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# Doing it differently: youth leadership and the arts in a creative learning programme

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**KEYWORDS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Notions of youth 'leadership', partnership or collaborating with young people as 'service users', are currently being endorsed and elaborated across a very broad spectrum of thinking, policymaking and provision. This paper argues that if we want to understand this phenomenon, we should not look in the first instance to young people as the prime source of commentary or agency: instead, we need to understand it as a way of 'doing' – in this instance - the arts or education differently. The paper draws on research into how one organisation, the flagship English 'creative learning' programme, Creative Partnerships, run in schools between 2002 and 2011, attempted to 'put young people at the heart' of its work. It argues that youth leadership should be analysed as it is enacted within and through specific sites and practices, and in terms of the subjectivities, capacities and narratives it offers to teachers, students, artists and others involved. The result is a more ambivalent account of participatory approaches, acknowledging their dilemmas as well as their achievements, and observing that they reconfigure power relations in sometimes unexpected, and sometimes all-too-familiar, ways.*

In the UK, schools are now legally required to 'consult' with pupils and school inspectors report on how successfully they do so; but like other organisations, they might also choose to apply for a 'Hear by Right' kitemark - developed by the National Youth Agency, a charity with core funding from the Local Government Association - to show that youth participation 'is at the heart of service delivery and development'. Young people's democratic rights are delivered by School, Local Authority and British and United Nations Youth Councils, which are in turn supported by a range of voluntary sector and membership organisations, or social enterprises such as 'award-winning' [involver.org.uk](http://involver.org.uk). The Association for Citizenship Teaching, the Citizenship Foundation and the Institute for Citizenship all provide resources for citizenship education, which has been compulsory since the Education Act of 2002. The Institute for Citizenship's funders include the NatWest Bank, the Swiss Embassy and the Greater London Authority. Young people's views as service users can also be envisaged as a form of expertise: the multi-agency 'online gateway' Participation Works ([www.participationworks.org.uk](http://www.participationworks.org.uk)) has recently launched a 'Young Inspectors' package to support local service providers to train young people in assessing and improving what they do. Youth leadership initiatives in schools have been developed by the National College for School Leadership (a government-funded non-departmental public body), the Specialist Schools' Trust (previously also government-funded and now a membership organisation), as well as publically-funded academic research programmes whose results have been published in book form (e.g. Rudduck and Flutter 2003). Meanwhile, Arts Awards have been developed as a nationally recognised accreditation to 'support any young person to enjoy the arts and develop creative leadership skills', according to its website ([www.artsaward.org.uk](http://www.artsaward.org.uk)).

Whilst these are only a few examples, they indicate the very broad range of agencies and instruments now compelling, directing, inviting or inspiring individuals and institutions working with young people to engage with 'participation' and 'leadership'. They span national and international laws (such as the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child); accreditations, kitemarks and syllabi; training aimed at service providers or directly at young people; government departments; non-governmental organizations and quasi-autonomous public bodies; publically or privately funded lobbying groups, foundations, membership bodies, campaigning groups, charities, consultancies and think tanks; university and independent researchers. There has, of course, been considerable debate about what it means for what was once deemed a marginal and 'radical' concern to have moved into the centre ground in this way. Some have welcomed it as a mark of adult enlightenment and readiness to share power, whilst others have found its assimilation into 'neoliberal' governmental and managerial objectives somewhat sinister. In either case, however, the field as a whole is highly moralized; that is, youth participation is usually seen as desirable and just in and of itself, even if its realisation in specific instances is deemed to have failed to meet the ideal form its advocates prefer.

To choose 'leadership' over the many other cognate terms available (voice, participation, consultation, choice, empowerment, agency, democracy, capacity-building, collaboration, partnership...) may indicate particular orientations and influences. It is perhaps inherently hierarchical, despite the gallantly equalising efforts of prefixes such as 'distributed'; it has been associated with terms such as 'excellence' and 'skills' that resonate with the promise of corporate success (Urciuoli 2003) and evoke images of the student who is 'smart' in all senses of the term; or its power may lie in associating young people with qualities and actions normally assumed to be the preserve of authoritative adults. 'Youth' too is ambiguous; it often connotes threat and social problem, or a transitional state pending emergence into the full rationality of adulthood; but it can also signify promise, potential, the future; a 'national resource' requiring careful nurturing. Adding 'the arts' further confuses an already contradictory combination: despite mainstream youth orchestras, theatres and the like, the youth (sub)cultures of the sort beloved by 1970s sociologists challenged or at least existed outside the norms of official high culture, and the term 'youth arts' still tends to suggest 'street' forms such as graffiti and rap.

