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Power With the Young People - Witness in Theatre-Making

An Exploration of the Potential and Possibilities of Making Theatre *with*
Young People

Anna Glarin

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy



School of the Arts

January 2026

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How to Read This Exegesis

This written exegesis is accompanied by an online portfolio which documents my practice – combined they form my practice-led PhD submission. They are designed to be read in conjunction with each other as one supports the other. However, the order in which they are approached does not matter.

Online portfolio: <https://annaglarin.wixsite.com/phdresearch>

The portfolio documents my practice through images and reflections, and its intention is to bring the essence of Waterloo Community Theatre and my practice with the young people to life. Beyond the PhD, the aim of the portfolio is to be a stand-alone resource for practitioners interested in witness in theatre-making and this is also why there is some overlap between the two. The portfolio is therefore also less academic in its tone.

I reference and point to the online portfolio at various points throughout this exegesis, often through hyperlinks for ease of locating the material.

Abstract

This practice-led research explores the concept of witness in theatre-making *with* young people, challenging the assumption that either full youth autonomy or total adult leadership offers an effective participatory model. Instead, it explores the nuanced, co-creative space that emerges between these poles. Building on a broader shift toward researching *with* rather than *on* young people—who are increasingly recognised as “experts in their own lives” (Coyne and Carter, 2018: 2)—this study examines how co-creation manifests in practice. Although co-creation implies shared authorship, adults often disavow their artistic influence, presenting young people as sole creators. This research argues that such detachment masks the relational, interdependent nature of genuinely co-creative work.

Existing youth participation models tend to be linear and hierarchical, primarily addressing levels of young people’s involvement in decision-making. I contend that *practice with adults*—characterised by iterative action, critical reflection, and ongoing adaptation—requires distinct consideration. Keeping these domains separate clarifies that witness arises specifically from co-creative practice rather than from conventional participation frameworks.

A Practice as Research methodology, informed by Tripp’s (2012) Critical Incident Analysis, enabled systematic reflection on moments of tension, disruption, and negotiation within my theatre-making practice. These critical incidents revealed the fluctuating power relations shaping witness, offering insight into the complexities and constraints of adopting a witness-oriented approach.

From this process, I propose the *Place of Optimum Withness*: a reflective framework that captures the “constantly moving and dynamic” (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018) nature of “messy” (Hughes et al., 2011) co-creative theatre-making practice. It identifies six interrelated dimensions—Power, Relationships, Frame, Reciprocity, Dialogue, and Mess—that support intentional, co-creative engagement between young people and adult practitioners in a theatre-making context.

Acronyms

AATE: American Alliance for Theatre and Education

ACE: Arts Council England

CI: Critical Incident

CIA: Critical Incident Analysis

DCMS: Department for Culture, Media and Sport

ERA: Education Reform Act

LEA: Local Education Authority

MKO: More Knowledgeable Other

NC: National Curriculum

NPO: National Portfolio Organisation

PaR: Practice as Research

POW: Place of Optimum Withness

SDT: Self-Determination Theory

UNCRC: United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child

UKRI: UK Research and Innovation

WCT: Waterloo Community Theatre

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Chapter 1 – Introduction: Setting the Scene

Picture this: 5pm. Friday. A bunch of teenagers together in a community hall in Waterloo, Southeast London. One is obsessed with the royal family and EastEnders and switches between a royal wave and shouting ‘Oi! Get out of my pub!’ to everyone who comes near. Another sits at the back and mumbles into a microphone. A few are chatting to each other on Snap. A few others are playing songs on Spotify and showing off their moves. A diverse group of young people with different stories to tell. But as Aristotle famously said, ‘the whole is greater than the sum of its parts’ and weaving together these stories and sharing them with audiences creates a unified theatrical narrative created by the young people in the group. Welcome to Waterloo Community Theatre!

1.1 WCT – The Local Context

Waterloo Community Theatre’s (WCT) was a young people’s theatre company based in Southeast London from 2015 to 2023. It was set up as a Community Interest Company and incorporated as a company limited by guarantee in 2015, and I was the founder and co-artistic director. WCT was born out of a need for inclusive and accessible participatory drama and theatre-making provision in the Waterloo area of south London. While the Waterloo and South Bank area is considered a cultural hub of London with The National Theatre, The Old Vic, The Young Vic and The British Film Institute to mention a few high-profile art and culture venues in the vicinity, there was no regular inclusive and accessible theatre-making offer for young people. As a local youth and community arts practitioner, having just completed my MA in

Applied Theatre I felt compelled to address this issue. My MA dissertation (Glarin, 2016) focused on research into cultural offers in the local area as well as understanding the needs and wants of local young people. It explored the dichotomy of a socio-economically poor and culturally rich Lambeth, barriers to engagement with theatre among young people, and how extra-curricular provisions can contribute to young people's well-being and increased cultural capital.

My interest in the hyperlocal stems from living in Waterloo for many years. I also worked for social enterprise Coin Street Community Builders on London's South Bank, where I managed all arts-related community programme initiatives. My responsibilities included running weekly youth clubs for local young people aged 8-18. The majority of those who attended told me they do not access local theatres and art centres as they do not feel that they belong there or that the programming represents them. This was against a backdrop of high poverty; in 2016, the year WCT started operating, Lambeth was reported as the 8th most deprived borough in London and the 22nd most deprived in England (State of the Borough, 2016). The same report goes on to state that "Lambeth's population is highly skilled, but those who are not risk missing out on the opportunities created by growth" (2016: 5), suggesting that the children and young people in households who are not considered 'skilled' and thus more likely to be low-income, miss out on arts and culture opportunities. Seven years later, in 2023, the State of the Borough report states that "[c]hildren are more likely to live in poverty in Lambeth than in London, with a similar proportion to England" and that "Lambeth is among the top half of boroughs that have the highest percentage of households that are deprived in three or four of the dimensions

described in the Census 2021”¹ (State of the Borough, 2023). Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory (1943) suggests that one’s basic needs, such as food and adequate housing, must be fulfilled before one will be motivated and able to seek out activities that are not essential. As such, engaging with and spending money on non-essential activities such as taking children to see theatre or engage in theatre-making is not likely to be at the top of Lambeth families’ list of priorities. This prioritisation was reflected in national agendas too, in which we have seen how “youth services have been cut and the arts marginalised in schools” (Glasier, 2025a). Art education and after-school provision remain inaccessible to many, with high fees and selection processes which present barriers to disadvantaged young people. This has resulted in many grassroots arts organisations springing up to fill the gap, and I founded WCT as a direct response to the local climate at the time and the wider identified socio-economic barriers to engagement with the arts for young people (Brook et al., 2018).

1.2 WCT’s Aims and Activities

Despite the prominence of art and culture venues in the vicinity, very little programming was aimed at young people and not a single free of charge, fully inclusive and consistent theatre-making offer was available at the time of WCT’s inception. Therefore, to address the lack of inclusive and accessible theatre provision and the need for a space in which young people can express themselves in creative ways, the key aims of WCT were twofold:

¹ The dimensions of deprivation used to classify households are indicators based on four selected household characteristics: education, employment, health and housing.

1) to increase young people's cultural capital through theatre-making and theatre-going;

2) to amplify young people's voices by offering them the platform from which they can use theatre as a tool to tell their stories in their words.

In the first aim, WCT used Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital (2010, first published in French in 1979) to suggest experiences, knowledge and habitual behaviours which influence the young people's future attitudes and access to future cultural opportunities. WCT sought to increase young people's cultural capital through free access to drama and theatre-making workshops, as well as 'handholding' to see live theatre performances in the local area and the West End. This was facilitated through free ticket schemes and my professional network, which helped enable this key aim. I know how having access to theatre-making and attending live performances myself from an early age, i.e. having cultural capital, has enriched my life and influenced my attitude to theatre, thus affording me opportunities I otherwise would not have had. This is mirrored in the wider cultural sector with social mobility a persistent issue and the sector being "dominated by those from affluent social origins" (Brook et al., 2018: 2).

In the second aim, WCT used the term 'amplify' to suggest how WCT was a space aimed at supporting young people to articulate their voices and offering a platform for them to share their stories in their own words. Based on my own experiences as a teenager, I wanted to create a space in which the teenagers of today could use theatre to share their experiences exactly as they want them to be shared. Busby asserts that "[d]evising theatre is a collaborative activity and working with under-represented groups prompts us to recognise whose stories are

usually told and whose are usually not, and to amplify the latter” (Busby, 2023: 122). This was indeed very true for WCT as the devised work we created together centred around the stories that mattered to the young people and that often went unheard. The notion of young people as marginalised and under-represented, as well as access to opportunities and voices of young people, is addressed in more detail in Chapter 6 (Youth Voices).

I recall seeing London-based youth theatre Company Three’s play *Brainstorm* during one of their two short runs at the National Theatre’s Temporary Theatre space in 2015. It inspired me immensely, and in a way, helped me create the foundations for WCT. I saw the effect this “vibrant, energetic and highly original” (Busby, 2023: 161) piece, devised and performed by young people, had on a paying audience, and I was compelled to create something that could offer the young people of Waterloo a similar opportunity.

The programming of *Brainstorm*, despite its success, was sadly not common practice.

Matarasso asserts that

teenagers are numerous and artistically active but their art is almost invisible in the sanctioned spaces of public culture: theatres, galleries, television and the press. Instead, they are discussed, problematized, othered, by those with privileged access to cultural authority. No wonder they paint on neglected walls. Whatever else it may be, tagging is a protest against invisibility. (Matarasso, 2019: 76)

Given that the main programming in local theatres generally did not represent young people, amplification of their voices and inclusion of their stories in the fabric of the local cultural landscape felt like an important part of our mission.

In keeping with our hyper-local approach, my co-artistic director Mark and I recruited our young people mostly through the local secondary school. However, word of mouth tended to be the most successful recruitment method. WCT had an open-door policy, which enabled young people to join at any time. We offered two groups split by age: broadly 7-11 (primary school years 3-6) and 12-16 (secondary school years 7-11). As young people reached the age of 16 they could remain with us as a volunteer, and some even gained paid work as assistant facilitators. Both groups' demographics were predominantly young people from the Global Majority, with some from other ethnic backgrounds. While the younger group felt quite stable in numbers, with approximately 16 young people attending regularly, the older group fluctuated more in numbers. We had a core group of young people who attended weekly, but also a number of young people who attended more sporadically. This meant that the core group was familiar with my research from the beginning, but as we had some young people come and go, it was necessary to mention the research at the beginning of every session so they were aware it was taking place and that they could withdraw or not participate in any activities they did not want to participate in.

Including our work in schools, we reached a total of approximately 500 young people, of whom approximately 60 attended our weekly after-school sessions. We targeted local young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, but our doors always remained open to anyone who

wanted to join, irrespective of their background. We offered weekly sessions which focused on devising based on the young people's own life experiences and created original work told in their own words, while also learning about production and staging. The productions, which were performed mostly in non-traditional spaces, such as community halls, the local city farm and the local park, were mostly autobiographical in the sense that they dealt with topics that were relevant to the young people and that they wanted to share with audiences, and included stories from their own lives on topics such as friendships, family, relationships, love, trust, hopes and fears.

Mark and I recruited well-qualified and experienced co-facilitators to support our mission, mostly whom had completed the same MA Applied Theatre degree course as me.

1.3 WCT – Closing Our Doors and Our Legacy

A Youth Theatre Census carried out in 2024 reports that “smaller youth theatres with the least funding are less likely to be able to provide free places or have policies and procedures to remove barriers to participation” (Company Three website, 2025). Despite this, WCT were lucky to be oversubscribed and fully funded for the seven years we operated. This suggests both a need for the service and also demonstrates that funders recognised this need. However, in 2023, following Arts Council England's redistribution of £24m in other places than London (Hytner, 2023), we started to feel the financial pressure. Councils also allocated less funding for youth and art activities. As a grassroots organisation, this directly impacted WCT, and securing funding became extremely challenging. Sadly, due to the challenging arts funding landscape and changes to the directors' personal circumstances, we made the difficult decision to wind

down the company in August 2023. With our ethos of offering our services free of charge, which was fundamental to our mission and vision, and with no other income streams, this unfortunately meant that we had to take the decision to close our doors as it simply was not viable to operate anymore. Walcon's chapter *The resilience web* in Hughes' book *Precariousness and the Performances of Welfare* (2020) perfectly captures the precariousness of the nature of being at the mercy of funding grants. I can sympathise with everything Walcon talks about in this chapter, with the notion of "wobbling on a metaphorical ledge between making it and not making it" (Walcon, 2020: 148).

WCT was not alone. In fact, cuts to arts and culture across the board in England resulted in many organisations losing their ACE National Portfolio Organisation (NPO)² status and being forced to close; sadly, although not an NPO, ours was not an unusual situation. It paints a wider picture of how art and culture are being relegated to the bottom of the priority list for policymakers and how dependent on the prevailing government agenda small grassroots arts organisations are.

1.4 Why this PhD?

I grew up in Lapland in the far north of Sweden. There, I joined the local amateur dramatics company aged 13 and this was immediately the place where I felt at home. In contrast to the UK, where art education and extra-curricular art activities tend to be very costly and therefore

² National Portfolio Organisations receive three years' worth of funding from Arts Council England. It is ACE's regular funding programme for arts organisations, museums and libraries across England and their 2023-2026 Investment Programme saw many London-based organisations lose their funding in favour re-investment in other parts of the country.

exclude those who cannot afford them, in Sweden, it is quite the opposite. Access to extra-curricular creative subjects has always remained free of charge and highly encouraged.

Nevertheless, this was in the 1980s and 1990s, when children and young people were to be seen and not heard, and I rarely felt listened to or acknowledged by adults. Theatre became a place where I made them take note and listen. The people I encountered in the theatre-making space made me see myself differently; I felt seen and heard. It was a space in which I felt liberated from the constraints of society's norms and could explore who I was and my place in the world. Therefore, it is not surprising that theatre-making with young people became my chosen career path. I consider myself lucky to have had this opportunity of free access from an early age, but realise, having worked in the British education system for many years and bringing up a child here, that it is an opportunity afforded by few rather than many.

Therefore, setting up WCT was about providing young people of today with what became my sanctuary as a teenager, a space where young people could express themselves through creativity, with supportive adults, and a space that they had ownership of, but was supported and facilitated by adults. In my theatre-making practice I have always reflected upon my own journey and asked myself the questions of how and why – and then what? Following my MA, this is what eventually led me to pursue this PhD and take this thinking forward. I was interested in exploring the tensions of co-creation with young people and adults occupying the same theatre-making space, and how this witness manifests in practice. Professor of Applied Theatre Selina Busby suggests that youth theatre is a 'thirdspace' for young people to "construct their own environments, and formulate and test their developing identities" (Busby,

2023: 153). Facilitated right, it is space where young people freely can express themselves. As the thirdspace, she argues, “invites forward thinking when it offers young people a place to explore who they are in their world” (Busby, 2023: 159). She references youth theatre Company Three’s use of a ‘den space’ which their former artistic director Ned Glasier argues is critical to their success and central to their methodology. The den is the space in their premises which belongs entirely to the young people and which Glasier describes as “a space which is entirely theirs, which they can come to any time, which isn’t ever hired out to adults... that they can break, that they can move around, where they can come and have genuine agency” (Glasier cited in Busby, 2023: 168). In other word, a space where young people can freely and truly explore who they are. Company Three’s den space is owned by the young people. It is a space in which they can freely explore with agency, which in turn enables them to bring their ‘true’ selves to the theatre-making practice (Note: Identity and the notion of a ‘true’ self is discussed in Chapter 6 (Youth Voices)). That was the kind of space I felt theatre offered me as a youngster, a space where I felt I could be myself and take creative risks alongside adults. That is the kind of space I wanted to create for the young people of WCT.

1.5 Chapter Outlines

This exegesis offers an in-depth account of reflections on my own practice underpinned by theory. My reflections are illustrated through Critical Incident snapshots of my practice throughout the exegesis. In this section, I map the reader’s journey throughout my research. The chapters — supported by the online portfolio — build towards the formulation of what I have termed *The Place of Optimum Withness*.

Chapter 2 - The Evolution of Applied Theatre and Youth Participation demonstrates how the counter-cultures of the 1960s and 1970s paved the way for the development of the umbrella term applied theatre. The chapter maps out how Theatre in Education (TiE) was a building block for participatory theatre practices with Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed as a noted influence. The contested term 'artist' is untangled, and the chapter posits that everyone who makes art is an artist. The chapter outlines some of the existing models of youth participation to demonstrate their linearity and highlight their focus on participation of youth only.

Chapter 3 – The Place of Optimum Withness introduces my framework for understanding and articulating a withness-centred practice, *The Place of Optimum Withness*, and its six dimensions as a conceptual reflection framework. I argue that *The Place of Optimum Withness* framework's uniqueness lies in its non-linearity and fluidity, with its dimensions anchored in practice with theoretical underpinnings. The identified six dimensions of the framework are: 1) Power, 2) Relationships, 3) Frame, 4) Reciprocity, 5) Dialogue, and 6) Mess. I propose *The Place of Optimum Withness* as the Space Between full autonomy for young people and absolute adult leadership, where the six dimensions converge and are navigated.

Chapter 4 - Methodology of this exegesis locates my research in the social constructivist and interpretive paradigms and outlines a reflection-based Action Research approach and Practice as Research as methodologies. It goes on to demonstrate a Practice as Research approach as my primary methodology. The chapter discusses Tripp's Critical Incident Analysis (Tripp, 2012) and practitioner conversations as my methods. I make it clear that although I adopt a

participatory approach in my theatre-making practice with young people, my research itself is not participatory in nature, as the young people are not regarded as co-researchers.

Chapter 5 – Ethical Considerations addresses ethical considerations such as informed and ongoing consent/assent, the choice to acknowledge the young people by name and the ethics of dissemination. In addition, I discuss the ethics of dealing with emotive material, which often is the case when using participants’ own life stories in the workshop space. The chapter concludes with a discussion on ethical practice in participatory theatre-making as a dynamic process and something which is unique in every encounter and every workshop space. Thus, while I recognise that there are established core principles of ethical practice for practitioners to adhere to, I argue that what constitutes ethical practice is constantly shifting and changing.

Chapter 6 - Youth Voices opens with discussions about the paradigm shift we have seen in how childhood has been viewed and perceived and how this has evolved. As part of the emergence of the new sociology of childhood (Qvortrup et al., 2016; Coyne and Carter, 2018), Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a landmark document, states explicitly that children now have a say in matters concerning them (UNICEF, 1989). The chapter furthermore explores the way in which young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and lower-income households are not afforded the same opportunities as their peers from more privileged backgrounds and can therefore be considered marginalised. The chapter posits that a shift from Youth Voice to Youth Voices—a plurality—is critical, recognising that young people are not a homogenous group, but rather individuals with individual voices. Drawing on my own experiences, I argue that the theatre-making space lends itself well to finding voice and identity

for young people. Quite the opposite from traditional educational settings which seek conformity, in the theatre-making space individuality and identity navigation are encouraged; it is a space for expression and facilitation of voice(s). I argue in this chapter that young people must be seen as experts of what it means to be young today.

Chapter 7 – The Complexities of the Shared Space deals with the many complexities of the theatre-making space shared and occupied by adults and young people. The chapter brings to the fore how attitudes and values influence our perspectives and the importance of acknowledging and celebrating different perspectives. Furthermore, I argue that such an approach is grounded in knowledge exchange and reciprocity, built on a listening practice between the adults and the young people. This chapter explores my complex insider/outsider position as a trusted member of the group, who was also company director and researcher. While I am not an insider as a young person and participant, neither am I a complete outsider due to my established relationship with, and vested interests in, the young people. In this chapter I acknowledge that openness to different positionalities and perspectives can be challenging due to the messiness of a participatory approach. I discuss how framing the uncertain—the mess—becomes critical in managing uncertainty, and I give examples of how this was achieved in WCT.

Chapter 8 – Power Relations delves deeper into the power relations in theatre-making with young people and adults. The first section argues that participatory and creative methods are efficient in addressing power imbalances and interrupting the status quo. Using several examples from my own practice, I demonstrate how reflection on in-the-moment decisions and

dialogue is critical in ensuring power distribution is more equitable. The chapter goes on to discuss democratic ownership of organisations and argues for a move towards a witness-centred practice. Using WCT's example of inviting a young person to be a director in the company, I suggest that engaging young people in leadership structures that go beyond tokenism is key to achieving institutional change and thus, witness. This chapter employs a Foucauldian understanding of 'power as action' (which proposes that power cannot be owned, it is acted out as a response to another action) to analyse how power is enacted between young people and adults on a constantly shifting basis. It concludes with a discussion about the power relations among the young people it is critical to be aware of.

Chapter 9 - The Curveballs of COVID focuses on how the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted all in-person activity and how this affected WCT's delivery. It addresses how the group dynamic changed and evolved, and affected how the young people engaged with WCT. I discuss how we, as a group, dealt with the challenges of not being able to meet in person and how conversation-based online sessions resulted in unexpected outcomes. I describe *The Realist*, a podcast and radio project which emerged from these sessions and represented a move away from theatre-making. In conclusion to this chapter, I reflect on how this project altered my perception of myself as a theatre-maker.

Chapter 10 – Concluding Remarks offers my concluding remarks and thoughts. I argue that a witness-centred approach in arts practice has much to learn from ideas originating in adjacent disciplines, including Radical Participatory Design (Udoewa, 2022). In addition, the chapter references a workshop which I held with other theatre practitioners and educators at a

symposium in Salt Lake City, Utah, in November 2025. It addresses, through pointing the reader to the online portfolio, how The Place of Optimum Witness conceptual reflection framework was received/perceived, and its potential for practical application by theatre practitioners.

2. Chapter 2 - The Evolution of Applied Theatre and Youth Participation

2.1 Applied Theatre as a Community Theatre Practice

WCT's practice and ideology fit under the umbrella term applied theatre, which began to emerge as a term in the late 1990s; today it is still widely used in academia, while at grassroots level, the more preferred terms tend to be "participatory theatre, collaborative practice or community theatre" (Collective Encounters website, n.d.). Theatre for social change and theatre for development are also commonly used terms, and what they all share is "a belief in the power of the theatre form to address something beyond the form itself" (Ackroyd, 2022: 74). Despite all the different names, the common thread is an approach anchored in some form of desire for social change.

I use the term applied theatre to reference the work of WCT. While 'community theatre' may be a more accessible term for those unfamiliar with the field, I prefer applied theatre as it "embraces a range of progressive theatre practices" (Vine, 2016: 169) and thus feels more open-ended. It can be applied to many different groups and settings, be it work taking place in prisons, care homes or indeed, youth settings, and I feel this is more aligned with my practice. Roger Wooster, who in his book *Theatre in Education in Britain: Origins, Development and Influence* gives a comprehensive account of the development of theatre in education in Britain, points to Prendergast and Saxton (2009), for whom "Theatre for Development (TfD), Prison Theatre and Museum Theatre all fall under the heading Applied Theatre" (Wooster, 2016: 188), alluding to the open-ended nature of the term.

It must be noted, however, that my aim here is not to provide an overview of or explanation for the many and varied terms in existence, as many of them have complex histories. For extensive discussions about the complex nature of the terms, I refer to Thompson (2012) and O'Toole (2022). This section aims to situate the practice of WCT in the wider context of applied theatre. Therefore, a brief overview of the socio-political landscape in the UK and its effect on how applied theatre developed is helpful.

2.2 TiE, Drama in Schools and the Emergence of Participatory Theatre

Applied theatre has one of its origins in the Theatre in Education (TiE) movement of the 1960-1980s. TiE was concerned with trained actors and educators performing for school students with the intention of changing attitudes and behaviour, and it is regarded as one of the “historic roots of applied theatre practice” (Prendergast and Saxton, 2009:7). It is impossible to discuss TiE without mentioning Dorothy Heathcote. With her focus on “the journey rather than the destination” (Wooster, 2016: 32) she developed the Mantle of the Expert (MoE) approach (Heathcote and Herbert, 1985), widely adopted in educational settings. Heathcote recognised drama as a powerful learning tool across the curriculum. Its uniqueness lies in its focus on critical thinking and deep enquiry as it transforms curriculum content into meaningful, real-world problems within a fictional context. Heathcote, on a mission to challenge the way children are viewed and “create other ways of working with children, ways that drew on their imagination, respected their ideas, and worked in collaboration with them” (Taylor, 2016: n.p.) developed the Mantle of the Expert in order to place the student as the expert with the teacher as co-explorer. The significance of Heathcote’s contribution to drama as a way of learning

cannot be overstated, and, despite her passing in 2011, her techniques continue to be a source of inspiration for drama educators to this day, including myself.

TiE is considered an important building block for participatory theatre as it saw theatre “as a tool for development and directly involved audience members as active participants in the drama” (Collective Encounters website, n.d.). Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*, first published in 1979, with its anchoring in Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in 1970, saw drama and theatre as a ‘rehearsal for revolution’, where the “spectator” (Boal, 2000: xxi) can change the outcome of the drama, ultimately achieving real change in society. As Baz Kershaw explores in his seminal book *The Politics of Performance* (1992), which addresses the social and political purposes of performance over the decades, Boal’s approach and methodology grew out of a Marxist ideology rooted in a desire for social and political change. This was around the same time as the counter-cultures of the 1960s and 1970s Britain provided “a ‘model’ for oppositional action against hegemony” (Kershaw, 1992: 39) and the activists of this time saw themselves as a “movement” (Matarasso, 2019: 20).

The counter-culture movements help us understand how theatrical performances were used to connect with the idea of societal change, and formed part of the “anti-nuclear, anti-war and civil rights demonstrations in Britain and the USA” (Kershaw, 1992: 40). As these “economic, social and political uncertainties prompted a widespread desire for self-determination and autonomy” (Kershaw, 1992: 251), we saw the emergence of community theatre groups in opposition to the status quo of the socio-political landscape in Britain. The movements and the theatrical performances opposed the “dominant social and cultural values” (Jones, 2021) and

were the “art world’s response to the wider social changes of the time” (Matarasso, n.d: 220). These performances tended to work “outside the existing theatre system in venues where their counter-culture messages would be welcomed” (Kershaw, 1992: 103) and saw the relationships between performers and audiences “characterised by a new directness” (Kershaw, 1992:103), with a focus on audience involvement and participation, similar to that of Boal.

In the 1980s, “emancipatory and libertarian movements” (Kershaw, 1992: 39), such as pro-gay rights action groups, and pro-marginalisation groups, along with black and feminist consciousness movements, gained prominence in the UK. As result, “more work began to be done with groups defined by ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age and disability” (Matarasso, 2019: 156), and community performances “tended to be tailor-made, often collective devising, for particular communities” (Kershaw, 1992: 143). The performances were often made specifically with the aim of speaking for and on behalf of these groups.

As if this shift in community practice was not enough, we also saw a shift in education policy. 1988 saw the introduction of the Education Reform Act (ERA) and thus also the National Curriculum (NC) and with it, education became administered centrally and thus also highly politicised (Fisher, 2008). In contrast, its predecessor, the 1944 Education Act, was locally administered through LEAs, and had a “high degree of local decision-making, with professional teacher autonomy” (Fisher, 2006: 255). The National Curriculum had multiple objectives; it standardised what subjects were taught in schools in England and Wales, introduced core subjects (English, maths and science) alongside foundation subjects and set up assessment

mechanisms. The NC was, and is to this day, enforced in all state-funded schools, with academies exempt from it, giving them more autonomy.

Following the introduction of the ERA, “TiE companies were to be one of the main casualties” (Wooster, 2016: 77). This, alongside the changes to school funding and with individual schools being “enabled to ‘opt out’ of the control of the LEA” (Wooster, 2016: 82), presented a devastating blow to drama in schools. With the changes to school funding, and perhaps alongside headteachers’ limited understanding of the value of TiE, many state-funded schools were forced to choose between books or theatre. Opting for books meant they were generally unable to afford the additional costs of TiE.

The NC introduced attainment targets at various ages with learning objectives attached to all foundation subjects, which included art and music, but did not include drama. With Thatcher in power, this could be argued was a highly political move away from the ‘left-wing’ approaches associated with TiE. David Davis, Professor of drama in education, wrote at the time:

It is no accident that drama is not alongside music and art in the foundation subjects.

Drama provides the clearest opportunity in the education system for young people to actively investigate the truth of their lives and the world around them in a social, co-operative, feeling way. (Davis, 1988, reprinted 2008)

Cooper, heavily influenced by Davis, states that “[t]he TiE Movement has been all but destroyed in the UK because it enables young people to think independently and critically, and they - the ruling class - will not allow that” (2023: 67).

We have certainly seen this decline in drama as a school subject in more recent years: National Theatre’s executive director and co-chief executive Kate Varah states in a *The Guardian* article that “[p]erforming arts subjects have seen a 68% drop in student numbers, while the figures for those taking GCSEs have dropped by 47% and A-levels by 29%” (Thorpe, 2025).

It must be noted that as part of the final report of the Curriculum Review, which was published in November 2025, “drama will be strengthened in schools both as a subject in its own right and as a subsection of English” (Chambers, 2025). I welcome this as it demonstrates a commitment to a broader and richer curriculum, which ensures that pupils have access to creative subjects, and it remains to be seen how it will be implemented.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s art world, with a ripple effect on community-based and applied theatre in the UK as well as the United States, there was a significant shift from creation of objects, or performances, towards a “collaborative process that would transform the consciousness of both the artist and his or her co-participants” (Kester, 2013: 128). It was not the “drama of bourgeois entertainment” anymore, but rather “a drama of exploration, emotion, confrontation and discovery” (Matarasso, 2019: 71). In other words, drama which focused on the process and centred the people, akin to Heathcote’s notion of the journey being more valuable than the destination.

In the 1980s, we saw the emergence of many grassroots theatre companies working with specific communities, such as Geese Theatre (1987) and Mind the Gap (1988), and both are still around today. Geese Theatre works with individuals with experience of the criminal justice system, while Mind the Gap works with communities with lived experience of learning

disabilities. Both companies concern “communities of experience” (Collective Encounters website, n.d.), and their practice is anchored in Boal’s methodology. Their approaches were focused on theatre, which told the stories “that went unheard, but increasingly to offer personal development outcomes for participants” (Collective Encounters website, n.d.).

There was also a resurgence in youth theatres in the 1990s. Half Moon Young People’s Theatre in London, championing young people’s voices through devised work, became an independent young people’s theatre company in 1990. National Youth Theatre Connections was established in the mid 1990s and is one of the world’s largest celebrations of youth theatre.

Thus, community-based theatre became more concerned with empowering people to share their personal narratives through the medium of theatre. The dismantling of TiE represented a move away from the notion of actors enacting topics and issues relevant to children and young people, and a move towards young people, and communities, using their own words to tell their own stories.

Matarasso notes that “the path from ‘community art’ to ‘participatory art’ [...] marked and allowed a transition from the politicised and collectivist action of the seventies towards the depoliticised, individual-focused arts programmes supported by public funds in Britain today” (Matarasso, 2019: 157). With this came a change in thinking around who art is for and who is considered an artist.

2.3 Participatory Art and Co-Creation – Who Is an Artist?

I recall one of the first days of my MA Applied Theatre degree course when all students were asked to arrange themselves in a line from ‘I Am an Artist’ to ‘I Am Not an Artist’. At that time, I placed myself firmly at the ‘I Am Not an Artist’ end of the spectrum. I reflect on this often, as I today would place myself at the opposite end of the spectrum. The more I have practised participatory art and co-creation and the more I have read, thought and understood about it, the more I view myself, *and* the people I create art with, as artists. Upon reflection, I know that the hesitation to call myself an artist stems from the common perception that artists create ‘quality art’, and participatory artists “have a different idea of what quality means from that of the art world and its institutions” (Matarasso, 2019: 88). I argue that the value and the quality in the art we create through our theatre-making with young people largely lie in the authenticity of the stories being told. This may not always be understood or perhaps even acceptable by ‘professional artists’ as the purpose of participatory art differs from that of professional and commercial art. Perhaps it is “the different intentions people bring to participatory art [which] help explain why it can be hard to understand in a world of professional specialisation” (Matarasso, 2019: 83). Heart of Glass and Battersea Arts Centre, in their report on co-creation, state that the

levels of deep connection and collaboration are instinctive to artists and practitioners with many years of experience of working with communities of place, enquiry and interest, with marginalised groups, with people of all age ranges, gender, ethnicity and

sexual orientation and, increasingly, in a variety of settings and ‘non-arts’ civic spaces
(Heart of Glass and Battersea Arts Centre , 2021: 5)

It could be argued, therefore, that the spaces in which participatory art takes place and its focus on marginalised groups help make it more accessible for everyone, which fits with the aim of participatory art.

Francois Matarasso is a leading expert on community cultural practice and continues to write extensively about participatory art and co-creation. He describes participatory art as a collaborative practice in which art is made, or co-created, collaboratively by “professional and non-professional artists” (Matarasso, 2019: 45). One such example is Cornerstone Theater Company. It was founded in 1986 as a travelling ensemble, settled in Los Angeles in 1992 and has since, very successfully, made collaborative theatre with urban communities all over the United States. As part of my MA in Applied Theatre, I spent a month in 2016 with Cornerstone Theater on their Institute Summer Residency, getting to know and making theatre with the community of Oakwood Park in Venice, California. For this production, we worked with the company ensemble of professional actors, but most actors in the final production were members of the Oakwood community. The play addressed the very pertinent issue of “gentrification and the housing crisis in Venice” (Cornerstone Theater Company website, n.d.) and brought to the fore the complex views and emotions of the community it concerned. There was an implicit aim to tell the stories of those affected by the issues of the play to change perceptions of policy and decision makers. This wider shift from ‘on’ to ‘for’ and ‘by’ the people it concerns has placed emphasis on participation and co-creation.

However, the right for people to create art is nothing new and Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits” (United Nations website, n.d.). Matarasso argues that “denying people the right to participate in the cultural life of the community is to deny them a voice. And preventing people from being heard is the first step to denying them other rights” (Matarasso, 2019: 44).

Therefore, the right to participate in artmaking is a basic universal human right, and if you make art, simply put, you are an artist.

I am reminded of WCT’s first-ever production that we shared with an audience in 2016, which we called *Everyone an Artist*, and which was the first step in the young people’s work towards the first Arts Award³. It involved the young people reflecting on the first time they ever saw a piece of art and what their favourite art was. We facilitated discussions around art and what art is, and shared the end-product, a show, with an audience. We ended up with a young person dressed as Frida Kahlo, a young person singing ‘Letting it Go’ from the film *Frozen*, a young person talking about their favourite film and everything in between! The point was for young people to get a sense that, by making art, they too are artists. To encourage the message that we can all be artists, we also created several Fun Palaces⁴ in and around the Waterloo and South Bank areas of London to which the local community was invited. We organised and facilitated drop-in sessions in graffiti, storytelling, art and crafts and much more, all led by the

³ Arts Awards are recognised qualifications that inspire young people to grow their arts and leadership talents. It is accredited by Trinity College.

