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"Student voice is not as important compared to teachers/adults": towards critical capacity building for school-based youth participatory action research

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Abstract

Purpose – The past 30 years has seen an increase in the use of youth participatory action research (YPAR), but research into YPAR is, paradoxically, adult-centric, with adult-led capacity building (Cullen and Walsh, 2020). The purpose of this study is to compare young people's perspectives of YPAR outcomes to those identified in adult-centric research and articulate the potential of youth-led capacity building to improve YPAR processes and research outputs.

Design/methodology/approach – Working alongside young people undertaking YPAR in a secondary school, the authors use qualitative methods – focus group, mind maps and research journals – to promote young people's participation in the exploration of youth-led capacity building.

Findings – Undertaking thematic analysis, the authors have two key findings: engaging young people in research into YPAR shifts the research focus from individual to collective outcomes and drawing upon young people's prior understandings of research methods and ethics has the potential to promote critical capacity building.

Originality/value – The authors contribute to the literature on YPAR processes and research by demonstrating why future research into YPAR should involve young people in participatory roles, to promote critical capacity building and, ultimately, improve the quality of YPAR itself.

Keywords Project-based learning, Research ethics, Young people, Youth participatory action research, Critical capacity building

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The inclusion of children and young people as researchers is becoming increasingly popular within school-based research projects (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Allen, 2008; Cullen and

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Walsh, 2020). The United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989) served as a catalyst to understanding children and young people as active subjects rather than passive recipients in the research process (Robinson and Gillies, 2012). More specifically, Article 12 fostered a paradigm shift towards ensuring that that every child has the right to say what they think in matters affecting them, emphasising how a child's voice should be taken seriously (United Nations, 1989). Over the past three decades, the aims detailed within Article 12 have been manifested through increased advocation and implementation of youth participatory action research (YPAR) (Cullen and Walsh, 2020; Edwards and Brannelly, 2017).

This paper presents qualitative research conducted by Green and 12 young people during their initial experiences of the NextGenLeaders, 2023 (NGL) programme. The NGL programme aims to empower secondary school students (ages 11–18 years) to become the next generation of socially responsible leaders and is delivered in areas of social disadvantage in the England (NGL, 2023). In line with YPAR, students on the programme become "Changemakers", planning, conducting and reflecting upon their own research projects, which aim to impact positively upon their local communities and contribute to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). Since its inauguration in 2017, NGL has grown year-on-year, with over 300 young people enrolled for the 2023/2024 academic year.

YPAR is defined using participatory language (Anyon *et al.*, 2018), but a systematic review conducted by Dobson (2023) demonstrates how research methodologies into the use of YPAR with young people are, paradoxically, adult-led. Furthermore, the "capacity building" dimension of YPAR itself, where young people develop their understanding of research methodologies, is often a neglected aspect of YPAR, which also, paradoxically, can be adult-led (Cullen and Walsh, 2020). By working alongside young people to encourage them to reflect upon their initial experiences of YPAR on the school-based NGL programme, we aim to articulate how and why young people should be involved in research into YPAR. We also aim to identify how young people might be involved in discussions about ethics and research project design from the outset of their YPAR projects so that YPAR facilitators can take a youth-led, critical approach to "capacity building" in YPAR (Luguetti *et al.*, 2023) that maximises young people's participation.

Literature review

Policy context

The NGL programme is targeted at the local communities of the young people engaged in the project. All NGL research projects are bespoke, offering young people the opportunity to work in collaboration with their peers, a NGL facilitator and key stakeholders from the local community to drive social change. As documented in the Organisation for Economic Development's (OECD) memorandum, young people "imagine and inquire", developing their research projects by considering the beneficiaries and barriers to participation (OECD, 2020). Informed by the OECD's Learning Compass 2030 (OECD, 2021), participation in the NGL programme helps young people to develop agency, as well as the "transformative competencies" required to become independent learners and actively change society for the better.

In relation to England's policy context, where this study takes place, NGL aligns with the government requirement for schools to foster the Personal Development of its students, developing the skills and competencies that bridge the gap between education and employment (OFSTED, 2021) articulated through the Gatsby benchmarks (The Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2024). As OECD (2014, 2017) shows, the UK, and many other countries, require further education policy reforms to move from a knowledge-based curriculum to a curriculum which prioritises skills and competencies for employment,

helping young people understand and contribute to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). Key here is the OECD (2020) highlighting the relationship between students developing these outcomes and pedagogical variation, with socially disadvantaged students in the UK more likely to be the recipients of transmissive approaches at school. The pedagogy highlighted by the OECD (2020) is project-based learning (PBL), which is part of Wales and Singapore's curriculum and a key pedagogical approach for delivering pedagogical variety and developing students' skills and competencies. PBL, like any other pedagogy, is currently not part of curriculum policy in England.