However, our aim in this article is not to disentangle these layers of ambiguity in order to articulate precise definitions, or to propose an untainted terminology to match a more ideal practice. The multiple meanings and the many 'subjects' engaged in elaborating the field of participation are in fact the point, and underpin our arguments here. The problem with terms such as youth leadership, we propose, is in the first place that they are virtuous abstractions, compelling our assent but all too often emptied of content and therefore under-analysed as processes. Secondly, they misdirect our attention by suggesting that young people are and should be our central focus, or even that they are the key locus of agency. The result is evaluations based largely on seeking the perspectives of young people directly involved in initiatives, whose monosyllables ('it takes a lot of work', 'it was wicked') are transformed through the alchemy of academic commentary into such currently desirable outcomes as agency, resilience, self-esteem, identity or engagement. But we hear much less about the broader context, except in the more conspiratorial accounts given by critical pedagogy, which tend to uncover everywhere the same-old tale of neoliberal subjectification (Giroux 2005).

To understand youth leadership, we propose, we should not look in the first instance to young people. Instead, we should conceive it as a way of 'doing' the arts or (more relevantly in our case here) education differently, that produces new problematisations of existing practices. We have borrowed this insight from Clive Barnett and his colleagues (Barnett et al 2011), who make the same point about the relative insignificance of individual consumers when seeking to understand ethical consumption. Our approach is also indebted to the work of Jessica Pykett and others exploring the 'pedagogic', post-welfare state (Pykett 2009, 2010; Pykett et al 2010; Clarke 2010). Here we aim to produce more complex ways of seeing 'youth leadership' within changing dynamics of education and arts practices generally.

Ian Hunter's Foucauldian analysis (1994, 1996) describes the school as a 'pastoral bureaucracy' that evolved in a piecemeal, contingent and plural fashion, 'assembling' from diverse other sources those technologies that might augment the capacities of populations and thereby establish prosperity and order. 'Students as researchers' initiatives can be seen as one such technology (Bragg 2007). Hunter's work encourages us to see education – and by extension, the arts - as a multi-faceted, sometimes contradictory domain, mobilizing a 'plurality of ethical compartments' amongst its many 'subjects', who include students, teachers, administrators, and policy makers (Pykett et al 2010: 490). Youth leadership is better conceived as being *enacted* rather than accessed, and as disciplinary in the sense of developing positive competencies and capacities, albeit within constraints (Bragg 2007; Pykett et al 2010). Nonetheless, we should not assume that any particular technologies of youth leadership are necessarily effective and 'deliver the subjects whom they seek to summon' (Clarke 2010: 648).

In what follows we explore these issues with reference to the work of one organization, the English creative learning programme Creative Partnerships (introduced more fully in the next section). We trace how the concept of leadership or partnership circulates and signifies across different domains (within Creative Partnerships as an organization, within schools and amongst young people); we explore the processes and practices through which it is enacted in different contexts; and we reflect on the subjects who are 'summoned' by it, including how young people are imagined, understood, addressed and positioned. All these enable particular kinds of stories to be told, and we consider how these relate to other available stories and the educational practices they point towards, although do not determine. We draw on a research project funded by the Arts Council of England from 2007-9 (Bragg, Manchester & Faulkner 2009). It involved interviews (with Creative Partnerships personnel, staff in schools, creative agents or practitioners and students); observations in schools and at events, focus groups and 'shadowing' students, in twelve Creative Partnerships regions; and analysis of textual evidence

(photographs, minutes, schools' or Creative Partnerships' reports, publications, evaluations, multi-media productions, school application forms).

### **CREATIVE PARTNERSHIPS: YOUTH LEADERSHIP AS BRANDING AND PROBLEMATISATION**

Creative Partnerships typifies many aspects of the heterogeneous twenty-first century educational landscape (Ball 2007). It was funded between 2002 and 2011 as the 'flagship creative learning programme' of the New Labour government, in England. (The Conservative-Liberal coalition government that came to power in 2010 has since withdrawn its funding.) Its genesis is often located in a 1999 report, *All our futures: Creativity, Culture and Education* (NACCCE 1999), which tapped into widespread concerns amongst professionals about the constricting effects of the National Curriculum and target-driven performativity cultures. Creative Partnerships built on traditions of 'artists in schools', although its definition of 'creative practitioner' was wider, and it specifically aimed to foster long-term collaborations. Rather than being funded by the education department, however, it was initially managed by the Arts Council of England and funded mainly by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. Government policy of the time identified the arts and creative industries as a means to regenerate socio-economically disadvantaged communities, and it was in these areas that Creative Partnerships was asked to work. Thus its remit straddled 'raising the aspirations' of individual students, 'engaging' youth through the arts, contributing to school improvement and performance, 'transforming learning' in classrooms and school cultures, developing new audiences for the arts and contributing to community cohesion ('strengthening families'); in addition, its work also supported local creative industries. These were goals that by no means smoothly cohered, particularly in a context of marketization and standards-driven change (Jones & Thomson 2008). They also reflected contradictory contemporary 'rhetorics of creativity' (Banaji, Burn & Buckingham 2010), where (for instance) 'art for art's sake' jostles for attention alongside claims mapping the supposed attributes of creative people (risk-taking, adaptable, independent, resilient, inventive, entrepreneurial, responsible and the rest) onto the needs of the future workforce, and where creativity can signify artistic originality or the mundane ingenuity of common cultures. This mishmash, however, should not be decried, but perhaps instead appreciated as the inevitable consequence of the improvisational nature of modern governmental systems, according to Hunter (1996: 148).

