Conversation in Youth Work

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Conversation in Youth Work: A Process for Encounter

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ABSTRACT
Conversation and dialogue are used as a central process within youth work. Whilst much has been written about the micro-skills of conversation, less attention has been paid to the philosophical realm. This paper examines how dialogue in youth work can be deepened when juxtaposed with the philosophies, principles and theories of conversation. Using qualitative and phenomenological methodologies, this study involved 32 youth workers from across Northern Ireland, in focus groups ($N = 8$) and interviews ($N = 24$). The findings illustrate how youth workers perceived dialogue in their practice, pointing to the connections with relationship-building, the development of critical consciousness and the equalizing of power.

KEYWORDS
conversation; critical self-awareness; dialogue; informal education; learning; youth work; young people

Introduction

Much attention has been given to understanding *the nature* of youth work (Davies, 2010, 2021; Dickson et al., 2013; In Defence of Youth Work, 2012; Jeffs & Smith, 2005, 2010; Young, 2010). Within this body of literature, divergence exists on the essential features, purpose and principles of the work, however a unifying concept emerges within these treatises - of the place and role of 'conversation and dialogue' between the youth worker and the young person.

Ostensibly, this study is about conversation in youth work. This discussion begins by exploring the manner and timbre of conversation as a social transaction before delving into the philosophical opportunities for making sense of existence in dialogue with another. The links between conversation and learning are at the heart of this philosophical encounter; whereby the micro-interactions in the dialogue can build into a space for discovery and

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revelation. The potency of these interactions is presented through the words of the youth workers who took part in this research.

This paper is based upon a PhD research project undertaken by one of the writers and reflected upon and further analyzed by the second author. The research sought the perspectives and opinions of 32 youth workers about the processes they utilize in working with young people (Hammond, 2018). Whilst the PhD research explored the four key processes of relationship-building, participation, conversation, experiential learning, the analysis saw the process of conversation and dialogue emanating as a primary focus of the youth worker's practice. As such, this paper explores this single youth work process to consider the role, nature and significance of conversation and dialogue for youth work, beyond the functional.

Academic parlance of conversation

The theoretical ideas behind conversation are firmly placed within the broader academic discipline of linguistics, whereby the deconstruction of language is interrogated and studied from various perspectives.

Within the sub-field of sociolinguistics, conversation is viewed as primarily a social activity (Wardhaugh, 1985). As such it involves sophisticated levels of communication (Jeffs & Smith, 2005), governed by unwritten rules and principles (Grice, 1975; Wardhaugh, 1985; Wolfe, 2001). Wardhaugh (1985, p. 63) proposes that these principles *"enable us to exhibit a basic tolerance toward and cooperation with others, which is the basis of all social bonding and all social behaviour"*. Furthermore, Grice (1975) maintains that this 'cooperative principle' is the overriding principle in all conversation.

Anthropological linguistics, on the other hand, goes beyond Chomsky's concepts of "linguistic competence" and "linguistic performance" to recognize the connection between patterns of language and the speaker's social and cultural context (Hymes, 1974). In this context, the power dynamics of language use and reproduction are fundamentally understood as intersecting with gender, hierarchy, class and other aspects of social life (Silverstein, 1985).

These sub-disciplines form the backdrop for this paper however, as the interest of this study is to investigate how a process such as conversation is utilized by youth workers and serves the purpose of youth work, it necessitates a narrower, more applied focus. The philosophical considerations of conversation are herein explored, to understand how youth workers can connect a young person to the abstract, the existential and the metaphysical.

The distinctiveness of youth work

Youth work within the UK and Ireland is a distinctive approach – different to other practices in working with young people (Davies, 2019; Hammond

& Harvey, 2021; Taylor, 2017). It is framed conceptually as an educational endeavor of learning and growth, as opposed to a youth welfare or a youth protection pursuit. Youth work imbibes the purposes and processes of informal and non-formal education. Freirean critical pedagogy is a core integral foundation for youth work, which takes account of the dialectic nature of education, borne out of conscientisation.