⁴ Fun Palace is a movement anchored in Joan Littlewood’s practice founded by Stella Duffy OBE in 2013. Fun Palaces encourage and support local people to co-create their own cultural events.

young people of WCT with support from the staff team. This seemed to cement the idea that art is for everyone, and everyone can make art.

Although the co-creation discourse has shifted in recent years from democratisation of culture (making high culture accessible to everyone) to wider discussions about cultural democracy (increased access to art and empowering people to create, participate in and define culture) (Matarasso, 2019; Heart of Glass and Battersea Art Centre, 2021; Matarasso, 2023) it is still not always clear what they mean and how they differentiate. Matarasso offers a suggested simplification of the terms: “Cultural Democratisation = Great art for everyone. Cultural Democracy = art by, for and with everyone. (You can’t determine whether it is ‘great’ in advance of people creating it.)” (Matarasso, 2023: n.p.).

Throughout this exegesis, the concepts of artistic identity and the collaborative processes through which adults and young people create work together are progressively developed, thereby constructing an account of how co-creation manifested within my practice. Co-creation is “moving closer to being recognised as espousing accepted and necessary principles of good and ethical practice” (Heart of Glass and Battersea Arts Centre, 2021: 5), and it has thus become the accepted and ethical approach to participatory art by those who are engaged in it, and I address this in Chapter 5 (Ethical Considerations).

2.4 From the Margins to the Mainstream

In the last 20 or so years, we have also seen a shift in how professional theatres in the UK engage with their communities and a participatory and co-creative approach is often reflected

in mainstream producing theatres across the country. Matarasso notes that participatory art “has spread from the marginal urban and rural spaces it occupied in the 1970s to the centres of cultural power” (Matarasso, 2019: 21) and today one will be hard pressed to find a producing theatre without a participation team attached to it.

One of the (many) aims of participation activities is to increase the theatre’s engagement with its ‘harder to reach’ and marginalised communities, including young people. Here it is worth noting that these terms are not unproblematic, and the notion of young people as marginalised is discussed in Chapter 6 (Youth Voices). The participatory approach thus becomes critical as it has been evidenced that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to engage with arts and culture (see Wan Mak et al., 2020; Ramaiah, 2025, and discussed in more detail in the next section). A 2023 DCMS-commissioned report by Alma Economics entitled *What Works to increase equality of access to culture for lower-economic groups: Evidence review and scoping research* has found that “Co-creation and participatory practices are one of the most effective ways to engage audiences from lower socio-economic backgrounds with culture” (Knott, 2025: n.p.). The report found that

[e]nsuring the cultural offer reflects and represents the local community can be done by asking not what they expect of a cultural offer, but instead what needs, wants, and values they have in their broader lives, what challenges they are facing, and what they want from the future. (Alma Economics, 2025: 63).

Therefore, a participatory approach which engages with its communities and considers their opinions in the programming of participation activities as well as main house productions, could

be argued to be the more advantageous approach to engagement. Participation and co-creation thus emerge as effective ways of inviting communities to be active change-makers through theatre participation. Heart of Glass and Battersea Arts Centre's definition of co-creation as "a set of processes and working methods and approaches that seek to generate change" (Heart of Glass and Battersea Arts Centre, 2021: 20) is a useful description, as it can be applied to theatre-making as much as research. Their report, commissioned by Arts Council England (ACE) to inform their *Let's Create* strategy, lists the elements which contribute to this 'change' and they all concern a shift in power and agency, as well as focuses on the process rather than the product; it is done 'with' rather than 'to'.

2.5 What Next?

In June 2025, Ned Glasier, Co-creation Consultant and previous Artistic Director of Company Three, alongside other practitioners and theatre companies, curated Youth Theatre Together, an in-person event which brought more than 150 youth theatre leaders and young people together. It was a "direct response to the findings of the 2024 Youth Theatre Census, the biggest survey of youth theatres in England since 2011" (Youth Theatre Together website, 2025). A 2024 Youth Theatre Census found that the sector is "underfunded" and "unequally resourced", it is "meeting complex needs", it is "not accessible enough" and "youth theatre leaders are struggling" (Glasier, 2024: n.p.). As a youth theatre leader, none of this is news to me. It is clear that a change is needed to tackle an underfunded and non-accessible sector, and this event marks a significant shift in how a change can be achieved. The focus of the event was on re-imagining and defining a new future for the youth theatre sector through the

establishment of a new national development agency for youth theatre, *with* the people who are directly involved in it.

We threw out the tired conventions of conferences in which a few ‘important’ people speak and everyone else listens. Instead, we held made open, creative spaces in which everyone could have a say. We invited the people who normally get asked to *speak* at conferences to become ‘Listeners’: to listen to the conversations and take detailed notes. (Youth Theatre Together website, 2025)

Although I was not present at this event, I support its mission and applaud its ambitions. We need to take matters into our own hands and reshape the future youth theatre narrative. Brecht has been credited with the famous quote, “art is not a mirror with which to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it” (BBC Bitesize website, 2026). Although it remains contested where the quote originates from, these words resonated with me when I decided to set up Waterloo Community Theatre; I saw a need for change in my local area and I wanted to use theatre as a means to give local young people an inclusive platform for creative self-expression to share their narratives and their voices, and achieve some form of change in society’s perception of young people.

2.6 Introducing Withness as a Concept

WCT’s strapline was ‘Making theatre with, for and about young people’. The ‘for’ and ‘by’ are seemingly emerging trends in theatre-making; Burnt Oak Theatre state they “collaboratively, consciously and cleverly create new and boundary-pushing theatre for young people, by young people” (Burnt Oak Theatre website, 2024), which they no doubt do very successfully. Ideas

Test, a case study which sought to explore how adults worked collaboratively with young people to co-create theatre that prioritised young people's voices was branded "theatre for young people, by young people" (Culture Hive website, 2025). While making theatre 'for' and 'by' young people certainly appear to be the buzzwords, 'with' is less so. My aim, therefore, is to acknowledge the presence of adults in adult-initiated spaces occupied with young people and explore the withness of our co-creation.

There is a tendency for practitioners to boldly claim that the work they have created with young people is the work of the young people only, when in fact, what they often mean is that it is co-created *with* the young people. By making this claim, they are denying their vital role in the theatre-making process in favour of suggesting that it is solely the work of the young people. Ned Glasier, former Artistic Director of young people's theatre company Company Three, reflects on his own evolving thinking and practice about the co-creation process:

Now I think it's one of the worst things we can say, and I hear it all the time, and I've definitely said it, is 'it's all their own work, it's all theirs'. It's not true. It's a fallacy. And a dangerous fallacy that adults employ to absolve themselves of responsibility. (Glasier, Conversation on Zoom, 2020b)

I agree with Glasier that it can never be 'all their work', as it is created in a space inhabited by adults *and* young people, in a space we have agreed to occupy together. Claiming that the work is 'all theirs', i.e., the young people's, detaches the adults and their influence, perspective and expertise, from it. I am interested in valuing, owning and celebrating the withness. Glasier

happily admits that some parts of Company Three's successful production *Brainstorm* were not written by the young people:

There's a massive speech in *Brainstorm*, I wrote that, but I wrote it with a million of their words in my head. So I picked from the words. None of the young people wrote that thing. But in a good room, that's with the tacit permission of the young people and if you bring them back something because you've got more time and you've got more expertise, that they hate...they'll tell you straight away. And if they don't, that's really problematic. (Glasier, Conversation on Zoom, 2020b)

Glasier's reflections demonstrate the importance of acknowledging the adults' involvement and influence but makes an important observation that in a 'good' room which fosters co-creation, the adults' involvement is with the 'tacit permission' of the young people. I assume what Glasier is saying is that tacit permission is something which is difficult to articulate but in the 'good room' it is understood. While I can see what Glasier is trying to say, I was curious as to why he chose to describe it as 'tacit', rather than 'explicit'. Relying solely on tacit understandings can be problematic as it is difficult to ascertain whether our tacit understandings are the same as that of the young people as it lacks transparency. Explicit permission would surely be preferred to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations. To elicit Glasier's intentions, we had a conversation via email prior to my PhD submission, and he confirmed that upon re-reading his testimony, he asserts that explicit permission is much more important.

The point Glasier is making with this quote is that it is not making ‘with’ if the young people feel they cannot say when something is not right or not working—the ‘problematic’ Glasier refers to—as this is not co-creation; it is done ‘to’ rather than ‘with’.

My early experiences of co-creative theatre-making as a young person have had a direct and enduring influence on my practice as an adult theatre-maker. As a young participant who often felt unheard by adults, theatre became a means through which I could assert my voice. The opportunity to collaborate with adults was significant, as they created and sustained the conditions necessary for artistic exploration. Waterloo Community Theatre primarily engaged young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds who were frequently excluded from such creative environments. In facilitating this space, I developed a participatory practice in collaboration with the young people, through which the concept of *witness* gradually emerged.

Co-production has in the last few years gained prominence as the preferred approach to most aspects of not just youth work, but also citizenship (see European Union’s European Youth Portal website, n.d.), mental health care (see Teixeira et al., 2025) and higher education (see Geurts et al., 2023; Austen and Donnelly, 2023). In the ACE commissioned report which Heart of Glass theatre company and Battersea Arts Centre put together in 2021 they shared some “thoughts on principles, ethics and references pertinent to the area of co-creation” (Heart of Glass and Battersea Arts Centre, 2021: 4). In the same year, Battersea Arts Centre hosted a Co-Creating Change Festival, offered in person and online on a pay what you can basis, aimed at exploring “radical new ways of working together that the world urgently needs” (Battersea Arts

Centre website, 2021). Ned Glasier has departed Company Three and is now, according to his LinkedIn profile, consulting on ‘Co-creation, young people and strategy’, alluding to a growing need for the practice-based expertise in co-created theatre-making he can offer.

Despite the rise in popularity of participation and co-production not only in practice, but also in youth studies literature, it appears to be focused very much on the young people’s role and participation, not always, but often ignoring the role of the adult. This is perhaps not surprising, given that for too long, young people were excluded from the discourse, and it was considered acceptable for adults to give “proxy accounts” (Coyne and Carter, 2018: 3) on behalf of young people, as discussed in detail in Chapter 6 (Youth Voices). Thus, youth participation has, rightly so, been illuminated by scholars and practitioners alike through a range of different models, as will be explored in the next section.

It is critical to note that, although WCT has closed its doors alongside countless other art organisations, the concept of withness in theatre-making remains; theatre-makers are still making theatre with young people all over the world and navigating their way through the tensions and dynamics of withness in theatre-making.

2.7 Existing Models of Youth Participation

A conceptual model or framework is used for understanding and guiding action by simplifying complex realities. Similarly, youth participation models can help us understand and “classify participatory practices” (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018: n.p.). Many youth participation models and frameworks have been introduced and discussed in the literature over the last few decades, and I acknowledge the valuable contributions they have made to advance the youth

participation discourse. Many models to date have been developed to address very specific, and much-needed, aspects of youth participation, such as power and decision-making. However, throughout my research, I have yet to come across a model which centres around co-creation between adults and young people in practice, and more specifically, in theatre-making practice. Youth participation and withness, as presented in my research, are closely aligned as they share characteristics and have a central objective of greater engagement and participation of young people. However, in presenting the concept of withness I am interested in a practice which considers the presence and contributions of young people *and* adults. It is, nevertheless, useful to understand how youth participation models have evolved over the years, as insights into the youth participation discourse helps understand why a different kind of model may be useful, particularly in a theatre-making context.

The first youth participation model of its kind was Arnstein's seminal *Ladder of Citizen Participation* in 1969.

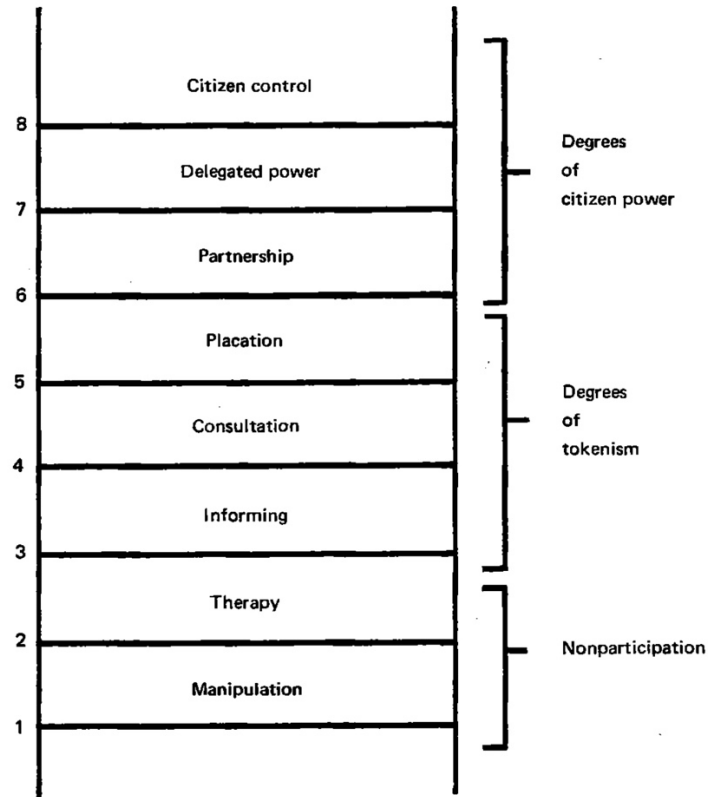


Figure 1 - Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation

Arnstein's typology is "designed to be provocative" (Arnstein, 2007: 2016), with each rung of the ladder-like depiction describing forms of citizen power in democratic decision-making, ranging from Nonparticipation (no power) to Degrees of Citizen Power (actual power). In 1992, Hart's *Ladder of Children's Participation*, often referred to as the "ladder of youth participation" (Creative Commons, 2012: 5) was adapted from Arnstein's model, and levels of children's participation in decision-making and was depicted through rungs of a ladder (Fig. 2).

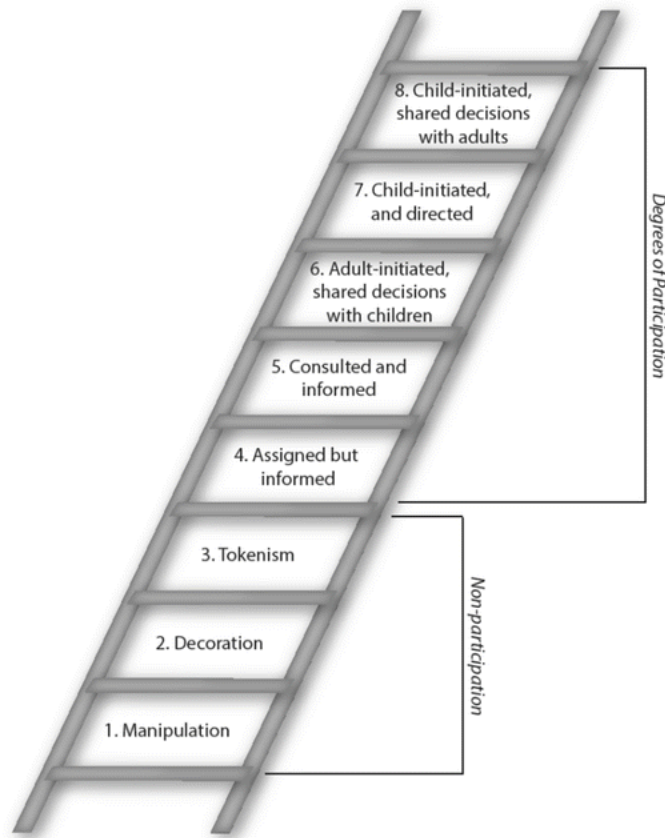


Figure 2 - Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation

The top five rungs are labelled as 'Degrees of Participation' with the bottom three labelled as 'Non-participation'. Hart describes participation as "a process of shared involvement in the decisions which affect the lives of individuals and groups within the community they live" (Hart, 1992: 2). While arguably the most known youth participation model, Hart's model is much contested in more contemporary literature (Reddy and Ratna, 2002; Rathbone et al., 2018) partly due to its hierarchical and linear structure. Treseder's *Degrees of Participation* in 1997 (Creative Commons, 2012: 7) adapted Hart's top five rungs through a hub and spoke model (Fig. 3).

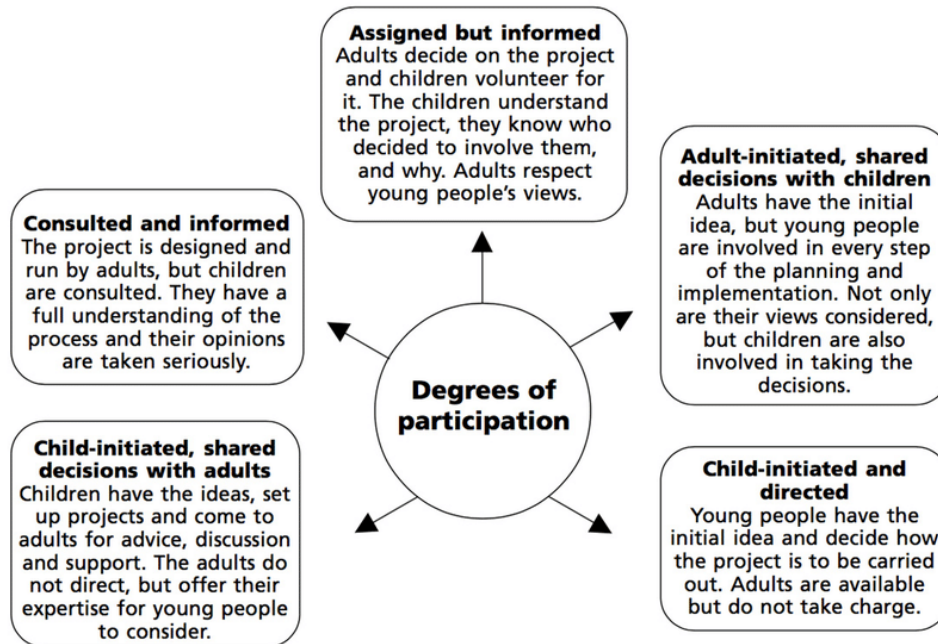


Figure 3 - Treseder's Degrees of Participation

While this model moves away from the linearity of the ladder, the similarities are striking; it could be argued that it merely replicates the five top rungs of Hart's ladder model, albeit using a different illustration. To its credit, it offers more detailed information for each degree than Hart's Ladder.

Jans and De Backer illustrated their ideas in a *Triangle of Youth Participation* in 2002 (Fig. 4).



Figure 4 - Jans and De Backer's Triangle of Youth Participation

They suggest that a “dynamic balance between challenge, capacity and connection is a sound base for youth participation” (Jans and De Backer, 2002: 18). Broadly, this model suggests that young people must initially be incited, or challenged, to participate. They must have the capacity to understand how their participation can make a difference to the challenge, and finally, they must be supported through connections for their participation to make a difference.

Gaventa’s *Levels, Spaces and Forms of Power* in 2006 was depicted through a 3D cube (Fig. 5) and focused on forms of power.

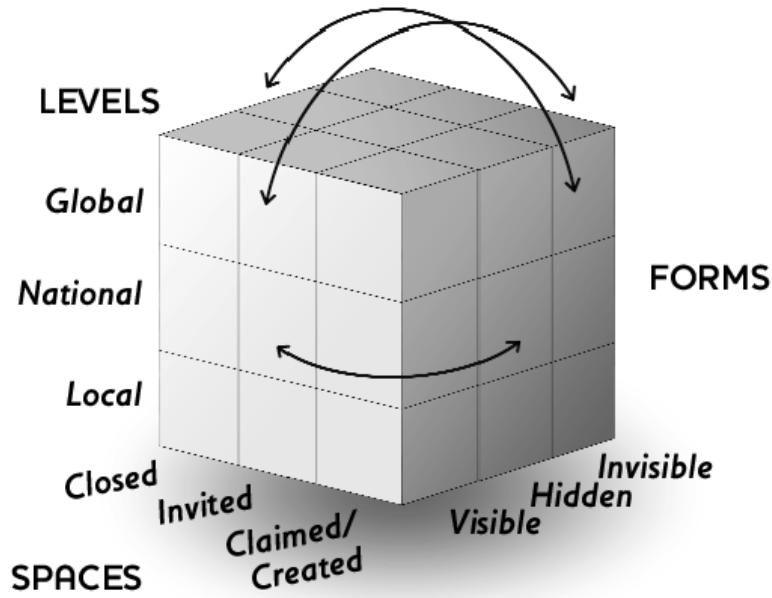


Figure 5 - Gaventa's Levels, Spaces and Forms of Power

The cube model helps to unpack the different levels of power (Local, National and Global), the spaces in which they exist (Closed, Invited and Claimed/Created), and the forms they adopt (Visible, Hidden and Invisible). The model offers a useful tool for practitioners wishing to focus on and “map the types of power” (Gaventa, 2006: 25) which exist.

More recently, the *Hear by Right 7 S* self-assessment tool offered by the National Youth Agency “supports organisations to plan, develop and evaluate their participation practices to ensure youth voice remains front and centre” (National Youth Agency website 1c: n.d.) The 7 S’s (*Shared values, Strategies, Structures, Systems, Staff, Skills and knowledge, and Style of leadership*) offer a highly practical tool for organisations to evaluate their approach to youth participation on two levels: Active (entry-level) and Flagship (advanced level) (National Youth

Agency website 1c: n.d.). Its strength lies in the fact that it is created with young people, and I can see the usefulness of this outcome-focused self-assessment tool.

A unifying characteristic across the aforementioned models of participation is their use of hierarchical levels to assess the extent or degree of young people's involvement. Somewhat contrasting these models, the *Lundy Model of Child Participation* conceptualises a child or young person's right to participation through its four interrelated key concepts: space, voice, audience and influence. Drawing directly on Article 12 of UNCRC, it has been adapted and applied globally in social and geographical contexts, and "its promotion, adoption and implementation have contributed directly to ensuring that the United Nations, governments and national and international organisations involve children, right across the world, meaningfully in the decisions that affect their lives" (Queen's University Belfast website, n.d.). It has been depicted in a variety of ways since its introduction, depending on which organisation has adopted it, however, Lundy's illustration in her paper '*Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (2007) makes its references to the chronology of the UNCRC Articles explicit:

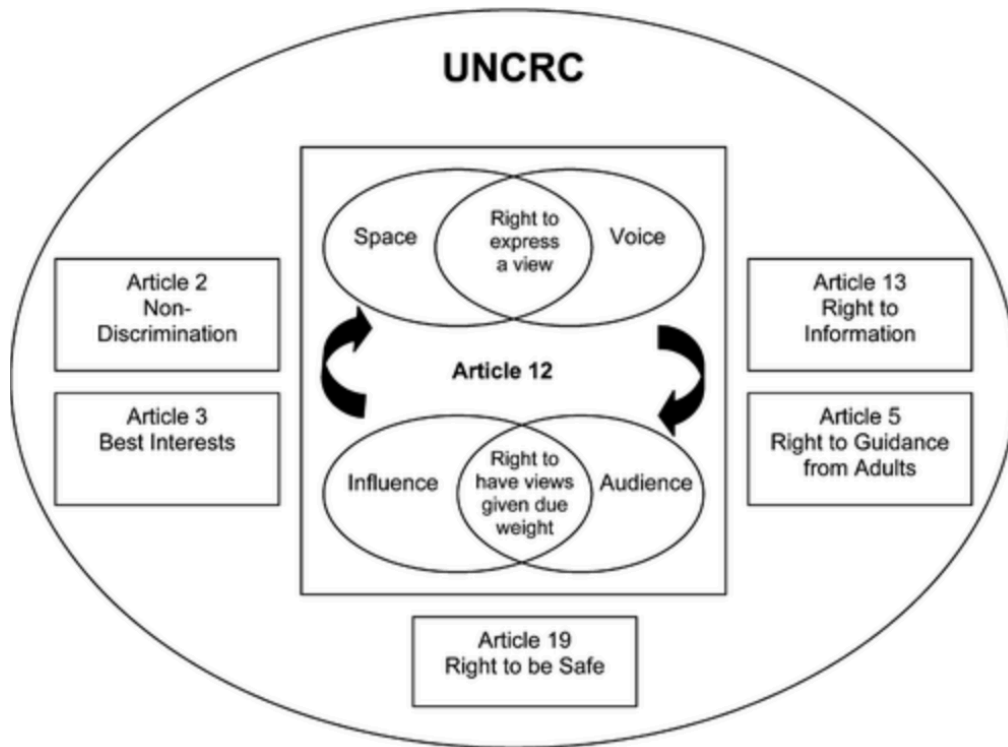


Figure 6 - The Lundy Model of Child Participation

The four concepts are intended to “focus decision makers on four elements” (Lundy, 2007: n.p.) of Article 12 of the UNCRC. They effectively illustrate how the model provides a practical summary of Article 12 as it “condenses the wording of the provision without sacrificing its scope and meaning” (Lundy, 2007: n.p.). This is a useful model for those wishing to understand how Article 12 relates to youth participation, evidenced by its global reach and implementation. More recently, Cahill and Dadvand’s *P7* (2018) model of youth participation, with its machine-like moving cogs, offers another conceptual model, which the authors argue accounts more for the “socio-cultural contexts in which youth participation takes place” (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018: n.p.) than the previous models. The *P7* model moves away from the linearity of many of the youth participation models, and centres on *Purpose*, with the remaining six Ps organised around it, demonstrating their interrelatedness (Fig. 7).

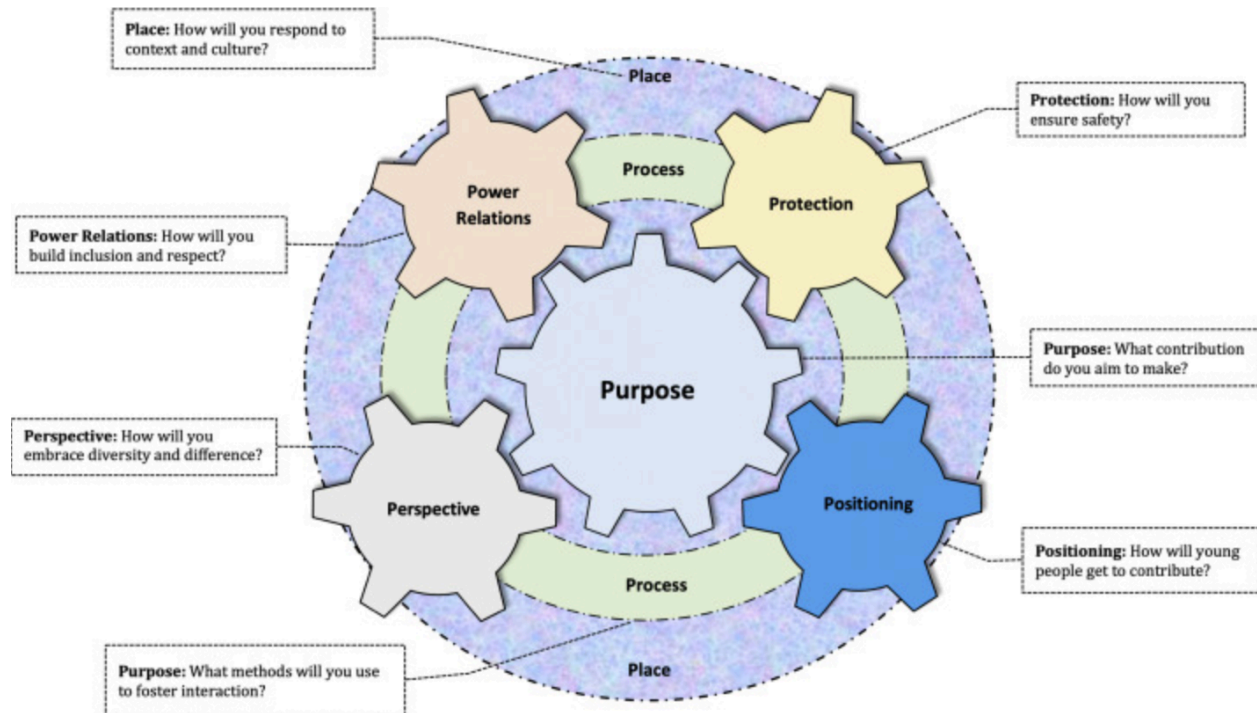


Figure 7 - Cahill and Dadvand's P7 Model

With its anchoring in concepts of “empowerment, voice, identity and agency” (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018: n.p.), the *P7* model presents a more conceptually oriented framework compared to previous models. Drawing upon the work of theorists and researchers, it serves to bridge the gap between theoretical constructs and practical application. Underpinned by a robust theoretical foundation, it is explicitly designed to inform and enhance young people’s participation. Cahill and Dadvand argue that “there is a need for a framework which focuses on the fluid nature of participation, with its ongoing responses to context, circumstances and to the shifts in relational power dynamics that can evolve, ebb and flow within a given venture” (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018: n.p.). The *P7* model captures the dynamics of youth participation very well indeed.

As evident from the youth participation models above, many models following Hart's Ladder of Participation focus on and suggest different levels of young people's participation. Hart's Ladder, to its credit, depicts the highest rung as 'child initiated, shared decision with adults'. This is critical, as it is suggestive of co-creation, and it could be argued that co-creation, therefore, is the highest degree of participation. Simply put, the quality of work matters equally as much to the young people as it does to the adults and therefore, co-creation is the preferred approach.

To conclude this chapter, I am interested in the non-linearity and non-hierarchical nature of *withness in practice*. ACE's *Let's Create* strategy (Arts Council England website, 2025b) while excellent at addressing youth voice and how we as practitioners can engage young people, does not talk about a practice of working *together*, rather, the focus tends to generally be placed on the young people. The *withness*, which undoubtedly exists in spaces occupied by both adults and young people, is not discussed to the same degree. With such a practice in mind and given the limitations youth participation models offer in addressing this one objective of this exegesis is to develop and propose a potential model which represents and captures the fluid and dynamic nature of *withness*. To this end, I propose *The Place of Optimum Withness* conceptual reflection framework.

Chapter 3 – The Place of Optimum Withness (POW)

Withness proactively re-constructs balance and equity

Withness disrupts social constructs and destabilises power relations

Withness is reciprocal dialogue and knowledge exchange

Withness is the unknown and messy presence of the space between

The above is my withness manifesto. It encapsulates withness as a concept, as discussed and presented in this exegesis and in the portfolio. In this chapter, I will make the distinction between youth participation and withness-centred practice. In doing so, I am thinking back through the previous chapter where I outlined some models of youth participation and discussed how a focus on these models has laid bare a gap in addressing withness in practice. In this chapter, I thus introduce an alternative model in the form of *The Place of Optimum Withness*, a visual representation of the manifesto and my proposed conceptual framework for reflective withness-centred practice.

Unpacking this subtle difference between these two concepts is likely a beneficial endeavour in this context. Firstly, youth participation is “most commonly understood as a process in which children and young people engage in activities and decision-making which concern and affect their lives” (Becevic and Dahlstedt, 2021: n.p.). Notably, this definition offers no explicit consideration of the role played by adults in shaping, facilitating, or constraining such processes.

Therefore, while all models discussed in Chapter 2.7 (Existing Models of Youth Participation) focus on youth participation, I argue that the concept of a witness-centred practice warrants a distinct consideration. Practice, in the context of theatre-making in spaces occupied by adults and young people, is to be understood not merely as participation – which might, for example, be one-off or consultative – but as a sustained and iterative process involving repeated action, critical reflection and continuous improvement. It aligns closely with principles of action research and Schön’s concept of practice as a form of knowing-in-action (Schön, 1983). This conceptual distinction underpins *The Place of Optimum Witness* reflection framework, which is specifically designed to capture and support the dynamic process of witness-centred practice, rather than a focus merely on young people’s participation.

3.1 The Place of Optimum Witness as a Framework for Practice

I envision *The Place of Optimum Witness* as a constantly moving and dynamic framework for reflection, not merely on participation, but on *a witness-centred practice*. Consequently, *The Place of Optimum Witness (POW)* framework offers something unique in that it is inherently

embedded within theatre-making practice *with* young people. Cahill talks about the *P7* framework as a “set of thinking frames” in the context of “constantly moving and dynamic nature of participation” (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018: n.p.). I appreciate this approach as it shares many similarities with my own thinking around withness. *The Place of Optimum Withness* seeks to provide a similarly dynamic and flexible framework for youth theatre-making practice.

Like the *Lundy Model of Child Participation* and the *P7* model, the *POW* framework is situated at the nexus of theory and practice. It is designed to convey fluidity and illustrates the dynamic and non-linear nature of practice grounded in withness. *The Place of Optimum Withness*, which I also think of as the Space Between, is centred, with the six dimensions of withness as identified through my research, arranged around it in fluid, equally sized compartments (Fig. 8).

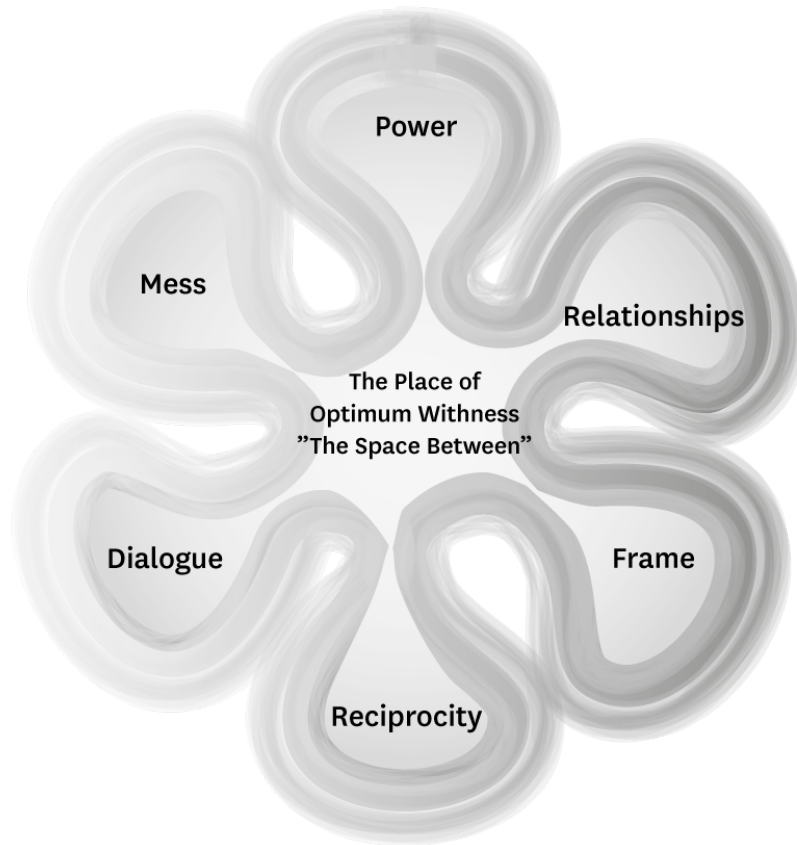


Figure 8 - The Place of Optimum Withness Reflection Framework

As the Space between, *The Place of Optimum Withness* is the “elusive sweet spot” (Stevens-Ballenger and Jeannete, 2024: 65) where the six dimensions of withness in practice is navigated.