In 2009, Creative Partnerships' website stated that 'Young people [are] at the heart of what we do' and that:

*Creative Partnerships programmes demand that young people play a full role in their creative learning. We believe that our programmes are most effective when young people are actively involved in leading and shaping them, taking responsibility for their own learning. Creative Partnerships programmes enable children and young people to develop the skills needed to play an active leadership role in school life*

*[www.creative-partnerships.com accessed 07/05/09]*

In this emphasis on young people, Creative Partnerships rides the tide of the trends to which we pointed at the start of the article; whilst the vocabulary and tone it adopts - somewhere between the inviting and the imperative - perhaps also reflect the rather conflicting motivations that have been argued to animate them. For instance, the claim that young people are at its 'heart' suggests not only warmth and welcome, but also Creative Partnerships' own radical and youthful core – a nod to the traditional understanding of participation, and its advocates, as necessarily enlightened, democratic and emancipatory. Yet the space Creative Partnerships occupies in order to

play such a role is politically ambiguous, since it depends on successive government measures - to, for instance, marketise and diversify forms of provision, reduce local authority or 'state' control in favour of multiple other influences, and reconfigure teacher professionalism – that have been highly contested (Ball 2007). Indeed, by referring to its capacity to impose a 'demand' on its partner schools, Creative Partnerships implicitly creates an unflattering comparison between its own dynamism and schools that might otherwise resist or lack the will for change – a portrayal that is perhaps both a symptom of and contributor to the changed power relations between schools and other agencies effected by these policy processes.

Creative Partnerships does not in this statement refer to young people's rights or inclusion, discourses that more readily occupy the moral ground of intrinsic good, but to 'effectiveness', a more instrumental benefit. Effectiveness could be construed as referring to outcomes for Creative Partnerships or schools (young people may positively influence what they do). But it might also refer to individual outcomes (a question of the difference Creative Partnerships makes to young people). A similarly convenient ambiguity is involved in assertions about students 'taking responsibility' for their own learning, which might imply collective partnership, a mutual balance of rights and respect, or a harsh, individualising, 'survival of the fittest' meritocracy.

In practice, the capacity of Creative Partnerships to enforce change was rather more limited than these formulations suggest. It was not a compulsory top-down programme, but an opt-in one for schools primarily in deprived areas. It has been described as an open and fluid organization, following a 'vernacularising trajectory' that permitted its 36 regional offices and nearly 6,000 partner schools considerable autonomy in realizing its aims (Thomson, Jones & Hall 2009). Schools applied to work with Creative Partnerships, no doubt incentivised in part by the funding that was available, but had to meet particular criteria to be accepted. The application process therefore attempted to embed Creative Partnerships values and priorities: for instance, in relation to youth voice, asking schools how they would involve pupils in the planning, delivery and dissemination of a programme of work. Once a partnership was established, attention was drawn to collaborative approaches by, for instance, requesting pupil evaluations of projects. However, Creative Partnerships could not directly control how schools interpreted and implemented these requests, since it operated at arm's length from them.

Senior staff in Creative Partnerships regional offices brought varying levels of commitment to and experience of working in collaboration with young people, which influenced both how far they emphasised this in their communications with schools, and how they understood it. Alongside their schools-based programmes, they could also develop other projects directly, and many of these related to youth leadership and the arts: they ranged from film or arts festivals organised by and for young people, support for pre-existing democracy initiatives (for instance, MUNGA, the Model United Nations General Assembly), to facilitating consultation on issues such as urban regeneration, school redesign and rebuilding programmes. Regional offices worked with both public and private sector organisations: some local councils proved particularly welcoming, enabling youth input notably into a citywide cultural strategy and a local authority education development plan. Some regions adopted a more self-consciously entrepreneurial tone, for instance describing an urban regeneration project as showing 'private and public sector decision makers that engaging with young people has value beyond ticking a box... [that] if you get the product and the branding right, you can attract private sector investment in young people and cultural/ creative activity'. The regional offices' relative autonomy not only from the national body but also from each other meant that they developed resources and approaches independently: in some cases these were then disseminated more widely, whilst others were quietly buried.