The planned, structured nature of non-formal education offers opportunities to develop skills and competences (Council of Europe, 2000). However, this alone, does not include the full array of "unpredictable and creative" encounters and situations that can maximize learning for young people (In Defence of Youth Work, 2012, p. 2). For Jeffs and Smith (1997/2005/2011) the untapped potential for learning lies in informal education as the "*spontaneous process of cultivating learning* … . *through conversation, and the exploration and enlargement of experience.*" The focus here is less on "teaching" activities and more on "*crafting experiential learning opportunities, facilitating critical dialogues, or engaging in projects that allow young people to process their academic, familial and activist lives*" (Baldridge, 2020, p. 620)

Youth work includes elements of non-formal education, but it is the embedding of informal education as a philosophical stance and an operational imperative that separates the youth work approach. Seal and Frost (2014, p. 1) describe this approach as one that operates through words and ideas – "*it is the conversations (words) we have and the meanings (ideas) which we help people create in their lives that define us.*" This work happens with and through relationships. Tiffany (2001, p. 94), in exploring the essence of relationships, proposes that "*a connection or association exists or is formed, between two or more things, people or ideas.*" However, the interpersonal dimension to relationships recognizes how "*something tangible and meaningful exists between people*" (Tiffany, 2001, p. 94), emphasizing care within the connection.

Youth Work writers identify discipline-specific features on the necessary juxtaposition of youth worker and the young person – a stance of equal power. The youth worker starts where the young person starts and moves forward (Davies & Merton, 2009), the worker tips the balance of power in favor of the young person (Davies, 2021) and more controversially, the young person exercises their active and ongoing choice to engage (Davies, 2021; Ord, 2009; Williamson, 2020). These conditions for engagement establish clear intent for the purpose of youth work, laying fertile ground for power to be held and ignited within and by the young person.

Conversation and dialogue in a youth work context

While the idea of conversation may seem rudimentary for human functioning, its role in youth development is more elaborate and intricate than

initial ‘common-sense’ suggests. Jeffs and Smith (2005, 2010) have argued that conversation, while sometimes undervalued, is a central aspect to the work of youth workers. While its significance is articulated across youth work literature (Jeffs & Smith, 2005, 2010; Ord, 2016; Sapin, 2013; Seal & Frost 2014; Wolfe, 2001) the theory and principles are variously understood and presented in practice.

According to Jeffs and Smith (2005), conversation in a youth work context requires immediacy. The swiftness of the interaction necessitates a keen cognitive process of wily interpretation, coupled with commensurate responses. Here is an acknowledgement that conversation requires an elevated level of skill (Jeffs and Smith, 2005), drawing upon deeper knowledge of the person and their context, to build up ecological intelligence of the young person and the worker as proposed by Bronfenbrenner et al. (2006). In the youth work context, ecological intelligence refers to the process of gathering information and understandings of the ecology of the young person; that is “*the environments, relationships, and experiences that influence the development of young people and their families*” (Ross et al., 2016, p. 20). This process involves interpretation of complex situations and circumstances, but also requires the youth worker to build ecological intelligence of their own world to fully understand what influences their own thoughts and responses.

Baizerman (1989, cited in Seal & Harris, 2014, p. 90) suggests that a youth work conversation is an educational encounter. Conversations in youth work are not ordinary conversations but rather “*it truly engages in the other, as this is how knowledge is created*” (Seal & Harris, 2014, p. 110). In their eyes, the relational and ‘jazz-like’ nature of conversation creates a space for learning and reflection which is spontaneous (Seal & Harris, 2014). This free flowing and educational emphasis has purposeful aims that facilitate the other to work through difficulties and solutions together.

Therefore, conversation in a youth work context is by no means neutral. Smith (2010, p. 40) suggests that it is not merely a logistical activity but “*more an encounter of the emotions*”. Where conversation is viewed merely as a functional activity in youth work, it refers to the skills and techniques of engaging young people (Sapin, 2013; Smith, 2010) with the values underpinning the practice of conversation (Jeffs & Smith, 2005; Wolfe, 2001). Jeffs and Smith (2005 p. 78) go further to boldly assert that informal education (youth work) is “driven by conversation”. This assertion places conversation at the center of the informal education process. However, while these assertions from youth work writers elucidate, it is the philosophical purpose of conversation that gives deeper meaning and focus to the practice.

Conversation and learning: underpinning philosophies

Martin Buber (1947, 1970) the Austrian existential theologian and philosopher, begins with conversation for truth and authenticity. Describing genuine dialogue, Buber (1947, p. 37) states

> … each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.

Buber's perspective not only emphasizes the esteem one should have for the 'other' but goes further in suggesting that there must also be an openness to change oneself (Cooper et al., 2013). His philosophical idea is to find the 'space between' rather than contend either party holds the truth. Buber (1970) is concerned about authentic existence rather than merely existing with the other (Friedman, 2002). The quality of relationship between those in dialogue is emphasized over the substance or topic of the conversation. The focus of Buberian dialogue is therefore marked by both receptivity; openness to the other, and expressivity; the willingness of both parties to authentically share of themselves (Cooper et al., 2013). Regarding Buber's perspective on the educative role of dialogue, Smith (2001) states,

> Martin Buber believed that real educators teach most successfully when they are not consciously trying to teach at all, but when they act spontaneously out of their own life.