NexGenLeaders and youth participatory action research

When conceived of as student-led and community-facing, PBL is synonymous with YPAR, as evidenced by comparing definitions in recent systematic reviews. In Anyon *et al.*'s (2018, p. 856) review, YPAR is defined as: projects that are grounded in youths' lived experiences, where youth are collaborators in methodologies and pedagogies, and where youth are actively engaged in interventions to change practices to improve the lives of their communities. Similarly, Condliffe *et al.*'s (2017) systematic review defines PBL as projects that promote learning, with young people deciding the projects' driving questions, where engagement is cultivated, and where student projects are presented to public audiences. Both systematic reviews (Anyon *et al.*, 2018; Condliffe *et al.*, 2017) show how YPAR and PBL involve young people being afforded agency to explore issues considered pertinent to them and working collaboratively to enact change. The main difference between YPAR and PBL is that YPAR has an explicit focus on building young people's capacity to undertake research, whereas capacity building in PBL is more implicit. For this reason, we view the secondary students on the NGL programme as undertaking YPAR.

The inclusion of socially disadvantaged young people in YPAR projects can be seen to provide these young people with the competencies and affective skills outlined in the OECD's Learning Compass 2030. These include cognitive competencies, such as critical thinking and problem solving; intrapersonal competencies, such as self-regulated learning; interpersonal competencies, such as collaborative learning; and affective skills, such as motivation (Dobson, 2023). Despite these reported benefits, YPAR remains a neglected pedagogical approach within mainstream UK education (Dobson, 2023). The Education Endowment Foundation have undertaken research into the related pedagogy of PBL, focussing on how PBL might improve young people's attainment in literacy (Menzies *et al.*, 2016). However, this research was flawed by high levels of teacher attrition as well as a research design which was aligned to a knowledge-based national curriculum, seeking to explore literacy outcomes rather than cognitive, intra- and inter-personal competencies and affective skills.

Young people's experiences of research: the case for critical capacity building

To think about young people's participation in YPAR, we draw upon research relating to YPAR alongside some of the broader principles drawn from literature relating to participatory research with young people. This literature on participatory research with young people includes Mayne *et al.*'s (2018, p. 6) *Rights-Based Research Accountability Framework* (RBRAF), which is aligned with the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) and helps researchers "more effectively identify, intentionally plan and implement rights-based research". The RBRAF has three dimensions: the status afforded to the child in research, including whether children are objects, subjects or actors; the researcher perspective, including whether the research empowers children in research; and the research culture,

focussing on how the children view their participation in research (Mayne *et al.*, 2018, p. 6). The RBRAF stems from Mayne *et al.*'s (2015, p. 30) meta-analysis of research involving younger children, which concluded that 96.6% of research either positioned children as non-participant objects or semi-participant subjects, with only 3% of research giving children participatory roles and 0.4% giving them roles as co-researchers.

The disempowerment of young children through research design and implementation is equally dominant in research with older age groups. As discussed, Dobson's (2023) systematic review of YPAR and PBL demonstrates this disempowerment as well as a tension, which lies at the heart of research into YPAR and PBL – the review included 25 studies and, whilst the young people in these studies were leading their own community-impacting projects, all studies into the outcomes of YPAR were, paradoxically, conceived of and implemented by adult researchers. Although it could be argued that it was the projects within these studies and not the studies themselves that were of interest to the young people, in reference to the RBRAF (Mayne *et al.*, 2018, p. 6), research into PBL and YPAR outcomes (Dobson, 2023) positions children as "objects", researches "on" children and uses a "non-respectful" culture.

Discussing the need for more participatory research with children, Kellett (2010, p. 4) acknowledges how no adult researcher can acquire "the richness of knowledge that is inherent in children's own understanding of their worlds and subcultures". In line with this, we argue that involving young people in more participatory roles in research into YPAR processes and outcomes could serve to provide the research community with a much deeper understanding of how young people experience YPAR as well as what these experiences mean for their development.

We also argue that taking a youth-led approach to "capacity building" in YPAR (Anyon *et al.*, 2018) can help improve the quality of young people's participation and, therefore, the quality of YPAR itself. Pedagogical approaches to capacity building in YPAR can be overlooked by adult researchers, as clearly evidenced in a recent narrative review (Cullen and Walsh, 2020). In the review, 26 selected YPAR studies were analysed as offering young people varying levels of participation, not always empowering young people or equalising power structures between adults and young people, and often operating approaches to consent inappropriate for the context of the study (Cullen and Walsh, 2020). The review advocates a more context-sensitive approach to YPAR capacity building, as embodied by Luguetti *et al.* (2023), who believe that YPAR should promote "critical capacity building". Critical capacity building is an approach to nurturing young people's methodological knowledge and skills that recognises that capacity building is never "a one-size-fits-all proposition and that groups and organisations can benefit from tailored capacity-building initiatives that are grounded in individual and community realities" (Luguetti *et al.*, 2023, p. 15).