One regional office was assigned particular responsibility for raising the profile of youth as partners within the organisation as well as in the wider sector. The Regional Director had previous experience in a Teaching and

Learning unit in higher education, and was assisted by the City Council's interest in youth participation. His key tactic was to establish groups of students known as 'Young Consultants', active both with the regional office and where possible within schools. Their role was to shape the content, personnel and tone of creative programmes and projects from the outset, for instance by recruiting creative practitioners or arts organisations. Its ethos of 'nothing about us without us' constituted a form of branding for the regional office and to some extent Creative Partnerships nationally, and served to problematise established expectations, approaches and practices adopted by colleagues and partner organisations. For instance, the Regional Director described in a 2007 interview what he called a 'line in the sand' moment: a three-day event at which 28 applicant arts organisations ran workshops for the Young Consultants, who then decided which students would be accepted to work with Creative Partnerships and schools. He commented that 'It set the agenda so that it let people know that we were serious about young people's participation in decision-making, and it put the fear of god in some of the practitioners – who'd been on a very good living from education up until that point!' He did not specify exactly what difference young people made to those decisions, although the inference is that they were likely to reject some established experts in the field and provide opportunities to newer applicants.

Elsewhere, as we discuss below, schools often called similar groupings 'Creative Councils', 'Think Tanks' or similar, and they were a prime means through which schools responded to Creative Partnerships' demand for youth leadership with regards to their creative programmes. Other regional offices inflected the 'model' differently. For instance, one office convened a 'Youth Board' that was initially more focused on what de Roeper and Savesburg (2009) refer to as 'audience development'. They took students (nominated by teachers from a range of inner-city secondary schools) to a range of 'cultural experiences' from ballet to live performance art and subsequently helped them commission a new piece of performance-based work for a local arts festival. By contrast, although cultural participation and understanding featured in the 'Young Consultants' model, it was perhaps more oriented in general to activating dispositions related to management than to the arts *per se*.

Overall, the approach may have had more traction with secondary age students than primary given its underlying image of an assertive, confident and independent decision-maker. The choice of name suggests a certain professionalisation of 'youth', as a form of capital to be exploited (and indeed once established, these groups were often called on by other bodies keen to show they had consulted with local youth). Burman (1995) has argued that a rights-based approach, as mobilised here, inevitably assumes a universalised and individual subject, abstracted from social differences such as gender. In practice, however, this model was generally acknowledged to attract more female than male students: it might be asked whether self-awareness, and the emotional literacy it entails, involve feminised skills, albeit now naturalised and presented as the route to social mobility (Burman 2005). Paradoxically, whilst the expression of views was seen as both a right and as having inherent value, the groups were also seen to need training and development to exercise leadership in an acceptable or appropriate manner; for some individuals this extended over a period of years. The Regional Director argued that such intense investment in his Young Consultants enabled work and dialogue at a higher 'creative level'. However, it also posed some dilemmas to which we return below, concerning how far this training distanced them from their peers and whether less polished 'youth perspectives' might have provided as much or more critical substance, and the nature of the 'empowerment' provided by honing participatory skills within one specific 'site'.

A number of other regional directors came from backgrounds in primary education and progressive child-centred pedagogies – in particular at the time of our research, the educational philosophy of Reggio Emilia (for an account of this philosophy, see Hewett 2001). Accordingly, they developed professional development programmes in this area for teachers and creative practitioners, including visits to the Reggio Emilia community

in Italy. Such work could impact rapidly on classroom practice: Reggio Emilia concepts of child-led curriculum, its stress on all sensory aspects of the environment and on multiple forms of self-expression ('100 languages') offered an appealing definition of creative learning, suited the skills of many artists, and fitted well with many established progressive traditions. It offered positive identities to teachers, as well, allowing 'stories' to be told that emphasised teachers' professionalism and the skills it took to be able to observe and follow children's own interests. These were significant given what Jones and Owen (2008) describe as the hyperbole around 'the iconic, catalytic figure of the visiting artist... offering the portal to skills, learning, funding and a better life for us all'. Here, the artist figured as a 'resource' – alongside other resources imagined to reside in colleagues and the school community (such as parents) - rather than 'saviour'. However, these kinds of student-centred creative learning approaches struggled to make the same inroads into secondary teaching, where constraints and pressures were more intense, as it did into primary.

Progressive education and the developmental psychology on which it is often based have been argued to assume a free, naturally creative and curious child, different in some respects to the Young Consultants' rational decision-maker, but also decontextualised, not yet embedded in relationships, and ungendered (Pykett 2009; Burman 2005). Yet the concept of 'youth leadership' acquires meaning in specific contexts and spaces, and we identified powerful imaginaries associated specifically with the deprived communities in which the young people and their schools were generally located. A 'cultural deficit' model, for example – traceable in discourses of 'raising aspirations' - attributes poverty to personal inadequacies (lack of skills, ambition, education, discipline, and so on) and thus blames the poor for their poverty. Some discourses of creativity also differentiate a metropolitan, culturally sophisticated urban centre from its benighted margins (that is, the housing estates or suburbs where students lived), distinctions that emerged when some professionals lamented the fact that students had 'never been into the city centre' or had 'nothing to write about' because they had 'no life experiences' (which appeared to mean, they were unfamiliar with particular art forms). Whilst these discourses seemed sympathetic, they tended to disparage students' home lives as uncreative and to view non-participation in the arts as self-imposed, the consequence of a lack in their families or communities. The emphasis on environment within the Reggio Emilia approach may in this context have represented a search for new ways to address the spatial dimensions of (creative) learning.