Aligned to the ideas of Martin Buber, the Russian educationalist and philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) has been associated with the concept and practice of dialogue within a context of learning (Cooper et al., 2013; Hamston, 2006; Matusov, 2011; White, 2009). Bakhtin's view on dialogue involved the rejection of a monologic world view where knowledge or truth is transmitted from the 'knowing' to the 'unknowing' (Cooper et al., 2013). Bakhtin (1984, p. 110) suggests that 'truth' is not found in the individual but rather *"it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction"*. He believed that even in learning science there is always an interplay between the subjective and the objective and as such it is dialogical (Bakhtin, 1986). In this learning context, new discoveries about the subject and/or the other are realized. Matusov (2011, p. 115) expands upon Bakhtin's ideas on dialogue within a formal educational context, stating,

> The goal of education is not to make students have the same understanding as the teacher, but rather to engage them in historically valuable discourses, to become familiar with historically, culturally, and socially important voices, to learn how to address these voices, and to develop responsible replies to them without an expectation of an agreement or an emerging consensus.

This suggests a collaborative approach to learning rather than one which is traditionally didactic or authoritarian. Learning, he implies, is a democratic process. While little reference is made to Bakhtin in the youth work literature, his philosophical standpoint elucidates youth work thinking on dialogue and conversation. In one rare reference to Bakhtin's dialogical philosophy, Edginton and Randall (2005) write of the necessary inclusion of young people in programme planning for youth work. This basic application, while useful, does an injustice to the depth of Bakhtin's philosophy and undermines the potential of his theory for a youth work context.

Conversely, Paulo Freire (1921–1997), a 20th century educationalist is cited by several youth work writers within the British and Irish context regarding his conceptualization of dialogue (Batsleer, 2008; Beck & Purcell, 2010; Buckroth & Parkin, 2010; Young, 2010). Underlying the Freirean concept of dialogue is a critique of education which is perceived as exploitative and disempowering. Freire (1970, 2007) contends that in a learning context, people should not be treated as receptacles that are to be filled through a process of education, the concept he named as 'banking' (Freire, 1970; Smith, 2002). Dialogue, Freire states, is an existential necessity, which requires humans to encounter one another, not in hierarchical relationships but as co-learners. Freire (1970, p. 70) suggests a radical rethinking of how the world is viewed, stating that dialogue *"is an act of creation: it must not serve as a crafty instrument of domination of one person by another"*.

Dialogue, within the Freirean tradition has a two-fold emphasis. Firstly, it aims to produce a greater critical awareness of the 'undesirable ways' in which the participants are affected by their circumstances or culture (Cooper et al., 2013, p. 79). However, understanding is not enough. Freire (2007, p. 40) refers to this process as the development of critical consciousness whereby critical action emanates from a critical understanding. Dialogue is concerned with enabling people toward action; to do something about their realities and bring about emancipation (Balagopalan, 2011).

Secondly, Freire's concept of dialogue emphasizes the valued contribution of both the educator and the participant in the learning process. This participatory approach, as with Buber (1947, 1970) and Bakhtin (1981, 1984), esteems both parties and is intended to create a less hierarchical learning environment. Therefore, the purpose of dialogue is to emancipate in a way that emphasizes equality of educator and participant. This emphasis on power sharing is also endemic within youth work and illustrates how the process of conversation and dialogue have purpose.

Freire is often written about in superlative terms, with little critique of his philosophy or ideals. However, selected writers suggest that Freire overemphasizes the equality that can be achieved through dialogue, and therefore ceases to recognize the power imbalances which are inherent within an

educational relationship (Cooper et al., 2013; Smith, 2002). Also, Smith (2002, p. 2) intimates that the binary nature of Freire's argument produces an 'either/or' approach; that is, society separated into the powerful and the oppressed thus creating a simplistic political analysis. Furthermore, as Freire practised his pedagogical ideas within a more formal context, Torres (1993) questions its' transferability to an informal educational setting, such as youth work.

Nonetheless, his theoretical perspective has been embraced within a youth work context (Batsleer, 2008; Buckroth & Parkin, 2010; Wolfe, 2001; Young, 2010). Whether in a therapeutic or educational relationship, the type of dialogue posited by Buber, Bakhtin, and Freire, is at odds with traditional notions of hierarchy where the power often lies with the 'expert' psychotherapist or educator. This type of dialogue, with both parties open to change and when the relationship is marked by authenticity, may not be unique to youth work but is very much coveted in the profession.

