to not only respond to her own developmental needs but to share these with her parents/carers as she became aware of obstacles limiting her educational outcomes. She subsequently accessed CAMHS support.

At this stage in the process young people were supported by mentors using a range of activities framed within the NYA standards of youth work, such as cooking, gardening and participating in family games. This extended to supporting young people and their parents/carers via advocacy work in schools, social services and the police, thereby identifying and addressing barriers (personal or systemic) to accessing the educational resources they needed to achieve their goals. Hence, the possibilities for the learning and development of young people, mentors and family members emerged from the quality and characteristics of the relationship that were, in turn, a response to the experiences encountered as the relationships developed (Cameron, 2013; Charfe and Gardner, 2020; Kolodny, 2010 in Davies, 2016).

In particular, mentors expressed the concerns of both the young people and the parents/carers that many of these young people were experiencing an existential crisis exacerbated by school exclusion. That is, these young people had become disorientated in relation to their self-narratives and uncertain of who they were becoming. For example, Tasmin, the mother of one young person, explained that since becoming excluded from mainstream school and attending an alternative provision on a part-time timetable, her child had started to become involved in crime with other students who had also attended the provision.

A common indicator of such ontological insecurity experienced by the young people was a feeling of not being seen and not being heard – of non-existence outside their own interiority. For example, when presented with a picture of a school at stage one of the decoding model carried out in the initial research phase of the project (2018), comments written on Post-it notes by parents/carers and young people included: 'They don't understand, pushed from pillar to post, misunderstood, not being listened to or taken seriously, repeated many times, not being told things, multiple exclusions for misunderstanding'. Consequently, many young people with whom the mentors developed relationships experienced discontinuity of their self-narratives through school exclusion and family and communal relationship breakdown. This foreclosed their options to the good life that they and their parents/carers had envisaged from childhood, making problematic any focus on self-formation, self-assertion and self-improvement expected of politically endorsed ethical subjects.

Towards more substantive ethical youth work

BSG mentoring processes addressed this discontinuity by creating dialogic spaces for the young person and their parents' or guardians' voices to be brought, in the spirit of negotiation, to organisational leaders and broader actors who influenced the shaping of their narratives. This illustrates similar social pedagogy practices applied to Smith's (2019) study carried out in the context of a Pupil Referral Unit. Smith (2019) argued that his social pedagogy: 'accommodated both the pupils' social needs and academic learning. By giving the marginalised young people a voice, the data suggests that the PRU was able to offer pupils a positive and supportive educational experience' (p. 1). He added that his social pedagogy enabled a sense of belonging to develop within the context of the Pupil Referral Unit that led to pupils' social learning and well-being and also allowed their teachers to exert agency and resist policy that did not align with their values and beliefs. However, the pedagogy employed in our mentoring practices offered young people, parents, mentors and organisational leaders the opportunity to negotiate (re)continuity and a new sense of belonging towards and within each young person's self-narrative. In the BSG relationships a sense of belonging was not bound by organisational contexts.

Voice therefore became a process of becoming in relation with the other through speech and action in dialogue – a process that bell hooks (2014) calls 'coming to voice' (p. 148). Dialogue was not a statement of arbitrary words but a process signifying the transient nature of lived experiences (Biesta, 2004; Freire, 2005). A multi-direction and transformational (rather than contractual) process (Sellman, 2009) that enabled a particular quality of relationship to form and from which ethical goods could emerge.

A particular ethical good emerging from the mentoring processes was that young people became more able to verbalise their experiences and understand their existential crises. Significantly, they

recognised (a) personal, familial and wider systemic factors that inhibited their ability to resolve these crises, and (b) factors that inhibited their parents' or organisational leaders' ability to intervene at points at which they encountered crises. They also became increasingly able to identify triggers and systemic issues that had exacerbated the situation, contributed to their school exclusion and delayed their social development.

For example, on seeing the picture of a signpost with the word 'support' written on it in stage one of the decoding model carried out in the initial research phase of the project (2018), young people and their parents/carers wrote on Post-it notes: 'SEND late diagnosis, lack of ASD understanding from teachers and tutors, lack of support in the classroom, school can't handle his needs, CAMHS, autism, support stopped, fighting for support, barrier to learning, goals, diagnosed, didn't get the support, didn't understand'.

Here, the principal right of liberty (freedom to flourish) as civic subjects was being denied. However, in line with Bauman (2000) and Bauman and Raud (2015), and based on lived experiences, the mentors believed that while the past may have informed and partly explained the present, it did not necessarily determine the future. Neither are we in an age of certainty or historical determinism. That is, a young person's reading score at 11 will give a statistical probability of their GCSE results, but there is no established causal link to outcomes. Hence, the processes that framed the mentoring interventions enabled the young people to become conscious of their realities and understand that they had the capacity to make choices within the collaborative and secure relationships being (re)established.