Critical capacity building is seen by Loveridge *et al.* (2023) to be particularly important in relation to ethical issues, which are seen as contextual, emergent and impervious to being fully anticipated by adult researchers. Research ethics in critical capacity building, therefore, aligns with Mayne *et al.*'s (2015) view that consent with young people should be negotiated through an ongoing "interactive narrative approach". Focussing on participatory research with children, Thomas-Hughes (2018, p. 239) argue that ethical processes become necessarily messy: "mess should have a permanent place in the accounting of participatory research as a means of building rigour into method". For Govaerts and Fensham-Smith (2024), ethical processes require the researcher to be highly attuned to young researchers, including non-verbal expressions of dissent. This means that "dissent, assent and consent [are] non-binary continuums that must be reflexively considered across all stages of research,

including community dissemination" (Govaerts and Fensham-Smith, 2024, p. 5). As Kohfeldt *et al.* (2011) have specifically identified in relation to YPAR, however, "mess" becomes more difficult to implement within the regulated spaces of mainstream school institutions, where learning is more commodified and, therefore, adult- rather than youth-led. Given this context, we were interested in exploring the potential for critical capacity building in a UK mainstream secondary school context.

Research questions

Considering the discussion above, we wanted to shed light on the potential of involving young people in research into YPAR by exploring their early experiences of YPAR on the NGL programme in a secondary school context and by promoting a youth-led approach to capacity building. We, therefore, had two key research questions for our study:

RQ1. How do young people conceptualise the benefits, values and outcomes of engaging in YPAR and how do these conceptualisations compare with conceptualisations in adult-centric research?

RQ2. How can researchers promote critical capacity building with young people undertaking YPAR in schools?

Research methods

The case: Calder Grange High School

This article presents findings collected from a case study research project exploring the experiences of 12 young people enrolled on the NGL programme during the 2022/2023 academic year. The research was conducted in a comprehensive secondary school in the north of England, pseudonymised as Calder Grange High School. Calder Grange is a mixed-gender school with a student population of over 1,500 young people aged 11–16 years. At the time of our study, approximately 35% of students at Calder Grange were eligible for "free school meals", a measure of social disadvantage. With the national average of students eligible for free school meals being 19.7% (GOV.UK, 2023), Calder Grange High School is in an area of social disadvantage.

Our study was open to all students currently enrolled on the NGL programme. In total, all 12 of the young people enrolled on the programme volunteered to take part. These young people were all in Year 8 (12–13 years old) and are referred to throughout this article as "Changemakers", a term used by NGL. It was agreed by all Changemakers, NGL facilitators and the school, that anonymity would be maintained and, therefore, pseudonyms are used throughout. Table 1 displays participant information, including pseudonyms and team names.

The NGL programme typically spans eight months, and includes a "project design phase", an "action phase" and an "evaluation phase". Our study ran alongside the first three 1-h sessions of NGL's "project design phase", where Changemakers were undertaking secondary research and making key decisions about their projects: The Butterfly Effect team had decided to focus their project on helping child refugees; and the BADD habits team were focussing on tackling anti-social behaviour in their community. Directly after each of these three 1-h NGL sessions, Changemakers spent a further hour with Green for this study.

Project design and a rights-based approach to research ethics

Although the YPAR projects were driven by the Changemakers and were, therefore, participatory, a limitation of our study is that the methods and guiding research questions

Table 1. Participant information

Participant name	Gender	NGL project team
Changemaker 1	Female	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 2	Female	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 3	Female	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 4	Female	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 5	Female	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 6	Female	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 7	Female	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 8	Female	The Butterfly Effect
Changemaker 9	Male	BADD Habits
Changemaker 10	Male	BADD Habits
Changemaker 11	Male	BADD Habits
Changemaker 12	Male	BADD Habits

Source(s): Created by authors

were designed by an adult-researcher. This limitation was, in part, due to pragmatic reasons: with only three 1-h sessions available to us, we felt it was necessary for Green to structure the sessions to maintain children's focus and explore our research questions. Furthermore, involving Changemakers in the design of this study was not our purpose. Instead, we wanted to explore the Changemakers' early experiences of YPAR, including their potential to engage in youth-led capacity building. This, we felt, would address the gap in the YPAR research literature addressed above and, in doing so, suggest how future research into YPAR and capacity building in YPAR could become participatory for young people.

Despite this limitation, our case study was guided by the *Rights-Based Research Ethics and Planning Framework* (Mayne *et al.*, 2018), and included three key design stages:

(1) ethical foundations;

(2) practical design considerations; and

(3) implementation of rights-based research.