The wording of *The Place of Optimum Withness* is intentional. ‘Optimum’, in its fundamental sense, denotes the most advantageous amount or degree of a given element in relation to the desired outcome. Within the framework of *The Place of Optimum Withness*, it signifies the synthesis of the six dimensions of withness. It is important to note that it does not suggest a fixed point, merely something non-fixed to strive towards, and which is nuanced for different

situations. For each of the six dimensions, the *POW* framework offers initial questions to help the practitioner to begin to reflect upon their practice in the Space Between:

Power

Who benefits from the work? Who is it for? Who makes decisions? How do I proactively challenge the traditional teacher/learner power dynamic?

Reciprocity

How and what am I learning from the young people? How do I know I am open to learning from the young people? How do I ensure learning is a two-way process?

Relationships

How do I know trust is established? How do I ensure we nurture this trust together?

Dialogue

Who speaks and when? To whom? Who listens? How do I know that I listen? When do I not listen?

Frame

What is our agreed frame/structure, and how do we operate within it? When do we break out of it, and how do we react when this happens?

Mess

How do I/the young people respond to the unknown (e.g. no set outcomes)? How do we navigate the unknown together?

Just like *The Place of Optimum Withness* as the Space Between the six dimensions is not a fixed destination; it is a journey, the above is not an exhaustive list of questions, merely a suggested starting point. Practice in the Space Between requires constant navigation, as no situation is ever static and is always in fluid motion across the six dimensions, pulling in all directions. I encourage the practitioner to use these questions as a compass for reflecting on their practice in the space they share with young people. When practitioners engage in reflective and reflexive inquiry in the Space Between, they are positioned to advance toward a more equitable and relationally grounded mode of practice, underpinned by the principles of withness.

My research adds to the growing literature on co-creation with young people. The gap I have observed in practice and in the literature suggests there is a need for a framework which acknowledges the agency and withness of adults and young people in a co-creative theatre-making space. The report produced by Heart of Glass and Battersea Arts Centre (2021), as discussed in the Introduction to this exegesis, goes some way to make suggestions for what practitioners who seek to co-create *with* young people ought to be mindful of. In addition, Stevens-Ballenger and Jeanneret acknowledge that “examples of practice are not widely accessible” (Stevens-Ballenger and Jeanneret, 2024: n.p.). Thus, my research, as an example of practice, adds to the literature which serves to bridge that gap.

3.2 My Personal Perspective

Casting my mind to back when I started making theatre with young people, I often felt lost in terms of how I could make sense of my own practice and how I could gain a deeper sense of

how our sessions with young people could have co-creation embedded in our approach. With WCT, I always insisted on post-session debriefs with the staff team, but they tended to mainly address safeguarding, logistical and operational issues. We never really addressed or analysed our own practice. Perhaps because we were simply not sure how to? Despite my interest in co-creation and a desire to meet young people where they are, I was not sure how to go about doing this. Even as a more experienced practitioner, I never felt certain about how I could, or should, benchmark my own practice in terms of co-creation and withness. Once I started actively reflecting on my practice using Tripp's Critical Incident Analysis method as part of my research (more on this in Chapter 4 (Methodology)), through a withness lens, things immediately started to fall into place as I had something tangible to help guide my reflections. The process of developing the conceptual framework has enabled a greater understanding of my own withness-centred practice. Based on my own experiences, I hope that the POW reflection framework can be used by other practitioners interested in withness in their practice as a benchmarking tool, the kind I wish I had had access to when I started to become interested in understanding and articulating a withness-centred approach.

However, it is critical to note that it is not a one size fits all solution or indeed applicable to every situation of participatory applied theatre work. It would be reductive to simply read the manifesto and look at the framework and make judgements about one's practice; as "being aware of what something means to us is of little practical value unless we do something with it" (Tripp, 2012: 31). The framework requires the practitioner to actively and continuously engage with their own practice for it to have an impact. Every human encounter is unique, and the

space of every workshop is unique. Therefore, 'optimum' suggests something to strive towards rather than a fixed point, it will mean different things in different situations. *The Place of Optimum Withness* is a living and evolving model, never fixed or finite.

3.3 The Six Dimensions of POW

The framework illuminates the six dimensions of withness as identified through my research.

The six fluid dimensions, while at first glance may appear as though they are positioned randomly, are in fact intentionally positioned. *Mess* is positioned opposite *Frame*; *Dialogue* is opposite *Relationships*; and *Reciprocity* opposite *Power*. This placement is not to suggest that these dimensions are in opposition of each other, but that there is a constructive tension between them. Similar to the polarity of Victor Turner's anthropological ideas of *communitas* and *structure* as the "two major "models" for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating" (Turner, 1969: 360), the positioning of the dimensions suggests how they are interrelated (albeit not necessarily in juxtaposition). The Space Between is where they are navigated, and it is always in flux and never static.

Analysis of the six dimensions reveals their inherent interconnectivity, indicating that each dimension is mutually influential and cannot be fully understood in isolation. Cahill and Dadvand say of their *P7* model's domains that "the intention is not to consider them as separate territories, but rather to recognise the intra-connectedness of actions across these domains" (Cahill and Dadvand, 2018: n.p.). Similarly, if one dimension of withness is considered in isolation, it is impossible to find the balanced centre, the Space Between, where withness is navigated. Conquergood says of his dialogical stance that "the strength of the center is that it

pulls together mutually opposed energies that become destructive only when they are vented without the counterbalancing pull of their opposite” (Conquergood, 1985: 9). For example, the dimension *Power* becomes a distinctly negative force when not counterbalanced by *all* the other witness dimensions. If one is considering only one dimension it is impossible to explore witness as described and suggested in this exegesis, instead it becomes a rather dangerous and reductive practice. Therefore, it is not only the dimension directly across which renders any single dimension destructive on its own, it needs the counterpull of all other dimensions.

Noel, referred to in Chapter 7 (Complexities of the Shared Space), uses cooking ingredients to describe identity and positionality. “Depending on where you are from or the ingredients you have on hand”, you might use different things, but “you probably wouldn’t say another person has made the wrong thing just because they make something different from you”. This is because “you understand that your identity, your worldview, and past experience—in other words, your positionality—will affect how you use the ingredients you have” (Noel, 2023: 3).

Noel’s cooking analogy is a useful one to help understand the complexities of the ingredients—the dimensions—of witness. Regardless of your identity and positionality, and although every encounter is unique and practice will never look the same for everyone, it is essential to recognise how the POW reflection framework can help elevate practice through reflection.

Hughes and Ruding argue that “there is an urgent need to research the skills and capacities of practitioners in order to support their confident engagement with the discourses of institutional environments they ‘apply’ their methodologies within as well as enhance the impact of the work” (Hughes and Ruding, 2009: 221).

The importance of always remaining self-aware, reflective and reflexive is critical for practitioners seeking a more equitable theatre-making practice with young people. Developing the *POW* framework has enabled me to become more self-aware, thus enhancing the impact of my practice. The *POW* framework would have been extremely useful for me as a practitioner in the early days and when I started to explore and thinking about withness in my practice as it could have guided me to the concepts which underpin a withness-centred practice. My hope, therefore, is that it can serve as a benchmarking tool to support other practitioners in cultivating a more self-aware, reflective and reflexive approach to their practice, thereby increasing the overall impact of their work.

Glasier, alluding to the potential of youth theatre to contribute to a better and more hopeful future, muses about youth theatre as a force for social change. He envisions a world in which youth theatre is seen as a “place where transformative art is made: a new, national civic space, a sprawling network of hyper-local groups engaged in a collective imagining of a new future” (Glasier, 2020a). For youth theatre to have the potential to achieve social change, however, it is critical that it is the voices of the young people we hear. Simply put, “sticking kids in plays originally written by adults for adults won’t cut it anymore” (Glasier, 2020a). For youth theatre practitioners to meet young people where they are, as the experts they are, we need to do better. Accordingly, a practice grounded in the principles of withness can offer a framework for engaging with young people in ways that are responsive to their lived realities.

3.4 The Dimensions of POW Deconstructed

The discussions throughout this exegesis have provided the theoretical ideas which underpin the POW framework and its six dimensions. I will now address the dimensions in more detail, but in doing so, it is critical to remain vigilant to the fact that all six dimensions are interrelated and converge in the Space Between.

3.4.1 *Mess and Frame*

These dimensions are positioned opposite each other, as one suggests something which is unknown and messy, and the other suggests something which is rigid and structured. But in fact, they are tightly connected. Participatory art, such as theatre-making, lends itself well to creating a space for the unknown and unexpected to occur. Rajani et al. (2001) argue that for “meaningful participation” to take place, adults, who traditionally are positioned as the teachers with the knowledge, “need to be open to things not going their way” and “not pretend to know all the answers” (Rajani et al., 2001: 13). However, taking art from a safe, expected and prescribed place to an uncertain and unexplored place where the outcomes are unknown also poses challenges. Responding to the challenges of a participatory approach, the ‘messiness’ of it (Hughes et al., 2011; Baxter, 2019; Forbes, 2019) is, by virtue of its approach, unknown in nature. Thus, the fear and excitement of ‘the plan being no plan’ becomes concerned with creating a supportive space—a space between—which enables this uncertainty to thrive. Kirby asserts that “witness is what happens when you enable that uncertain possibility”, but as discussed in Chapter 7 (Complexities of the Shared Space), uncertainty and mess is only conducive to theatre-making when held within a frame.

The frame we had established with the young people in WCT was, on the face of it, very simple as it merely consisted of a check-in, an opportunity to share, and a check-out. However, combined with the intrinsic values we had created as a group, it provided everyone in the space with expectations to follow to achieve what we had agreed and set out to do as a group: to make theatre. Like Buber's notion of 'I-thou' (Buber, 2013), Kirby asserts that it is very much about the relationship between the facilitator(s) and the young people, and the facilitator is "trusted and supported to cultivate that [uncertain] environment" (Kirby, 2020). The young people trust and support the adults to cultivate the uncertain 'messy' space, knowing that it is held within a frame we have all agreed upon. Had the frame been that of a school-like scenario where decisions tended to be made by adults, it would have been an adult-directed space, and the power imbalance would have been palpable; clearly not conducive to witness.

On the other hand, as I demonstrate in *Critical Incident 8: Biased Noise Choice* (detailed in Chapter 7 (Complexities of the Shared Space)), removing the frame, thus also removing the involvement of the adults, was simply not conducive to theatre-making.). It turned into a solely youth-led space and descended into chaos. Thus, holding that frame and enabling some structure to become part of the frame is essential. Turner states that "for me, *communitas* emerges where social structure is not" (Turner, 1969: 371). Therefore, it becomes a process whereby, much like Foucault's notion of power as action, which 'acts upon actions', they must co-exist; one cannot exist without the other. Thus, structure—the frame—sets up the

conditions for the *communitas*—the mess—to exist. (Note. I will return to the method and practice of developing the Critical Incidents in Chapter 4 (Methodology).

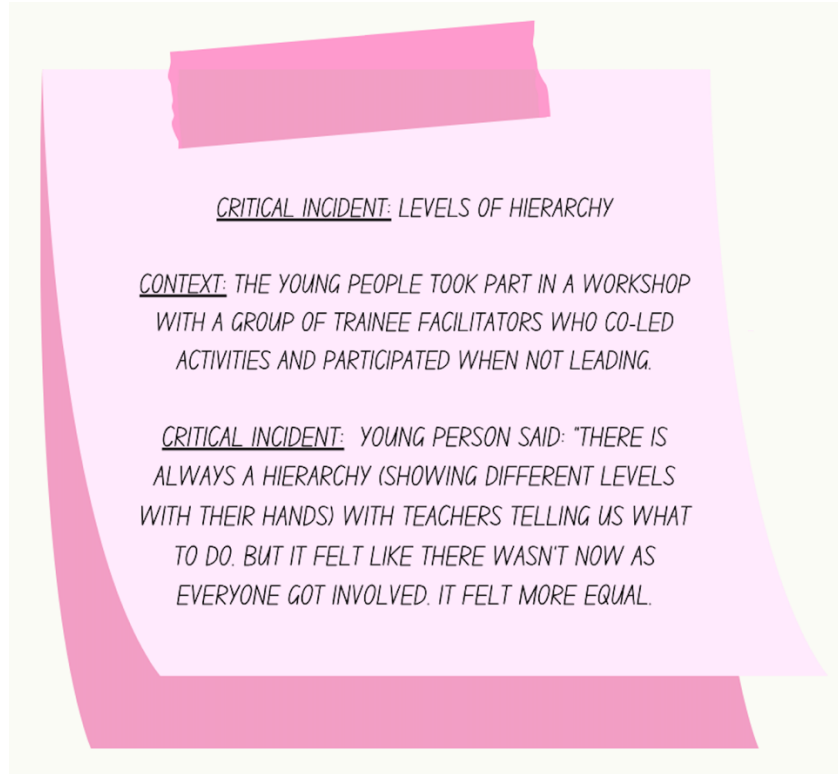
3.4.2 Power and Reciprocity

Extended and thorough reflection on my practice has made it clear that neither exclusively adult-led nor exclusively young people-led approaches serve the notion of *withness* well.

Rather, *withness* is located somewhere between. Exclusively adult-led and young people-led approaches will only serve to enhance the power imbalance which already exists. *Withness* at its core disrupts social constructs and destabilises power relations by placing an equal amount of responsibility and power with both adults and young people. This contradicts the traditional norm of adults as leaders and teachers, and young people as followers and learners.

Critical Incident 4: Meeting the Funder offers an example of how we achieved this in practice. I invited Muhammad, who at that time was a participant and not yet a director of the company, to speak on behalf of WCT in an update meeting with our project funder. The norm tends to be that the adult project leaders attend such meetings, but it felt important for us that a young person joined the conversation on behalf of WCT about the project.

In *Critical Incident 1: Levels of Hierarchy*, a young person suggested that the hierarchy which usually exists between adults and young people was disrupted.



Critical Incident 1 - Levels of Hierarchy

The young person's comment in this CI made it very clear that they felt there is always a hierarchy when adults, or more specifically, teachers, are involved. The trainee facilitators in this CI chose to also partake as participants in the activities they had planned and delivered with the group, blurring the lines of the established hierarchy. The young people responded to this by throwing themselves into the activities, fully embracing the workshop, and Mark and I did the same. They demonstrated their appreciation through action and disrupted the expected hierarchy.

Thus, witness proactively reconstructs balance and equity. This conscious and pro-active effort to address and dismantle the existing powers is an ongoing effort, requiring constant

negotiation and renegotiation; the “demanding pedagogy” (Kirby, 2020). This is in direct tension with *Reciprocity*, which, in this context, suggests an exchange and sharing of knowledge with a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO, as discussed in Chapter 5 (Ethical Considerations)) for mutual benefit. In *Critical Incident 6: Youth Speak* (as discussed in Chapter 7 (Complexities of the Shared Space)), it was clear that it was the young person who was the MKO. Through validating their contribution, I acknowledged that and thus respected their different knowledge. However, in *Critical Incident 2: I Thought It Was Really Authentic*, as discussed in Chapter 4.2 (Whose Truth is Real(ity)? – A Subjective Paradigm), Mark and I were the MKOs as we are the experts on theatre-making, and the young people, through dialogue with us, acknowledged this and thus respected our knowledge. Reciprocity emerged because of this knowledge exchange.

Power can be argued to stem from our perspectives as the MKO. Perspectives with which we enter a space bring not just positions of power(s) we are aware of, but also those that we are unaware of (perhaps even powers we are aware of but ignore). Making ourselves pay attention to and become aware of these positions of power is critical to achieve withness but this can be challenging—*demanding*—yet necessary for any approach grounded in withness. It must be noted here that this is not limited to perspectives of power but can also include other perspectives, such as culture and gender, which all influence our perspectives.

Beeson states: “I think it’s all about respecting that [young people] have something unique to offer which is as precious as anything you can come up with, and it’s just from a different perspective” (Beeson, 2020). In *Critical Incident 8: Biased Noise Choice*, also discussed in

Chapter 7 (Complexities of the Shared Space), the problem lay with me, and I had to challenge myself and my perspective about what is productive and ‘right’. The young people in the room, scaffolded by our frame, knew how to organise themselves and get things done, albeit in a noisier way than I am used to or perhaps would have preferred. But then, I am in my 40s, and they are from a different generation with its own practices – it is their perspective.

Thus, the ‘demanding pedagogy’ concerns dismantling existing power relations and pro-actively reconstructing them with witness in mind. All the while, having an “attunement” (Hepplewhite, 2016: 4) to and celebrating all perspectives in the space, a rather fine and challenging line to navigate. When the relationships between adults and young people (and indeed between young people themselves as well as between adults) are in the Space Between they are dependent on the mutual agreement, and an openness, to learn from the MKO; an agreement of *Reciprocity*.

3.4.3 Dialogue and Relationships

Dialogue and *Relationships* are closely connected. Mackey suggests that, in a PaR applied theatre setting, such as that of WCT, “maintaining a constructive polyphonic conversation is critical” (Mackey, 2016: 487). It is critical because, with multiple people inhabiting the space and exerting their will and power, constructive and continuous dialogue serves to ensure that the trusted relationships are nurtured. Mackey’s proposition of the applied theatre space as ‘polyphonic’ suggests an environment which is “multivocal” (Mackey, 2016: 487) as it is relational and concerns others, be it participants, community members or other facilitators. Like Buber’s notion of the ‘I-Thou’ mode, we have entered a relationship and dialogue with our

participants, and this is when we “question, debate and challenge each other” (Conquergood, 1985: 9), including power imbalances.

As evidenced from *Critical Incident 2: I Thought It Was Really Authentic* (Chapter 4.2 – (Whose Truth is Real(ity)? – A Subjective Paradigm)) and *Critical Incident 9: Use What We Make* (Chapter 8.1 (Disrupting the Status Quo)), the young people felt that they could challenge the adults, and judging from the conversation which followed the latter CI, the adults in return challenged the young person. This resulted in a dialogue which led to a solution we were all in agreement with. This level of dialogue is only possible when relationships, and thus trust, has been established. The notion of trust was identified as the main theme in my own CIs as well as in the practitioner conversations. Trust is derived from and nurtured through relationships, a key concept of witness. Trust can only occur when the relationships between the adults and young people have been established over time. Prendergast and Saxton emphasise the importance of creating a “safe space” (Prendergast and Saxton, 2013: 33). While it can be argued that it is a complex term, their definition is two-fold; a space is physically and emotionally safe. Of the emotionally safe space they state that the “atmosphere of trust is built over time” (Prendergast and Saxton, 2013: 33) and while the tone is set by the facilitator (as this is an adult-initiated space) it is “maintained over time by the whole group” (Prendergast and Saxton, 2013: 33). In the case of WCT, we worked with our young people for a very long time, often years. We were a part of their lives as they progressed through their teenage trials and tribulations, sharing their stories and their lives with us every week. As COVID hit, it became clear that these relationships were valued as the young people chose to join our weekly online conversations, and the relationship continued and even deepened, despite the

challenging times. While the conditions for how we were able to conduct our sessions had changed greatly, the relationships within the group grew stronger. Our 'caring conversations' during the first few online months during this period and our continued attention to the well-being of others contributed to the creation of a "community of identity" (Nicholson, 2005: 93-94), strengthening the existing relationships. Our carefully nurtured relationships grew through ongoing dialogue.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

4.1 Introduction to Methodology

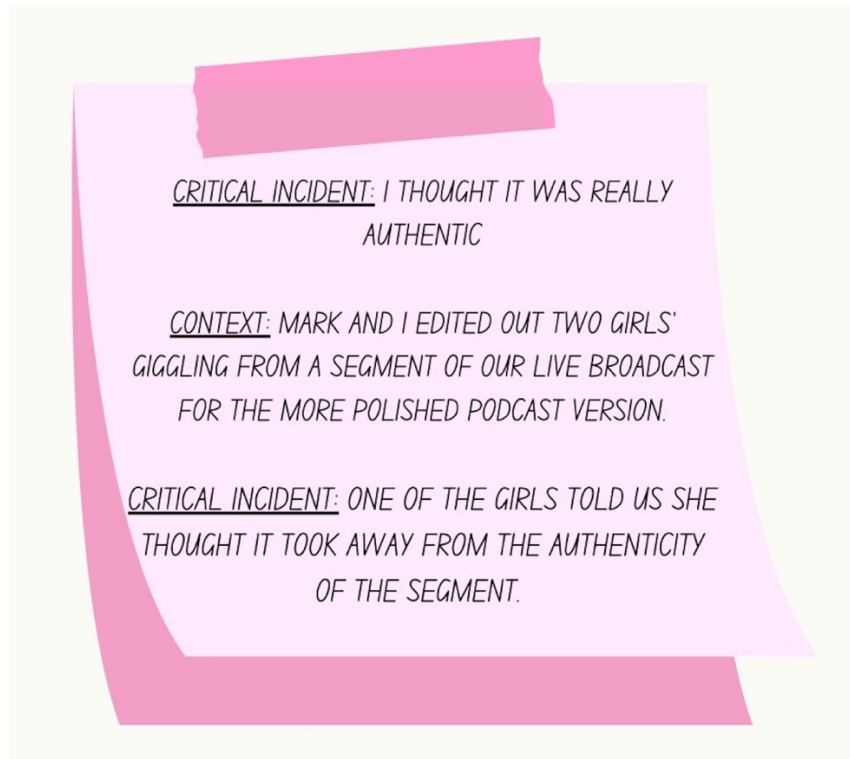
My research explores the potential and possibilities of witness in participatory theatre-making with young people, adopting a reflection-based Action Research approach. My main methodology is Practice as Research (PaR). The methods I have adopted are Critical Incident Analysis (Tripp, 2012), practitioner conversations and literature review.

This chapter will begin by locating my research methodology in the appropriate paradigm. I will then outline the reasons why, although my theatre-making practice is participatory in nature for this exegesis, I opted not to conduct participatory research (such as for example working with members of WCT as co-researchers). It will then move on to discuss PaR as a methodology which underpins the research process and its central notions of reflection and action, and the chapter will discuss how these ideas have been applied to my research. The chapter will address in detail Critical Incident Analysis (Tripp, 2012), also referred to herein as CIA, the primary method used for collecting reflective observations and outline the process for how the observations were grouped and themed. Critical Incidents from my practice are woven in throughout the whole exegesis to illustrate moments of reflection. This chapter will also outline the practitioner conversations which were undertaken to engage in dialogue with theatre practitioners who in my opinion are at the forefront of theatre-making with young people, and to inform my own thinking.

4.2 Whose Truth is Real(ity)? – A Subjective Paradigm

A paradigm is a set of concepts or thoughts, which includes theories and research methods, that presents a particular and widely accepted way of thinking. Within a social constructivist and interpretive paradigm (Boyd and Barry, 2024), my ontological assumption is that there is no single reality or truth; reality is created by individuals and interpreted in individual ways; experiential reality is subjective. This notion is crucial to my research as it is based upon subjective interpretations of situations in a participatory arts context with young people. My ethical approach, therefore, which is related to my research questions concerning witness in theatre-making, primarily derives from a commitment to young people's right to agency, self-determination and participation. WCT's theatre-making approach was anchored in dialogue, reciprocity and shared experiences with the young people who attended our sessions. While we occupied this space together, how I interpreted a situation in this context may have been very different to how someone else may have interpreted it.

To illustrate this in practice, *Critical Incident 2: I Thought It Was Really Authentic* (below) demonstrates a particular situation which by all accounts seems to have been interpreted very differently by myself and the young person involved.



Critical Incident 2 - I Thought It Was Really Authentic

In [this Critical Incident](#), Mark and I made the joint decision to edit the giggling out of the podcast we were making with young people. We interpreted the situation in one way and made a decision based on our interpretation of it. The young person clearly interpreted it very differently, as they told us they thought it took away the authenticity. We had a conversation with the young person concerned and while trying to understand their perspective, also gave them our perspective. Once we explained that it took away from the content and distracted the listener, they understood and were happy with the edit. My epistemological assumption, therefore, is that the reality of situations in this context is a subjective interpretive process, which I, as the researcher, can only “‘come to know’ through my subjective understanding” (Radnor, 2002: 21) of any situation.

With hindsight we probably should have had this conversation before making the edit, but due to time constraints, it was not possible. However, the dialogue with the young person and subsequent realisations following the incident described above suggest points of reflection and reflexivity for both the young person and me. This “multivocal” (Mackey, 2016: 487) space, as discussed in my short article [Dialogue and Relationships](#) which is featured in the online portfolio (Glarin, 2025), is ideal for these polyphonic conversations to take place. It is through dialogue we enable a practice anchored in witness. I have reflected on this incident through retrospective analysis, but it is equally important to remain reflexive—actively and continuously aware of, and critically examining, the power dynamics that undermine the witness agenda.

4.3 Young People as Co-Researchers or not?

I am adopting a PaR approach and my research focuses on my observations and reflections of and in my practice; I am doing action research on participatory theatre-making. Here is an important distinction to make: while my practice is participatory in nature, my research is not. Therefore, it is important to address the notion of young people as co-researchers as I, in my exegesis, argue that young people are competent beings in their own right and that research ought to be carried out *with* young people, not *on* young people; yet the young people in my project are not involved as co-researchers. My research has involved making theatre with young people and as demonstrated by Mayne and Howitt’s Rights-based Research Accountability Framework (see Fig. 9), which provides a solid tool for researchers to help them

“identify how a study is positioned in terms of upholding children’s rights” (2015: 37), the implied ideal Child Status for a Respectful Research Culture is as Co-Researcher.

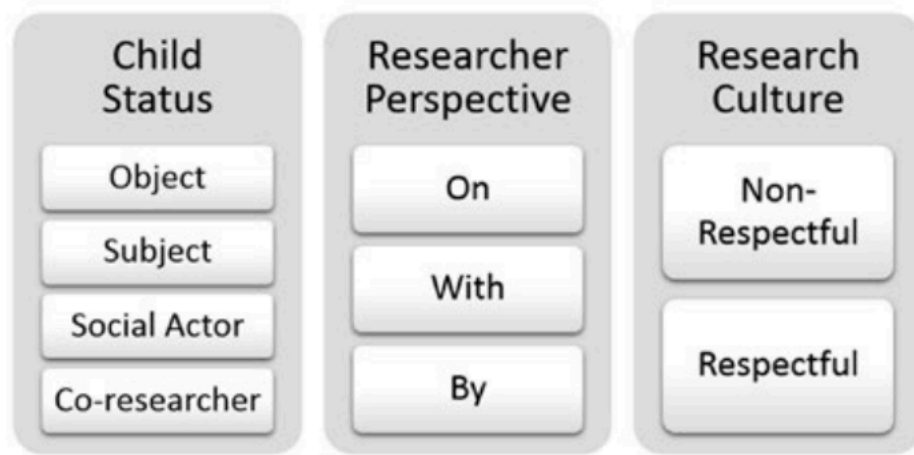


Figure 9 - Mayne and Howitt's Rights-based Research Accountability Framework

While agreeing with this as an ideal if one is intended on carrying out research with young people *as co-researchers*, at an early stage of my PhD project I made the decision not to pursue this as a central methodology.

In this exegesis, I am focused on the witness in the process of theatre-making, and I would argue that the theatre-making was very much of a participatory and collaborative nature and my CI reflections are grounded in interactions with the young people. This is evidenced in the [online portfolio](#), which documents my practice and my reflections on the theatre-making process. However, for my research, my reflections on our process of theatre-making, and subsequently also our output, have become my research and the interpretation of this is very

much situated in my reflections on my own practice. This approach emerged from a balancing of ethical imperatives (to conduct research with people not on them) with responsiveness to the young people's particular interests and priorities.

My initial intention had been to engage collaboratively in the identification and reflection of Critical Incidents as part of a shared process of inquiry. When the research was introduced to the group, there was evident curiosity and engagement with its aims, reflected in the initial discussions. However, as the project developed, the research dimension did not become embedded within the ongoing practice in a way that would constitute a participatory research process. While it would have been methodologically possible to incorporate young people's perspectives through approaches such as questionnaires, focus groups or interviews, I chose not to adopt these methods. These approaches would have positioned the young people as research participants within a more formalised data-collection framework, or alternatively implied a shift towards a co-researcher role, neither of which aligned with the central focus of this study. Instead, the young people's involvement remained located within the theatre-making process itself, where their contributions were integral to the co-creative practice rather than to the research design.

Throughout the project, the young people were kept informed about the research and were invited to share reflections where appropriate. Their perspectives are therefore embedded within the co-created artistic work and the practice from which the research draws, rather than being elicited through discrete research methods or framed as co-research activity.

A couple of young people expressed in our radio show (discussed in Chapter 9 (Curveballs of COVID-19)) how and why they joined WCT, and continued to come to our weekly sessions: “I thought it was fun, learning and showing our drama skills and stuff like that” and “I didn’t actually know it was called WCT for a long time, they just called it drama” (Waterloo Community Theatre, 2023). These comments suggest that young people attended as they enjoyed the drama aspect of the sessions—the fun—they were not interested in getting involved in the research. The young people simply were more interested in the process of co-creation, in making theatre, as this is the activity they signed up for; the research itself was of less interest to them.

The same can be said for my co-facilitators. As co-origins of a witness-centred practice, their roles as co-creators in our theatre-making and decision-making as a company are intrinsic to WCT’s approach, depicted by the [Venn diagram in my online portfolio](#). However, they are *not* co-researchers; my research is the articulations of my own reflections on my practice.

It would, therefore, be incorrect to suggest that the young people, and indeed co-facilitators, are co-researchers when in fact they are not, or that my research is a participatory process when it is not. What I am demonstrating through my research and my core research method reflective PaR, is what co-creation and witness in *theatre-making* looks like in practice. It demonstrates the many complexities of witness. The young people were very much embodied in and throughout the project; the body of work we created through our creative process, our output, forms the data for my research as much as my reflections. The young people’s voices

are very much embedded in the artistic work we created. “Young people’s experience was the ‘body of knowledge’ ... and the arts were employed to explore those experiences and disseminate the results of the investigative process.” (Hughes et al., 2011: 202-203). In other words, young people’s experiences were concerned with the process of theatre-making and the artistic output, the ‘body of knowledge’, and I draw on co-created artistic work by the young people as my ‘data’; my observations. This approach is very different to the notion of inviting the young people into the research as co-researchers.

Had the young people been co-researchers, I acknowledge that the project outcomes may have been different to the actual outcomes. Observations would not just have been my own, but included insights and reflections of the young people. The richness of observations from both the adult and the young people’s perspectives could have influenced my thinking around withness (it would have been *our* thinking) and this would no doubt have influenced the development of *The Place of Optimum Withness* framework. However, the young people had made it clear that being co-researchers was not for them, and I could not keep pushing something that they clearly had no interest in so had to accept their choices not to be co-researchers.

This relationship between participatory practice and participatory research is something that I have grappled with at different stages of my research. I am aware of the compromises implicit in my chosen approach, but believe they reflect the right ethical and methodological situation for the context of WCT.

4.4 Observations from Practice as Research (PaR)

Corbin and Strauss (1990) argue that as a qualitative researcher, I create my representation of my understanding of phenomena and their causes, leading to the themes which I attach to the phenomena. Although it is my representation and my understanding, it stems from a witness-centred practice and dialogue with the young people, from our *practice* together. Hughes et al. (2011) acknowledge the challenges of “direct engagement with practice” (Hughes, et al., 2011: 187) and that “this way of working challenges notions of method and methodology as epistemically secure, finite, discrete sets of procedures fit for the purpose of discovering certain, measurable findings about the impact of applied theatre practice” (Hughes et al., 2011: 188). Practice is never ‘secure’ or ‘finite’; it is uncertain and fluid, always evolving. As a reflective piece of PaR, the knowledge gained from this research can only be generated through practice; it cannot be generated merely through intellectual analysis. Hughes et al. assert that “applied theatre research is the kind of practice that produces discourses and narratives that may (or may not) open up new perspectives and questions of relevance to the people and contexts it works with and in” (Hughes et al., 2011: 207). My PaR has enabled a more witness-centred practice to take shape, and my observations —my data— are critical to this new perspective. My observations (noted as Critical Incidents throughout this exegesis and in the [online portfolio](#)) as a highly experienced practitioner are vital and central to the inquiry. Thus, crucially, the practitioner-researcher “practice to a solution” (Haseman, 2007, cited in Nelson, 2013: 10) is considered “new knowledge gained in action” (Mäkelä and Nimkulrat, 2018: 1).

4.5 Perspectives and Biases

I would argue that a participatory practice is anchored in ethnography, as the practitioner is immersed in the world of the young people, exploring their ways of seeing and experiencing it. The ethnographic approach is “an obvious methodological choice for practitioner researcher” (Warren, 2000: 129), and Hertz asserts that the “reflexive ethnographer does not simply report ‘facts’ or ‘truth’ but actively constructs interpretations of his or her experiences in the field and then questions how those interpretations came about” (Hertz, 1997: viii). I am not just reporting on what happened in the situations. I actively reflect on my interpretations and with an understanding of the power of why, constantly ask questions to seek out underlying patterns and examine “professional habitus” (Tripp, 2012: 21) which affect the behaviour of the people concerned. In addition to being reflective, adopting a reflexive approach can open possibilities for behaviours to change for the better. As described above, in the constructivist paradigm all knowledge stems from a subjective perspective, but it is how that perspective is viewed critically and reflexively which suggests it has potential for new insights. Professor Peter Reason agrees that the notion of critical subjectivity means that

[w]e do not suppress our primary subjective experience, that we accept that our knowing is from a perspective; it also means that we are aware of that perspective and of its bias, and we articulate it in our communications. Critical subjectivity involves a self-reflexive attention to the ground on which one is standing. (Reason, 1994: 326-327)

Being explicit about one's own bias and perspective, therefore, is what adds rigour and validity to the new knowledge claims. Donna Haraway's notion of "situated knowledges" (1988) suggests that objectivity and impartiality is impossible; it is a "view from above, from nowhere" (Haraway, 1988: 589). In other words, *everyone* has a positional perspective, and thus, all knowledge stems from such perspectives, and these perspectives influence any space we enter. In my conversation with Ned Glasier carried out for this research, he reflects on his own perspective:

With my 40-year-old straight, white maleness I bring a whole range of perspectives, and I will definitely influence that space. All that I can do in that space is make sure that I am in step with the young people as much as possible, that I am listening as well as I can, that I am constantly referencing and being aware of the way that I might be influencing it. But also acknowledging it and celebrating it because I'm a human. (Glasier, Conversation on Zoom, 2020b)

Ackroyd states that "we have to live with the fact that each of us carries attitudes and values that will influence our work" (Ackroyd, 2022: 80). Therefore, the act of listening to the young people, as well as an awareness of one's own perspective and its influence, (and indeed that of others) as suggested by Glasier, becomes imperative in these spaces where we lay claims to be equals. In addition, the notion of recognising and celebrating those different perspectives and the fact that in most spaces we are in fact not equal by society's standards, but being open and transparent about this becomes even more critical. This can lead to tensions; I have my

perspective, as does everyone in the space, and to remain vigilant to these while also ensuring they are acknowledged and celebrated can be challenging. Kirby, whose theory intersects with her practice, agrees: “I don’t think you can be objective so I would avoid even trying to. For me, ontologically, I feel that you are embedded in that space and that’s an asset, not something to try to avoid” (Kirby, 2020). Lesley-Ann Noel, who in her book *Design Social Change*, writes about challenging the status quo, agrees and states that “we don’t need to hide our identities from our work. Who we are shows up in everything we do, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing (Noel, 2023: 4). Indeed, my own situated knowledge—my positionality—is that of a white, Scandinavian female adult in my late forties and that will undoubtedly influence any space I inhabit.