In practice, they had developed the capacity to enter critical dialogue and mutually realise and problematise their situation and then collaboratively and individually apply this knowledge to develop skills, abilities and dispositions to address wider systemic problems. This process was not just something that supported the young person's or their parents' development but extended to that of the mentors, as significant others in the young person's and their family's narratives. Each were beings-in-progress within this shared narrative. Hence, the mentoring processes were maintained within transitional and transformational, that is, covenantal (rather than contractual) relations (Braidotti, 2019; Freire, 1972, 2005; Giddens, 1991). Consequently, ethical goods emerged from the mentor/young person/family relationships to primarily benefit the young person in their community and their family relationships by supporting their social and academic development within these relationships.

However, while Freire's decoding model, with its underpinning critical theory, was used as a framework, this did not assume that there was neither historic or cultural dialogue between young people, their families and significant others (including youth workers) in these relationships. Rather, the value in using Freire's decoding model lay in resituating these discussions within an emerging consciousness which problematised broader educational policy discourses and practices that had framed their experiences of school exclusion. This provided a platform for young person-led interventions but within pedagogic practices underpinned by youth work standards and the covenantal relationships previously established. This allowed for a more substantive ethical goods to emerge within this collaborative process.

Nonetheless, although it is assumed that familial and community relations have a level of critical enquiry, conscientisation engenders a level of democratic discussion and negotiated action that can be limited within some existing relationships. For example, this was experienced by Leoni, but the decoding model created a framework in which a specific focus (exclusions) could be explored. Significantly, this was in a field in which these young people's voices were rarely heard or brought to the negotiating table, particularly at the confluence points of policy, systemic practice and familial discourses illustrated in this article. The BSG mentoring processes therefore built on, rather than undermined, previously established family and community covenantal relationships by bringing forward the young persons' voices within those ties. Here, democratic action and covenantal relations stood hand in hand.

Further, this process did not undermine or replace interventions by schools, police, social services or CAMHS. Rather, the BSG youth work practices that reflected this approach were located at the confluence of these organisational interventions within the home and immediate community settings. It was at these confluence points that the BSG youth work processes enabled mentors to become aware of and listen to the young person's (and their parents') conceptual understandings of their lived experiences. The mentors, young people and their parents/carers were then able to verbalise these lived experiences within an emergent social narrative grounded within familial and community discourses. This also provided a dialogic framework with which to negotiate and discuss next steps with organisation personnel encountered at these confluence points.

Specifically, within the BSG mentoring processes, the young people became aware of (a) their position as students in relation to parents/guardians and school teaching staff; (b) a range of social, personal and cultural factors that impacted on their social and academic development; and (c) a future orientation (that is, educational and social development goals) that enhanced their life chances. Thus, knowledge of their social world and also of curricular content discussed and explored within the context of these relationships became meaningful to the young person and to their family members. Knowledge being produced was now maintained within a collaboratively produced self-narrative – a *becoming self*. Relationships established between the young person, family and mentors were dialogic events (Freire, 1972, 2005). These events became encounters from which the nature of goods emerging from within the mentoring process were the primary concern. The mentor therefore became significant within these narratives as a trusted other (see Cameron, 2013; Davies, 2016) who enacted and participated in the processes of communal upbringing and the collaborative process of identity formation.

The benefits and challenges

The opening sections of this article discussed the fact that historically, youth work in England emerged from local community and family discourses and activities related to upbringing that were led by the interests and needs of the young people rather than state policy, discourses and activities. In attempting to revisit this model in the context of tensions related to state intervention and the professionalisation of youth work practices, community was therefore not understood by BSG as one of practising professionals. Rather, community consisted of familial and extended family ties within which young people are situated and with whom the youth worker (BSG mentor) became a significant other (Davies, 2016; Giddens, 1991).

Hence, with its focus on developing covenantal relationships as a central canon, this model coincides with Davies's (2016) call for a return to historical notions of youth work that also encapsulates some of the origins of social pedagogy principles that Cameron (2013) also discusses. Perhaps they can offer a way forward (or even backwards) to practitioners operating within these corresponding fields at a time when ethical questions and increasing concerns are being raised, and notions of professionalism and practices have become bounded by contractual relations that disembody young people from the very communities and family relations they claim to emancipate them into.

This is not to discount policy agendas that attempt to address broader civic concerns though. Indeed, BSG mentoring processes were positioned at the intersections of justice, exclusionary and also interventionist organisations (for example, but not in corresponding order, police, school, mental-health services and social work). However, in the current climate at least, its originality was in its response to addressing the needs and concerns of young people and their parents/carers as a community activity of upbringing, drawing on the skills and services of volunteers and family/extended family members. Ethical goods emerged from the quality of the relationships established within covenantal relational processes.