Stage 1 involved the research team making the strategic decision to ensure that the research would adhere to principles mandated within the UNCRC (UN, 1989), aiming to create a culture whereby all participants felt they had equal opportunities to have their voices heard. For Stage 2, we considered practical designs which would enable their underlying ethical foundations to be enacted, including avoiding hurrying the informed consent process (Harcourt and Sargeant, 2011), and ensuring protected time was structured into the sessions so that Changemakers were consciously aware of what they were consenting to and their rights of participation. Promoting Changemaker agency in these two ways, we felt, was important in terms of balancing the participatory constraints we have placed on the Changemakers in our decision to provide focus and structure across the three sessions by designing the methods and activities. Stage 3 involved open dialogues between the Changemakers and Green as part of an interactive narrative approach to consent (Mayne *et al.*, 2018). These open dialogues not only ensured that the Changemakers had a deeper understanding of our research project, but, as discussed in the Findings and Discussion section below, also helped facilitate discussion of research ethics with Changemakers as part of our youth-led approach to capacity building in YPAR.

Data collection

All data were generated during three research sessions outlined in Table 2. As indicated above, each session was designed by Green to allow the Changemakers to reflect in a focussed way on their early experiences of YPAR and deepen their understandings of research. Across the three research sessions, data were generated through a combination of qualitative methods to capture and Changemakers' evolving perspectives, including a focus group discussion, group mind maps and individual journaling. The range of qualitative methods was used as an inclusive strategy to promote different forms of Changemaker participation.

During the first research session, Green facilitated a focus group discussion with 11 of the 12 Changemakers, which was audio recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. Green designed five general lines of enquiry for the focus group discussion, allowing the Changemakers freedom in their responses (Bergold and Thomas, 2012) to discuss their opinions, aspirations and perceptions of YPAR (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010). In line with the purposes of the study, although the focus group was initiated by Green, careful consideration was paid to how the spatial arrangement of the classroom facilitated Changemaker agency and freedom in expression (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010; Bergold and Thomas, 2012). Attempting to create a more informal atmosphere than the "normal" classroom setting, furniture was rearranged into a circle, enabling eye contact to be maintained by all participants during the group discussion.

From a pedagogical perspective, Green analysed the content of the Changemakers' contributions during the first session. This informed the discussions in the second session, which focussed on research ethics, the value of YPAR and research methods. Green then analysed the Changemakers' contributions from the second session, which informed the third session's focus on youth voice, research ethics consent forms and their school-based research projects.

Mind mapping was the primary method of data collection used during the second and third research sessions. Guided by the recommendations of Buzan and Buzan (2000) and Davies (2011), the Changemakers were provided with A3 paper, coloured pens and uninterrupted time to discuss and capture their group reflections in a mind map. To give opportunity for individual participation, Changemakers were also provided with bespoke research journals in which they could reflect upon their thoughts, feelings and contributions to the research process (Groundwater-Smith *et al.*, 2015). Throughout, it was stressed that the Changemakers could record as much or as little as they desired and reminded that there was no "right" or "wrong" answers.

As the two Changemaker groups engaged in the mind mapping activities and group-based discussions in Sessions 2 and 3 simultaneously, and as these were less structured than the focus group discussion in Session 1, these activities were not audio-recorded. Instead, Green kept a research journal to make observational notes relating to Changemaker contributions throughout the three sessions.

Researcher reflexivity

As well as observations, Green used his research journal to capture reflections, meeting regularly with Authors 2 and 3, and the NGL facilitator, all of whom offered their responses to these reflection on the study's progress, the practical challenges encountered and the ethical tensions negotiated. Aspiring to foreground the Changemakers' agency, and attempting to minimise his power advantage as an adult (Atkinson, 2019; Mayne *et al.*, 2018), Green reflected upon the need to approach the sessions in an adapted positionality of the "friendly adult" (Fine, 1987; Van der Smee and Valerio, 2023). Seeking distance from a more authoritarian teacher persona (Raffety, 2015), in Session 1, Green informed the Changemakers that he was not a teacher, but rather a researcher interested in similar issues to