4.5.1 The White Privilege Perspective

Just like our world is “gendered”, it is also “raced” (Wildman and Davis, 1997: 314). Part of my intersectional identity is that of a white Scandinavian, which is rooted in systemic privilege, status and power; in other words: white privilege. In trying to define white privilege, Eddo-Lodge states that it is “difficult to describe an absence. And white privilege is an absence of the negative consequences of racism” (Eddo-Lodge, 2018:86). Whether white people like it or not, we are privileged merely by being born white. As such, contrary to those of a different skin colour, I have not experienced the ‘negative consequences of racism’ that Wildman and Davis allude to.

Given that most of the young people in WCT were from the Global Majority, my experience “is not the norm” (Eddo-Lodge, 2018: 86) in this space. I know this because we talked about it often in our sessions, and I have heard them express being treated differently because of their skin colour, and the negative consequences of racism that they have been subjected to.

I hold many intersecting forms of power (as discussed in Chapter 8.3 (Power as Action)), and in addition to these, the power I hold because of my white privilege in this shared space is undeniable. What is critical is how I handle it and how I choose not to perpetuate this power. The mere fact that I held all these intersecting positions of power meant that I could take steps to contribute to the “heavy work of dismantling racism” (Eddo-Lodge, 2018: 115). If racism is designed for white people to “maintain a quiet dominance” (Eddo-Lodge, 2018: 116), WCT’s work was often an attempt to dismantle it by bringing it to the fore and fostering dialogue about it. Through our work, I engaged in “equitable, shared meaning-making process” (Toraif et al., 2021: 469) about racism with the young people, not to create “whiteness as a fixed category” (Ahmed, 2007: 149), but to challenge the very notion of it. We made a film called [Legacy – “Where Are You Really From?”](#), of which the title indicates the kind of racism the young people would face daily. We talked about racism in the [Big Conversation segment of The Realist podcast](#). As we were discussing the now infamous Oprah Winfrey interview with Prince Harry and Megan Markle, which sparked media controversy as the couple accused the Royal Family of racism, on the podcast, a young person articulated their thoughts on racism:

“As a young black woman myself, it hurt a lot for people when the words casual racism were thrown around. Personally, I don’t think casual racism exists. I think this country and institution, the Royal Family, the police, everything, is very racist, and to bring in a term saying well we are not as open with our racism as the Americans, it is very casual, very subtle, is a very dangerous precedent to set.” (Waterloo Community Theatre, 2021b)

The systemic racism she alludes to is impossible to escape. I sympathise with Wildman when she so bluntly states that she is racist. She points out: “I do not say this with pride. I simply believe that no matter how hard I work at not being racist, I still am. Because part of racism is systemic, I benefit from the privilege that I am struggling to see” (1997: 317). I will never fully understand the perspective of “the other” (Eddo-Lodge, 2018: 85) because their experiences are not mine. Still, I can make conscious efforts to always and continuously challenge my own white privilege assumptions and those of others.

Thus, an awareness of how anyone brings their perspective and influences a space, but also how it can be an asset, is key to navigating the many existing ‘situated knowledges’ in a space. Haraway argues that it is “critical positioning” which produces knowledge (Haraway, 1988: 586). This sentiment is echoed by Radnor who emphasises that “there is no sense of objective knowledge, it is all about intersubjectivity” (Radnor, 2002: 21) and that the researcher “cannot remove her own way of seeing from the process, but she can engage reflexively in the process and be aware of her interpretive framework” (Radnor, 2002: 31). This intersubjectivity is key to my approach, as it suggests, as alluded to above, it is not simply about my perspective, but

rather an intersection between mine and the young people's perspectives. Therefore, others might deem other situations or incidents critical based on their value judgements, experiences and their 'interpretive framework'. This includes an awareness of one's biases and one's perspective. An awareness of and a process of constantly questioning one's own biases in relation to those we find ourselves with becomes paramount. Moore et al. (2015) suggest that it is by the process of engaging with others that "researchers might open up opportunities to explore and render explicit their motives, behaviours and biases in ways not previously possible" (Moore et al., 2015). It is this process of dialogue, underpinned by a clear awareness of one's own perspective, which creates opportunities for reflexivity and subsequently, potential development of new knowledge.

4.6 Critical Incidents: New Knowledge from a Subjective Perspective

To capture the theatre-making process for my research, I adopted educational consultant David Tripp's Critical Incident Analysis (CIA) approach, which he pioneered in the early 1990s. Drawing on how major historical events can mark a significant turning point or change, he applied the same notion to education. Although initially aimed at classroom teachers, it is an approach which is useful for any practitioner facilitating learning with and for others, thus making it an effective tool for reflecting on and learning from my own practice as a theatre-maker with young people. For me and my practice, it has enabled explorations of how the concept of 'witness' is enacted in theatre-making with young people in practice. 'Critical' suggests the identified incident is of a highly significant nature, and although the scale at which incidents are considered critical in major historical events is clearly different compared to that of in a

participatory setting, it is nevertheless an incident which marks a turning point or change.

However, as Tripp notes it is important to note that incidents become critical only when an individual attaches particular significance to them:

Incidents happen, but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event. To make something as a critical incident is a value judgement we make, and the basis if the judgement is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident. (Tripp, 2012: 8).

In this case, the interpretations are mine; I am the person identifying and reflecting on the incidents from my encounters with young people, and how I interpret them is based on my value judgements, i.e., my “experiences, personality, relationships, motivations and interactions” (Mander, 2008: 9) are what render the incidents critical from my perspective; this forms a part of my interpretive framework. It is also based of my Knowing-in-Action (Schön, 1983), my practitioner knowledge and expertise gained from having worked and made theatre with young people for many years.

4.6.1 Identifying Critical Incidents Through a Witness Lens

Through my research, I identified [36 critical incidents](#), generally one per session, during a period of three years, from September 2019 to September 2022. This was carried out during weekly online and in-person theatre-making and devising sessions with Waterloo Community Theatre’s teenage group. 12 of these CIs have been selected for inclusion and analysis in the

exegesis. These CIs were selected as they demonstrate particular aspects of witness (or in some instances, non-witness) which are discussed in detail in the exegesis. To help the reader get an overview of the PhD research process, given that the research took place over an extended period of time, I include a project timeline (see Fig. 10).

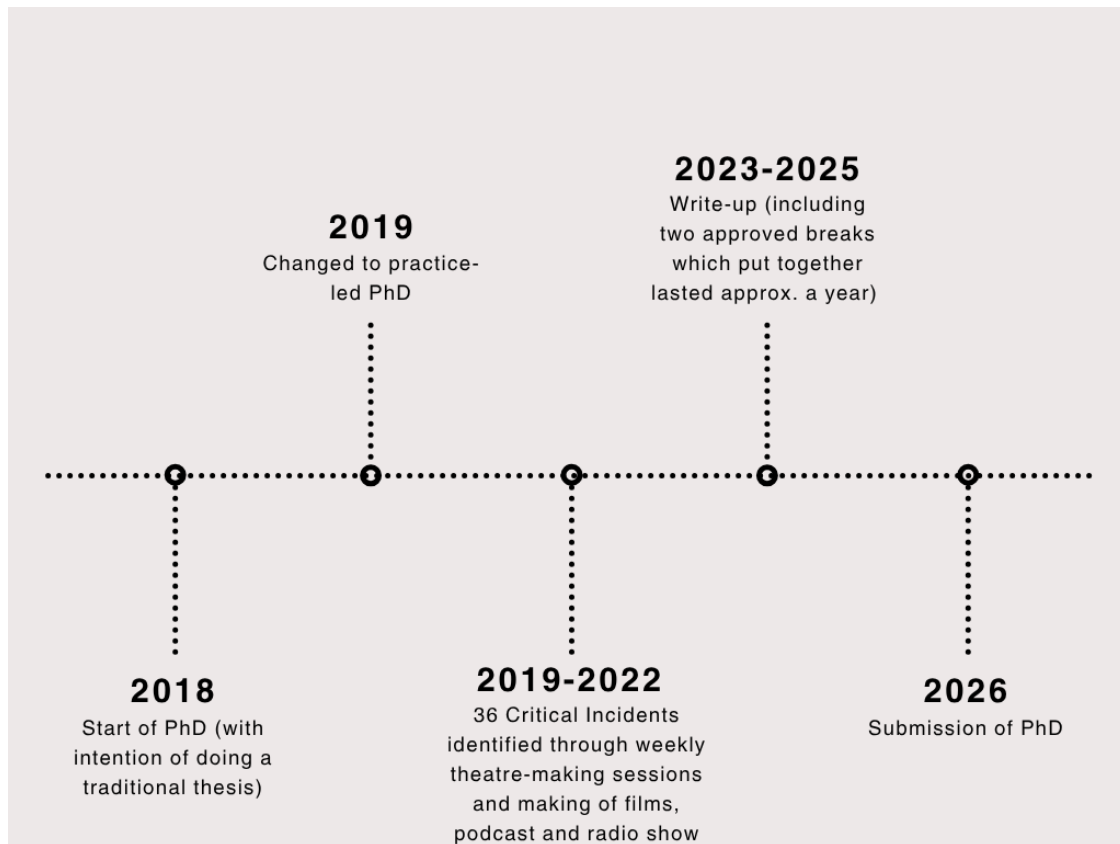


Figure 10 - PhD Research Timeline

I analysed the observations through a witness lens, consistently attending to and interrogating the relational dynamics between adults and young people within each critical incident, and assessing the extent to which witness was present—or absent—in those interactions. The witness lens is thus my “predetermined framework” (Angelides, 2001: 430). The criteria of this framework of witness would indicate that the critical incident suggests an imbalance in the

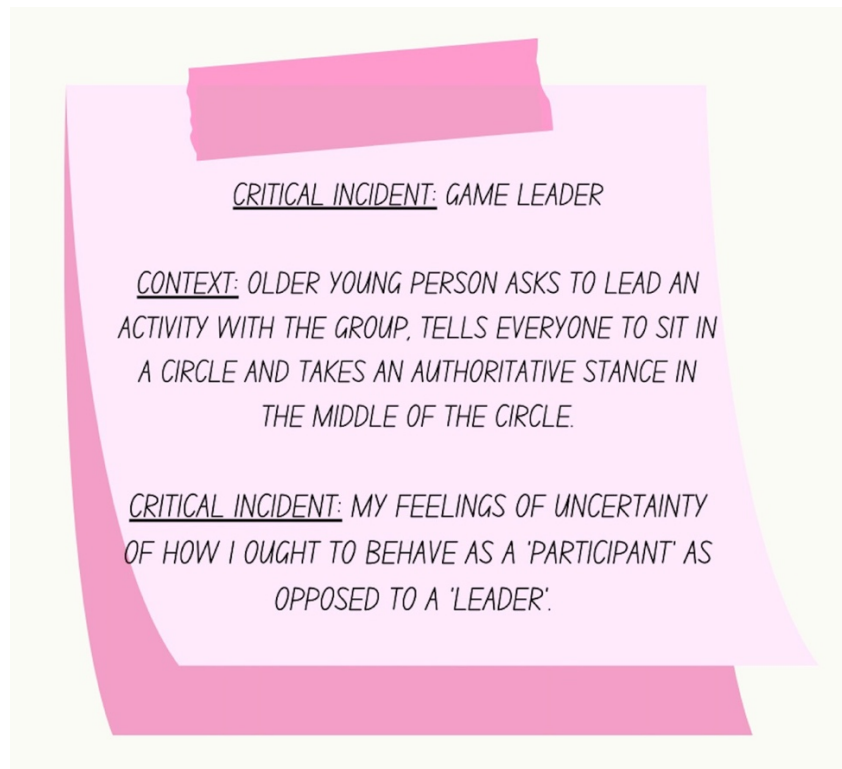
power relations between adults and young people, or that the notion of participation and co-creation is questioned. If the identified incident upon reflection did not enlighten the witness inquiry, then subsequently it was not rendered 'critical' for my research. Had I approached it through a different lens, my reflections and analysis would most likely have been very different, as "where the final analysis goes and what conclusions are reached should vary according to the intentions of the analyst and the nature of each case" (Tripp, 2012: 43). The purpose of the analysis is for my research concerning witness, so this was the lens through which I explored all CIs.

The criteria I used for identification of a critical incident varied; in some instances it was something someone did or said, or it was something I did or said, or just something I observed that made me think, or something that stood out, or that was "funny, sad, silly, witty, violent, unfortunate, boring or good" (Tripp, 2012: 35). A critical incident is something that upon reflection makes us "stop and think" (Durham Centre for Academic Development website, 2025) and that we recall for any reason. As a means of capturing my own reactions to account for what happened in the sessions, I recorded these as reflective observations. This involved recording experiences and incidents from the sessions in great detail and returning to these recollections several times to deconstruct the reasons for my reactions and allow for more in-depth reflection and reflexivity. Bruster and Peterson's (2013: 182) suggested prompts for how to respond to and reflect on a critical incident were used to enable a systematic analysis of each identified incident. These were:

- (1) Give a brief description of a teaching/learning incident you experienced recently. This can be something you observed or something you participated in.
- (2) What were the consequences (effects or outcomes) of this event?
- (3) Did an educational dilemma exist? If so, describe it.
- (4) Is this incident significant enough for you to reinforce it? Why or Why not?
- (5) What, if anything, would you have done differently? Why?
- (6) What do you expect the students learned from this event?
- (7) What did you learn from this event?
- (8) What further thoughts or questions were generated from this event?
- (9) What in your training helped you respond to the critical incident?

The reflections in identified incidents were based on the lens through which I approached the process, i.e. I deconstructed and analysed the identified critical incidents through a witness lens.

The identified incidents all made me stop and think, for a variety of reasons. Most often it was something trivial which in usual circumstances I cannot imagine I would have given a second thought to or identified as critical; however, Tripp argues that it is the “very judgement of them as trivial” means we should “consider them in great depth” (Tripp, 2012: 35). It is the “broader context” of the incident, which is “essential in rendering the incident critical” (Tripp, 2012: 33). For example, *Critical Incident 3: Game Leader* would not have been deemed critical had it been common practice and expected that young people always take the lead and adults follow.



Critical Incident 3 - Game Leader

Had the broader context been that young people commonly take the lead; the incident would probably not have been deemed critical. However, the established behaviour is that adults lead, and young people listen and follow their instructions. This is the expected behaviour in school and most likely also at home. This social construct of society implies that young people are powerless and oppressed by adults merely due to being young. The Critical Theory paradigm, spearheaded by approaches such as feminism, challenges this social construct and seeks to change the power relations inherent in society in positive ways. Educational theorist Paulo Freire's notion of 'critical pedagogy' (2017), first published in 1972, poses an approach to education as a way of emancipating yourself from authority, much like philosopher and social

critic Ivan Illich's notion of education and learning as a self-led practice outside the bounds of formal schooling (Illich, 2020). Scholar and cultural critic Henry Giroux argues that:

[c]ritical pedagogy attempts to understand how power works through the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge within particular institutional contexts and seeks to constitute students as informed subjects or social agents. (Giroux, 2010: 717)

The aim with a space like the one Waterloo Community Theatre created was not simply to make theatre with young people, but to gain insights into how the social constructions of power can be disrupted and more equally distributed. Any setting, I argue—although I am particularly interested in settings which adults and young people occupy together—would be well-served by a more equal distribution of power. Illich discusses with his notion of how not just 'deschooling education', but 'deschooling society', how social assumptions of power are indoctrinated into the core of our society, on which society's judgements are based. Critical theory "questions the social assumptions on which [...] judgements are based" (Tripp, 1992: 115) and seeks to emancipate those oppressed by social constructs. It could be argued then, that young people, by virtue of being young, are oppressed by our social construct, and the notion of young people as competent beings in their own right is thrown into question. Thus, in the spirit of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2017), my research interrogates how the theatre-making process transpires *with* young people and how the power balance can be made more equal between adults, the 'oppressors', and young people, the 'oppressed'. Given that the roles were reversed in *Critical Incident 3: Game Leader*; the adult was in place of the young

person and vice versa, is what made the incident critical; the broader context of our expected roles challenged the status quo. In addition to the broader context, it is only through analysis that the incidents are rendered critical (Tripp, 2012). Most incidents which I identified as critical could easily have been passed unnoticed, as they were not necessarily 'big' incidents; however, my analysis, from my perspective and through my lens of witness, is what renders them critical.

4.6.2 Critical Incident Analysis as a Process of Action Research

It could be argued that it is of little use to reflect on these critical incidents if the reflection is not analysed and, most importantly, followed by some form of action. As a reflective and reflexive arts practitioner in a participatory setting, it feels almost unnatural not to want to see some form of change or improvement, whether it is concerning the people involved and/or in the delivery and the outcomes. Where it could be argued that reflection merely suggests a process by which the learner examines their experiences and considers how they have changed as a result, a reflexive approach suggests a process by which the learner actually does change as a result. By adopting an Action Research approach, there is potential for wider-reaching change through a cycle of observation, reflection, planning and action. Tripp draws parallels between the CIA process and Action Research with his Diagnostic Teaching Circle (Fig. 11) which demonstrates how a reflection-based practice using CIA can "act as both an agenda for further action and a way of evaluating and interpreting it" (Tripp, 2012: 31).

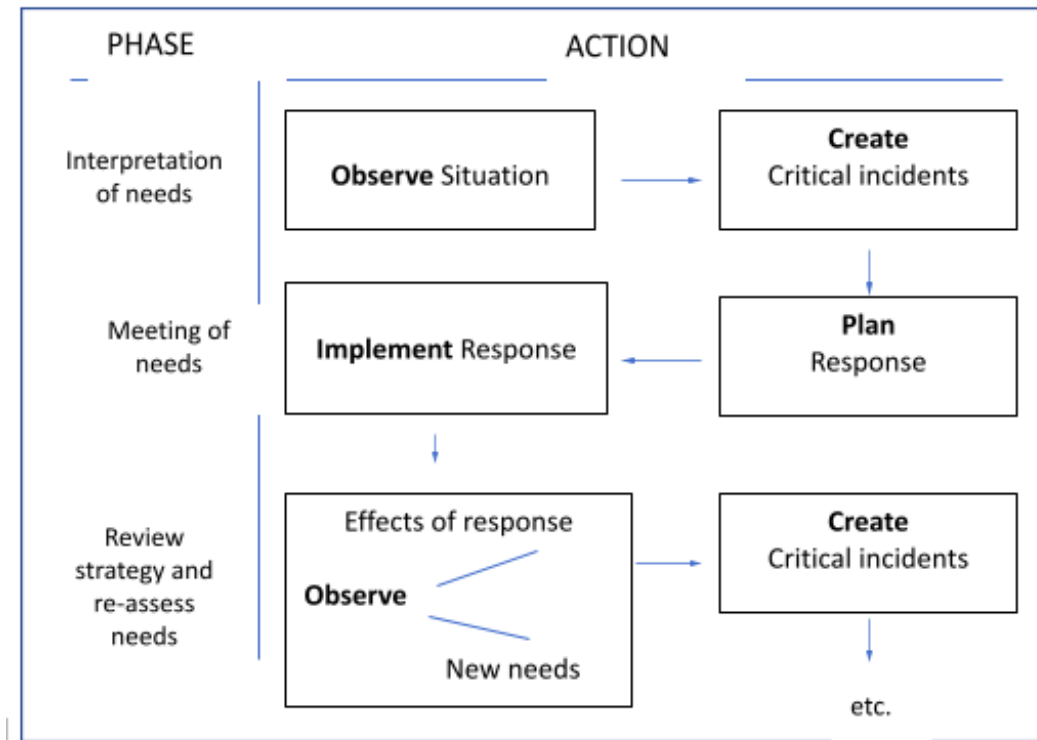


Figure 11 - Tripp's Diagnostic Teaching Circle

'Interpretation of needs' phase and 'Review strategy and re-assess needs' phase ensure the continuous link of the cycle with interpretation and evaluation of the needs, leading to the action needed. My process was indeed cyclical, and in the spirit of Action Research, it served as a process of reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983); I reflected in detail upon the incidents *after* they had occurred. The new knowledge gained from this post-incident reflection heightened my awareness of the issues identified in my reflections and thus informed my practice and the choices I made from that point onwards. I agree with Tripp's argument that Critical Incident Analysis is useful to "inform on-going educational action research" (Tripp, 2012: 24), and interestingly, although most effectively used formally as described above, Tripp suggests the cycle is equally appropriate for use "instantly during teaching in an informal way" (Tripp, 2012:

31). This is similar to Schön's notion of 'reflection-in-action' (1983), which I argue works best in tandem with 'reflection-on-action'. As I became more aware of my decisions and choices, my *practice*, through CIA, my in-the-moment decisions began to shift. It was a cyclical process by which the more I reflected on previous critical incidents and applied theory to practice, the more I became aware of the implications of my practice. This self-reflexive attention can also be discussed in terms of Hepplewhite's notion of 'responsivity', a way of "discussing how in-the-moment choices are made and how, whilst acknowledging a focus on the participants, the practitioners also develop within the practice" (Hepplewhite, 2017: 2). Possessing an awareness of one's ability to make in-the-moment choices and being able to be self-reflexive upon those choices becomes an integral part of the reflective process which informs the actions going forward. Just as the nature of Action Research is a constant cycle of observation, reflection and action, my reflective observations document was a live and ever-evolving document which I returned to many times over the course of the research to reconsider my previous reflections. Tripp asserts that "the main characteristic of critical incident writing is lack of closure and continual revision" (Tripp, 2012: 33). This process of "looking and looking again" is what "expanded the possibilities of knowing" (Halquist and Musanti, 2010: 453); it enabled me to re-visit previous incidents and develop my reflections with more attuned and refined understanding over time, allowing for new 'knowing' to develop.

4.6.3 Mind-Mapping the Critical Incidents

Once I had identified the critical incidents, the next step was to identify themes to group the CIs. To give myself some direction and structure, I followed a process informed by Corbin and

Strauss's (1990) open coding, and the "repeating elements and recurring themes" (Bruster and Peterson, 2013) were preliminary categorised into main overarching themes, e.g. 'power', 'bias', 'frame' and 'listening'. For each critical incident and through the lens of witness I asked myself: 'what is going on here?', i.e., what is the issue at the heart of the incident? and 'what are the one or two words, or a short phrase, I would use to describe what is going on?'. This then formed the theme for that incident. Thus, I found that the haikus had served their purpose and no longer aided the process, instead, simply answering these questions, which led to the theme felt sufficient. I further gave each incident a label, or a title, and my criteria for the title were that I would immediately know which incident it refers to. This approach, with a theme and a title, enabled me to effectively formulate a very brief but effective snapshot of each entire reflective entry to categorise and theme it appropriately. It is important to bear in mind here that "[i]mprovisation is evident in the application of these designs, particularly in the appreciation of research methods as tools that can support creative processes and conversations about them in ways that may be unplanned" (Hughes et al., 2011: 207). While I have made every attempt to ensure robustness in my analysis of the observations, it is, ultimately my own interpretation of them.

With the themes I identified, and to interconnect the themes, I went through a process of grouping "like with like" (Corbin and Strauss, 1990: 421), splitting the identified themes into categories, to seek consistency in the themes. I created a visual mind-map using index cards, allowing me to move the cards around to find the best fit (see Fig. 12 below). For me, this was a

process of making sense of the material (Reason, 2010) and working out the connections between the themes, a process of connecting the dots.



Figure 12 - Initial Critical Incident Mind-map with Index Cards

As I collected more CIs and went through a constant cycle of Action Research, with identified incidents continuously reread and continuously reflected upon, additional themes and patterns

started to emerge (Corbin and Strauss, 1990), and for one theme, Power Relations, sub-themes also emerged. Once themes started to emerge with incidents attached to each theme, I began plotting the themes out on a mind-map using the online tool Miro (see Fig. 13 below), which allowed for a clear visual representation of the CIs derived from the reflective observations.

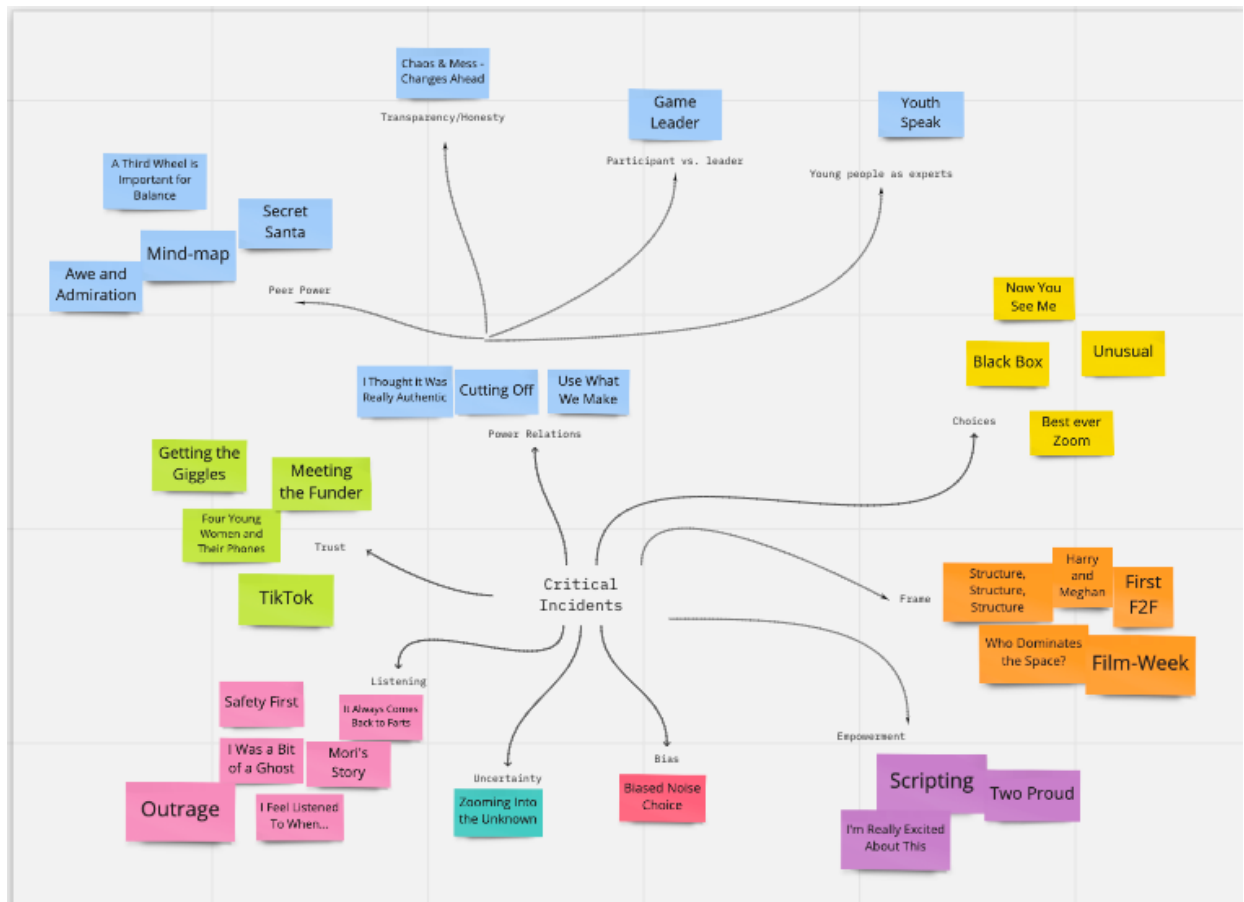


Figure 13 - Mind-map of Themes

This visual started to depict a journey of critical incidents, which addressed concepts of witness. I call this set of themes Primary Themes, as they were the initial themes to emerge,

and they were (as seen clockwise in Fig. 13 above and also featured in the [online portfolio](#) with the ability to zoom in):

- Choices
- Frame
- Empowerment
- Bias
- Uncertainty
- Listening
- Trust
- Power Relations

-young people as experts

- peer power

- transparency/honesty

Within the Power Relations-theme it was clear that sub-themes were required. Although all incidents categorised under the sub-theme sit comfortably under the main theme Power Relations, they are a variant of the main theme yet distinct enough to form their own sub-theme. Sub-concepts can gain “greater precision” (Corbin and Strauss, 1990: 421) and these sub-themes all represent different types of power relations, giving each sub-theme its own distinct meaning.

4.7 Practitioner Conversations

In addition to the reflective observations, I carried out conversations with four theatre practitioners and one researcher/educator. My intention was to engage in conversation with those currently active in theatre-making and/or researching with young people, to gain insights into their approaches and their thinking around participatory theatre-making and withness. The intention here was never to be systematic or all-embracing, but instead to lean into holding conversations with practitioners whose work with young people and whose practice I admire or are considered to be at the forefront of co-creation in theatre-making. While different in their approaches and in their work with young people, they all share similarities which appeal to me; their practice is anchored in dialogue and a respect for young people as collaborators. To this end, I carried out four conversations and spoke with:

- Ned Glasier, Co-creation Consultant and former Artistic Director of Company Three;
- Tim Etchells, Artistic Director of Forced Entertainment and Professor of Writing and Performance;
- Mark Beeson, Artistic Director, and Helen Gilbert, Education and Engagement Manager, both of MED Theatre; and
- Dr Perpetua Kirby, educator and researcher with interest in child/youth agency, participation and democratic education.

Company Three is a London-based young people's theatre company making "transformative theatre through long-term collaborations between young people and professional theatre-makers" (Company Three website, n.d). They describe themselves as "a leading force for change for teenagers in our local community and around the world" (Company Three website,

n.d). Ned Glasier was the Artistic Director from the company's inception in 2008 until 2023 when he stepped down and was succeeded by Nuna Sandy. Glasier has written extensively as well as delivered training courses on the topic of making theatre and devising with young people, some of which I have attended over the years. Company Three's successful production *Brainstorm* was created with Glasier and cognitive neuroscientist Professor Sarah-Jayne Blakemore and drew upon the life experiences of the cast. It was performed by the young people in the company.

Forced Entertainment, a Sheffield-based ensemble, reinvents theatre "to speak about the times we are living in, inspiring audiences across the UK, in Europe and further afield." (Forced Entertainment website, n.d). Their six-people artist ensemble "work with artists-to-be and people who don't identify as artists" (Forced Entertainment website, n.d). Tim Etchells is Artistic Director, and the play *That Night Follows Day*, which was performed by children and young people for an adult audience, has been a key part of the group's work with young people, exploring the way that adults and the adult world shape the experience, understanding and possibilities that young people have.

MED Theatre is a community theatre organisation based in Dartmoor, creating "multigenerational, original work using local material, which highlights the relationship between theatre and its surroundings" (MED Theatre website, n.d). They have dedicated young people's groups for all ages and they also work with schools across Devon. Despite their vastly different location to Company Three and Forced Entertainment, MED Theatre's work is original and devised with the groups of people with whom they work. Mark Beeson, who was

instrumental in shaping the ethos of the company, was the Artistic Director for 33 years sadly passed away in February 2022.

Dr Perpetua Kirby is an Assistant Professor and lecturer in Childhood and Youth (Education) in the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Sussex. Her research interests are participation, agency and children's rights. Her current research concerns how children's voices are heard and used to improve practice. Her research has been featured in many media channels, including BBC Radio 4's Women's Hour, Financial Times and BBC Newsround.

The above theatre companies have all made original work with young people, telling their stories, in their own words, and this is what drew me to these companies, and thus, the professionals associated with them. Kirby's practice and research, deeply rooted in children's voices and the uncertainty of working with the unknown, offered a different yet equally alluring perspective which is relevant to my own work and research. The conversations centred very much around the professionals' practice and how *they* approach their practice and theatre-making with young people. The conversations are referenced throughout this exegesis with indication to our Zoom conversations.

4.7.1 Themes from the Conversations

While I approached the conversations having 'witness' as the underpinning thread to my questions, my semi-structured interview guide also allowed for the practitioners to freely express their thoughts and ideas in their own words, which broadened the scope of the conversation and their responses. I followed a set of questions which were very similar in all

interviews (Appendix 1). The questions were developed from my thoughts around witness, and certainly influenced by the Primary Themes which emerged from my CIA. However, as there are some differences in their practice, some questions were only asked to those who they related to. For example, Etchells was asked to reflect on differences of making theatre with young people and adults, as Forced Entertainment do work with both; however, Company Three does not, therefore, this was not relevant in my conversation with Glasier.

I went through the same process of identifying themes as described during the Primary Themes process. Upon observing the recurring themes in all conversations, clear themes emerged across them all. I refer to these as Secondary Themes as they emerged after Primary Themes and they are:

- Listening
- Structure/frame/process
- Trust, relationship
- Awareness of power
- Perspective
- Choice
- Expertise

To explore interconnections between the two theme lists I cross-referenced Primary Themes with Secondary Themes. Thus, synergy between the two theme lists became apparent with

majority of themes in Secondary Themes also appearing in Primary Themes. Below are the two theme lists for easy comparison (the themes which appear in both are highlighted in colour).

Primary Themes From Critical Incidents	Secondary Themes From Practitioner Conversations
• Listening • Bias • Frame • Choices • Trust • Power Relations - young people as experts - peer power - transparency/honesty • Empowerment • Uncertainty/the unknown	• Listening • Perspective/bias • Structure/frame/process • Choices • Trust • Awareness of power • Expertise • Uncertainty

Upon analysis of the theme lists which emerged, it is clear there that many themes are directly overlapping and share characteristics. Their prevalence in the interviews, in my CIs as in addition to themes I have encountered in the literature, earns its way into the

conceptualisation by “*repeatedly* being present” (Corbin and Strauss, 1990: 420), as it is the “representativeness of concepts” (Corbin and Strauss, 1990: 421) which is important.