## **YOUTH LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS: MULTIPLE MEDIATIONS**

Creative Partnerships' work in schools was mediated through heads, teachers, its creative practitioners (mainly artists) and its creative agents (who worked across schools to broker collaborations). In this section, we give a necessarily brief sketch of how these constructed and inflected youth leadership practices.

Research identified a range of motives amongst headteachers for becoming involved with Creative Partnerships (Thomson & Sanders 2010). For instance: some saw Creative Partnerships primarily as a way to broaden their extra-curricular provision; some were seeking to boost their local reputation through a 'high-impact' project; others were focused on improving results, which could mean directing funds towards high-achieving pupils, to those at risk of exclusion, or towards teachers or departments deemed to be weak. Some identified Creative Partnerships with 'the arts' and thus with specific subjects, but others endorsed its vision of transformative creative learning across the curriculum. The broader context of educational competition and the relentless drive for 'school improvement', however, played a large and sometimes defining part in heads' responses to Creative Partnerships. Schools in disadvantaged communities were particularly likely to suffer from market segmentation leading to a concentration of 'low'-achieving students, poor public image and league table position, as well as



high staff turnover, sickness rates, and difficulty recruiting. Thus while Creative Partnerships sometimes seemed a useful 'badge' and a way to articulate schools' values and priorities, it could also be dropped when heads or other key personnel left, or if its work seemed risky (Thomson, Jones & Hall 2009). It also meant that youth leadership projects were subject to some pragmatic manipulations, according to Creative Partnerships personnel: for instance, if a project involved public display or presence for its outcome, heads were often said to choose 'star' students to represent the school; or, high-achieving students such as those on the 'Gifted and Talented'<sup>i</sup> register were asked to form Creative Councils or Young Consultants groups, with an eye on how this would play with parents. That is, when it came to the 'managerial' aspects of the Creative Partnerships programme, inclusion was often a secondary concern, especially compared to its greater prominence in the actual arts projects run in schools, which often did target students who were disengaged or disaffected.

Teachers could feel de-professionalised by the presence of artists if they were billed as the solution to substandard practice (Owen & Jones 2008). At best, though, teachers' sense of professional identity and competence was reinforced by collaborative work; taking on a Creative Partnerships coordinator role could offer promotion without onerous managerial responsibilities, which assisted with teacher retention. Teachers could also develop meaningful and sustaining relationships with the relatively small numbers of students involved as Young Consultants or in Creative Councils, of a kind that often proved elusive in large and busy classrooms. Even where teachers were not themselves directly involved in Creative Partnerships, however, they were often asked to nominate students from their classes or tutor groups for these initiatives. Such an approach might have been pragmatic and/or unavoidable in large schools; however, the outcome of a series of individual decisions made in this way tended to be 'leadership' groups composed of students who were already high-achieving and/or active in other areas of school life (for instance on the Student Council). This impacted in turn on how other students perceived them, as we discuss further below. By way of contrast, one primary school selected children for roles as creative 'mini-agents' by putting the names of all children in a class in a hat and drawing out three, in front of everyone. This not only publicly demonstrated confidence in the abilities of all the children, but also sent a message that 'anyone' could be creative.

Creative practitioners too came from diverse backgrounds that shaped their understanding of participatory approaches. Some drew on discourses of emotional intelligence or literacy, describing for instance how they 'exposed their own vulnerabilities' and showed their 'genuine care' in order to encourage students to 'open up'. A 'pupil voice toolkit' produced in one region took participants through exercises to 'challenge preconceptions about each other' and acquire 'skills/awareness' about 'honesty, responsibility, personal space, constructive/positive feedback', arguing that only after this groundwork had been completed could evaluative discussions about the school take place. Although the pack was ostensibly aimed at teachers and students, there was little evidence to suggest they shared this diagnosis of the barriers to youth leadership and collaboration, or indeed that they either lacked these skills or would be able to act on them once acquired.