Table 2. Research session information

Session and date	Session aims	Related activities	Data generated
1 to 25 May 2023	Introduction to the research project Familiarisation and rapport building To discuss Changemakers current understandings and perceptions of PBL and research Planning for future sessions	Group-based introduction: Mind-mapping exercise focused on personal biographies, interests and NGL project involvement Provision of Participant Information Sheet and Consent form. Open discussion about the documentation Focus group discussion facilitated by Author 1 Provision of Changemaker research journal	Focus group audio recording [transcribed verbatim and anonymised] Changemaker journal entries
2 to 5 June 2023	To revisit the research ethics process, drawing upon focus group data To explore what the Changemakers perceive/understand "research" to be Planning for future sessions	Whole group discussion (unstructured and unrecorded) about the research ethics documentation drawing upon focus group transcripts Mind-mapping activity: Changemakers working in their research teams to explore the following topics: research, research ethics and research methods	Mind-maps related to the follow themes: research ethics, what is research? And research rules Changemaker journal entries
3 to 18 July 2023	To discuss how the Changemakers may conduct research for the NGL projects To discuss the benefits/limitations of PBL and YPAR for young people Shared reflection opportunities	Mind-mapping exercise focusing on the Changemakers own research plans Mind-mapping activity focusing on the benefits of project-based learning Group-based discussion initiated by the Changemakers about their research journeys to date (unrecorded)	Mind-maps related to the following themes: benefits of project-based learning; research methods, voice of the youth and our ethics document Changemaker journal entries

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themselves. Moreover, Green was cautious not to enact teacher-like behaviours (e.g. endorsing behavioural management strategies and requesting obedience), instead enabling and encouraging unstructured conversations to develop, even when discussions were not related to the research project or the NGL programme. Given the time constraints of the study, this was certainly a risk, but one that Green reflected upon as helping to foster rapport with the Changemakers, enabling their agency and active participation with the methods.

As indicated above, due to this study's sessions following on from the NGL sessions, the NGL facilitator and schoolteacher were present for the beginnings of this study's sessions. In his research journal, Green reflected upon how their actions at the start of the first session may have problematised the voluntary participation of the Changemakers, with the teacher and the NGL facilitator encouraging Changemakers to remain "task orientated". As Green reflected, he responded by adhering to the ethical foundations of the study (Bland and Atweh, 2007; Kirby, 2020) and reminding Changemakers that their participation was voluntary. Green's approach was non-confrontational and was accepted and respected by the other adults for the time they were in Session 1 and for the times when they were in the following sessions. This, along with the nature of the participation of the Changemakers throughout the sessions, and the approach to consent outlined above, led Green to reflect that Changemaker participation was largely voluntary throughout.

Data analysis

The data collected from all three sessions comprised of a transcription of the focus group discussion (Session 1); Changemaker journal entries (Sessions 1–3); Green journal entries (Sessions 1–3); and photographs of mind maps (Sessions 2 and 3). We had intended to invite the Changemakers to contribute to the analysis process; however, due to unexpected disruption within the school, this was not possible. Instead, Green worked with Authors 2 and 3 to complete a thematic analysis of the data.

In line with Miles *et al.* (2020), our approach to data analysis involved three stages:

(1) immersion in the data;

(2) coding the data; and

(3) establishing patterns in the data to identify themes.

To give an example of this process, having immersed ourselves in the data, we used Dobson's (2023) typology of YPAR outcomes (cognitive, intra- and interpersonal competencies and affective skills) to code the YPAR outcomes valued by the Changemakers. In doing so, we noticed a pattern relating to how the Changemakers valued interpersonal competency and affective skills over other outcomes. As a pattern of Changemaker valued outcomes became established, this became our first theme.

As with the process of establishing our first theme, our overall approach to analysis was abductive in that the three emerging themes were always shaped by and related to our literature review and our research questions. Due to the abductive nature of our analysis, we cannot separate our data from the literature, and we present below our findings and the discussion of our findings together under the following three themes:

(1) young people's valuing of affective skills and interpersonal competencies as YPAR outcomes;

(2) age as a catalyst for ethical tensions; and

(3) towards youth-led critical capacity building.

Findings and discussion

Young people's valuing of affective skills and interpersonal competencies as youth participatory action research outcomes

During the first session's focus group discussion, similar motivations for engaging with YPAR were introduced by the Changemakers. Changemaker 11 stated, "I want to improve my confidence"; Changemaker 8 reported, "I want to develop my communication and teamwork skills"; and Changemaker 3 proposed, "I would like to get better at talking in public and teamwork" [focus group]. These quotes capture commonalities within the focus group data from Session 1, evidencing how the Changemakers believed that participation in YPAR would help them to develop affective skills (confidence) and interpersonal competencies (teamwork). Indeed, the nature of the overall discussion meant that intrapersonal competency development (e.g. self-regulated learning) and cognitive competency development (e.g. academic attainment) did not feature as fundamental reasons for the Changemakers to be involved in YPAR. This is interesting as these competencies feature highly as measured outcomes in adult-centric research into YPAR (Dobson, 2023).