While the themes arising from the interviews are not in themselves new, the unique convergence of these concepts with my growing contextual understanding of witness through CIA and PaR indicates that a significant articulation of what witness means in participatory theatre-making practice with young people has emerged. Indeed, “transformations occur when ignorance and misapprehensions give way to more informed insights by means of a dialectical interaction” (Guba and Lincoln, 2006: 113). While the reflective process was personal to me and the attention was focused on my own practice, it remains a dialogic interaction as the process would not exist without the young people; my practice does not exist in silo, it is grounded in the interactions with others.

Hughes et al., quite rightly point out that “qualitative data are often used without rigorous analysis” (Hughes et al., 2011: 188). Therefore, to ensure “interpretive validity” (Radnor, 2002: 40) of the observations, the Primary Themes formed the framework which I used for analysing the practitioner conversation transcripts. This helped make the analysis process systematic and justifiable; I had a solid framework developed from my CIs, which I was able to cross-reference with the practitioner conversations, and it helped me achieve knowledge accumulation through “generalization by similarity” (Guba and Lincoln, 2006: 112).

Chapter 5 – Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations sit at the heart of any research project. As ethical practitioners and researchers, we strive to achieve “maximum benefits with minimal risks” (Christians, 2011: 66). The notion of research ethics “takes its foundation from the long tradition of medical ethics” (Farrant et al., 2014: 13), which often involves human subjects. We can look to the Declaration of Helsinki, which was adopted world-wide in 1964 and following several revisions is to this day regarded as the “cornerstone document of research ethics practice involving people” (Farrant et al., 2014: 27). As my work is participatory in nature I work extensively with people, therefore, it is imperative to adhere to an ethical code and understand how it manifests in practice. Ethics in any research which involves people will seek to prevent inappropriate and unsafe methods and to ensure that no harm is caused to anyone involved.

Christians lists four “guidelines” (Christians, 2011: 65) which overlaps all major scholarly associations’ code of ethics since the 1980s: 1) Informed consent, 2) Deception, 3) Privacy and confidentiality, and 4) Accuracy (Christians, 2011: 65-67). This chapter will first address all these guidelines in some way, shape or form. I will describe the informed consent/assent process I adopted for the research. I will address how we remained transparent through continuous dialogue at all times to ensure everyone fully understood the project and their role in it, and their right to withdraw at any time. I will justify our choices to publicly share names of participants and acknowledge the challenges of seeking post-project assent.

This exploration is then followed by a discussion about the ethics of dealing with emotive material, as is often the case in applied theatre settings and participatory practice as ethical practice.

5.1 Ethics Approval

The job of the Ethics Committee is to “safeguard the rights, safety, dignity and wellbeing of people participating in the research studies, as well as those of the researchers” (Farrant et al., 2014 :29). Thus, any research project which takes place in a university context must seek ethics approval from the ethics committee. My project gained initial ethical approval from York St John’s Ethical Committee in 2018. This approval pertained to my project as it was then, which changed over the course of the following year or so. Once my focus shifted and became established as a practice-led research project, a new ethics approval form was submitted and approved in 2020, ensuring my research complies with the principles and practices required of researchers at York St John University. Research ethics is “*part of* the ongoing research process, not something that you get past in order to get to the ‘real research’” (Farrant, 2014: 15). Rather, it is ongoing and continuously negotiated and in the next section I will discuss how I did this with WCT for the purpose of my research.

5.2 Ethics as Ongoing Interactive Narrative Consent/Assent

Consent and assent are both critical to research which involves minors. Consent is sought from the legal guardian while assent is the ethical 'yes' from someone who can understand what is being asked, even if they cannot legally sign off on their participation.

At the very beginning of the research project, due to the fact that all participants were under the age of 18, I sought *informed* parental consent, which by its very nature means that "information is given in a way that the person can understand" and that their "decision to participate or not is voluntary and free from any coercion" (Water, 2018: 46). Informed consent suggests whoever consent is sought from is fully informed of the project. I sought such consent in the form of a hard copy form that went to all parents/carers to sign to say they gave consent for their child to participate. This form contained a detailed description of the project and outlined how to contact me to ask any questions.

Grounded in a co-creative theatre-making approach and for the purpose of remaining transparent as the researcher, it felt important to involve the young people in the consent process through assent. While their parent/carer may have read the information sheet and given their consent for the young person to participate, there was no way for me to know how much they had relayed to the young person about the project. In addition, it was important to ensure the young people owned their participation through their own assent process.

Therefore, having the informed consent, assent and withdrawal procedure discussion at the very start of the project was a crucial part of the initial process. To this end, simultaneously to the parental consent being in motion, I facilitated a session with the young people introducing my project and the terms consent, assent and withdrawal should they decide at any point that they did not want to participate. When everyone felt confident, they all agreed that it was a good idea to sign a group consent/assent sheet, and we did that on a large flipchart paper. This sheet listed the items discussed during the introduction of the project: the right to withdraw, the right to be acknowledged or not, and the right to decide their own participation throughout the project.

Ethics is an ongoing pursuit, and it is necessary to constantly negotiate and re-negotiate the ethical considerations attached to the project, particularly in a project of this length of time and with participants leaving and joining throughout. Young people came and left in the years of the project, from 2018 to 2023, and this moving part was unavoidable due to the nature of how WCT always operated with an open-door policy. Thus, consent must not be fixed, it must be continued and (re)negotiated and always be present and at the fore.

Our check-in “assured consent was constantly sought during each interaction” which in turn ensured that “ethical practices were adhered to (Austen and Donnelly, 2023: n.p.). The young people were reminded regularly about their right to not participate, and all activities were introduced with the preamble that ‘only share what you feel comfortable with sharing and only take part in the activities that you feel comfortable with taking part in’. These were our usual

safeguarding reminders, which also served as an ethical consideration reminder for everyone.

In addition, my research was often referenced by the staff team in the sessions, and thus, the young people were constantly reminded about it, whether online or offline. Adopting a participatory approach, facilitators are constantly working within the unknown, and researchers cannot predict the ethical issues that will develop. Therefore, consent is never fixed, and “researchers can rethink informed consent as ongoing and negotiated” (Mannay, 2016: 113).

Thus, consent and assent remain open-ended and constantly evolving, responding to the needs of the group. Drawing on Woodhead and Faulkner, Mayne et al. argue that “much depends on researchers’ underlying attitudes towards children” (Mayne et al., 2018: 5), and this viewpoint determines how they are included in the research. Intrinsic to my own stance, anchored in a rights-based approach, I have made conscious efforts to place the young people in the position of power and agency. Thus, an ongoing “interactive narrative approach” (Mayne et al., 2018: 7) to consent which “can transform children’s participation experiences through a focus on interaction [...] and narrative” (Mayne et al., 2018: 7). Indeed, continuous dialogue with the young people in our interactive participatory sessions developed an inherent ‘interactive narrative approach’ to consent. As described above, it was constantly referred to and discussed in terms of young people choosing their participation at all stages.

5.3 Confidentiality

Confidentiality was a topic we, as a group of adults and young people, discussed often and at length as we often dealt with very personal content. Tilley and Woodthorpe explore the ethics of dissemination and refer to confidentiality as the “management of private information” (Tilley

and Woodthorpe, 2011: 198). Private information was regularly shared in our sessions as WCT's work was primarily created based on the young people's lives and their ideas. As our work was performative in nature and shared with audiences, the notion of keeping content confidential, therefore, became a process of negotiation as we made decisions about what to share and what not to share. With the young people as owners of their stories (Glarin, 2020), the final decision was always theirs.

Judith Mason, Professor of Law and child law and socio-legal specialist, explains that "[t]he notion of confidentiality has a very particular meaning among researchers which needs to be explained and agreed with those participating" (Mason, 2000: 40). As a researcher and practitioner therefore, it was critical for me to ensure that everyone understood that research was taking place alongside the theatre-making. This was always a continuous process navigated together throughout the research.

5.4 Acknowledgement

In addition to content being shared and available in the public domain, the young people's names were attached to the work; they were visible on the website and their first names were used on the podcast. Tilley and Woodthorpe assert that "anonymity refers specifically to removing or obscuring the names of participants" (Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011: 198). In the initial project idea, which centred around identity through theatre-making, I had planned for the "ethical norm" (Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011: 199) of participants remaining anonymous. In research and practice with minors, there is a prevalent notion that young people must be

protected and thus, their identities kept hidden. Of course, that has generally been the case as the researched have been perceived to need protection (van den Hoonaard, 2003). As minors in our care, children and young people's rights to participate (in research and other activities) must always be balanced with adults' responsibility to safeguard them from harm, which can add to the complexities of including them. WCT's safeguarding policy stipulated that we adhered to the Gillick competency and Fraser guidelines⁵, which "balance the need to listen to children's wishes with the responsibility to keep them safe" (NSPCC website, 2022). The safety and well-being of the young person is paramount and should guide all decisions when applying Gillick competence and Fraser guidelines. We made a conscious decision to name young people, and the ethics of making this decision must be discussed and justified.

As facilitators, our ethical responsibility is to balance "their rights to protection along with their rights to participation" (Powell et al., 2012). The young people themselves decided to have their names attached to the work we made, as they wanted credit for it. They wanted their contribution to be acknowledged and valued, and "[r]esearchers need to respect the rights and dignity of participants, for example where participants may wish to have their views expressed and their identities given" (UK Research and Innovation website, 2024). In addition, it can be argued that the young people are of a different generation, having grown up with their lives "out there" (Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011: 197) on the internet and therefore have the

⁵ Gillick competency and Fraser guidelines refer to a legal case which addressed whether doctors ought to be able to give contraceptive advice or treatment to under-16-year-old without parental consent. Since the court case in 1980s, they have been more widely applied to help assess whether a child is considered mature enough to make their own decisions and to understand the implications of those decisions.

expectation to be identified. Whatever the reason, young people must be given the chance to exercise their right to full participation. BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research stipulate that "[r]esearchers should recognise the right of participants to be identified as the originator of their own work if they so wish" (BERA, 2024). Thus, as the makers and owners of the work, the young people have the right to openly claim it as theirs.

It is important to note that the decision was made with the parents and carers as well as with the young people. Parents and carers were kept informed of the intention to waive anonymity and had no objections. They were proud of the young people's work and consented to the young people's first names being used. Each episode of the podcast *The Realist* included the names of the people who took part, giving everyone credit. This was never an issue for anyone; it was a celebration and acknowledgement of everyone's contribution. We always obtained comprehensive informed consent from parents and carers. As part of the registration process for WCT was a requirement for all parents and carers to complete a comprehensive consent form. This enabled legal guardians to give their consent for young people to be (or not to be) included in photos, videos, have their name included etc.

5.5 Ethics of Dissemination

The young people's choice of publicly being named raises concerns for the ethics of research dissemination. Significant time has passed since consent and assent were sought as WCT was wound down in August 2023. Despite the continuous negotiation and re-negotiation regarding consent and assent during the sessions, it must be acknowledged that the young people are

now older and have moved on to other chapters in their lives and this might impact their perspectives on the research. Therefore, as significant time has passed since the data was collected, it is important to consider how to avoid misuse or misrepresentation after all this time. Thus, the potential impact of dissemination of the research at this later stage must be addressed, and UKRI states that:

The possible impact on research participants, their families and associates, organisations, and populations from which the sample is drawn needs to be thought through – particularly where anonymity may be jeopardised or where there is potential for stigmatisation of individuals or groups, or misuse or misrepresentations of research findings. (UK Research and Innovation website, 2024).

Despite not being co-researchers, the young people are an important part of the research journey as my research simply would not exist without them. Thus, the ethical course of action is to share the research output, i.e., the online portfolio which documents the practice and the PhD exegesis, with the young people concerned, prior to submission and publication of the documents. UKRI urge the researcher to consider: “When findings are released, what is the impact on other areas of participants’ lives, such as their families and careers? Did they permit the material to be archived or shared with other researchers?” (UK Research and Innovation website, 2024). Although consent and assent were continuously negotiated and re-negotiated during the research and data collection phase, it is crucial that this is continued before and during the dissemination phase. The young people who participated in my research and are

identifiable will mostly be aged over 18 by the time the exegesis and portfolio are submitted. Thus, the ethical practice for the researcher is to reach out to the young people and inform them of the pending submission, seeking their consent to still be included and named in the work, ensuring consent continues to be (re)negotiated. A few months before the submission of my PhD, I organised a get-together with a group of former WCT members to share my research with them. While everyone was invited to join, only a handful could make it to the gathering. They were all genuinely excited to have played a part, to finally see it coming together and reaffirmed their assent/consent. I acknowledge that the ideal scenario would have been to have them all present, but seeking assent years down the line is challenging. To those unable to make it, I sent the online portfolio where they are visibly represented (and some are named), to allow them to have their say. The link to the online portfolio was also shared on a WhatsApp group in which many WCT members were still active. I remained in dialogue with the young people who were still interested to do so, and while not perfect, I believe it is the best I could have done in the circumstances.

5.6 Ethics of Dealing with Emotive Material

Working in a participatory fashion by its very nature means there are people and their emotions to continuously navigate. In addition, applying arts-based methods has the potential to open conversations that other data-gathering techniques may not facilitate as easily. Mannay argues that “researchers applying visual and narrative methodologies need to be particularly sensitive to the affective impacts of their work” (Mannay, 2016: 110). Adopting for a participatory arts-based method can allow for participants to open up and share more

personal narratives that other, more orthodox methods may not lend themselves to. Moreover, with the devising and theatre-making approach WCT employ, drawing on the young people's own experiences and stories, can be experienced as an "emotive process" (Mannay, 2016: 111), suggesting the need for researchers to remain sensitive towards the ethical issues of the research and the creative output and "the decision to use them, whether in the workshop space or in public, needs special ethical attention, depending on context" (Rifkin, 2010: 25).

Most certainly, the open-ended way in which WCT conducted our sessions leaves the space open for young people to share personal stories. This was always delivered with an explicit ask that people only share what they feel comfortable sharing, and young people were always reminded to look after themselves and their well-being, as per our Safeguarding Policy and Code of Conduct. Ethically, the practitioner ought to have the relevant competency to be able to deal with such emotive and personal material. Rifkin states that "[w]ith personal and other kinds of difficult material, the need for competence in holding the theatre space is exemplified" (Rifkin, 2010: 25). The ethical competency, therefore, becomes concerned with making decisions within your capacity at every stage, and seeking additional support when you know something is beyond your capacity.

5.7 A Participatory Theatre-Making Approach as Ethical Practice

This section deals with the ethical implications of adopting an arts-based approach in practice. It is worth noting that a non-participatory approach may not necessarily be a negative thing; there are indeed many valuable theatre projects which are designed and

run by adults with young people acting out “pre-determined roles” (Hart, 1992: 9), for example, in performance-focused theatre schools. So long as the offer is transparent and this is what the young people know they sign up for and what they want, this approach is, of course, as valid. However, once a project or approach is claimed to be participatory, I argue that a different and more nuanced ethical stance from which one seeks to engage with young people is required, and it is from this standpoint that my approach to research and practice ethics arises.

Participatory approaches suggest that the research is conducted “with the individuals or community of interest, that is, *with* them and not *on* them” (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2018: 16). Therefore, here it is also very important to remind the reader to make the distinction between my participatory approach to making theatre and my approach to research, which for the purpose of this PhD differs greatly. While I adopt a participatory approach in my theatre-making practice with young people, my research is not participatory in nature as the young people are not regarded as co-researchers.

While witness is at the heart of my theatre-making practice, how do we, as practitioners, know whether our practice is ethical or not? How do we know “whose interests are being served” (Matarasso, 2019: 104) by the work? Frances Rifkin in her 2010 report, which was a “response to a perceived absence of consensus on an ethical approach to the teaching, learning and professional practice of Participatory or Applied Theatre” (Rifkin, 2010: 4) sought to develop a set of “ethical guidelines” for participatory theatre (Rifkin, 2010: 4). Rifkin suggests

that adopting Stanislavsky's questions for character-building can be a useful tool when seeking an ethical stance in the planning stage of a project. Using Who?, What?, Why?, Where? and When? questions can help decipher the intentions of the work and its wider context, and thus, whether it is participatory and ethical in nature (Rifkin, 2010: 21). Stanislavsky's questions are designed to unlock the specifics of the character and their intentions. For the purpose of planning a project, questions such as 'Who is the project for and who will it benefit?' and 'Why are we doing it?' will help to ensure an ethical frame from the beginning.

These are similar to the questions Matarasso suggests are critical questions at each point in the project cycle (Matarasso, 2019: 114). The answers to these questions will be different depending on each unique group. Therefore, answering these questions can offer context specific core principles to abide by and help "decide whether or not the work is within an acceptable ethical frame, whether or not to do it and how to mediate the problems through discussion or subversive action." (Rifkin, 2010: 23). Thus, the practitioner, in the planning stages, can get a sense of the ethical intentions of the work and mediate any concerns through conversation and taking action to address the concerns. Once an ethical frame has been established, how this is ethically implemented within the ethical frame then becomes critical. Participatory theatre practitioner Stella Barnes suggests that "ethical practice, as I see it, is positive, value-led practice, and I would define an ethical value as follows: if the opposite of the value is harmful, then the value is ethical. So, *safe* rather than *unsafe*, *honest* rather than *dishonest*, *just* rather than *unjust*." (A New Direction website, 2024) While somewhat simplified, this is no doubt a helpful start, but how do we know that our practice is safe, honest and just?

Rifkin suggests that the ethical principles: choice, equality, respect, safety and competence (Rifkin, 2010: 19) developed by Barnes during her tenure as Head of Education at *Oval House Theatre* in London can be helpful. While Rifkin acknowledges that the principles are not without their challenges and “questioning of the Core Principles is appropriate, not least because there are socially received notions about what they might mean, and those notions have to be challenged” (Rifkin, 2010: 20). While their ambiguous meaning can be different in different contexts and with different groups of people, they nevertheless can offer a good starting point for ideas of “good practice” (Rifkin, 2010: 18). Certainly, the first four Core Principles: choice, equality, respect and safety, all offer a cluster of words which participatory practitioners often come across in their work but may interpret in very different ways. Therefore, it can be helpful to establish a group interpretation; a shared nexus of words which constitutes ethical practice for any given group and unique situation.

The last of Barnes’ Core Principles, Competence, may need some unpacking. Child health researcher Tineke Water claims that a participatory approach with young people by its very nature suggests an “ethical standpoint” (Water, 2018: 37) as it values the “agency and right of the children and young people to have a voice in things that matter to them, whilst also recognising their developing competency” (Water, 2018: 37). It must be noted, however, as Rifkin suggests, that it is not only the young people who are developing their competencies; regardless of how experienced a facilitator is, every situation is unique, and we, as

professionals, are always and constantly developing our own competencies, and this can play into the notion of ethical practice.

Rifkin's collaborative research found that some of the capacities which relate to the Competence principle concerns the facilitator's knowledge and experience and suggests that the facilitator's competence is "both an ethical principle (an incompetent practitioner in a complex situation is unacceptable), and a necessary bridge between theory, principles and practice" (Rifkin, 2010: 19). By way of demonstrating this, Rifkin's research methodology in itself suggests an ethical standpoint; the research was carried out within an Action Research framework whereby the participant facilitators *and* students "were invited to reflect on their approach to ethics" (Rifkin, 2010: 9), to build a picture of ethical practice through collaborative conversations. Thus, it is "an opportunity for individuals and groups to recognize their existing knowledge and to develop their praxis" (Rifkin, 2010: 37), and for the reflective and reflexive practitioner, it therefore becomes a process whereby facilitators and young people are developing their competencies and their praxis *together*.

A New Direction, a charity developing creative opportunities for children and young people, reports on a masterclass in October 2024, delivered by Stella Barnes alongside other theatre practitioners, and participant Sarah Kadri from Lung Theatre shared her main takeaway of ethics as a "dynamic process" (A New Direction website, 2024). I agree that this is key to ethical practice, as it is "a journey" and we are all "constantly in development" (A New Direction website, 2024). Learning from the More Knowledgeable Other through a process of knowledge

exchange and reciprocity, as discussed in Chapter 7 (Complexities of the Shared Space), therefore, becomes critical. Sheila Preston suggests that:

As cultural workers, whether we are researchers writing about individuals, or theatre makers constructing narratives and stories, we have a responsibility towards ensuring that the representations that are made are produced through a climate of sensitivity, dialogue, respect and willingness for reciprocity. (Preston, 2009a: 65)

Thus, the praxis which is developed *together*, which presents differently in all contexts and situations, forms the ethical frame for participatory work, and this dynamic process is navigated through constant reflection and reflexivity.

Chapter 6 – Youth Voices

This chapter will explore how the voices of young people have been perceived and represented in research and the wider society, and how this has changed over time. It will make the case that young people are competent beings and experts on their own lives. Drawing on my own practice through critical incidents, the chapter will give examples of how young people's voices are facilitated and listened to. This is critical as a salient option for a move towards a witness-centred practice, rather than a practice which is focused merely on the young people's participation.

6.1 Paradigm Shifts in Perceptions of Childhood

While the concept of childhood might seem tangible, and children themselves even more so, in fact, both have undergone significant paradigm shifts over the last 100-150 years. Frances Brown wrote in 1939 about how children used to be perceived:

His dress was but that of the adult, cut to fit his shorter limbs; his tasks were those of the adult, lightened only to meet the needs of his weaker muscles; his education was that which adults prescribed, and had but one purpose, that for preparing for adult life. (Brown, 1939: 10).

This extract is a good example of how children used to be viewed the same as adults in industrialised nations in the Western world; they were expected to complete the same tasks as adults, with the sole aim of becoming fully formed adults. The invention of childhood as a

socially constructed stage of life with a specific role in society has evolved and been reshaped significantly over the years. From being viewed the same as adults, or as adults in waiting, children went to being seen as vulnerable and needing protecting; they were “passive, incomplete and incompetent” (Coyne and Carter, 2018: 5). Approaches to research and child or childhood was informed by these perceptions. Research, therefore, tended to be done *on* children rather than *with* children and children’s and young people’s views were often silenced (James and Prout, 1990; Coyne and Carter, 2018; Christensen and James, 2000;). It was a common view that children were unable to understand and articulate their life experiences due to lack of developmental maturity (Hood et al., 1996). The adults in young people’s lives were viewed as adequate sources of information about young people’s understanding and experiences, and this meant that they were also consulted as experts on their children’s lives (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Coyne and Carter state that it was also “assumed that adults could extrapolate memories from their childhood and identify the concerns of children in present-day realities” (Coyne and Carter, 2018: 3).

I would argue that it is nearly impossible for an adult to speak on behalf of a young person. We can speak about what it was like to be young in the times when we were young, albeit with the benefit of time having passed, our “autobiographical memory” may change and colour the narrative (Conroy et al., 2018: 62), but what we experienced then will not be true for young people today as times have changed significantly. Furthermore, “it was also commonplace that interventions developed for adult populations were applied to children without consideration of work or fit” (Eiser, 1990, cited in Coyne and Carter, 2018).

However, this view started to shift, and in the 1990s, research with children became increasingly more recognised. This coincided with the introduction and universal adoption of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, which reinforced the rights of the child to have a say in matters concerning them (UNICEF, 1989). This was fundamental in laying the “foundation for what adults’ relationships with younger people should be” (Pincock and Jones, 2020). Article 12 of the convention states that “the child who is capable of forming his or her own views has the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (UNICEF, 1989: 5). The UNCRC began to recognise the lack of research *with* children. The result was the emergence of the new sociology of childhood (Qvortrup et al., 2016; Coyne and Carter, 2018) and the subsequent paradigm shift among sociologists in the 1990s started to challenge “the notion of a child as an object” (Coyne and Carter, 2018: 3). Coyne and Carter contend that “this new sociology of childhood offered an alternative understanding of child development and was a reaction towards the perspective that childhood was a period in which children were socialised into adulthood” (Coyne and Carter, 2018: 3).

The notion of recognising children’s capabilities and listening to the “expertise” (Capewell and Fox, 2019: 11) of young people is now “something that is not merely espoused, but actively advocated” (Fielding, 2010: 62). It can be argued that the many youth participation models, as presented in Chapter 2 (The Evolution of Applied Theatre and Youth Participation), are no

doubt partly to thank for this. This has resulted in new ways of engaging with children and young people and therefore, participatory research methods are more widely adopted to “uncover the richness of their world” (Coyne and Carter, 2018: 4).

6.2 Young People as Marginalised?

In Britain today, those who are not much seen or heard in the cultural space “include people of colour, teenagers, deaf and disabled people, migrants, even women, among others. Their presence in the media, on stage and in galleries is limited” (Matarasso, 2019: 75). In addition, recent data suggests that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and lower-income households are not afforded the same educational and employment opportunities compared to that of their peers from more privileged backgrounds (Office for National Statistics website, 2023). This section will explore how young people are misrepresented in cultural discourses concerning youth in mainstream media and how they tend to be excluded from research and social policy discourse. It will argue that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds can be considered a marginalised group. While I recognise the use of the term ‘marginalised’ can be problematic (Pincock and Jones, 2020), I use it here to reference a group of young people who are often misrepresented and/or silenced (Fricker, n.d.).

Perceiving youth as a marginalised group of people is not a new phenomenon; Stanley Cohen describes in his work first published in 1972 how young people have been positioned as ‘folk devils’ and how media’s consistent portrayal of youth as threatening and menacing leads to ‘moral panics’, a term Cohen coined to describe feelings of anxiety as a result of perceived

threats to social values caused by youth. Young people have often been painted in a somewhat negative light, often associated with antisocial and criminal behaviour. Becevic and Dahlstedt argue that in “contemporary discourse, young people are positioned as a problem” (Becevic and Dahlstedt, 2021: n.p.). A youth research project from 2011 reports of “unbalanced negative media portrayal of youth” (Hertsmere Borough Council, 2011: 1) and a 2024 report “reveals pervasive negative media portrayals of young people” (Temple, 2024), suggesting that since Cohen’s work in the 1970s, not much has changed in society’s perception and portrayal of young people. Interestingly, this notion is in direct contradiction to the study *Teenagency* (Partridge et al., 2018), which found that young people’s participation in social action significantly outweighs adult perception, suggesting perhaps that adults and wider society have misconstrued and unfounded attitudes towards young people and often do not give them credit where credit is due.

The way in which professionals like to label young people perpetuates an unhealthy cycle of negativity and unfounded perceptions. I argue that these imposed labels do nothing to support young people; on the contrary, it often sets them up to fail. There is a tendency to label young people and treat them as a homogenous group. For example, the term NEET, which is used to describe young people in the UK who are Not in Education, Employment or Training, suggests, it could be argued, that they are not engaged in any form of activity which, by society's norms, might be perceived as meaningful. The implication is that if they are not engaged in any of these activities, which professionals and policymakers have attached meaning to, they must be up to no good. Therefore, being labelled NEET places young people at “risk of becoming socially

excluded” (OECD website, 2022), which can lead to transgressive behaviour. Transgressiveness both produces and is produced by a paradoxical perception of young people as vulnerable; a term often used in social policy (Brown, 2014). Brown’s study establishes a “relationship between vulnerability and transgressive behaviour” (Brown, 2014: 22) and investigates “the concept of vulnerability and its use in the care and control of young people” (Brown, 2014: 6).

Brown’s research found that being labelled as ‘vulnerable’ seemed “significant in disciplinary processes for young people” (Brown, 2014: 11), suggesting this as a way for professionals to exert control over young people. Brown refers to comments made by professionals: “from looking at referrals, we [the adults] identify the children we think are most vulnerable” and “we [the adults] are assessing vulnerability, and that’s made explicit in the documentation and also in the training” (my italics), (Brown, 2014: 11). These comments could suggest that professionals exert control over the young people by deciding to categorise them as vulnerable without consulting them.

Brown’s study highlights young people’s resistant responses to being labelled as such: “I’m not vulnerable...I think I’m doing well for myself” (Brown, 2014: 20). This suggests that it is the professionals and policy makers imposing control and making the judgements about vulnerability without consulting the young people themselves. In fact, there is a risk that professionals and policymakers consistently label young people, often in negative ways, and young people simply are not consulted.

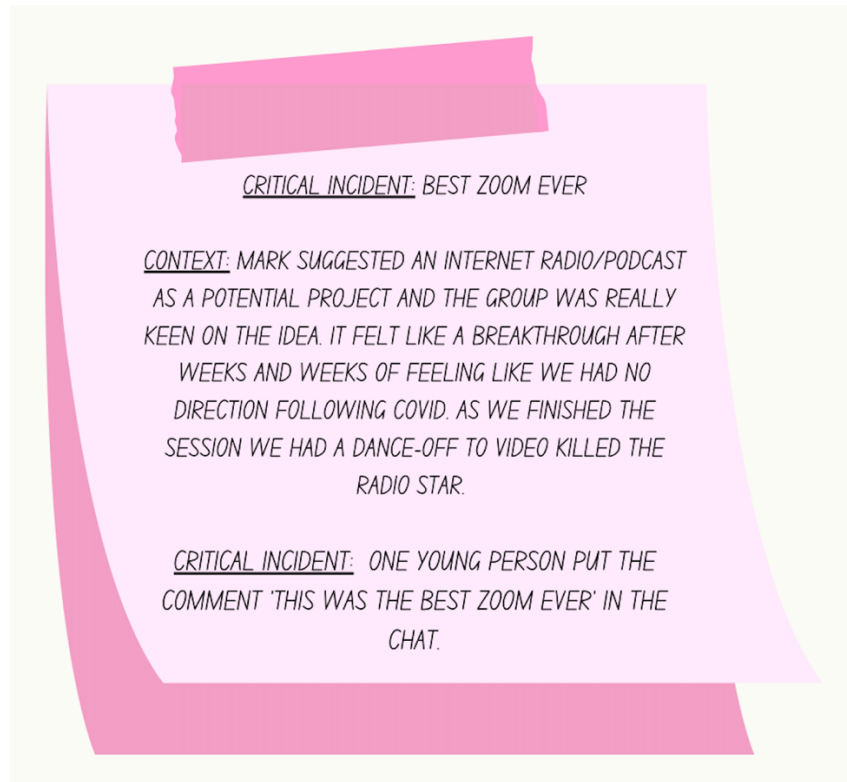
A study carried out by Nacro, one of the country's largest independent further education providers, found that "young people were talked about but rarely quoted or interviewed" (Nacro, 2024: 4), suggesting that their views are not included or considered. A good example which demonstrates how young people were excluded is the COVID-19 pandemic, which swept the globe in 2020. It occupied the news channels and the news discourse across the world, yet the perspectives of young people were not represented. The notion of not being seen or heard during this time is expressed by a young person's view on the Coronavirus pandemic as reported in Gillinson's article about how COVID-19 has affected youth theatres during the Coronavirus pandemic: "My friends and I talk about the coronavirus all the time. But our views are not on the news... we are invisible" (Gillinson, 2020). This was echoed by the young people of WCT, who told us often during this period of home-schooling that 'teachers never listen to us'.

In addition to being misrepresented in the media, young people continue to be underrepresented in research. Garcia states that: "till this day, youth continue to be excluded, discriminated against, and underrepresented within political spheres" (Garcia, 2019: 3), and this filters through to other areas such as healthcare research. Wilson et al., in a Wellcome Trust report, suggests that young people's involvement and representation in health care research is much less prevalent than that of adults as they "are often not invited to participate in research" (Wilson et al., 2020: 4). The above examples all suggest that young people from certain backgrounds, despite efforts by many to recognise their competencies, are under-and/or misrepresented and therefore I argue that they can be considered a marginalised group.

6.3 Young People as Competent Beings

Young people are simply by virtue of being young often considered less knowledgeable, less experienced and less agentic than adults (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2016; Qvortrup, 2016; Coutts, 2020). In some ways, this feels commonsensical: e.g., they are less knowledgeable because they have not completed formal education; they have less experience because they have been alive less time; they possess less agency because they do not have the right to vote; and they are developmentally not as ‘fully formed’ as adults. In opposition to this idea, a central component underpinning my theatre practice is the perception of young people as entirely competent in being young people, in being themselves. While this at first glance might be considered unproblematic, as explored in this chapter, there is a history of young people perceived by adults in their lives as ‘adults-in-the-making’, they are waiting to ‘become’; they attend school and learn about life so that they can become ‘good adults’. It is in response to this perception that there have been movements in participatory research, often also reflected in applied theatre as an area of practice, to re-evaluate the status of the child and to recognise their competencies. For example, Palaiologou (2012) advocates for a perspective of childhood which perceives children in light of who they are now, rather than who they will become.

This perspective leads to an approach of meeting young people where they are at any given moment in their lives. *Critical Incident 4: Best Zoom Ever* demonstrates a moment of facilitating a space which focused on meeting the young people exactly where they were at that time.



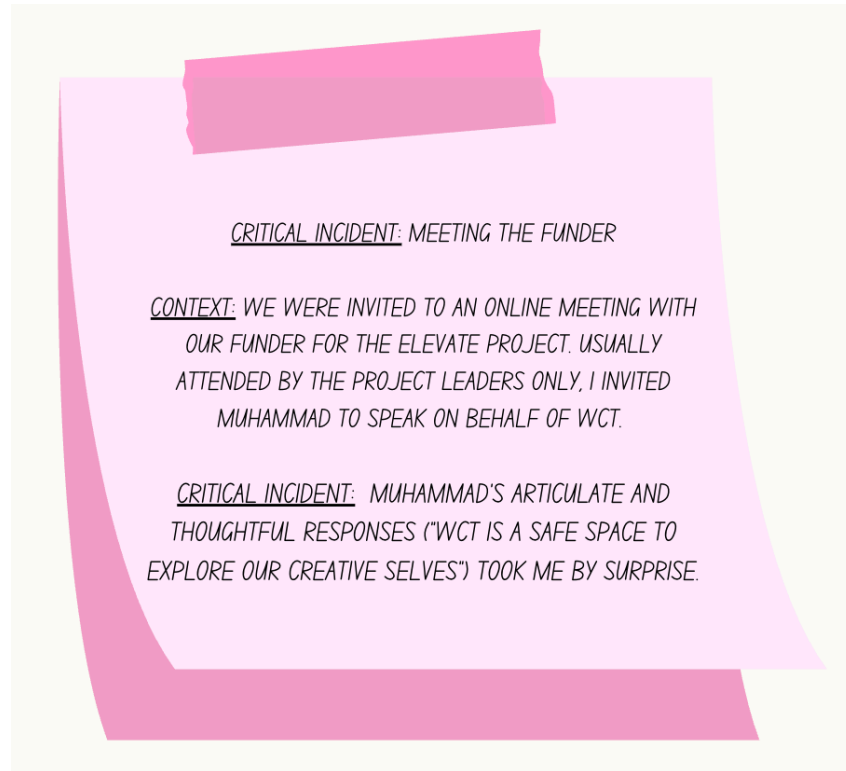
Critical Incident 4 - Best Zoom Ever

During an online session, WCT Co-Artistic Director Mark suggested making a podcast. Excitement broke out in the group. This was clearly something they were familiar with and keen to explore. After weeks and weeks of conversations, enforced by COVID lockdowns, the focus shifted to 'making' again, and with it the mood also shifted. Judging from the excitement of the young people, this was exactly in tune with what they wanted to do. Mark and I asked them how we should finish the session and, on their request, we rounded off with a dance-off to the well-known song *Video Killed the Radio Star*. Simple but fun and joyful, and exactly what the young people needed and wanted at that time. It felt like a very successful session, completely led by the young people and the elation we all felt during that dance-off was palpable. It was as though offering the option of a podcast unlocked something in them, and they took to it like

ducks to water. Ruddock and Fielding state that “what matters to students is their lives in school now” (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006: 223). Albeit not a school context, in *Critical Incident 3: Best Zoom Ever* we gauged the mood and met them exactly where they were at that moment. The young person’s comment that it was ‘the best Zoom ever’ as we signed off spoke volumes about how they felt about it.