Subsequently, these goods met the needs and desires of the young people as part of their social and educational development. Significantly, in line with current NYA and also Social Pedagogy Professional Association standards of practice, the youth work model emerged as a collaborative and democratic process led by young people, their parents/carers and community concerns about upbringing rather than being led by state concerns about economic well-being and policy led youth work. This is not, as noted earlier, that the young people were previously apolitical but rather that emphasis had now shifted towards the youth work relationship and pedagogic practices being led by the young people rather than political imperatives. This pedagogic practice endorsed ethical behaviours that captured the processes of youth work more substantively than contractual and state funded or led models.

This approach did not emerge without its challenges though. First, not taking referrals (and implied contractual and outcome led relations) led to the project having to apply to local funding streams that could pay for resources such as equipment (mobile phones, computers) and facilities to support the young people's social or academic development (such as sports centres and learning resources). The lack of targeted learning outputs for which funds might be applied significantly limited the options from which to source funds.

Second, developing covenantal relationships relied on the availability and willingness of community members who had some lived experiences of school exclusion and shared cultural understanding with the young people and/or their parents. Often, those who were willing and available either had little

money and themselves and required some form of part-time work or they already had part-time (and sometimes full-time) employment alongside the voluntary work of BSG that limited their availability. The BSG leaders and mentors attempted to address this concern by working with mentors to develop part-time hourly paid work but this had little effect on the issue, as the work was not substantial enough to transition from other employment to the mentoring. Hence, a return to voluntary work was enacted, to which the mentors remained committed. However, the charity did thank the mentors for their services with gifts at Christmas and BSG member meals and activities.

Third, the open-ended nature of covenantal relationships limited the number of mentors available. The paired working model led to substantive ethical goods emerging from relationships but limited the number of young people being supported to five at a time. This led to a waiting list of up to six months within one year of the project being established with a local authority requesting 50 spaces that could not be supported.

Conclusions

We do not claim BSG and its youth work to be a panacea for addressing ongoing concerns and debates around the professionalisation of youth work in England or its role in supporting wider state-funded services. Rather, we intend this discussion to provide a point of departure for further conversations contextualised within a practice framework that attempts to reconcile some of the concerns central to these debates within a contemporary context. Moreover, this model sits at a confluence point of policy and practice at which new pathways can and need to be considered – that is, for youth workers and social pedagogy practitioners working within social work fields who have raised similar concerns about the nature of relationships being established with young people that draws the worker away from their historical and core principles of practice that once operated in synergy.

Although mentoring and Freire's decoding model are not unique to youth work or social pedagogy, the application of these processes within the current UK youth work context is significant in its originality and supports ethical processes that draw synergies between historical youth work and social pedagogy practices. Thus, they enable youth work and some emerging social pedagogy practices to develop beyond policy discourses that disembed the self-project from its community and familial genesis as a collaboratively produced project; an ontological context in which humans as beings in-progress can flourish perhaps more substantively as ethical subjects.

With this in mind, three key goods that emerged from BSG mentoring processes are presented below, about which we invite further discussion:

1. Activities that support flourishing and the young person and their parents' view of the good life are not pre-agreed nor policy-led but emerge from the youth work process. Here, the youth worker enters into ongoing dialogue(s) between the young person, their family and community members rather than creating a disembedded conversation leading to interventions that can alienate the young person from these narratives.
2. At a time when appearance and esteem become part of being for the young person, while also masking differences in background to a certain extent, the processes of marginalisation (in this case by schooling models) add to the invisibility and depersonalisation of the individual. The mentoring processes first recognise the young person and their historical narrative and enable this to resume, but as a collaborative rather than individuated project.
3. A strengths-based model is applied in the mentoring processes in which young people, family and community members are assumed to have the capacity and motivation to develop the skills and competence needed to address concerns about upbringing within their communities that also coincides with broader civic concerns. As relationships and dialogue develop, the youth work processes are shaped and embedded within family and community narratives. Once the processes are embedded, they cannot become disembedded from those relationships and narratives.

Thus, we argue that, in line with Davies's (2016) position, covenantal relationships established between mentors, young people and family members can offer a genesis to more substantive ethical youth work that encapsulates the nature of this activity more meaningfully than contractual and outcome-led relationships.

Drawing on these findings, situated in the context of broader debates presented in this article, perhaps current mutual political and social concerns have presented youth workers and social pedagogy practitioners with the opportunity to work closely together, yet remain distinctive in their fields to develop more substantive ethical practices that draw on their respective origins. BSG's success in helping some young people address their existential crisis and to gain a degree of ontological security, surely, therefore merits and invites further examination.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with the following standards: Code of Human Research Ethics (2010) published by the British Psychological Society University of Portsmouth Ethics Policy (2017); The Concordat to Support Research Integrity (2012) published by Universities UK; UKRIO Code of Practice for Research: Promoting good practice and preventing misconduct (2009).

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication (all data has been anonymised).

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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