One reason for the Changemakers neglecting intrapersonal and cognitive competencies as outcomes was the ways in which the Changemakers felt that engaging with YPAR would offer them increased agency and opportunities for co-creation due to the different pedagogical approach on offer. Discussing why they decided to enrol on this study and the NGL project, many of the Changemakers explained how the opportunity to engage in a different format of learning to those in school was "exciting". Providing their rationale for participation, Changemaker 7 stated, "I want to do something different"; Changemaker 3 qualified, "because we will be wanting to do and explore different things. Whereas in a lesson you have to research a certain subject in a certain way" [focus group]. These ideas were evident in the reflections of the BADD Habits research team who recorded the following points when mind mapping the benefits of NGL programme in Session 3: "learning in an interactive and engagement manner'; 'benefits students that learn through more visual and physical forms"; "more engaging"; "more effective than normal approach; 'more proactive experiences + more realistic" [mind map].

As well as a different pedagogical approach, the Changemakers' focus on developing the affective skill of engagement through YPAR was also linked to their fundamental reasons for engaging in their NGL projects in the first place. In the Session 1, Changemaker 3 echoed the comments of other Changemakers to state their motivation for their project as being, "so we can improve the lives of the next generation. So, we can make a brighter future for the next children, to make the world a better place" [focus group]. Similarly, in Session 3, the Butterfly Effect team noted their motivation, "to make change" and "improve the lives of the misfortunate" [mind map] and Changemaker 9 documented, "I want a better reputation for our community, [and] I want to make positive change" [journal entry]. As indicated above, Calder Grange High School is an area of social disadvantage, which, we speculate, could account for the young people's motivation for this kind of civic action.

It needs to be highlighted that three of the Changemakers were less forthcoming than the others in discussing their motivations during the focus group discussion in Session 1. This may have been due to the presence of the teacher and the NGL facilitator at the start of Session 1; equally, it may have been due to the group nature of the discussion and the fact that they were not yet familiar with Green. However, these Changemakers did contribute more freely as the study progressed and expressed their motivations through their journals and the mind mapping in Session 3. As a result, it became clear that for all Changemakers YPAR was appealing as it could help them develop interpersonal competencies and affective skills through engaging with both co-produced pedagogical approaches and civic action;

outcomes that are rarely afforded by transmissive, knowledge-based pedagogical approaches and normalised schooling practices (Anyon *et al.*, 2018; Bell, 2010; Bland and Atweh, 2007).

Age as a catalyst for ethical tensions

Our data demonstrated that young people have the capacity to articulate sophisticated understandings of ethics, and that they understand how their age serves as a catalyst for ethical tensions. These perceptions about their age stemmed from Green following his university's ethical guidelines and providing Changemakers with a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form comprising of eight tick-box questions. During the first session, Green invited the Changemakers to share their thoughts on the ethics forms, which generated responses including "very easy", "straightforward", "tick boxes" and "well-structured" [mind map]. Debates relating to ethical procedures and the concept of consent remain at the forefront of scholarship pertaining to research involving children and young people (Flewitt *et al.*, 2018; Valentine, 1999; Whittington, 2019). Young people have been, and continue to be, identified as an inherently vulnerable group who require protection throughout research processes (Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010; Yanar *et al.*, 2016). Emblematic of such perspectives, it has been acknowledged that institutional review boards often recommend that ethical documentation should be simplified for children and young people (Taplin *et al.*, 2022; Yanar *et al.*, 2016). Although intended to be accessible and comprehensible, when ethical documentation is over-simplified, young people may have misconceptions about research ethics as such approaches can detract from the importance of information denoted on participant information sheets and consent forms.

Aware that the Changemakers' initial uncritical acceptance of the consent process was to some extent symptomatic of the simplified ethical documentation provided to them, in Session 2, Green encouraged the Changemakers to engage in collaborative reflections about the participant information sheet and consent form. Personal reflections and group discussions reveal that issues pertaining to anonymity, confidentiality and youth rights were of high importance to the young people. In terms of confidentiality, two contributions stand out: "[Green] is not allowed to share anything from this session" [mind map]; and "these sessions are good because our contribution will be confidential" [journal entry]. When introducing the project, Green placed emphasis on how the research sessions should be "safe spaces", where the Changemakers are given freedom to discuss and debate without consequence (Govaerts and Fensham-Smith, 2024; Kellett, 2010; Smith, Davis and Hill, 2006). This approach was stressed to provide the Changemakers with a sense of agency and freedom in their expressions, potentially alleviating any fears of "saying the wrong thing" and building trust across the research relationship (Davis and Hill, 2006). Although the Changemakers' championed the confidential nature of their participation, their common articulations that "[Green] is not allowed to share anything from the session" evidences a misunderstanding around sharing anonymously. Petrie *et al.* (2006) advocate for transparency in the consent process, certifying that young people need to understand the limits of their confidentiality. As (Coad and Evans, 2008) recommends, greater attention should be paid to discussing and differentiating notions of confidentiality and anonymity when discussing "ground rules" with young people in YPAR. Taking a simplified approach to consent based on young people's age can act as a barrier to developing this understanding.