However, meeting young people where they are is not always easy. Ned Glasier reflects on his own practice as the Artistic Director of young people’s theatre company Company Three: “Maybe at the start we were thinking about teenagers in the way that a lot of the world thinks about teenagers; teenagers need to develop into adults and they need to be turned into good adults” (Jubb, 2020). Adopting this view, I would argue, is to suggest that they lack agency and autonomy and are waiting to become adults to have “something salient to contribute” (Tisdall et al., 2008: 1). This notion invokes the idea that adolescence is a process of “becoming” (Water, 2018: 43); an in-between stage where one is not a child but also not quite yet at the desired and complete stage of an adult. Although this view has been much criticised (see Gallagher, 2008; Coyne and Carter 2018), Jean Ruddock and Michael Fielding refer to Anne Oakley’s assertion that as adults we are “often preoccupied” with young people’s status as “would-be” adults—rather than the here and now state of “being” (Oakley, 1994 cited in Ruddock and Fielding, 2006: 223). Glasier states that “[Company Three] have learned as a company to celebrate teenagers for exactly who they are, right now, and we have a principle in the work, we will meet the members for who they are right now” (Jubb, 2020). As expressed so eloquently in Company Three’s play *Brainstorm*, which is about the teenage brain: “most

people thought teenagers were just crap adults” (Glasier and Lim, 2016: 21), suggesting that “[t]he anticipation of and voyage towards adulthood [...] characterise adults’ attitudes to children” (Qvortrup, 2016: 22). This is also something I must confess to having been guilty of myself and often reflect upon; as adults we are often conditioned into viewing young people as ‘lesser than’ us through our own formal education and media discourse. Having worked with young people for many years has made me re-evaluate how I perceive young people, and I make conscious efforts to focus on young people’s existing competencies rather than the more negative “adult-like qualities they still lack” (Broström, 2012: 258). In *Critical Incident 5: Meeting the Funder*, I took action to value a young person’s competencies the same as I would an adult’s; I invited Muhammad, a young person, to join me in an online meeting with our funder to talk about our project.



Critical Incident 5 - Meeting the Funder

As our projects are co-created with the young people, it was a given to also invite a young person to represent WCT alongside me. I knew Muhammad would do us justice, as I know him to be a very intelligent and articulate young person. I would like to think that I actively seek to challenge my own assumptions, given the work and research I do, and that I view young people from a strengths-based perspective. Yet my response gave me cause to doubt that I had fully internalised this perspective. Coyne and Carter (2018) assert that viewing children and young people from a strength-based rather than a deficit-based perspective is key. Yet viewing young people from a deficit-based perspective is ingrained in us as adults, as proven by my own reaction. Reflection has enabled me to challenge this assumption.

Thus, viewing young people as “active, social actors and beings” (Coyne and Carter, 2018: 5) in their own right, “being prepared to ‘see’ young people differently” (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006: 225), is a step towards recognising their strengths and capabilities. So long as children and young people are provided with “appropriate tools that play to their capabilities and strengths”, even very young children can “convey their views” (Coyne and Carter, 2018: 5). The strengths and capabilities of young people are their perspective, which is unique and cannot be replicated by anyone else’s perspective. If we are to value that uniqueness through a participatory approach, the adults/practitioners must find those strengths in the young people they work with, provide the tools, and effectively implement them. Stevens-Ballenger and Jeannet suggest that “there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the ways in which a child is positioned within an experience can directly affect their level of engagement” (Stevens-Ballenger and Jeannet, 2024: 65). They posit that it is practices which “provide opportunities to make choices and contribute ideas that are pivotal to [...] the voice of the child” (Stevens-Ballenger and Jeannet, 2024: 65). Therefore, in addition to this shift in perception of young people there needs to also be a shift in our practice and how we engage with young people and how we position them within our work. In my conversation with Etchells he addressed how he and Forced Entertainment approach their work with young people:

There’s so many different versions of what a young person's existence is and the adult world interfaces with that in so many different ways. I don’t doubt that the project *That Night Follows Day* is centred in a particular place, comes from a particular place. We’ve

done rehearsed readings of the piece in quite diverse cultural contexts — Beijing in China for example — and you have to think hard about what the level of connect is, what needs to be changed and what doesn't need to be changed. There's always that possibility to make changes and if the young people say 'no that would never happen', then we're always up for it. (Etchells, Conversation on Zoom, 2020)

In Etchells' example, regardless of the context, the young people are positioned as 'competent beings' and the adults always remain open to positioning them as such. This in turn can nourish young people's self-concept and sense of potential. WCT participant and later also Co-Artistic Director Muhammad declares that: "I had never seen myself as facilitating or being a director of a theatre company [...] it made me more interested in facilitating, it meant I could see myself in the future perhaps facilitating at other theatre companies or similar creative art spaces" (Glarin, 2025). Being positioned and recognised as 'competent' opened up new possibilities for Muhammad.

WCT's offer to young people was anchored in our commitment to provide them with a space in which they could be their authentic and creative selves. [The Realist podcast](#), while conceived by my co-artistic director Mark, was entirely their space to do with what they wished. The young people wrote and spoke the introduction; they decided on the content and took complete ownership of the whole production. Enabling this also meant a shift in how we, as adults, tend to view young people. Ruddock and Fielding state that "student voice initiatives require that we review our notions of childhood" (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006: 225). Adults must treat young

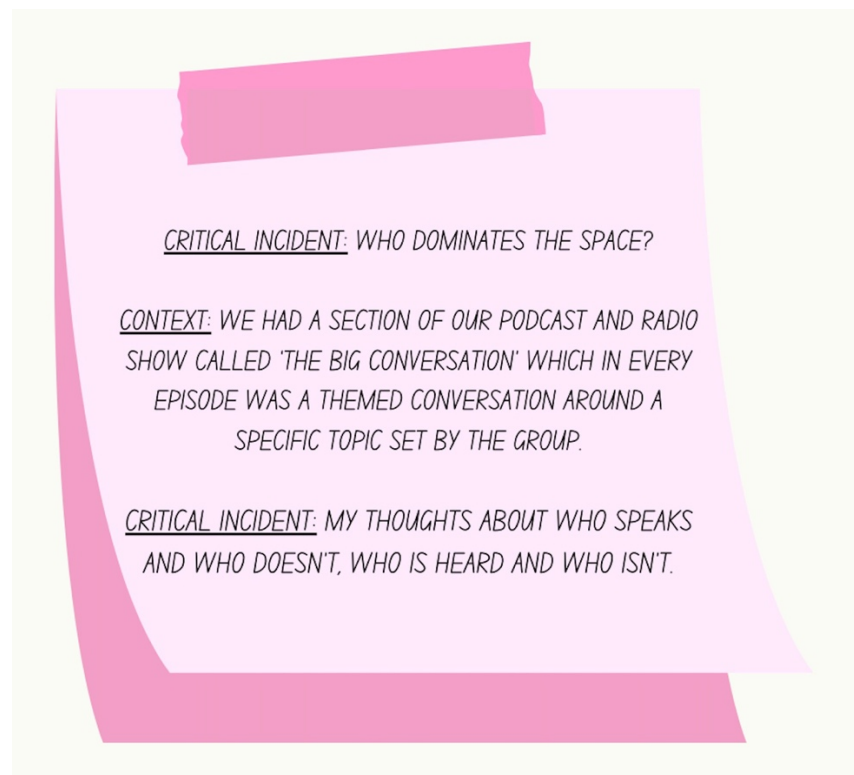
people more as equals and not simply dismiss their opinions due to what we might perceive as a lack of maturity or competence.

6.4 Youth Voice(s) – A Plurality

In an apparent paradox to this exclusion of young people, the notion of youth voice is prevalent in research, education and young people’s participation discourse (Ruddick and Fielding, 2006; Cook-Sather, 2006; Halsey et al., 2006; Serido et al., 2011; Stern, 2015). Youth voice is often simply a term used to describe the “distinct ideas, opinions, attitudes, knowledge, and actions of young people as a collective body” (Youth Work Unit website, 2025). However, the language used in this literature is telling, and young people are not a homogenous group—an “undifferentiated mass” who “sing in unison” (Stern, 2015: 76)—thus, ‘youth voices’ is a more appropriate articulation. It is not any different to how we refer to adults. Despite this, many youth organisations use ‘youth voice’ to signify work which is participatory and co-produced with a group of young people (see websites for Action for Children, 2025; Youth Music, 2025; YMCA George Williams College, 2022; Youth First, 2025; National Youth Agency 1a, n.d.). It is encouraging, however, to note that UNICEF acknowledged the shift from ‘voice’ to ‘voices’ and their dedicated Voices of Youth website (UNICEF, 2025) reflects this.

In the context of theatre-making with young people, the notion of a plurality of voices is critical, and dialogue is a crucial tool which can bring individual voices to the fore, as “[v]oices are in relationships, in dialogue, even when – especially when – they are opposed to each other” (Stern, 2015: 77). Pioneering applied theatre professor Sally Mackey describes applied theatre

practical research as a “polyphonic conversation” and posits that “polyphony suggest a number of different voices participating in the overall project, frequently following their own routes and independent needs, sometimes harmonious and occasionally not” (Mackey, 2016: 487). The young people in the WCT group entered the space with their own individual needs which we recognised and welcomed. While the young people often shared similar views and were in agreement, it was the occasions of *not* agreeing that tended to spur interesting dialogue and heated debate. The place for debate tended to be during the [Big Conversation](#), a regular feature on our podcast and radio show. In *Critical Incident 6: Who Dominates the Space?* I ponder the dynamics of who in this segment is heard and who is not, and who dominates the conversations.



Critical Incident 6 - Who Dominates the Space?

The Big Conversation was a free-flowing and uncensored conversation led by the young people, which had grown organically during COVID when we only met online (more about this in Chapter 9 (The Curveballs of COVID-19)). Did opening the floor to a free-flowing conversation in this way lead to anyone being unknowingly excluded? These were thoughts that I often reflected upon. After having listened to all episodes ([edited versions on Morley Radio](#) and [rough cuts from streaming platforms](#)), which featured the Big Conversation, I think it is a good example of how multiple voices in a ‘polyphonic conversation’ were facilitated through dialogue. From the topics we selected, how they were approached and how everyone was given their time to speak and share their own thoughts, I argue that these conversations fostered a non-hierarchical space in which everyone felt safe to express themselves freely. An example that demonstrates this is the young person who spoke openly about how their autism affects them in our [first ever episode of The Realist](#): “people call me weird because of my actions to others [...] and I end up feeling alone, which affects my friendships with other people” (Waterloo Community Theatre, 2021a). The young person speaks very candidly about their disability, leaving them open to vulnerabilities by so openly sharing their personal feelings and struggles. Yet, they chose to do so in our space, which speaks volumes about the space we have cultivated together.

The way this is handled, I would argue, is largely dependent on how the space is set up and facilitated. Thus, ‘voice’ becomes concerned with a process of facilitating multiple *voices* through dialogue and a non-hierarchical approach, as described in *Critical Incident 6: Who*

Dominates the Space? While the Big Conversation as a concept was initiated by us adults, the way it was facilitated, simply by already having created a culture of conversation and trust in the group meant that the young people felt confident to speak up and take up the space they felt they needed and wanted in any given session. Another young person, who always was the quieter one in the theatre-making sessions, commented: “I really enjoy being part of this session, and I feel like my voice is heard, and every time I feel like I wanna say something, I feel like you guys will listen... like understand... try to understand...” (Waterloo Community Theatre, 2021b). This young person’s reflection on how they feel that their voice is heard, is concerned with the rest of the group’s ability to listen and, at least, ‘try to understand’. In the making of the ELEVATE films (which we collaborated on with two other organisations and were funded through Lambeth Borough and is described in detail in the [online portfolio](#)), we, the adults *and* the young people, made space for a plurality of voices and really listened to each other. The young people steered a process which was facilitated by the adults, who, for example, supported the girls’ and boys’ groups radically different choices of filmmaking approach. Thus, listening becomes a key element in the facilitation of voices, and listening as a practice is discussed in detail in the next section.

In addition to ‘youth voice(s)’, the notion of ‘giving voice’ is often used in social policy and youth services in discourse around youth participation, and therefore, ought to be addressed in this section. Personally, I take issue with this phrase as I believe it suggests that voice is lacking, hence it is being given. Young people *have* a voice, and they all have their own individual, unique voice, but as a marginalised group, their voices are often not listened to. Busby asserts

that “rather than focusing on ‘giving’ voice to others we must recognise that participants already have a voice” (Busby, 2023: 117). Nonetheless, there continue to be a plethora of projects and initiatives which concern adults ‘giving voice’ to young people. A good example of how young people were listened to but perhaps framed without much thought is the European Commission’s article addressing young people who were consulted in a youth policy dialogue with Commissioner Hoekstra. The article boldly states that they are “giving young people a voice” (European Commission, 2025). By virtue of using this phrase, the underlying power hierarchies of adults and young people are perpetuated; ‘we are the adults, so therefore we give you voice’. In addition, the notion of one voice, rather than a plurality of voices, is maintained, which adds to the problematic nature of this headline. Therefore, while it is no doubt done with good intentions, I suggest that the use of the phrase ‘giving voice’ is problematic, and therefore, I try to avoid it.

6.5 Listening as a Practice

A young person who presented about their research project at a York St John University conference alongside my fellow PhD researcher Alice Little in October 2022 declared: “I think there is a difference between being heard and then actively doing something about it. Like school have listened, whether they are actually then doing anything is different” (Little, 2022).

With this statement, it could be argued that the young person suggests that the kind of listening taking place in school is merely tokenistic, as it has no follow-through. Perhaps, despite good intentions, in a school, teachers are often too stretched for time and/or too confined by the restrictions of the school system and the curriculum to be able to offer the

required follow-through. Listening then, for the young person, becomes concerned with some form of action following the listening exercise. In [Episode 7](#) (Waterloo Community Theatre, 2021c) of the podcast, the young people talk about teachers in a very negative way and express the different ways in which they feel that they are not being listened to in school: “I really, physically hate school. We are literally forced to sit next to people that we don’t wanna sit next to, and we have to deal with it. Like, anything we say, no one cares, literally, no one cares”. Another young person declares: “They have absolutely no idea what we are going through at home, yet all they do is shout at us”. Poignantly, one young person remarks in this podcast episode:

The funny thing is, no teacher ever asks us if we are ok. Like, once me and [name of young person] sent a massive, long email about the way we are feeling, about the amount of homework we are getting, and the teacher literally just said we have to do the homework. She never gave us a response of, like, she can make a change for us, to feel a little bit more you know, to feel more better about school. (Glarin, 2025)

These comments paint a wider picture of how the young people feel about school and their teachers’ inability to create a listening and caring environment, and the teachers’ inability to act on students’ suggestions.

ACE suggest that change through listening is best facilitated through “neutral spaces where young people feel comfortable and safe sharing their views, ideas and concerns”, and while “empathy is key” it boils down to the facilitator being a trained “great listener” (Arts Council England website, 2025b). Judging from the comments above, young people do not perceive

school as a ‘comfortable’ space which gives room for ‘empathy’ and listening. Of course, this does not mean to say that there is something inherently bad about teachers; it is perhaps the confines of the school environment that set up these challenging conditions for teachers to navigate.

So what constitutes a great listener? Chris McRae in his chapter on *Compassionate Critical Listening*, describes listening as “an act of dialogue” which is informed by a “commitment to working toward genuine understanding” (McRae, 2015: 70) and it is “our practices as listeners” which can “begin to produce or constitute, and even change, existing structures” (McRae, 2015: 74). As facilitators, listening therefore is critical to our work in enabling young people’s voices.

For Company Three, “listening and relationships are at the heart of [their] approach” (Arts Council England, 2025b):

Staff are supported through regular practice labs which provide space for weekly reflection, problem-solving, learning and professional development. Time is set aside for discussions about equity and representation, and paid training opportunities are offered to facilitators. These are considered “sacred spaces” which are held in diaries during the week to ensure that people across the company have the time and support to continually reflect, learn and grow through developing youth voice practice. (Arts Council England website, 2025b)

Thus, listening becomes the greatest and most valuable skill to enable effective change through youth participation.

In our conversation, Glasier muses:

I think it starts before the seed of the idea in some way, so what it starts with I think, and what I've learnt, and what I tried to express in the last few years is that it's massively about a listening practice right? So [Company Three] are a company that, for listening, is the one of the most important things we'll ever do and creating spaces to listen in which we don't know what the outcome is going to be are really important because then the right things rise up and then you can start to develop the resources into the work. (Glasier, Conversation on Zoom, 2020b)

In theatre-making, therefore, listening is concerned with the complex task of creating the right space, with the right people who are adequately trained—who are competent—and have sufficient time to reflect on what is said. It is only then that the environment through which the work of making theatre can truly be created and take place.

Etchells, in our conversation, emphasises that it is about "listening and opening rather than imposing and channelling" (Etchells, 2020). In other words, listening as a practice is being open to the perspectives of others rather than dictating and imposing one's own ideas and assumptions. Through my practice with young people, I have learned to continuously challenge myself, to stop myself from imposing my own ideas and allow for a listening practice to develop.

6.6 Finding Voice and Identity

As described in Chapter 1 (Introduction), I started to find my voice as a teenager upon joining the amateur dramatics group. I had a space to express myself through theatre, and it felt significantly different to being in school as I felt listened to. As I went on to study acting and drama aged 19, I found myself among like-minded people, and it gave me the courage to explore my identity through drama and theatre as a young adult. I would say that this is where I started to understand who I was and my place in the world; this is where I started to find *my* voice.

Ruddock and Fielding suggest that the “implications of ‘finding a voice’ are greater” than being able to have a say, as they engage with “issues of personal identity” (Ruddock and Fielding, 2006: 224). It could be argued that it is only when we know who we are—our identity and our ‘true’ self—that we can find our voice. Kathleen Gallagher recognises that the notion of a “true” self can be problematic (Gallagher, 2016: 119); as identity “is always a plural and always in process” (Brah, 1996: 195) suggesting the process is manifold and fluid - perhaps even more so now that we live in a globalised world in which finding identity and belonging is increasingly challenging (Nicholson, 2009). Therefore, dedicated youth spaces which can support young people to explore and express themselves are vital. Ruddock and Fielding discuss youth voice in the context of the traditional classroom setting, which, in their prescriptive approach, can be “by their very nature, places where individual affirmation is not all that easy to come by” (Hart et al., 2004, cited in Ruddock and Fielding 2006: 224). This environment does not traditionally

perhaps encourage agency and the notion of youth voice(s), instead being conducive to group conformity (Kirby and Webb, 2020).

Theatre made with marginalised groups in non-traditional settings such as prisons, hospitals and youth settings, often with a social change agenda, tends to be representational of the group's unified identity, the thing that brings them together in that space. For WCT, it was theatre-making and telling the stories of young people. However, that is not to say that they are all representing one voice. Quite the opposite, the plurality of voices is evident in the Big Conversation feature on The Realist podcast, where all young people readily offer their own individual opinions. In the [ELEVATE film project](#), it became very clear that there were opposing voices as the girls gravitated towards one subject they felt strongly about, and they felt represented by it, while the boys went a completely different route. Thus, applied theatre, as a “representational” form of expression (Sanae, 358: 2020), can offer a suitable space for expression and facilitation of voice(s) as it is a space in which identity navigation is encouraged. Busby asserts it is where “young people develop their identities and challenge hegemony by contesting social conventions and asserting their independence” (Busby, 2023: 165). It can help young people explore how they wish to represent themselves—who they want to be—in the world and techniques used in applied theatre lend themselves to this very well.

A young person in a recent youth theatre census states that “I joined Youth Theatre because at school I feel like I am judged by other people in my class, but here I’m comfortable with everyone and I’m not afraid to try things that are out of the box that I wouldn’t be in school.”

(Glasier, 2024: 2). This statement suggests that the youth theatre space can offer a unique environment which encourages identity navigation and exploration, and certainly, as described in Chapter 1 (Introduction), I can relate to this personally. Drama gave me agency as a young person, and as such, as Erin Walcon argues in her PhD thesis, drama can give young people “authorship of a life” (Walcon, 2012: 13), i.e. *their* life. Nicholson describes how “young people are finding a place to develop with professional theatre-makers theatrical languages and performance vocabularies that reflect their identities and represent their experiences” (Nicholson, 2009: 46).

Similarly, Glasier affirms that “youth theatre has become a crucial force for young people, their communities and the theatre industry”, even though “youth services have been cut and the arts marginalised in schools” (Glasier, 2025). It is a “place of self-expression and artistic exploration” (Glasier, 2025). A young person who attended sessions with WCT confirms that “you don’t really have to be scared about who you are when you come here” and another one agrees: “give us our space where we can be ourselves, and we can show you how we actually feel without being scared of judgment or anything” (Johnson, 2019). In [Episode 8](#) of The Realist podcast, one young person declares that “my favourite thing is, if we feel very strongly about something, we are gonna end up making a script about it. And we’re gonna end up sharing it on a podcast, and I love just sharing how we feel with no judgement from anyone” (Glarin, 2025). In the same episode, another young person asserts that they really like it because:

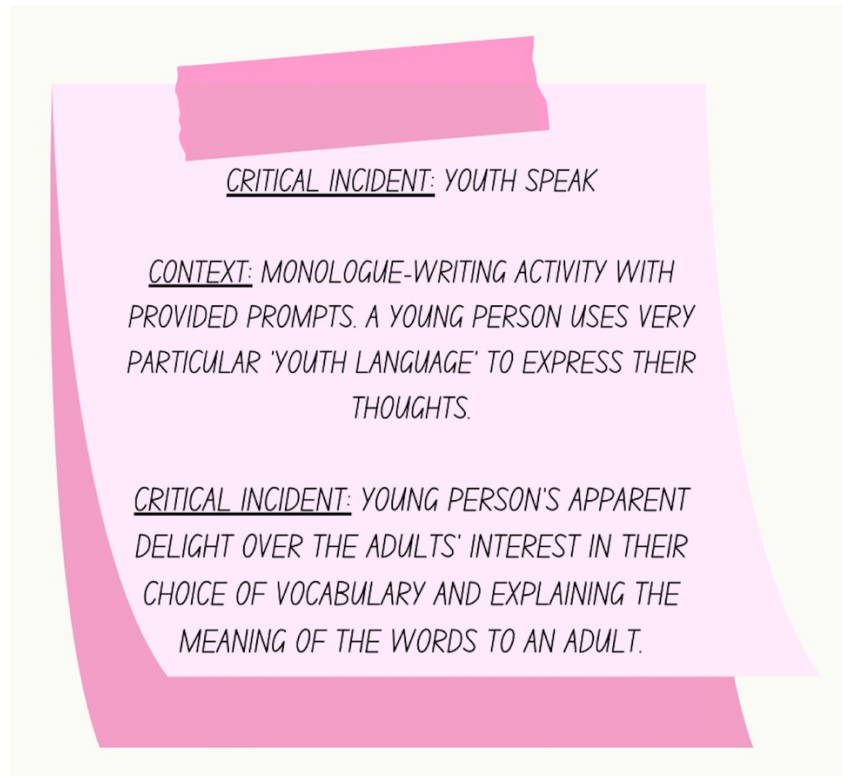
you can be creative and you can be you, without judgment. And when you have an idea, you can just say it, make a script out of it, or right now we are doing a podcast so if we have a really strong opinion on something, you can say everything you want to say onto the podcast and people all around the world can listen to it and learn more about your opinions. (Glarin, 2025)

These are all examples which demonstrate how the young people are finding their own voice and identity through their participation in WCT's creative making-sessions. An example of how young people used creative expression to explore voice and identity in a time when many young people felt 'invisible' was Company Three's creation of the Coronavirus Time Capsule during the pandemic. In response to feeling that they were excluded from the COVID-19 discourse, even though young people are one of the groups worst affected by it (Leavey et al., 2020), the young people of Company Three created the Coronavirus Time Capsule. It was an online piece of performance art created during lockdown, and with its worldwide reach⁶ goes some way to suggest the power of theatre to amplify the voices of youth. It demonstrated that "theatre is, more than ever, a vital place for community and expression where young people can be listened to and supported" (Company Three website, n.d).

⁶ Theatre companies and youth groups from all over the world participated, stretching from Scotland, Spain and the Netherlands in Europe, to Kenya in Africa, Thailand in Asia and the United States (and many other countries).

6.7 Young People as Experts

The Coronavirus Time Capsule also serves to give the rest of the world a glimpse into the young people's worlds, as COVID-19 was experienced by them. There is no doubt that young people are the experts on their own world, and "experts in their own lives" (Coyne and Carter, 2018: 2). However, it is perhaps understandable that it can be difficult to view young people as experts as it challenges the common notion and traditional view that adults are more knowledgeable, for example in the teacher/student relationship where adults by default are perceived as having more knowledge. Due to this perceived notion, it can be "hard for [adults] not to play a directing role" (Hart, 1992: 14). Reflecting on my practice, I am aware that I sometimes tend to direct young people more than I should. I reflected on this particularly during the making of the [ELEVATE films](#). I was able to take a step back and oversee the logistics of the process rather than facilitating the actual filmmaking as we were working with external filmmakers who took on this role. Reflection has enabled an awareness, which means I can address it and remain reflexive. Similar to Dorothy Heathcote's notion of the "Mantle of the Expert" (Heathcote and Herbert, 1985) which involves children and young people "taking on the responsibilities of people with expertise" (Taylor, 2017: n.p.), the young person in *Critical Incident 7: Youth Speak*, adopted the responsibility of person with expertise—the Mantle of the Expert—and led the activity as the expert they are.



Critical Incident 7 - Youth Speak

The young person's vernacular with words such as 'mandem', which is slang for a group of boys, was unfamiliar to me. In this incident, it is the young person who knows the meaning of the words they use, not the adult; thus, the young person is positioned as the story originator and topic expert. The young person felt very strongly that their specific youth vernacular had to be recognised and kept intact, as this was their story. I expressed my lack of knowledge about this word, and the young person seemed delighted in the fact that I was interested to learn and understanding its meaning. They took great pleasure in assuming the role of expert and explaining its meaning to me, and this shifted our pre-assumed roles of who is the expert in the space. It 'allowed' the young person to tell their story in their own words, and it also gave them

‘license’ to lead the activity. As Coyne and Carter describe in their work on participatory research and co-constructing knowledge with children and young people, young people’s stories ought to be told as they want them to be told as they are the “most important source of evidence on how their lives are lived and experienced” (Coyne and Carter, 2018: 9). It is simply a matter of adults recognising their expertise. A young person from the Hackney Youth Parliament on the importance of listening to the opinions of young people professed: “Society must trust us with the keys to the truck and the ability to drive it” (Yussuf, 2021).

It must be acknowledged that my positionality as a white Scandinavian woman in my forties, as touched upon in Chapter 4.5 (Perspectives and Biases), does not just influence any space I enter; it also influences how I understand and interpret my observations and relate to the young people. The word ‘mandem’, with its origin in Caribbean English Creole, is not a word white people in their 40s tend to use. Not only are the young people and I from different generations, but for the majority, our race and cultural heritage also mark a significant difference. Thus, my understanding of my observations can be significantly different to how the young people may interpret them. I cannot ever claim to fully understand or represent the young people, as our positionalities are so vastly different. As demonstrated by *Critical Incident 7: Youth Speak*, I am not familiar with young people’s vernacular, but in this instance, I recognised this and was wholly transparent about it. By being aware of and transparent about these different positionalities, this CI demonstrates how I used my lack of knowledge to create a space for learning for me, and which we negotiated together.

The strategy I adopted to elicit the young person's expertise in *Critical Incident 7: Youth Speak* very much originated from me as the facilitator and theatre professional. The specific activity from which this incident emerged was designed to provide a starting point for a monologue piece, which they could develop further, with prompts from me guiding them through the activity. This element of the activity was, in fact, entirely led by me, but while I always strive for a more participatory approach and view it as the more ethical stance, I argue that my chosen approach is not necessarily obstructive to a participatory approach. Hart's (1992) reference to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* scenario serves as a reminder that "while there may be many valuable examples of children organizing themselves without adults, these are not always for good causes" (Hart, 1992: 5).

It is worth noting that while the young person in *Critical Incident 7: Youth Speak* arguably is the expert on their own life and their own world, it does not necessarily mean they are experts in the lives of young people in general, and there could be a risk of treating young people as a homogenous group if one is not sensitive to this.

This chapter has argued that polyphonic dialogue and a listening practice that recognises young people as experts in their own lived experiences have emerged as foundational components of a theatre-making approach that seeks to explore the potentials and possibilities of creating work *with* young people. The moments of practice presented in the critical incidents illustrate how I have navigated the tensions inherent in such collaborative processes. When practitioners

intentionally cultivate environments in which these principles—or ‘ingredients’—can flourish, we move closer to establishing a witness-centred theatre-making practice.

Chapter 7 – Complexities of the Shared Space in Practice

This chapter examines the complexities inherent in the shared spaces occupied by adults and young people within collaborative theatre-making contexts. Drawing on examples from my practice, I illustrate how I navigated the challenges of devising and creating work as an adult practitioner alongside the young people of WCT. The discussion highlights how moments of challenge, tension, or disagreement frequently become sites of insight and learning. The chapter also outlines how my Practice as Research (PaR) generated strategies for engaging with these tensions. It provides examples of how I cultivated and critically reflected upon this shared and often contested space through a witness lens, my predetermined framework for assessing the extent to which witness was present—or absent—in those interactions.

7.1 Knowledge Exchange and Reciprocity in the Theatre-Making Space

Hart's sixth rung of The Ladder of Participation; 'Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children', he argues is considered "true participation because, although the projects at this level are initiated by adults, the decision-making is shared with the young people" (Hart, 1992: 12). Rather than merely focusing on the young people's participation, it becomes a process of knowledge exchange, which is at the heart of a witness-centred practice.

In the context of collaborative theatre-making, adults and young people can both be considered experts on something the other wants to learn about. The young people presumably attend the sessions because they enjoy it and/or have an interest in making theatre and want to learn about it. The adults presumably (certainly I do) facilitate theatre-making with young people

because we want to learn about their perspectives and tell their stories through the medium of theatre. An extensive sense-checking process, therefore, was integral to ensuring the work was authentic and represented the young people. It was a constant to-ing and fro-ing, with us adults asking “‘is this what you said?’, ‘is this what you mean?’, ‘did I interpret that correctly?’, ‘do you think this works?’” (Glarin, 2020). Consequently, the interaction between the young people and adults becomes an exchange of knowledge, a mutually beneficial reciprocity. In my conversation with Etchells, he reflects on his position of knowledge as the director and the experience the young people bring:

I have literally spent 35 years or longer, in fact, thinking about what happens on stages; I do that all the time. As creative and brilliant as a 10-year-old can be, they haven’t done that. It would be silly to deny that you’ve got skills and stuff. And it doesn’t matter how old [the young people] are, they are also bringing all of their experience and that you’re smart enough to listen to them. (Etchells, Conversation on Zoom, 2020)

This two-way process of learning from one another is akin to Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO); the idea that children learn more effectively from someone who has greater knowledge and understanding of a particular task than the learner.

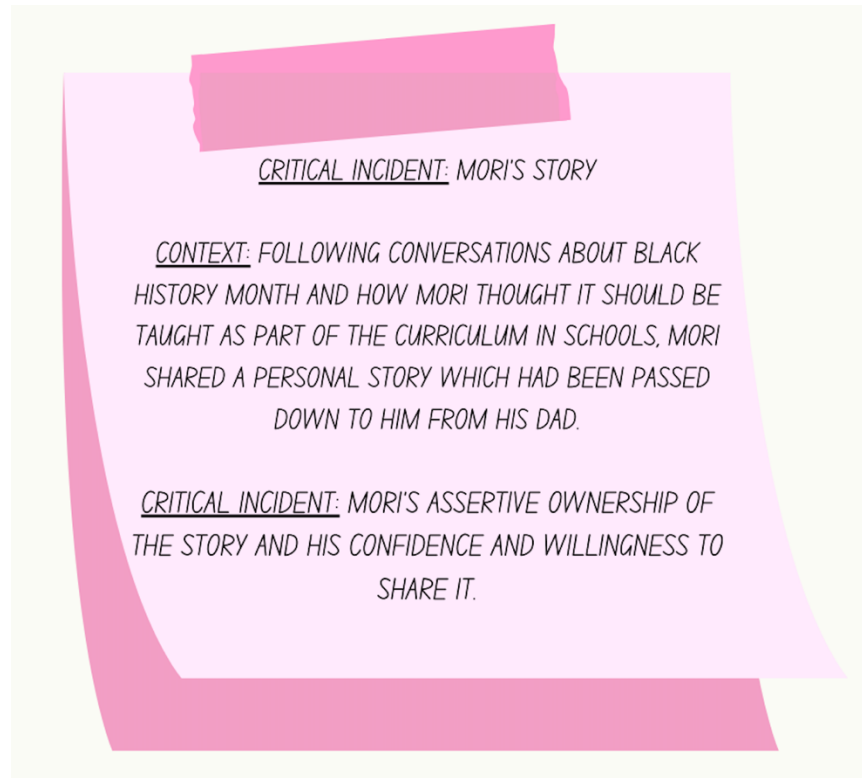
Hart states that children “need to engage in collaborative activities with other persons, including those who are older and more experienced than themselves” (Hart, 1992: 7). Indeed, the purpose of my work with young people is to use theatre as a means of expressing their words effectively. While the words originate from the young people, it is the adults who are the

professional theatre-makers with years of experience in the field. The adults become the MKO when we facilitate theatre-making sessions using our expertise as theatre-makers.