Other creative practitioners identified as social advocates of oppressed and marginalised social groups, and hence as providing skills and empowerment for young people to explore their experiences. Whilst this position challenged 'cultural deficit' discourses, it prioritised a specific realist aesthetic that was arguably remote from many students' cultural lives, and its concerns and practices often proved too far from central school processes and curricula to find an enduring place there. One project in a school on an isolated housing estate, for example, engaged students in creating some powerful audio documentaries and dramas on subjects such as gang culture, crime and youth relations with the police. These proved particularly popular with their peers, but the initiative did not survive beyond the period of Creative Partnerships funding as the school was unwilling or unable to justify funding it.

Creative practitioners were often conscious that their treatment of young people - as 'adults', 'equals' or as a 'client group' – contrasted strongly with 'teacherly' modes of address, particularly in schools where an authoritarian or hierarchical ethos was deemed the solution to low standards. Some played and even relied on such differences, collusively suggesting school was 'boring' compared to 'creative' work, and depicting teachers as dull ('too busy ticking the box to think outside it' as a creative practitioner commented). In some cases, they positioned themselves on the side of young people against both the school and what they imagined as artistic elites prejudiced against youth audiences. Unsurprisingly, however, teachers tended to claim that equal, respectful collaborations enabled Creative Partnerships to have more enduring impacts.

A general rule was that successful youth leadership groups were ably and often extensively supported by adults; and where they failed, a prime reason was usually the absence of such support. This observation is important not only practically (because a focus on youth alone may obscure the need to recognise and support those adults), but also conceptually, because we need to be aware of how adults – and more broadly mainstream cultures, practices and discourses - inevitably shape 'youth' leadership and participation agendas, what can be spoken about, how and to whom.

We noted above that Creative Partnerships aimed to 'transform learning' and 'improve schools'. However these goals were interpreted, 'youth leadership' was a means through which they were to be realised. Students were 'enrolled into the architectures of governing' (as Clarke, 2010, describes it) because they were imagined to be less entrenched in particular ways of doing things than (some) teaching staff, and to be naturally inclined towards a particular vision of education – for instance, rejecting didactic approaches, preferring dialogic and experiential learning where they would be 'partners' and active learners. Yet this vision was of course closely aligned with the one favored by senior staff or Creative Partnerships personnel. Sometimes staff admitted explicitly that they 'led' students to particular choices, but in many cases students' views were structured implicitly, as the outcome of what adults chose to hear or the result of the guidance delivered through their training. Thus if students were invited to comment on or research 'what makes a good lesson' or 'what is a creative lesson', 'how does creativity happen' (to give some common examples), their conclusions were in an important sense already scripted. Yet sourcing such views to students was considered an essential part of their impact. Sometimes this was because of their performative function (their skill, commitment and insight conveyed the validity of the principles for which they argued), although more dubiously, some senior managers used student opinion as a 'truth' with which to shame staff and enforce change. What may have been less open to debate, however, was whether such re-orienting of educational roles was necessarily beneficial to all social groups within the school, or whether and how student 'responsibility' for learning might shade into blaming individuals for failure, obstructing analysis of structural issues.

## **MAKING SENSE OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES**

In this section we address the call from Dempster and Lizzio (2007) to understand leadership from the perspectives of young people's experiences and interpretations. Above, we indicated how students were imagined by various parties involved in Creative Partnerships, as bearers of rights, as individuals in need of saving from the cultural deserts of their environments or as seekers of personal autonomy, and so on. Here we argue that young people are both to some extent 'made up' (constituted) by particular practices, and that they make sense of them from a perception of their social position and location. If one function of Creative Partnerships was to enable schools and students to tell 'new stories' about themselves as Thomson, Jones and Hall (2009) argue, for example, then the significance of this must be understood in relation to how school

reputations - intensified by educational marketisation - affect student intake, experiences, assessment of self and others.

Work on Creative Councils or as Young Consultants, as we have noted, involved students becoming familiar with local cultural industries, often by visiting organizations and attending events, sometimes by commissioning and recruiting personnel. Students also learned, through experience or induction, some general skillsets of participation, such as public speaking, running meetings, organising conferences, and on some occasions campaigning and lobbying. Some were trained in social science research skills, in order to conduct evaluations of projects or gather student views on teaching and learning; others learnt about teaching approaches so that they could run workshops, learning about education from the 'other side'. Creative Partnerships often had a distinctive emphasis on branding and image, as if its creative industry orientation made this essential: so, for instance, student groups would have their own logo, colors and T-shirts to mark them out. It would be difficult to designate the dispositions students were developing as straightforwardly 'neoliberal' and individualist; they were supposed to contribute to the common good of the school, for example. Nonetheless, there was often a lack of clarity around their 'leadership', in part perhaps because it was tied into 'creativity', which could be seen as a minority concern, or because they were (generally) not elected or assigned a representational mandate. Thus, although they were assumed to be working 'on behalf' of other students, they were not necessarily required to report back to them or in some cases even to seek their views. Schools appeared to operate a trickle-down/up theory of their impact, in which the groups were supposed to appeal to teachers on the one hand and fellow students on the other, without particular regard to the challenge of satisfying both constituencies simultaneously (for example, being an active learner but also cool; or negotiating a 'creative' identity alongside its potential gender and sexual associations). Having time out of lessons and out of school often appeared to other students to be an enviable privilege and this alone created resentment, especially in under-resourced schools where similar opportunities were rare. These difficulties could be intensified where the groups were perceived to be composed of already high-achieving or relatively privileged students. One Young Consultants project in a secondary school offers an interesting counter-example in some respects: the assistant head and the school Creative Partnerships coordinator carefully selected a mixed group, including students who had been identified as technically skilled, those who were academically but not necessarily socially successful, and those who were close to exclusion. Notably, much of the work was initially based around the school radio station, funded and developed with the school's creative partners and Creative Partnerships. The group organised whole school events and cultural programmes, and produced short films, a website and radio shows, before they began to work with teachers on planning creative learning programs. As a result they had some status amongst both peers and teachers, and after its involvement with Creative Partnerships ended, the school committed money from its central budget to continue the work. Nonetheless, as our research was finishing, the school was planning to relocate the radio studio where it would be inaccessible to students outside the 'official' group, once again highlighting the tensions between inclusion and potential elitism.