As well as our critical reflection that simplified, age-related ethical documentation can be a catalyst for problematising young people's understanding of consent, in Session 1, many of the Changemakers expressed concern that their age (12 and 13 years) would prevent them from conducting their YPAR projects. Researching within the local community,

Changemaker 2 felt that "depending on age, people might not want to give us information for what we want [to find out] because we have no idea [in their eyes]" [focus group]. Reiterating this shared concern, Changemaker 1 spoke of, "age" and "depending in how mature you are and like how developed you are as well" [focus group]. Such narratives demonstrate a shared perception amongst Changemakers, long established in research (Alderson, 1999), that their age may lead to adults underestimating their competencies, serving as a significant barrier to YPAR.

The perceived significance of the Changemakers' secondary school student status was further problematised during the second and third research sessions. When considering the role of young people in school-based and community-facing research, such as the NGL programme, the Changemakers that formed Butterfly Effect team created a mind map titled "voice of the youth". This mind map revealed that many of the Changemakers feel their voice is less valued than the voice of adults, with notes including: "students do not have equal rights compared to those superior"; "student voice is not as important compared to teachers/adults"; and "more experience means saying what you want". Changemakers clearly felt that their age may serve as a significant barrier to YPAR, with potential participants, adult audiences and their teachers not valuing their voices and consequently limiting their opportunities for agency (Couldry, 2010; Hall, 2020; Magill and Rodriguez, 2019). Such concerns are prevalent in similar research undertaken in schools, where young people are seen as relatively devoid of power through adult ambivalence towards their capacities and competencies (Davis and Hill, 2006; Kellett, 2010; Kohfeldt *et al.*, 2011). These findings draw attention to the ways in which power operates in school-based YPAR and emphasises the need to nurture genuine and dialogic approaches (Cullen and Walsh, 2020; Luguetti *et al.*, 2023).

We propose, therefore, that for young people to experience the benefits of engagement in YPAR, there is a need to challenge oppressive adult–child power relations and promote equitable research relationships. In order for the Butterfly Effects' plea for "student voice" to be heard, we would argue that promoting equitable research relationships between adults and young people should permeate all aspect of YPAR, including collaborative discussions of ethics as part of critical approach to capacity building (Hall, 2020; Luguetti *et al.*, 2023). A clear implication is that young people are able to make informed decisions about their participation in research and that they should be given agency to discuss their thoughts and understandings of ethical considerations. As argued elsewhere (Taplin *et al.*, 2022), seeking children and young people's direct perspectives on ethical processes and issues surrounding research is an innovative and highly valuable approach to ensuring ethical practice. It is also, as discussed below, an approach that can help embed critical capacity building in YPAR.

Towards youth-led critical capacity building

The final theme relates to Changemakers' perceptions and understandings of research methods and how this was developed across the three sessions. In Session 1's focus group discussion, the Changemakers were invited to share their prior understandings of research: *What it is? Who it involves? How it might be conducted? And how young people may wish to conduct research?* Initially, the Changemakers demonstrated a superficial conceptualisation of research. This included a broad distinction between primary and secondary research: "there are two types of research, primary and secondary. Primary is basically going out and doing stuff, secondary is information from online mediums" [Changemaker 12, focus group]; "what it [research] means is statistics, logos, scientists, these kinds of things are primary. Secondary, there is some great stuff out there. But that's what research is, creating surveys so you can collect information" [Changemaker 1, focus group]. Their

conceptualisation of research also included a focus on "surveys" as the main methods used in research. This is unsurprising, given that surveys are often used during NGL programmes, within school-based research (Yeoman *et al.*, 2017) and as research method that young people are most exposed to in their day-to-day lives. In Session 2, discussing the enquiry question "What is research?", the BADD Habits team recorded the following points: "statistics", "scientists", "percentages", "facts, evidence behind what you say" and "valuable information, which is just statistics" [mind map]. These references to statistics denote the presentations of data, aligning to young people's experiences of mathematics and geography lessons (Yeoman *et al.*, 2017) as well as school-based initiatives, for example anti-bullying week where students are shown prevalence-based statistics (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2023).

During the second session, Dobson planned to build upon Changemakers' *a priori* understandings of research methods. The NGL facilitator stayed for the whole group discussion, exploring with Changemakers how they might conduct their projects, with Green encouraging them to consider how they might collect information. At this point, Green suggested Changemakers could revisit their journals to consider their strengths, which they had detailed during the first session, articulating their interpersonal competencies ("teamwork" and "cooperative listening") as well as creative skills, including drawing. Encouraging the Changemakers to reflect on their own strengths enabled them to think more broadly about research methods and which methods they may feel more comfortable using for their own research projects. With their journal entries a catalyst for discussion, the research teams then discussed the various data collection methods they could use, including: "surveys" ("online" and "paper-based"), "interviews" ("in-person" and "online"), "open discussions", "storyboards" ("more child friendly") and "school visits" [mind maps].