However, the adults are learners just as much as the young people and we have “lessons to learn” (Hart, 1992: 5). We simply do not know what it means to be young today; the young people assume the role of the MKO on the topic, creating an equilibrium of knowledge exchange. Etchells says of Forced Entertainment’s experimental practice that they try to

give people skills, an appetite for different approaches to theatre and to drama, to performance, what can be done with it and what their role in it might be. Obviously, part of that’s trying to permission different kinds of creativity and different kind of skills and different kinds of approaches because that’s where we come from. So, in that sense I’d think about it as an alternative skill sharing, helping people develop creatively as potential makers or performers or artists. (Etchells, Conversation on Zoom, 2020)

Etchells’ description of what is occurring as an ‘alternative skill sharing’ resonates with me as although we are sharing our skills as theatre-makers, the young people are also sharing their skills and knowledge. This is demonstrated in *Critical Incident 8: Mori’s Story*. The young person was the expert, as the story he told originated from him.



Critical Incident 8 - Mori's Story

In this CI, Mori passionately shared a story about his heritage, which had been passed down to him from his dad. As Mark and I invited him to share it with the group, we positioned him as the expert he was, as the story was his (the idea of authorship and ownership is discussed in detail in Glarin, 2020). This was followed by a conversation with the whole group where we asked Mori questions and together, yet led by Mori, started to build what was to become his segment in their film [*Legacy: Where are you really from?*](#) This CI demonstrates an instance when the young person was the expert, and this was recognised by the adults who took a step back and allowed the young person to lead, asserting the young person as the expert. Etchells reflects on his process of making theatre *with* young people:

We did the workshops, they shared thoughts and ideas, they wrote bits of text, I wrote bits of text. I took everything away and assembled little bits which we then read together. It was developed in an ongoing... to and fro with them. It was about trying to make sense of how it fitted, how it sat in the room. What sense it made, what sense they were making of it, that I was making of it. (Etchells, Conversation on Zoom, 2020)

The process, as described by Etchells, suggests an ongoing dialogue, a 'to and fro', a process of sense-making together, and he confirms that it "was a dialogue with them, always" (Etchells, 2020). While it always is a dialogue, Glasier's stance is that every choice made in the creative process must be driven by the young people:

If we are making a play and we start with... er, a coffee cup, because that's what's in front of me right now. The choice of what to ask about that coffee cup or what to find out about that coffee cup should be given to the young people. The choice of where to research that or how to research that or how to understand it should be given to the young people because every choice they make will be informed by their culture, background, taste, interests. (Glasier, Conversation on Zoom 2020b)

While the drive and motivation certainly ought to come from the young people, I would argue that where to take that knowledge or those creative ideas always remains a conversation, as knowledge exchange takes place and positions of power are negotiated. Etchells acknowledges his position of power as the MKO while working with young people on the play *That Night*

Follows Day and states: “sometimes [the young people] are not always brilliant at seeing the box that they’re in because they’re in it” (Etchells, 2020).

This exchange of knowledge can be seen as a collaborative dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978) as we bring our respective expertise together for a mutually agreed purpose. Reflecting on our theatre-making process in WCT, one young person expressed their perception of how this knowledge exchange happens: “Because you’re telling us what to do but you’re not really telling us... I don’t know... um, it’s like... it’s like... you’re telling us what to do but then we can like make it our own... ” (Johnson, 2019). The collaborative and co-creative process of making the ELEVATE films, as explored in my portfolio [ELEVATE – A Film Project](#) (Glarin, 2025) demonstrates how the young people learned from the MKO, the adults. This could suggest that to the young people, as theatre professionals, we share our knowledge and use it to guide the group. The young people can interpret and apply it to their own worldview of what it means to be young today, and it can help them tell their stories more effectively. They recognise that while we are ‘telling them what to do’, we do it because we are the experts in making theatre. During the making of the ELEVATE films and the podcast, it was very much the case of the adults being the MKO as we introduced new media and kit for the young people to explore, which they had never used before. Yet the content created always originated from the young people, and the final decisions on how to share it and tell their stories remained with the young people, as they are the owners of those stories (Glarin, 2020). This suggests that, as the MKO in theatre-making, it is our duty to ask questions and challenge the young people’s ideas to get the best result.

In the words of Ranciere, “[i]t’s the disciple that makes the master” (Ranciere, 1991: 19) and one can teach the other only if the other is “obliged to use his own intelligence” (Ranciere, 1991: 15), his own will, to learn. The young people lend us the power to be the masters of our expertise, and reciprocally, the adults lend the power to the young people to be masters of their expertise. In the context of WCT, we attempted to disrupt the power hierarchy by willingly and knowingly learning from the other, resulting in the presence of knowledge exchange and reciprocity. I argue that this helps to develop; we all enter the space with the unspoken intentionality to learn from each other and co-create something artistic. Thus, a *co-intentionality* emerges.

Critical Incident 2: I Thought It Was Really Authentic in Chapter 4 (Methodology) demonstrates this well, as our co-intentionality for the podcast was to create something authentic yet professional, and through reciprocity and learning from the MKO, we reached an agreement together that we were all happy with. During the making of the ELEVATE films, we adopted a process of “plussing” (Belliveau, 2015: 11), with everyone contributing with ideas and therefore, continuously improving the original idea, a process of dialogue and reciprocity. Etchells describes how knowledge exchange plays out between him and other people in his creative process:

I might have a taste of something, but I need to see what other people are going to do, and I need their agency and their creativity and their... their misunderstandings of what

was in my head. And their creative spins of what was in my head or their totally different idea, I always need that. (Etchells, Conversation on Zoom, 2020)

Etchells' recognition of the knowledge and expertise of 'the other' shifts the power relation. Power and knowledge are intrinsically linked (Foucault, 1979, 1980; Allan, 2013) and recognising the knowledge and expertise of the other and thus enabling a shift in the power relation is key to achieving a practice grounded in witness. A more in-depth discussion on power can be found in Chapter 8 (Power Relations in Theatre-Making with Young People).

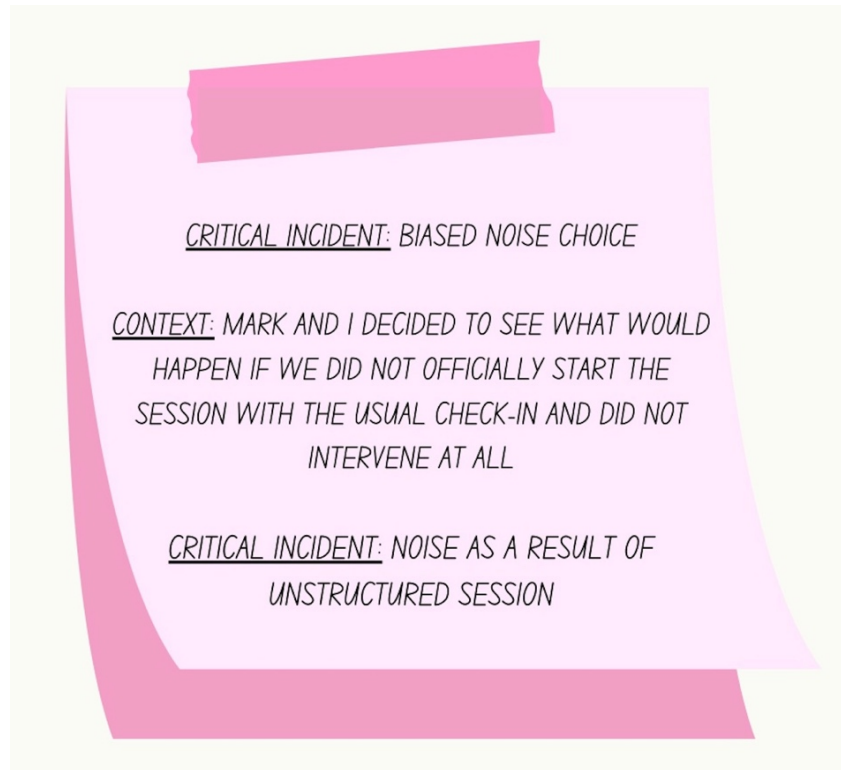
7.2 The Insider versus Outsider Conundrum

As demonstrated in *Critical Incident 3: Game Leader*, *Critical Incident 7: Youth Speak* and *Critical Incident 8: Mori's Story*, which position the young people as experts, "[c]hildren and young people can offer new perspectives as they are "insiders" to a peer culture where adults are "outsiders"" (Coyne and Carter, 2018: 8-9). The insider/outsider binary spectrum, which Mannay argues is "inadequate in an absolute sense" (Mannay, 2016: 29), offers little by way of capturing the complex backgrounds and experiences of researchers and practitioners such as myself who, I would argue, are neither fully insiders nor fully outsiders. The insider/outsider dichotomy is therefore more of a spectrum than a binary notion. While I am not an insider in the sense of a young person and participant in the group, I am neither a complete outsider as I have an established relationship with, and invested interests, in the group. Thus, my relationship with the participants suggests a position as "researcher operating as an insider" (Mannay, 2016: 30). I am a PhD researcher, and therefore I have an agenda, but I am operating

as an insider as I am a practitioner working closely with the young people. Moreover, as the founder of the theatre company, I possess power that positions me as the outsider, yet equally, the company, and therefore the group, would not exist had it not been for the very fact that I founded the company. However, while a trusted member of the group, I cannot claim to be wholly unbiased, as due to my role in the company and my role as researcher, I am a member with power and an agenda. Although this can be challenging to navigate, it can also lead to opportunities otherwise lost, as '[r]esearchers from within are often in roles and positions of formal and informal power, that place both constraints on, and opportunities for, access to people, processes and information' (Smyth and Holian, 2008: 38). This poses another example of how one must navigate the tensions of being the outsider professional with power, yet this power also leads to insider opportunities for the group. This adds layers of complexities the adult must constantly be aware of and transparently navigate in the space. However, remaining open to such positionalities and tensions is not easy.

7.3 Internal Resistance to Mess

In *Critical Incident 9: Biased Noise Choice* it was my own internal resistance to being open which led to the critical incident.



Critical Incident 9 - Biased Noise Choice

Adults took a step back as we decided to see what would happen - and what I can only describe as organised chaos ensued. Or, perhaps, what is chaos to me is not chaos to others. In fact, while the young people were noisy and to a stranger it would have looked utterly unstructured and out of hand, I could see that they were using techniques we had introduced and playing around with characters they had developed in our sessions. While I could see they were in fact, amid this 'chaos', using and applying what had been developed in previous sessions, I struggled with the loud noise and what I thought was the lack of structure. Perhaps it is a case of what Tripp refers to as "the practical problematic"; "the underlying social relations which generally make it a problem for the teacher alone" (Tripp, 2012: 16). I was most likely the only person in the room who felt this way and that is my internal resistance to being open, but through this CI

I am confronting my own “values and judgements” (Tripp, 2012: 17) and by making myself aware of them, also confronting my internal resistance. Perhaps engaging the young people in dialogue could have helped the situation by giving me an opportunity to be open to the young people’s point of view and for them to understand mine. The ‘underlying social relations’—my internal resistance—affect how I engage with the world around me.

Philosopher Martin Buber proposes two modes of engaging the world. The experiential ‘I-it’ mode, in which the experiencing I is an objective observer rather than an active participant, and the relational ‘I-thou’ mode, which Buber argues is the one we must make use of to be truly human (2013). In the ‘I-thou’ mode we enter a relationship with the other, in the context of WCT, or a theatre-making space, the adults enter into a relationship with the young people and vice versa, and we both participate in something with the other, the object. The fact that it is relational suggests a need for negotiation and renegotiation (Mannay, 2016; Water 2018) as with any relationship, there will always be other points of view, other ideas and other needs to consider. This (re)negotiation is subject to an openness to respond to the challenges of a participatory approach; the ‘messiness’ of it (Hughes et al., 2011; Baxter, 2019; Forbes, 2019). Perhaps part of the messiness lies in the “desire to leave space for participants” (Hepplewhite, 2017: 9). While battling with my internal resistance to the ‘chaos’ which unfolded in *Critical Incident 8: Biased Noise Choice*, and knowing that “taking on uncertainty, change and unpredictability is inherent in the creative process” (Rifkin, 2010: 25), I was also very aware that we *wanted* to leave space for them and create an environment of uncertainty, “the plan being no plan” (Johnson and Gallagher, 2021)

7.4 Framing the Uncertain

Normally we would always hold that uncertainty and ‘mess’ within our structure, our frame.

While the creative work and generation of material, the ‘messy’ and creative part of the sessions, although we rarely had a plan for, we had a repertoire of possible structures to propose to draw from. The facilitators’ combined extensive experience meant that we were very well equipped to improvise, depending on what the young people brought to each session.

The responses always sat within our ‘operational’ frame, which we had developed together as a group from the outset. It consisted of a) a check-in; b) circle up to allow for everyone to share, and c) a check-out. The advantages of the check-in/check-out and the ‘drama circle’ approaches are discussed in detail by Prendergast and Saxton (2013) and support the establishment of the relationships in the group. Over the years we worked together, we also established conventions and values which were part of the unspoken contract, the frame, we created together.

Incorporating these methods into the fabric of our sessions set basic expectations for everyone for how we have agreed to structure the sessions and work together; it was our frame. In the instance of *Critical Incident 9: Biased Noise Choice*, as the frame was removed, it became too chaotic and too messy, thus not conducive to theatre-making. Stevens-Ballenger and Jeanneter acknowledge that both “too little voice, and engagement” as well as “too much voice without support or scaffolding” (Stevens-Ballenger and Jeanneter, 2024: 65) can have negative effects. But it can be a blurry, sometimes even invisible, line to navigate. Finding that balance of what is acceptable ‘mess’ and still being conducive to theatre-making and being creative, and to the

group dynamic, is another tension to contend with as the adults in the space. Etchells reflects on the notion of framing the sessions:

I do think it's important to say that we, as people running a session and offering a project, we're the ones who are framing something up and I think it's framing it up in a way that is open to the impulses and redirections and the reinventions of the people that come into that frame. (Etchells, Conversation on Zoom, 2020)

I would argue that adults can only 'frame it up in a way that is open to the impulses of the young people' when the young people know what the frame is and feel comfortable within that frame to share their impulses. Thus, the frame is partly decided by us adults as we are responsible for the safeguarding and well-being of the young people and therefore must set boundaries, but it is also to a large degree set by the young people. It is a mutual agreement, a "drama contract" (Prendergast and Saxton, 2013: 32-33), between the adults and the young people. It is the relationship between the practitioner and participants and the need for constant renegotiation between them which enables the practitioner to be responsive to the nuanced needs of the participant; to know when to leave space and when to interject.

7.5 From Co-Creation to Co-Intentionality

Manning et al., (2025) in Common/Wealth's recent publication share a gentle critique of co-creation as a concept as "there's usually someone driving the process, and actually that's not always a bad thing, especially when you are working to a timeline and need to get things done"

(Manning, 2025: 38). The reality of much of our work as theatre-makers working with young people, is that we are often working to a timeline and there is often the 'need to get things done' to report to funders, for example. Perhaps, therefore, as touched upon in Chapter 7.1 (Knowledge Exchange and Reciprocity in the Theatre-Making Space), it becomes more about a *co-intentionality* of the work which exists in the space. Preston argues that "if genuine participation exists through co-intentionality, the relationship nurtured by the facilitator or artist is crucial and therefore their sensitivity and skill in working 'with' participants and enabling democratic ownership of creative mediums is key." (Preston, 2009b: 129). A 'democratic ownership' could suggest that adults have indeed relinquished their power and are open to the notion of young people as competent beings who are experts in their own lives.

Perhaps the most useful guide to navigating the shared space is provided by ethnographer Dwight Conquergood's concept of dialogic performance. He defines that as "one path to genuine understanding of others" (Conquergood, 1985: 9) and goes on to state that "[t]he aim of dialogical performance is to bring self and other together so that they can question, debate, and challenge one another" (Conquergood, 1985: 9). Much like Mackey's notion of the 'polyphonic conversations' (2016), it is often the moments of challenge or disagreement which provide the moments for new insights.

Conquergood's mapping of the "genuine conversation" (1985) entails four "major dangers a performer might encounter in attempting to engage with others across difference" (McRae, 2015: 70). To perform at the centre is to be aware of and avoid the four ethical pitfalls; the

Custodian's Rip-Off concerns engaging with others for selfish reasons; the Enthusiast's Infatuation trivialises the other; the Curator's Exhibitionism focuses exclusively on the differences of others and puts them on display and sensationalises them; and finally, the Skeptic's Cop-Out, which similarly to the Curator's Exhibitionism focuses on the differences, but rather than objectifying the differences, those who fall into this pitfall ignores and refuses to engage with the differences. In the middle lies the dynamic space for Dialogical Performance, which holds "in tense equipoise the four contrarities" (Conquergood, 1985: 5). This is the carefully navigated space in the centre of the ethical pitfalls in which the Dialogical Performance, and thus Genuine Conversation, occurs, as depicted by Figure 14:

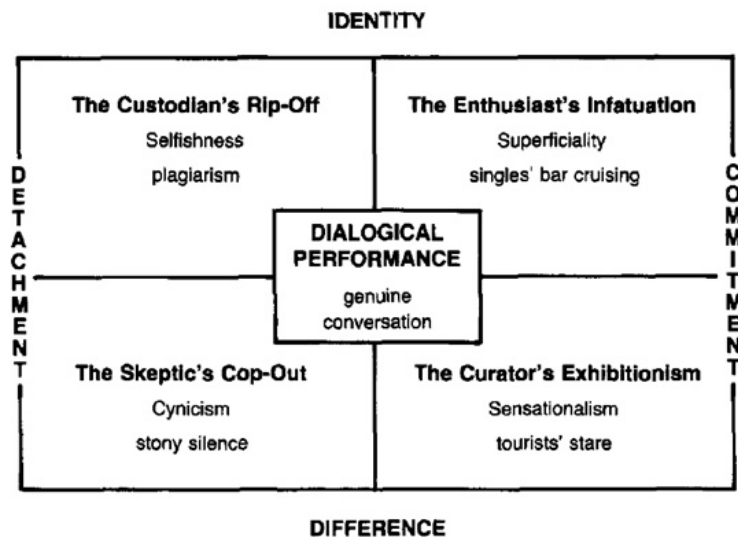


Figure 14 - Conquergood's 'Genuine Conversation'

Conquergood asserts that "more than a definite position, the dialogical stance is situated in the space between competing ideologies" (Conquergood, 1985: 9), and this position is never static; the pull in different directions is dynamic and therefore requires constant (re)negotiation. Conquergood contends that the 'genuine conversation' is a "way of finding the moral center as

much as it is an indicator that one is ethically grounded” (Conquergood, 1985: 10), similar to Water’s notion that participatory methods suggest an ‘ethical standpoint’. Being grounded in a participatory ethical standpoint suggests openness to such tensions and the uncertainty they can bring. The dialogical performance is a way of “speaking to and with” rather than “about” (Conquergood, 1985: 10).

Thus, Conquergood’s dialogical performance model (much like the youth participation models mentioned in Chapter 2 (The Evolution of Applied Theatre and Youth Participation), which offer underpinning principles for a witness-centred practice) can offer insight into how we can recalibrate his model for youth theatre practice. With a genuine conversation grounded in co-intentionality and reciprocity, the young people will be quick to let the adult know if they are being misrepresented. If they do not, it is not a genuine conversation. Crucial for enabling genuine conversations is for adults to have the “desire to leave space for participants” (Hepplewhite, 2017: 9) to share their thoughts, and the adults remain open to the young people’s perspectives.

This chapter has, through my Practice-as-Research (PaR), examined the inherent tensions and complexities that characterise shared theatre-making spaces. Given that participatory approaches are fundamentally marked by uncertainty, establishing frameworks that can productively hold and navigate this ambiguity becomes essential for effective collaborative practice. If Conquergood’s utopian notion of the ‘genuine conversation’ is to be realised, adults engaged in this work must critically interrogate their own assumptions and biases so as to

cultivate conditions that support equitable knowledge exchange, mutual learning, and reciprocity.

Chapter 8 - Power Relations in Theatre-Making with Young People

A recurring implicit theme in the previous chapter concerned how interactions between adults and young people are inevitably shaped by dynamics of power. In this chapter, these dynamics are made explicit as I examine how power manifests within practice. I argue that creative participatory methods offer productive means of navigating the power relations that are always already present in such contexts. Drawing on a Foucauldian understanding of power as relational and enacted—rather than as a commodity that individuals possess—I articulate the various forms of power I hold within the research process. I analyse selected examples from practice to illustrate how these relations are negotiated, contested, and reconfigured.

8.1 Disrupting the Status Quo

Chapter 6.5 (Listening as a Practice) paints a vivid picture of how many young people feel about the adult world, and that ‘all they [adults] do is shout at us’. Adults exerting their power over young people in explicit ways is not uncommon in settings such as school and the home. Teachers and parents/legal guardians *do* have more power than young people.

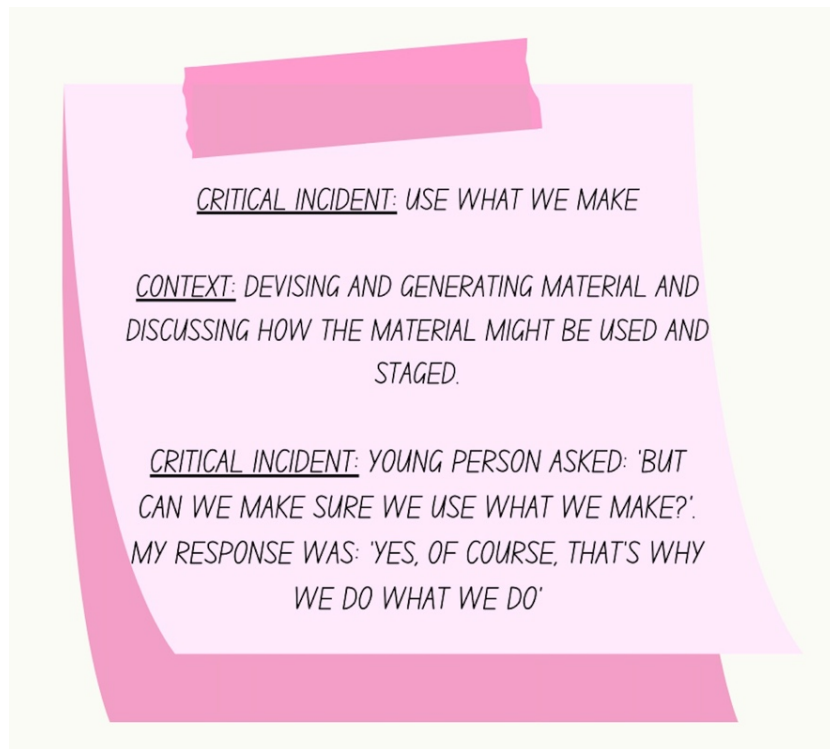
As the adult and facilitator in WCT, I had always been keen to challenge the forms of power I hold in the theatre-making space. The mere fact that this is my desire and my intention when entering the space, and influencing the young people to challenge it, could be argued to be enabled by my power. However, as the young people and the adults in WCT adopted creative methods to explore these power relationships and hierarchies, we embodied our experiences of everyday power. For example, a common setting that we often revisited was school and the

young people took on the role of their teachers by acting out scenarios in school where they felt unfairly treated. Using improvisation and forum theatre⁷ we addressed these power imbalances and sought other solutions. Effie Makepeace, in her PhD thesis entitled *Tinayankha Ndi Maputi Yathu – We Answered with Our Bodies: Creative Community Practice and Collective Understandings of Power*, describes power in a Foucauldian sense as “constantly circulating and shifting in our everyday and embodied experience of life, rather than an instrument to be wielded only by certain people or institutions” (Makepeace, 2023: 13). This approach enabled participants to take on positions of power through their embodied experience of everyday life situations. Thus, using creative methods in this way to explore these power relationships together opened new opportunities for understanding them and new possibilities for how such scenarios could be approached.

Coyne and Carter acknowledge that the use of participatory methods “changes relationships and power status” and while “[i]t does not mean that power is shared equally [...] it should mean that the power differential is better balanced” (Coyne and Carter, 2018: 7). Makepeace argues that “creative and embodied methods are crucial for groups wishing to investigate or transform power relationships” (Makepeace, 2023: 21). Creative research methods scholar Dawn Mannay contends that “although participatory techniques offer an opportunity to disrupt power relations, they are unable to transcend these hierarchies” (Mannay, 2016: 45). In other words, power imbalances will always remain present (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2018). *Critical*

⁷ Forum Theatre as a method originates from Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* movement as introduced in Chapter 2. In it, a scene often depicting an oppressive situation is shown twice; the first-time audience members can shout ‘Stop!’ to interrupt and step onto the stage to replace a character of their choice to try out different, more empowering solutions to the outcome to the scene.

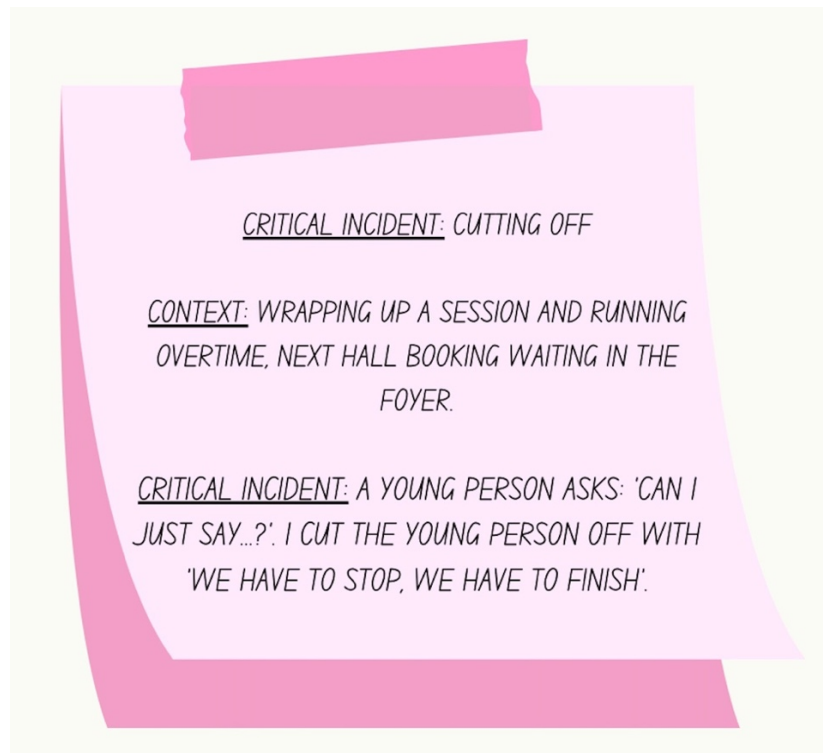
Incident 10: Use What We Make gives an example of an instance where power imbalance is very much a persistent force, despite efforts to transcend power hierarchies and ‘emancipate’ the young people from the control of the adults in the room.



Critical Incident 10 - Use What We Make

In *Critical Incident 10: Use What We Make* there is a degree of uncertainty detected in the phrasing of the young person's question: 'But can we make sure we use what we make?'. It is as if they are asking for permission, suggesting that they do not see themselves as equals; that it is the adults who hold the power and therefore permission must be sought from them. There is a clear power hierarchy present, and my power as an adult and group leader is enforced by my response, which, although affirmative, nonetheless dismisses the validity of the doubt present

within the young person's question. The response brushes their question off and swiftly moves on to another topic. The response assumes that the young person knows the answer, and therefore, I am also assuming that the young person knows that they have as much say as the adults. However, the very fact that the question is asked could suggest that they feel inferior and that they need permission from the adult. My dismissive response thus only reinforced my position of power. Similarly, in *Critical Incident 11: Cutting Off* my position of power was also clearly established.



Critical Incident 11 - Cutting Off

With the next group waiting to get in, I was pressed for time and needed to vacate the multi-use hall very quickly. As I was ushering the young people out of the space, a young person

asked, “Can I just say...?” and without even hearing, I brushed them off with “We have to stop, we have to finish”. My comment was made in the rush of the moment as we were running late and wrapping up the session. My responses in both *Critical Incident 10: Use What We Make* and *Critical Incident 11: Cutting Off* suggest a clear power imbalance between the young people and me, as I simply dismissed their questions. I did not give much thought to my responses at the time; however, it is the meaningful reflection (Schön, 1983) on these moments and critiquing my professional judgement which will “change [my] awareness” and thus “deliberately setting out to view [my] practice in new ways” (Tripp, 2012: 12). It is only then I can “frame and reframe [my] actions or experiences to discover specific solutions” (Mohamed et. al., 2022). In other words, it is the active reflection upon my practice which leads to action and solutions that help make the power more equally balanced.

Upon reflection, I realise I was dismissive, and there are many other ways I could have, and indeed should have, dealt with the situation, e.g., facilitating a ‘genuine conversation’ as suggested by Conquergood. With hindsight, I realise the way I dealt with the incidents only served to enhance the power imbalance. While hierarchies and thus power imbalance are unavoidable, the “critical issue”, Matarasso argues, “is how inevitable power inequalities can be acknowledged and negotiated” (Matarasso, 2019: 108). It is the acknowledgement of one’s position of power which can enable a capacity to negotiate these hierarchies but there was no acknowledgement or negotiation of the power imbalance taking place in these instances. While a participatory approach cannot transcend those hierarchies, it can disrupt them. In *Critical Incident 3: Game Leader*, which I discussed in Chapter 4 (Methodology), the young person is

positioned as the expert as they take over the facilitation role of the adult. By facilitating this, the adult validates the young people's contributions and their skills and expertise. Mackey argues that "such people-positioning might be interpreted as respecting different knowledges and skills and a proactive construction of balance and equity" (Mackey, 2016: 485). Thus, actively recognising the expertise of the other is an act of disrupting the status quo.

Hepplewhite describes her concept of "responsivity" as "a way of discussing how in-the-moment choices are made and how, whilst acknowledging a focus on the participants, the practitioners also develop within the practice" (Hepplewhite, 2017: 2). In *Critical Incident 10: Use What We Make* I could have stopped and investigated why the young person asked the question and have an open and transparent conversation about the theatre-making process. In *Critical Incident 11: Cutting Off*, I could have offered the young person alternative ways to tell me their thoughts, for example, in the foyer, or asked them to write them down for me, to validate their contribution. Had it been an adult who asked me the same thing, I suspect I would have listened or offered an alternative way to hear what they had to say. Subconsciously, the action I chose to take in the moment only served to enhance the adult/child, leader/participant power imbalance and undermine the young person's 'active input' alluded to above. Dialogue is therefore crucial as the "first move towards making any power distribution more equitable is to discover the point of view of others" (Tripp, 2012: 20). Reflecting on these moments, they offered opportunities for dialogue that I chose to disregard but it is only upon reflection I can see this and consider how I can act differently in future scenarios to balance the power distribution.

8.2 'Legacy of Care' as an Approach to Governance

With WCT, we were keen to disrupt the structural hierarchy we so often find in organisations. With young people's voices in mind, Fielding asserts that "however committed they may be, [young people] will not of themselves achieve their aspirations unless a series of conditions are met that provide the organisational structures and cultures to make their desired intentions a living reality" (Fielding, 2004: 202). Therefore, while we always had intentions anchored in witness in our theatre-making process, we also recognised something needed to be done in our organisational structure. In the spirit of witness, we started considering how this might look in practice.

Many organisations with a participatory approach have a Youth Board, which in theory has the potential to help redress power imbalances, but only if it serves the young people. However, as "these structures need careful planning, budgeting and resourcing in order to be successful" (Arts Council England website, 2025a), they often fail. Hart rightly suggests there should be "increasing opportunities for children to participate in any aspiring democracy" (Hart, 1992: 4). In a quest for democracy and enabling the voices of youth, the appeal of a Youth Board or a School Council is easy to understand; however, the reality is that it can be extremely complex to implement successfully.

To understand the barriers, Arts Council England, as part of their 2020-2030 *Let's Create* Strategy, consulted with over 200 young people, and their "opinions made such an impact that Arts Council decided to pilot its own Youth Advisory Board" (Arts Council England website,

2025a). As a result, there are many good examples of organisations successfully enabling young people's voices through a variety of approaches. Zest Theatre describe their development of a Youth Advisory Board, or what they call young trustees, where "young people are involved in delivery of projects, on interview panels and all staff are involved in their youth voice work" with "25 project alumni meeting monthly and paid to act as consultants" (Arts Council England website, 2025a). Boundless Theatre has, following the successful implementation of an advisory group of 20 young people, begun "developing a co-leadership model where, over a period of two years, the Artistic Director and CEO and Executive Director roles will be shared by two leaders under the age of 25" (Arts Council England website, 2025a).

The ACE also note that, before considering establishing a youth board,

it is essential to have a clear and shared understanding of why you are doing it, and to be ready to actively listen and respond to the board's decisions and recommendations. They also demand a higher level of commitment from the young people involved, which can be off-putting to those who need a more casual type of engagement. (Arts Council England website, 2025a)

Thus, establishing a youth board is a complex task which must not be executed lightly; it requires careful thought. Ensuring that the appropriate safeguards and procedures are in place is critical; the 'hosting' which Ride argues is fundamental to the viability of any programme (Ride, 2020).

Most importantly, though, we must ensure it is set up as a space which allows for creative expression without fear of judgment. Glasier (2025b) gave an online Zoom talk in December 2025 open to anyone interested to learn more about inviting young people onto a board. He had presented the talk to a group of Arts Council England Relationships Managers a few weeks previously. In the talk, he introduced the notion of the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). The SDT originated from psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci in the 1970s, and which they describe as a “broad and widely applied theory of motivation, personality development, and wellness” (Ryan and Deci, n.d: 4). The SDT has since then been applied in a variety of settings and the three conditions of the SDT, as defined by Ryan and Deci, are 1) relatedness, 2) competence, and 3) autonomy. Relatedness concerns the need to feel connected to and cared for by others, in other words, a sense of belonging; one is more likely to express one’s real feelings and opinions when one feels connected to other people in the room. Competence refers to the need to feel capable and effective, and in the context of boards, this relates to feeling competent about the topics discussed in board meetings which then ensures a solid understanding of one’s role as a board member on a board or a youth board. Autonomy refers to the need to feel a sense of control over one’s own actions, and in the context of a board, this translates to self-endorsed behaviour of being in charge of one’s own learning and exercising of influence.

I would argue that *Critical Incident 2: I Thought It Was Authentic* offers an example of when all three conditions were met; the young person’s immediate willingness to tell us adults that they thought we had made a mistake suggests they felt comfortable to challenge us; they felt competent it was their place to tell us we had made a mistake and they were autonomous to

take charge of their own learning process. They would not have been comfortable telling us this had they not felt a sense of belonging in the space.