Elsewhere, terms such as critical discourse (Mezirow, 1981, 2003) and communicative discourse/action (Habermas, 1984), explicate how conversation and dialogue are used in learning contexts. According to Kitchenham (2008), the concept and practice of transformative learning developed by Jack Mezirow (1927-2014) has been heavily influenced by the theories of dialogue and communication espoused by Freire (1970) and Habermas (1984). Mezirow posits that the significant process by which transformation is achieved is critical discourse, whereby, engaging the other in dialogue involves an "*assessment of beliefs, feelings, and values*" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 60). This leads to deeper critical reflection and increased self-awareness. As such critical discourse relates to agreement and consensus, rather than the acquisition of knowledge or testing if something is true. Although writing from an adult learning perspective, Mezirow (1981, 2003) shares goals with those of youth work (for example Beck & Purcell, 2010; Smith, 2001; Young, 2010). However, the transformative process of which Mezirow writes, demands a high level of honesty and openness which may not always be achieved in an adult/young person relationship due to an inherent power differential.

Secondly, the writings of the German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929) highlight the concept and practice of mutuality in dialogue and discourse toward knowledge and consciousness. According to Warren (1995) a basic, yet contested, premise of Habermas's (1984, 1987) philosophy of communication is that "*we are always motivated toward consensus in speech*" (Warren, 1995, p. 180). In reviewing the literature of Habermas's contribution to education, Ewert (1991, p. 364) adds a further dimension by asserting that all the writers whom he reviewed accept that the Habermasian ideal assumes that true discourse should be free from

constraint; to take explicit account of the inherent power differentials in conversation (Seal & Harris, 2014, p. 95). Habermas (1984) further claims that communication produces non-distorted knowledge when several conditions are adhered to. These conditions are summarized as follows –

> (a) everyone who is involved in a given activity is part of the discussion to coordinate that activity, (b) status is disregarded, (c) personal interests do not intervene, and (d) participants in the discussion decide as peers using norms of rationality" (Cooper et al., 2013, p. 80).

Habermas (1984) acknowledges this is a sophisticated form of dialogue that necessitates a high degree of maturity on behalf of the participants to create open and honest discourse. This open and honest discourse leading to new knowledge and understanding is a high aspiration within much of the writing on dialogue and conversation (See also Bakhtin, 1984; Buber, 1947; Freire, 1970). Moreover, Habermas (1984, 1987) extends the reach of dialogue even further to encompass social transformation at a macro level.

This review of literature offers a historical and theoretical framework for understanding conversation and dialogue as a youth work process beyond merely a tool for relationship-building. As a form of communication, dialogue may refer simply to social exchange (Cooper et al., 2013; Wardhaugh, 2006). However, it can be viewed as a more ontological experience, reflecting the essence of human existence (Bakhtin, 1984; Buber, 1947; Freire, 1970). Dialogue from this perspective recognizes the intertwined social relationships of humans and their need for each other. However, the transformative elements of dialogue and notions of critical discourse elevate the possibilities for this dialectic process. Table 1 offers an overview of the theoretical and philosophical perspectives outlined by the writers reviewed above.

Table 1. Overview of theoretical perspectives on conversation.

Author	Emphasis
Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith	Conversation as a skill for informal education
Mike Seal and Peter Harris	Conversation for learning and knowledge acquisition
Martin Buber	Dialogue for an authentic encounter of 'I and thou'
Mikhail Bakhtin	Dialogic interaction for truth-seeking
Paulo Freire	Dialogue for critical consciousness – of critical understanding and critical action
Jack Mezirow	Conversation as critical discourse toward perspective transformation
Jürgen Habermas	Mutuality in dialogue toward new knowledge and consciousness

Methodology

This paper emerged from a PhD study with a broader remit of exploring the four key youth work processes of relationship-building, participation, conversation and experiential learning (Hammond, 2018). Ethical approval was obtained from the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences at Ulster University. The PhD research examined youth work practitioners'

perceptions of their own youth work practice. The PhD research question was 'What do professionally qualified youth workers understand about the purpose, processes and theory underpinning their practice?' The research methodology was qualitative in nature stemming from an interpretivist paradigm and drawing from both constructionism and phenomenology to analyze and interpret the data. Phenomenology explores how people interpret events in their world to develop meaning and make sense of their experience (Kumar, 2014, Denscombe, 2017).