For their part, those in the youth leadership groups often became aligned with certain dispositions towards learning, with particular notions of social mobility and getting on in life: 'I have a dream,' ran one youth presentation at a public seminar, 'that we will come to school in business suits, to prepare us for the world of work...'. They may as a result have become less patient with and more distant from others who did not share this view. Refusal to participate, as Kesby (2007) argues, becomes less intelligible from the perspective of participants. Most often and most predictably, we heard negative accounts of 'chavs', that is, white working class students, although other existing social divisions within the school, based on ethnicity, gender and 'ability' labelling, also came into play. The presence of stratifications echoes what other educational research has repeatedly found, so is not a criticism of Creative Partnerships or youth leadership endeavours *per se*. However,

it does show that such approaches are not a social panacea, and the importance of acknowledging the power relations in which young people are already embedded.

Equally, the image of youth-as-partners left little room for young people to be skeptical about, for instance, the (in)sincerity of consultation initiatives, although some students involved in these were certainly dubious that they would achieve anything beyond advancing their individual career prospects. The creative industries, similarly, were generally presented as glamorous and exciting places to work, with little attempt to discuss the wider economic contexts of the de-industrialised areas in which these industries were now often located, or the low pay and exploitation that is often a feature of the employment they provide. Somewhere along the line, 'working-class jobs' had become a respectable aspiration for many schools in disadvantaged areas, rather than a myth to debunk<sup>ii</sup>.

As we have already argued, leadership initiatives presume a participating subject who knows what they want and whose desire to express views is already in place. Yet in practice, students' commitment to leadership groups was both highly structured and heavily incentivised. Creative Partnerships' inducements took the form of: time out of school; snacks and drinks at meetings, branded goods (bags, stationery, etc); access to expertise and skills; close attention from a creative practitioner and/or teacher with whom students developed strong bonds and who treated them with respect, sometimes in sharp contrast to other teachers and adults in their lives. This is not to belittle students' contribution, or to deny that they often surprised adults by their preferences, opinions or insights. But the concept of 'youth leadership' tends to suggest it derives only from itself. As Facer (2008) argues in relation to the related concept of 'digital natives', to obscure the enabling conditions and contexts of agency may entrench and naturalise some young people's existing privileges, and further disadvantage young people who in their lives outside school lack access to the skills, networks, and material and cultural resources necessary for many forms of leadership.

For some young people, involvement with Creative Partnerships projects resulted in substantial personal benefits and change, whether in their self-image, commitment to education, choice of career or path of study. An interesting question, however, was to what extent this change was due to audience and context: that is, to being recognised and regularly reaffirmed in their new identity and role (sometimes counteracting established reputations as 'trouble makers' or 'low ability'). Where students' achievements were not witnessed or recognised by others in the school or wider community, their effects were diluted and in some cases even counter-productive. For example, a project where 'problem' Y5 (9 year old) children in a primary school took on positive new identities as 'artists' and ran workshops for younger children then failed to release teachers from timetable to observe their triumph. Similarly, a photography project with 'underachieving' girls in a generally successful secondary school culminated in an exhibition to which only one teacher turned up, which the Creative Partnerships Regional Director concerned interpreted as the school's institutionalised reluctance to address the girls' negative experiences.