Glasier argues that a space which meets these three conditions is a space in which young people can truly express themselves without fear of judgement, and posits that boards, generally, are the worst conditions for self-determination. My experience of a range of representation structures confirms this. During my years as a Primary School teacher, I witnessed the tokenistic nature of the School Council as described above on more than one occasion. In addition, while in a leadership position in an arts charity, the Youth Board seemed to exist merely to endorse the non-hierarchical ethos of the company. The young people on the board were (on the instruction of the Chair of the Trustees) excluded from accessing the company's financial data as well as from *any* strategic decision-making, suggesting it was anything but non-hierarchical. This tokenistic agenda did not meet any of the conditions of the SDT. It takes effort and the ability to be reflective to create the right environment for young people to be invited onto boards, or create youth boards, and as practitioners, we have a lot of work to do to get there. And perhaps the very fact that youth boards or advisory panels are "adult-designed governance structures" (Priest, 2025) is the root cause of their often failing. Priest says of youth advisory panels:

For too long, organisations have patted themselves on the back for setting up year-long Youth Advisory Panels. They look great on the annual report. They tick a box for "youth participation". And make adults feel like they are listening. But here's the truth: they don't work. Meetings are at adult times. Minutes are in adult jargon. And, decision-

making is made at an adult pace. Gen Z and Gen Alpha don't think in annual cycles. They live on short loops, with instant feedback. So, no wonder engagement drops when you ask them to sit through 12 months of 1980s-style committees. (Priest, 2025)

Thus, an awareness of and reflection through a witness-centred lens and considerations for how young people are involved can certainly offer solutions to the youth board conundrum. In pursuit of what Gilbert refers to as “democratic ownership” (Conversation on Zoom, 2020) and consistently always seeking ways in which to improve WCT (not just the work, but the organisational structure) as a space shared *with* the young people, my Co-Artistic Director and I were conscious of our official leadership structure, which consisted of only the two of us. As the two registered directors of the company, both white middle-aged people, we felt that we were unable to accurately represent our young people. Preston argues that

if genuine participation exists through co-intentionality, the relationship nurtured by the facilitator or artist is crucial and therefore their sensitivity and skill in working ‘with’ participants and enabling democratic ownership of creative mediums is key. (Preston, 2009b: 129).

Therefore, we knew we had to make some changes; however, the notion of the most obvious option of setting up a youth board never appealed to me due to my own personal negative experiences of it.

Cook-Sather acknowledges that “oversimplification of the issues involved in changing school culture to make it more responsive to students will lead to tokenism, manipulation and

practices not matching rhetoric” (Cook-Sather, 2006: 11). Although concerned with a classroom setting, this can translate to any setting which involves young people and adults. My own experiences as described above demonstrated to me an oversimplification of the commitment required and felt like a tokenistic attempt to increase young people’s voices, which instead reinforced the hierarchy and power dynamic. As a result, I am interested in a more ‘radical’ approach, which Stern recognises the need for in governance (2015), than the traditional Youth Board structure. Thus, we invited Muhammad, a young person who had been a participant with WCT since he was 14, to become a company director as soon as he turned 18. We selected Muhammad for a variety of reasons. Due to his long involvement with, and his commitment to WCT, we felt he understood and embodied our mission and vision. In addition, with Mark and I both from white middle-class backgrounds, Muhammad represented the majority of the young people, who were from the Global Majority. Having this representation on the board of directors was important in order to ensure the young people could see themselves represented at director/leadership level. We approached Muhammad and had a conversation with him, enquiring whether it would be of interest to him. We explained what it would entail and that it would be a learning journey for us all. As directors, Mark and I paid ourselves for our planning and facilitation work when we had money in the bank to do so; similarly, Muhammad was paid for this time when he carried out director duties or facilitated the younger group.

Once it was understood that he was interested, we began an onboarding process. He joined all directors’ meetings, and he was given access to our Google Drive. We took our time to gradually introduce Muhammad to the operational aspects of health and safety measures,

financials, funding applications and the nature of Companies House, to support him to become 'competent'. He was trained in safeguarding and data protection, and this was particularly important, given that he went from participant to director and was privy to some sensitive information about the young people in the group. The initiative to introduce a governance structure which included a young person who was also a participant as a company director placed enormous responsibility on us in terms of ensuring their well-being and that they were fully aware of what this undertaking meant in terms of accountability. We did not take this responsibility lightly. We acknowledged that this would be a learning curve—that we would be learning together—and could not be rushed, but that this approach has potential for "new possibilities [to] emerge for institutional dialogue and change" (Reynolds and Petersen, 2025: n.p.). While a big responsibility, it also felt like a step in keeping with a witness-centred approach. It was never going to be a perfect solution; rather, it was an ongoing dynamic process, much like our sessions, navigated through dialogue and ongoing reflection.

Most importantly, this step meant that we were starting to create what Muhammad refers to as a "legacy of care" and "full circle impact" (Glarin, 2025). This, for us, was a huge deal, as looking after the well-being of our young people was always at the fore; we existed as an organisation because of them. We cared and valued their opinions, and we actively sought to position them as equals. Listening to Muhammad's testimonial about what he gained from his 'full circle impact' journey with WCT, it becomes clear that it is concerned with giving young people the tools to realise their own potential, as he declares: "I never had seen myself as being a facilitator or as director of a theatre company" (Glarin, 2025). Therefore, Muhammad's

articulation of this as a ‘legacy of care’ demonstrated for us that we were moving in the right direction in our quest for an embedded witness-centred approach.

It is important to note that had WCT continued to operate as a company, I can envisage that we would have extended the invitation to come on board as directors to other young people. I can see a trajectory of a young people’s theatre company truly led and spearheaded by young people, with support and guidance from more experienced professionals, but fully anchored in knowledge exchange and reciprocity.

8.3 Power as Action

If power is considered from a Foucauldian perspective, then power is not something that is possessed, rather it is exercised—it is an act, which “acts *upon* actions” (Gallagher, 2008: 144). In other words, power is not something which can be owned, it is something which is acted out as a response to another action. As social science researcher Michael Gallagher explains, in a situation of “complete control, there would be no need to act on actions, and power would become redundant” (Gallagher, 2008: 144). In such a scenario, there would be no room for argument or debate—for resistance. However, in *Critical Incident 10: Use What We Make* and *Critical Incident 11: Cutting Off* some of the young people act on my action, they resist my exercised power by asking questions and seeking clarification. They could, like the majority of the other young people in the group, have kept quiet and not asked the questions, but they chose to speak up and voice their opinion; they chose to demonstrate resistance. Foucault argues that where there is power there is resistance (1979); and he even goes as far as to argue that “where there is no resistance it is not, in effect, a power relation” (Mills, 2003: 40). While I

concur with Foucault that resistance enables power and thus also a need for constant negotiation of power, I also recognise that the power which I do in fact possess in this context is undeniable. Due to the established traditional perception of power which exists; adults are seen as powerful and young people as powerless (Gallagher, 2008: 147). I therefore I have power over the young people. Furthermore, I possess multiple positions of power because of who I am and my position in the group. Prentki argues that,

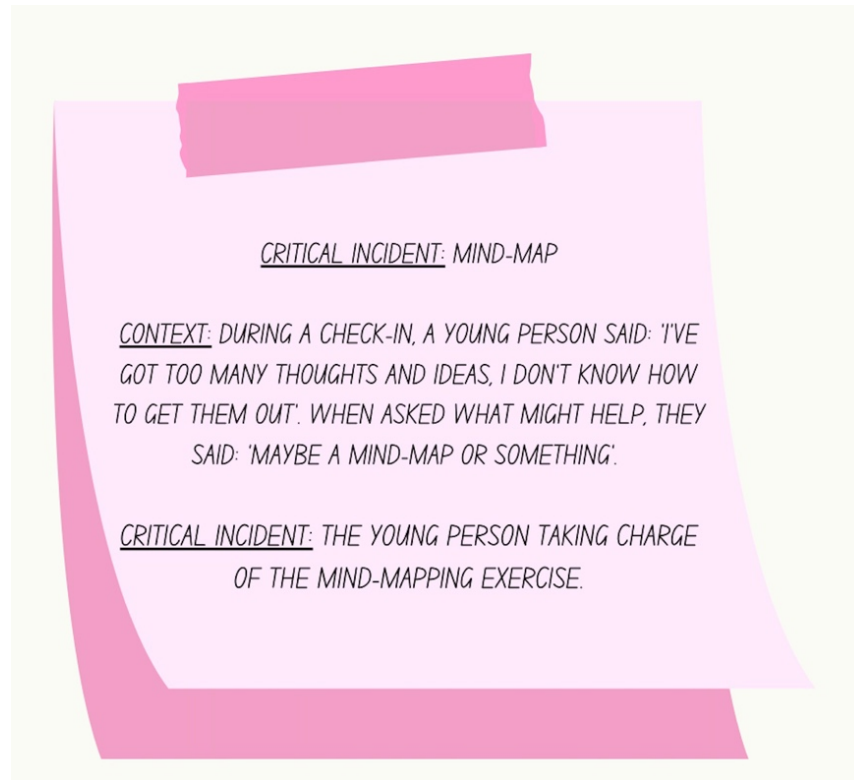
while practitioners [...] should be bound by democratic principles where the voice of each participant has an equal right to be heard in the process, the context in which the practice occurs may have predetermined inequalities structured into the formation of the group. (Prentki, 2009: 181)

The 'pre-determined inequalities', in our case, are the fact that I am the lead facilitator, the company founder and co-director, and while different identities may bring different levels of influence and power, all my identities in the group suggest a high level of power. Therefore, it is I who holds the ultimate power. But it could also be argued that this is power lent to me by the young people, and they could very well choose to withhold it should they want to. Perhaps the young people *want* direction and structure, and the lack thereof as demonstrated in *Critical Incident 9: Biased Noise Choice* goes some way to demonstrate this, and they therefore lend me the power to enable and facilitate direction and structure.

Interestingly, the play *That Night Follows Day*, which Etchells wrote with a group of young people, and he referenced in our Zoom conversation, is “about power and the way that the adult world influences, controls and shapes young people” (Etchells, 2020). He describes how the rehearsal process, while very “generous and open”, also had discipline with “pure authority”; “it could only be made by making them drill those bloody lines” (Etchells, 2020). Gallagher is concerned that power is “seen as a bad thing by researchers” and applying a Foucauldian lens, he claims that while power can be “dangerous”, it is also “productive” and “full of possibilities” (Gallagher, 2008: 147). The power in Etchells’ example, I would argue, is entirely lent to the facilitator, as the young people know he is the theatre expert and want the end product to be good enough for a paying adult audience.

8.4 Peer Power

While an awareness of the power imbalance between adults and young people is critical, as demonstrated by *Critical Incident 10: Use What We Make* and *Critical Incident 11: Cutting Off*, among others, it is equally important to acknowledge the “larger webs of power relations” (Gallagher, 2008: 143), for example, among and between the young people themselves. The power imbalance between the young people was made particularly clear in *Critical Incident 12: Mind-map*—yet it also provided potential to navigate power positively.



Critical Incident 12 - Mind-map

In this instance, much of the session was led by one young person. As a practitioner, to place the young people's voices at the centre of our work and allow them to lead, this session felt monumental in the sense that a young person assumed a position of power through the role of the adult facilitator.

However, upon reflection, while the rest of the group participated in the exercises, they did not offer any resistance—they simply went along with the young person leading. This raises questions about how the rest of the group really felt as the quieter people did not contribute to the same extent, and one person in the group did not say anything at all for the duration. It suggests that power relations exist among the young people, and Gallagher recognises the

“existence of multiple shifting relations of power” including amongst peers and between young people (Gallagher, 2008: 143). As the adult with the ultimate responsibility for the safety and well-being of the young people in the sessions, these shifting relations of power require my constant attention and navigation. Upon reflection, I should have intervened.

On reflection, I can see that I was so focused on enabling young people to lead and take ownership that it led to the sole domination of the space by one young person only. Similar to Gallagher’s example of children exercising power over one another in his model-building activity⁸, perhaps it is the case that in *Critical Incident 12: Mind-map*, “they were able to exercise power in this way precisely because of my reluctance to coerce them into [an] [alternative] activity” (Gallagher, 2008: 143). The activity needed my attention to make it more co-creative, to find a way for the rest of the group to resist the power exercised by one young person. As an experienced facilitator, I should have spotted the opportunity to harness the young person’s desire to lead the activity, yet also included the rest of the group to promote a collaborative environment and navigate the power in the room in a positive way. Hart proposes that activities ought to be designed to “maximize the opportunity for any child to choose to participate at the highest level of his ability” (Hart, 1992: 11), and in this instance, only one young person participated to the highest level of their ability.

⁸ Gallagher critically discusses an activity he carried out in the spirit of a participatory approach which involved young school children opting in to make models of their classroom, and how some children monopolised the activity.

Power, which threads persistently through the chapters of this exegesis, constitutes a central conceptual pillar of a witness-centred practice. Rather than treating power as a static resource held by particular individuals or institutions, I adopt a Foucauldian understanding of power as dynamic, relational, and enacted. From this perspective, power emerges in the contingent negotiations between participants, practices, and institutional structures, continually shaping and reshaping the conditions under which theatre-making occurs.

Throughout my research, moments of practice have revealed how these power relations manifest in subtle and sometimes unexpected ways. Reflecting on these moments has enabled me to surface how I, as a practitioner-researcher, have navigated, disrupted, or reproduced the power dynamics inherent in co-creative work. Such reflections illuminate not only how power circulates within theatre-making contexts but also how a witness-centred approach invites a heightened ethical and relational attentiveness to these dynamics. This, I argue, is essential for understanding the conditions under which young people are enabled—or constrained—in their participation and co-creation.

Chapter 9 – The Curveballs of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly shaped not only WCT's operational practices but also the direction and conditions of my research, which is inextricably linked to my practice. For approximately two years, from early 2020, our activities were constrained to online and socially distanced forms of delivery. It is, therefore, impossible to articulate the development of my practice—or the evolution of this research—without situating them within the wider context of the pandemic, which fundamentally disrupted established modes of working and reconfigured the possibilities of participatory theatre-making.

The transition to online delivery rendered the planning and facilitation of sessions particularly complex. Yet, despite these challenges, the period also prompted significant innovation. New modes of connection, experimentation, and learning emerged through necessity, reshaping my understanding of practice under conditions of constraint. This chapter reflects on these shifts, examining how my practice adapted during the pandemic and the insights that this generated.

9.1 From Room to Zoom

My theatre-making approach, as that of many other participatory theatre-and-art makers, was entirely predicated upon working with young people in a physical space. But, as we all know, this changed dramatically and very quickly as the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe. I invite the reader to cast their mind back to February 2020. In the UK, upon guidance from the Government, everyone was forced to stay at home and only allowed to leave the house for one hour a day for exercise or for essential shopping. The home, while confining us was also the

window to the outside world through online platforms such as Zoom. Blunt et al. describe the dichotomous nature of the home during this time as “porous and bounded, expansive and confined” (Blunt et al., 2024), painting a vivid and contradictory picture of how the home was experienced by many.

Not being allowed to meet physically in a room made for a very challenging time to make theatre, and WCT were forced to adapt our approach to theatre-making entirely. However, it was not a situation unique to WCT as we “witnessed rapid pivots in the live and performing arts sector on a global scale” (Trezise et al., 2023: 1). With our roles defined as so much more than merely that of facilitator— “youth worker, mentor, coach, agony aunt, support worker, academic adviser, parent liaison officer, advocate... and sometimes a DJ, a dance captain and a cheerleader, too” (Glasier, 2025)— youth theatre leaders quickly realised we simply had to pivot and find alternative ways of reaching our young people.

Therefore, like so many others, for WCT it was never a question about whether we should continue, but *how* we continue. Glasier highlights that “youth theatre leaders are struggling” (Glasier, 2024: 14) due to being under-resourced and over-worked, yet, in the face of adversity, it seems we are, nevertheless, resilient in our efforts to mobilise and support our communities as best as we can. While the shift to an online space was not ideal, and we found it really challenging, we also knew we had no other option, so we continued our weekly slot on Zoom. Lacking the physical space and the physical interaction we were used to; we found ourselves in unfamiliar online territory with many unexpected challenges.

The most pertinent challenge for me personally was my lack of knowledge of online delivery, but this was not unusual. Reason, in his paper *Inclusive online community arts: COVID and beyond COVID* (2022), asserts that most facilitators he interviewed “reported low levels of technological confidence or resources, with few having previously delivered online workshops or practice” (Reason, 2022: n.p.). Luckily, I did not have to worry, as Mark is extremely knowledgeable and competent in this area and took the lead on all things technical. Therefore, the main challenge for me was concerned with what making theatre online might look like.

9.2 Group Dynamic and Identity

We found that it was also a challenge to involve some of the young people in this new format. Reason addresses “attitudes and perceptions of support networks” (Reason, 2022: n.p.) as a barrier to access to online participatory arts practice during COVID-19, which we saw play out firsthand. Given that schooling took place entirely online, sadly, some young people were unable to join our online sessions due to parents/carers’ worries about spending too much time in front of a screen. Others were just not that interested in the online offer. We were left with a small core group of young people. With the change in group make-up, the group identity was thrown into question; suddenly, we were a smaller group, a *different* group, and in a new and unfamiliar space

Not only was the group identity being questioned, but the individual identities began to shift. In our physical space, young people had clear, pre-determined identities. My assumption, based on what I knew from parents, carers and teachers, is that as most attended the same school, it was most likely the identities they had carved out for themselves in school, e.g. the popular

one, the talkative one, the quiet one, the funny one etc. As the group dynamic had shifted as a result of some of the more vocal members of the group not attending the online sessions, the quieter ones who were now attending regularly became more engaged and vocal. It was as though, in the absence of some group members in this new space, they took ownership of the sessions and claimed this online space as theirs. For example, a couple of the girls proactively initiated and developed material in their own time, which they had never done before, and they willingly and excitedly shared it with the group. In the physical space, I would never have seen this coming, but somehow, in this new online space, it felt completely natural. It was as though we could all reinvent ourselves and try new things, which we most likely would not have even considered previously. Interestingly, the same two girls started making their own podcast inspired by ours, as though taking ownership of this space, they felt equipped, and perhaps empowered, to do it on their own through the online space we facilitated.

9.3 Self-Selected Levels of Participation

In a session in a physical space, the expectation tended to be that if you attended, you contributed. In a Zoom session, this expectation shifted as those who attended had greater control over their own level of participation within a session than they would have in a physical space. The options for audio and video meant they could self-select to participate in the way they wanted, and that suited them at that time. They can participate fully, with mic and camera on, or have the video off and contribute through audio only or even switch camera and sound off and simply just listen – or use the chat function. Had someone attended a session in person and chosen to not say anything, we most likely would have worried or at least asked questions

about why they are there but not contributing. In the context of COVID-19 we appreciated that people may have valid reasons for their selected level of participation and did not question it, and perhaps there is some learning to take from this to apply in physical sessions, even post-COVID.

9.4 Caring Conversations

Having lost the physical space to connect in and therefore also our process as we knew it, we felt lost for a long time. It was as though this new and unknown online territory bewildered us all, and we spent many sessions not even considering theatre-making, just having conversations about anything and everything and just checking in with each other. We were feeling our way, aimlessly looking for something that we did not quite know what it was yet. As facilitators we felt frustrated as we were not getting anything from the group in terms of ‘making’. We asked them what they wanted to do and how they wanted to spend the time; what they wanted to explore but only got rather despondent ‘I don’t know’ replies in return.

Interestingly, although we felt lost in our approach to making, the time spent having long conversations and chatting informally, as a group but also in smaller breakout rooms, without the distractions of the physical space, became the thing that we all valued. It became a space in which the young people could talk about the things that were on their mind, offering solutions to each other, and we all just listened as best as we could. In a sense, it felt as though we got to know the group in a different, more personal way. Akin to James Thompson’s notion of ‘care aesthetics’, which he describes as “the craft and art of how we look after each other”

(Thompson, 2020: n.p.) and to Glasier's idea of 'love', a "deep, caring approach to young people as individuals" (Busby, 2023: 168), our sessions centred around checking in on each other, placing wellbeing, care and love at the heart of them.

Upon reflection, it feels as though we did not know the possibilities of what we could potentially do, and that is why we had this feeling of aimless fumbling in the dark; you do not know what you do not know until you know it. Perhaps we needed the thinking and conversation-time, and a time without pressure to 'make', without the pressure of outcomes, felt welcome. As described in my *Performance Review of The Coronavirus Time Capsule* (Glarin, 2021), it might not have been theatre in the traditional sense, but it was a creative process, nonetheless. Entering this new and unknown territory meant we were all learning together as we went. Although we might have felt as though we are not *making* and being creative, these conversations can most definitely be considered a creative process. This is particularly true given the pandemic-context within which we were operating, which enabled us to develop our care aesthetics. It was as if this space facilitated a refined 'attunement' (Hepplewhite, 2016 and 2017) with the group; we were able to focus on listening and supporting. Scott-Bottoms and Roe call this emotional attunement and "two-way dialogue and mutual representation" a "dialogic art practice" (Scott-Bottoms and Roe, 2020: n.p.). They assert that the artist/facilitator "functions not as a maker [...] but as one who frames and facilitates dialogue between participants which might not otherwise take place" (Scott-Bottoms and Roe, 2020: n.p.). Amid this unusual time of uncertainty, we shared many conversations and reflections, and it made us feel attuned with the group and their wants and needs. The pandemic forced us to explore

beyond the realms of theatre-making, and in this 'new normal', we found the value of conversation. Conversation thus became our response to the pandemic. Therefore, the work which followed this extended period felt more important than anything we had ever done before.

While online delivery added new layers of discovery, some things just cannot be replicated online. With the loss of the physical space, we had also lost the impulsiveness and immediacy of physical interactions; the foyer small talk before and after the session; the ballgame as people arrived, which focused people's minds on the here and now, the free-flowing conversations. On Zoom, only one person can speak at a time or else no one will hear what anyone is saying, so the natural flow of a conversation is stifled. However, this can also be viewed as an advantage as it forces people to be more attentive and listen more to others; it focuses the conversation more. Reason argues it can even create a more inclusive space as we "all have equal amount of screen space, all existing in the same size boxes in a way that reduces hierarchies". (Reason, 2022: n.p.). Reflecting with the group on what we had lost or gained through moving online, there was a general sense of gratitude for having the creative outlet available. Most importantly, being able to still connect in a time when human interaction was limited meant that the conversations felt more appreciated and valued. While engagement had decreased in numbers, we all felt it had increased in quality and depth. Thompson writes, "whilst we can't touch or rub shoulders, we will keep *in touch* in new ways, using our ingenuity to develop creative responses to the pandemic" (Thompson, 2020). We found ourselves "committing project resources [...] to some new technique with outputs that were, as yet, uncertain"

(Cooper and Fitzgerald, 2024: n.p.). We simply did not know what performative output this would result in, if any at all. Yet we threw ourselves into it and fully committed to it. Reflecting on this process, these conversations can essentially be considered research and development for what became our next project, *The Realist*.

9.5 The Realist – A Podcast and Radio Project Developed During COVID-19

In addition to missing seeing each other in person, we certainly also missed the live element of performing. Following many weeks of unstructured conversations, there was a tangible sense of excitement in the group when Mark and I introduced the idea of live streaming. Thus, [*The Realist*](#), a live show which we wrote and went live with every Friday, was born. The show had a magazine-style format with short skits, interviews and the final element, which was dubbed The Big Conversation, a frank and open discussion around a current topic chosen on the day. We spent an hour preparing and rehearsing, then went live at 6 pm. We then edited the live version to a slicker version, which was shared as a podcast on all major podcast platforms. The live version was unedited and raw, but the young people loved the live element; the anticipation and the nerves made it feel less like a Zoom call and more like a performance. Knowing that our reach was potentially far wider than an in-person live performance, with people listening from all over the world, added to the excitement. The live element also brought a sense of togetherness. During the live show, we all had to help each other out by covering for each other's mistakes, just like we would have done in a physical live performance. For example, when someone forgot their turn or to unmute their microphone, someone else would step in and do it for them. This sense of togetherness was echoed by the group; they reflected that all

of us working together on the elements and running order of the show on a Google Doc to which everybody contributed and had equal editing-rights added to the sense of cohesiveness, teamwork and accountability. Gilbert reflects on how adopting a similar approach during COVID-19 helped MED Theatre to achieve a 'democratic process' (Gilbert, 2020) as they navigated the ideas of many different people. Akin to the situation I encountered in *Critical Incident 2: I Thought It Was Authentic*, it was as though the belief in the MKO, which was grounded in the trust that had been built up over time, meant that this collaborative editing went seamlessly. In addition, for WCT, it was as though the smaller group size placed more responsibility and ownership on everyone; they could not hide behind someone else and therefore took ownership, not just of their own part, but of the whole document.

9.6 From 'Theatre-Maker' to 'Creative Maker'

While I found myself in a sphere of uncertainty and unpredictability, navigating the challenges of a practice-led participatory research project amid a global pandemic, it "created a richness of disturbance" (Veal et al., 2024) and thus offered opportunities for new learning and new understanding.

While the consensus was that meeting in person was preferable to online, the online space had added something new to our repertoire as a group. While this forced online presence initially felt like a huge obstacle, it had in fact challenged our creativity in exciting ways and presented us with new opportunities. From being theatre-makers, we now found ourselves as makers of art, which gave us 'permission' to explore other avenues which we would not have explored

had it not been for the pandemic. Crooke and Farrell-Banks (2024) describe how in their study with museum staff the “pandemic altered their relationship with their work” (Crooke and Farrell-Banks, 2024: n.p.). Similarly, my relationship with my theatre-making work has been significantly altered. COVID and lockdown, while throwing lots of curveballs our way, have in unexpected ways acted as a valuable filter, enabling me to see myself as a maker of art with young people, and not worry too much about the label 'theatre-maker', and this extended to the group.

Therefore, in some respects, COVID-19 has been a liberating experience as it has enabled me to move out of the remit of theatre and paved the way for new avenues of thinking and making, particularly about what it means to be an artist and the kind of artist I see myself as. Göksel and Abraham describe how they “have grown as practitioners as [they] experimented in new spaces” during COVID (Göksel and Abraham, 2022: 94), and I can most certainly relate to this sentiment. However, while they argue for the need for drama in online settings, and I agree that this is useful in the contexts they describe, I find that COVID shifted the emphasis for drama as the medium. It is not so much about the theatre as it is about the young people; theatre may be my chosen medium, but following COVID, there was a definite shift in my perception of the importance of the medium. Be it theatre, radio, film, whichever media we have utilised to tell the young people’s stories, it is ultimately about the young people and their stories, not the media through which they are told.

During this period of online delivery, which ‘forced’ opportunities of the unknown upon us, we also discovered a sense of witness we had not known or tapped into before. The conversations and the change of dynamic have enabled me to explore a new approach to my practice. As a step towards a practice grounded in witness, I have learned to be more patient and to give space for things to organically take shape, to listen and to not impose, and to trust the young people. This is often when the magic happens.

We saw a lot of potential in *The Realist*, and the young people were unanimous about continuing the project. Therefore, post-COVID-19, we established a relationship with local community radio station Morley Radio and secured funding to continue to develop the live radio/podcasting idea further. This project continued to the day we closed WCT’s doors for good.

While COVID-19 certainly threw many curveballs our way, and it was an immensely challenging time, it also paved the way for new thinking and new approaches. In fact, looking back, developing *The Realist* as a project together with the young people feels like the most co-creative project we have ever worked on. As touched upon in my short article [The Challenges and Advantages of Funded Projects](#) featured in the online portfolio, standard practice tends to be for facilitators to plan projects to fit a funder’s criteria. “This has felt not just limiting, but at times, despairingly counter-productive. It has felt a bit like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole, and having to shave off the pointy bits in order for the project to fit” (Glarin, 2025). However, this approach was turned on its head with *The Realist*, which grew organically from

our 'genuine conversations' with the young people. We developed the project we wanted to do, approached a funder with our idea, and presumably, precisely because it grew out of those conditions and conversations, it appealed to the funder. Thus, *The Realist* originates from a place of witness and it was the uncertainty created by COVID-19 which afforded us this opportunity.

Chapter 10 – Concluding Remarks

My reflections, which in my research were noted as Critical Incidents, have led to a greater awareness of my own practice in relation to witness; I have become much more aware of the space I inhabit with young people; the positionalities of people, the micro-decisions made, and phrases said or left unsaid and their effect. The Space Between requires the practitioner to be consistently reflective and reflexive, resonant with Schön's 'Reflection-on-Action' (Schön, 1983) and 'Reflection-in-Action' (Schön, 1983). Reflection is an act of action research and is akin to Tripp's description of his Diagnostic Teaching Cycle, as mentioned in Chapter 4 (Methodology). The main characteristic of the application of the framework is its "lack of closure and continual revision" (Tripp, 2012: 33). It requires the practitioner to continually be attentive and open to their actions and those of others. Therefore, *The Place of Optimum Witness* is a suggested starting point from which one can begin to reflect on one's practice through a witness lens, but this is always an ongoing pursuit for the practitioner. Reflection is a continuously living and evolving process of discovery. Helen Nicholson proposes that "applied drama has a reflexive ethos" (Nicholson, 2005: 166), and my own 'reflexive ethos' as explored and crystallised during my PhD research has informed and shaped *The Place of Optimum Witness* reflection framework as presented herein.

To get a sense of its application to practice, I workshopped and shared my framework at the Amplify and Ignite symposium organised by the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE) in Salt Lake City, Utah in November 2025. The workshop demonstrated to me that the

framework has potential to support a witness-centred practice for others. I go into detail about this in my [blog post](#) in the online portfolio (Glarin, 2025), and I would encourage the reader to view this as a parallel ‘practice-based’ moment of dissemination and sharing.

As I presented, the conceptual framework merely addressed the identified main concepts and how these connect; I had not yet developed the reflection questions for each dimension. Some workshop participants felt that the framework needed guiding questions to aid reflection.

Although conceptual frameworks “are systematic structures that are made up of concepts and propositions that provide organization for thinking, observing, and interpreting what is seen” (Graham and Tetroe, 2007 cited in Sale and Carlin, 2025: n.p.), these are valid points. To make the framework a more usable tool, I included suggestions for specific reflection questions to support the practitioner’s own reflection using the framework. It must be said, although this is where my thinking is at the point of PhD submission, it is important to note that the journey does not stop here for me. I see this PhD as the beginning of shaping and re-shaping the framework as I continue to navigate the dimensions of witness in the Space Between in my practice and encounter and learn from new discoveries.

To this end, I would argue that a witness-centred approach in arts practice has much to learn from ideas originating in adjacent disciplines, including Radical Participatory Design (Udoewa, 2022), which I have become acquainted with and very interested in of late. Victor Udoewa, who is spearheading a Radical Participatory Design (RPD) approach primarily in the Global South, and has written extensively on the topic, explains it as “participatory to the root or core” as it “prioritizes relational, cultural, and spiritual knowledge, as well as lived experiential knowledge,

over mainstream, institutional knowledge” (Udoewa, 2022: 59). Thus, whoever the research concerns are considered the expert(s) as they possess the relational, cultural, spiritual *and* experiential knowledge. Udoewa helpfully provides three defining characteristics of RPD:

- 1) “Community members are full, equal members of the research and design team from the beginning of the project to the end;
- 2) Community members outnumber non-community, professional designers, and
- 3) Community members retain and maintain accountability, leadership, and ownership of design outcomes and narratives about the design artifacts and work.” (Udoewa, 2022: 62)

Although originating in the Global South, RPD is an approach which is gaining traction in other parts of the world. The UK-based global development charity Practical Action has a very clearly articulated long-term commitment to local community expertise, informed by similar principles to those of the RPD approach. Their Missing Voices approach “captures first-person perspectives of marginalised people to ensure that no one is left behind” through “building trust” and “listening” (Practical Action website, n.d.). Thus, the communities are positioned as the experts and are encouraged to mobilise and build resilience, be their own change and become active change and decision-makers in their communities.

I see many similarities between a witness-centred approach and Radical Participatory Design (RPD). Applying an RPD approach to theatre-making places the people concerned in theatre-

making and devising practice as experts who must be involved at *every stage* of the project.

Adopting this approach represents a conscious “move towards a model of community member as [...] designer” (Udoewa, 2022: 64), involving them from the very beginning to the very end.

This is similar to Matarasso’s suggested two stages before actual co-creation: Conception and Contracting (2019: 111), where the development and negotiation of the project take place. He argues that projects can only be described as participatory if the people intended to benefit from the work are involved in all stages (Matarasso, 2019: 111).

An RPD approach, therefore, concerns researchers and facilitators “relinquishing their roles as controllers and knowledge owners” (Coyne and Carter, 2018: 7) and places the community members, the people concerned in the research or the project, as the experts. While this can be challenging due to the uncertain and unknown nature of the approach, it is critical that the researchers, or in the case of theatre-making with young people, the facilitators, “drop the designer-dominated notions of time, and move at the pace of community relationships, availability and desire” (Udoewa, 2022: 62-63), allowing the young people to lead and to determine the parameters of the project.

Inviting a young person to be a director of WCT meant that a young person would have direct strategic influence over how the company was run and the decisions we made. In contrast to the young person’s comment that [‘there’s always a hierarchy’](#), it felt like a step towards a Radical Participatory Design approach, whereby “professional designers divest power, and the

community assumes it” (Udoewa, 2022: 64), i.e., we adults divest our power and the community, in this case the young people, assume it.

While WCT is no more, the concepts of withness discussed in this exegesis remain relevant to encounters of people in spaces concerned with making theatre. Hughes et al. (2011) state that “[s]tories of practice worked up in applied theatre research – including narratives offered by participants and theorised overviews offered by researchers – always only indicate a temporarily abstracted fragment of the practice.” (Hughes et al., 2011: 207). My reflections on my practice merely represent my process of seeking to make sense of and articulate moments of withness, or indeed in some cases, non-withness. Synthesising my reflections on my ‘abstracted fragment of practice’, with those from the young people, other practitioners and theatre-makers, researchers and work from theorists, led to *The Place of Optimum Withness* conceptual reflection framework as proposed herein. It has been a process of discovery and learning, and I would like to think my practice is much more withness-centred as a result. My ultimate hope is that my research will inspire practitioners to create more equitable theatre-making spaces.

Appendix 1 – Practitioner Conversation Questions

1. Start by telling me about how young people join your company and how new members are introduced to your ethos, values and your ways of working?
2. You have over years developed a solid approach to how you make theatre with young people. Can you tell me about the process from the seed of an idea to finished product?
3. How did you develop your defined process for making with young people?
4. What do you think are the main challenges of making work with young people and how do you overcome these?
5. What are your thoughts on the terms participation, collaboration and co-creation? Can you unpack them and their relevance to your practice?
6. How do you perceive power? And how do you think power operates/manifests itself in your process of theatre-making with young people? And between who?
7. In your opinion, what are young people's strengths, that perhaps adults lack?

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