In doing so, Changemakers not only demonstrated an enhanced knowledge of data collections methods but also demonstrated critical thinking skills by considering which methods were most appropriate for their projects and their participants. The Butterfly Effect group noted how visual and creative methodologies (i.e. storyboarding) may be more child-friendly, inclusive and accessible for their proposed participants (child refugees). Similarly, the BADD Habits research group suggested how group-based interviews may be the most appropriate method of data collection for them to explore primary school students' (ages 5–11 years) perceptions of anti-social behaviour. As the groups were discussing ideas, both groups began to think about which forms of research could enable them to capture their child participants' voices. This discussion about participants, aligned with a discussion of project aims and the projects teams' strengths, brought to the surface a sophisticated and critical understanding of research methods, which was not immediately apparent in terms of their *a priori* understanding. It highlights how facilitating a youth-led approach to project design has the potential to lead to critical capacity building with YPAR, whereby research design is evaluated in relation to both their strengths as researchers and the needs of their participants.

As well as the data demonstrating Changemakers' meaningful engagement with research ethics and methods throughout the three sessions, journal entries in Session 3 also demonstrated that the young people relished the opportunity to be involved in capacity building: Changemaker 2 reflected on their "enjoyment" of the sessions; Changemaker 6 felt that a "positive culture [was] created"; and Changemaker 10 appreciated the opportunity to "voice" their opinions about ethics and research. The Changemakers' enjoyment is significant as it indicates how a youth-led approach to capacity building can enhance young people's engagement in YPAR.

Conclusion

As already acknowledged, the limited number of sessions meant that our project was not as participatory as we had first envisaged. It also meant that the rapport Green built with the Changemakers fell short of achieving an ethics of care based on relationships, which has been effective in a project where the researcher is a Researcher-in-Residence (Bussu *et al.*, 2021). We were also unable to involve the Changemakers in data analysis and to achieve focus within this relatively short timeframe, Green designed and structured the research methods. However, by underpinning the design of the methods using the *Rights-Based Research Ethics and Planning Framework* (Mayne *et al.*, 2018), Green was able to both build rapport over the three sessions and balance the restrictions of structure with Changemaker agency, which was further enhanced by the use of a mixture of individual qualitative methods. At the same time, we also need to emphasise that our project was never conceived of as being fully participatory for our Changemakers. We had our own research questions, which, we feel, were important ones to address, as the answers to those questions, we also feel, can help YPAR research become more participatory in the future.

For those researching into YPAR outcomes, we recommend engaging young people in participatory roles in their research processes rather than measuring expected and predetermined outcomes. Our study shows how young people might perceive the benefits and outcomes of engaging in YPAR differently to existing research into YPAR outcomes, which is adult-centric (Dobson, 2023). Of note, here is the way in which the young people in our project were motivated by YPAR's promise of a different pedagogical approach to the transmissive approach of formal education (Anyon *et al.*, 2018; Bell, 2010; Bland and Atweh, 2007) as well participating in "civic action". Furthermore, in terms of outcomes, interpersonal competencies and affective skills appeared to be more important than intrapersonal and cognitive competencies for these young people. This, along with the young people's anticipation of YPAR offering a different pedagogical approach that affords more agentic engagement in a school context, suggests how researching into the outcomes of YPAR with young people could put forward a radically different research agenda than YPAR research that is more aligned with adult-defined outcomes of perceived benefit to the school environment (Dobson, 2023). Given how pedagogical variation is limited in areas of social disadvantage (OECD, 2020), our research also shows how YPAR has the potential to engage young people in schools in these areas.

For those undertaking YPAR with young people such schools, we recommend taking a youth-led approach that draws upon and develops young people's *a priori* understandings of research ethics and research methods to move towards "critical capacity building" (Luguetti *et al.*, 2023). In relation to critical capacity building for ethical understanding and practice, our study demonstrates that it is vital to transform how ethics is presented to young people, avoiding "dumbed down" documentation (Taplin *et al.*, 2022) by valuing young people's voice in providing spaces for them space to discuss, critique and reflect upon ethical procedures, including their own perceptions of age-related power imbalances. In relation to research methods, we found that encouraging young people to reflect both upon their own strengths as researchers as well as the needs of their participants can help young people develop sophisticated and inclusive ideas for project design. This approach to research methods and ethics, therefore, avoids an adult-led pedagogy (Cullen and Walsh, 2020), values young people's voices and holds the potential to develop critical capacity building in YPAR, with project design accommodating both researchers' strengths and participants' needs. The fact that Changemakers in our study enjoyed participating in capacity building for their research also indicates the real potential for critical capacity building in YPAR to impact positively the quality of young people's research projects.

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