In another case, staff in the Creative Partnerships regional office that worked with the Youth Board mentioned above noted with disappointment that despite students' long involvement and the Arts Awards accreditations they had gained, they nonetheless opted to follow 'lower-aspiration' career paths on leaving school. As Kesby (2007) argues, this may suggest the importance of understanding the environments and spaces of participation. A focus on 'deepening' and 'getting the conditions right' for participation overlooks the possibility that their social relations may have little purchase outside the specific sites that give them meaning. Where participatory projects seemingly fail to produce sustainable effects, Kesby proposes, this may not only be because they did not last long enough but also because their environment did not extend far enough. In this case it seems that students'

accrued expertise in the arts remained separate from the rest of their lives, particularly from the formal and hierarchical environments of their schools where they were not able (or invited) to exercise agency in the same way; so they were unable to transfer or capitalise on it.

The pedagogies that seemed to us to respond sensitively to such issues, or to mobilise young people's existing strategies for negotiating these complexities, did not necessarily resemble the codifications by which 'youth leadership' may now be most familiar (such as cadre groups). One primary school for example, situated in a diverse urban area and with over 20 languages spoken, had to confront the danger or shame associated with some ethnic identities - mothers in hijab spat at whilst on the school run; children ashamed to admit Pakistani origins, for example – that complicated a celebratory approach to multiculturalism. The school's response involved moving between different 'spaces' – for instance, developing twinning relationships with schools in Lebanon and Pakistan, and transforming the (symbolically central) school hall into a creative studio via floor-to-ceiling blackout curtains. It also encouraged collaborations between teachers and artists, the latter funded in part (and again symbolically) from their core budget. As one example, a term's work with Year 1 and 2 (5-6 and 6-7 year olds) began assembling in the hall junk materials brought in from home (suggesting a desire to connect what goes on in schools to students' outside lives), and developed very differently according to each year group's interests, so that Year 1 did junk modeling, while Year 2 children focused on environmental issues. The adults involved – who included an experienced artist educator with a longstanding interest in the Reggio Emilia approach mentioned above - spoke of a 'three-way partnership' of teacher, artist and children, and offered in evidence that it developed in unanticipated directions. For instance, towards the end of the term's work, the school arranged to meet with some other local schools in a nearby park, to share what had been achieved (thus 'extending the environment of participation', in Kesby's terms). The children decided to 'protest' about the environmental impact of plastic bags, designed their own placards, banners and eco-bags, and made up chants and songs as they walked through the streets on the way to the event. Brief as this sketch is, it attempts to show how creative arts practices might take account of power relations, of young people's existing identities and locations whilst encouraging movement across different contexts, and be sustained by collective responses oriented to solidarity rather than elitism.

## CONCLUSION

An ironic coda to the paragraph above is that the school subsequently received feedback from Creative Partnerships suggesting that it needed to do more to develop student voice, leadership of their creative programme, and so on. Yet the conclusion that we hope would be drawn from our arguments in this paper is that if we conceive youth leadership as a way of 'doing the arts or education differently', then our evaluations of particular initiatives or projects should also refer to these wider frameworks and make our values and visions explicit. In broad terms, the work we discuss here used youth leadership as one strategy amongst others through which to develop pedagogies involving flattened hierarchies between students and teachers, with the latter positioned as 'facilitators' of learning and students working in groups or teams, emphasising communication and interpersonal skills as much as the transmission of a body of knowledge; in some cases the work was explicitly collective and collaborative rather than individualised. Such approaches feature regularly in contemporary debates about education for the needs of a future society and workforce. Our argument that youth leaders do not pre-exist these practices, but are produced by and through them, does not mean that young people have no contribution to make. We hope it might however disrupt the powerful assumptions that youth leadership and participation are necessarily and everywhere beneficial, and encourage more nuanced analyses

that take into account the social relations and situatedness of initiatives. As we have seen, for instance, the contexts in which youth leadership is enacted are marked in significant ways by school competition and marketisation, which affect not only how young people see themselves and others, but also the demands placed on headteachers, and the (ir)resistibility of other arguably divisive educational practices such as streaming and grouping by ability. Developing a 'cadre' of youth leaders to represent the school to outsiders and parents is comprehensible in these terms, as is also the potential for resentment and further stratification between groups of students within it. As we aim to have shown, our analyses need to focus on the material and symbolic resources that underpin young people's capacity for 'leadership', rather than mythologising it as purely self-generated. It is also illuminating to explore the kinds of dispositions and orientations that different practices promote amongst the many subjects 'summoned' by new collaborative approaches, including the degree to which they are collective or exclusive, compassionate or judgmental, whether they confirm or interrupt existing 'stories' of social disadvantage and quotidian creativity, teacher professionalism or inadequacy. Approaching 'youth leadership' in this way is likely to yield accounts that are more surprising (or surprised) and ambivalent than straightforwardly celebratory; if so, however, they are long overdue.

**NOTES**

<sup>i</sup> 'Gifted and Talented' was a government initiative to give additional support and stimulation for high-achieving children.

<sup>ii</sup> A point made by Professor Pat Thomson during a presentation at the European Educational Research Association Annual Conference, 28-30 September 2009, Vienna.

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