Consequently, a small scale, qualitative study was employed, using a non-probability purposive sampling strategy. The sample size within this study was not determined by a mathematical equation (Guest et al., 2006) as with quantitative research, but rather, it was dependent on the researcher's judgment in reaching a saturation point when little or no new information was presented (Kumar, 2014). In total, 32 people participated in the research, with eight taking part in two focus groups and 24 in semi-structured interviews. Focus groups were primarily used to establish a framework of questions while interviews were utilized to reach greater depth. Research participants were selected from across Northern Ireland, because of their experience and knowledge of the youth work field. Some consideration was given to obtaining balance in gender, community background, organizational role and breadth of youth work practice. Objective criteria for inclusion in the sample focussed on youth workers with a minimum of 3 years practice experience, who were professionally qualified at diploma, degree or post-graduate level from a range of academical institutions. This allows for a diversity of academic and practice perspectives. However, the use of non-probability purposive sampling for qualitative study, deems the generalizability of such research questionable. Nonetheless, this type of study produced rich data and in-depth narrative in exploring the meaning of conversation and dialogue for practice.

The main themes were extracted using the 'constant comparative method' (Thomas, 2017) and aspects of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) utilizing NVivo software. A six-phase process was adapted from Smith et al. (2009) in the analysis phase. Phase 1-3 of the process moved from deep immersion in the data to grappling with meaning and reading between the lines toward the identification of emerging themes. Phase 4 of the process involves "searching for connections across the emergent themes" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 92); with the last two phases for re-interrogation of all 26 cases/participants (2 focus groups and 24 interviews) to identify patterns or configurations of the presenting themes.

This thematic analysis produced findings on all four processes; but the most prominent emerging theme was the process of conversation and

dialogue. To create this paper the authors engaged in a reflective and discursive writing process, drawing out the salience and character of the dialogical process, as described by respondents. The focus groups and interviewees were asked about the emphasis they place on conversation in their practice, the purpose of the process and what they thought conversation produced. This conversational approach to eliciting a narrative about the understanding and perception of conversation and dialogue created the rich data presented here.

Through a reflexive process, the authors considered their own positionality and bias and mitigated these through attention to a balanced sample, peer review of the interview/focus group schedule and systematic interrogation of the data. The authors were aware of the limitations in this study. A perceived weakness within the study may be the potential for respondents to draw on academical theories that have been learned through a shared training process. While many of the respondents (22 out of 32) were trained in the authors' academical institution, the academic ideas presented within this study were not routinely taught until after Hammond's data collection and publication of his PhD study (2018). A further limitation involves the data being drawn from self-reported perspectives rather than observed practice or young people's perspectives. However, as this study was qualitative in nature, the aim was to understand *"the phenomenon or event under study from the interior"* (Flick, 2009, p. 65). This approach sought the narrative of experienced youth work practitioners. This piece would benefit from further study gathering different perspectives.

Findings and analysis

Whilst the wider study explored the four key processes of relationship-building, participation, conversation and experiential learning, the findings below focus on the process of conversation and dialogue as a primary focus of the youth worker's practice. These findings illustrate how the youth workers viewed conversation and dialogue in their practice. They made specific reference to the building of relationships with young people, the purposeful use of conversation, and the intersections with equality and power.

Conversation and dialogue intertwined with relationship

Although all respondents were speculative in articulating the significance and purpose of conversation and dialogue in their practice, there was an evident commitment to the process. One focus group participant talked of this commitment and its connection to action, saying ***"I love doing work with conversation because particularly work with young men it's about***

conversation and talking about what to do" (FG1). He later went on to say why, "***It's having them meaningful conversations, conversations that they know; this is really going to benefit them and help them to communicate"*** (FG1). While he identified the purpose of conversation as the development of communication skills, others did not view conversation in such technical terms. Conversation was viewed by two other focus group members as a key component which facilitated and drove other processes. ***"I think that to do dialogue for me is such a key component, it's the cog for turning everything else"*** (FG2) and another stated ***"for me dialogue is the starting point of self-reflection, it's about this ability to hold a mirror up in front of your face or somebody else's face, for me it is the key for understanding self"*** (FG2). Here, conversation and dialogue were either seen as central or foundational to youth work. This prevalent viewpoint showed the instrumentality of conversation and dialogue in engaging young people in deep reflection and how it drives other youth work processes.

A dominant thought in the focus groups was the connection between conversation and relationships. One respondent suggested that conversation is about relationship, stating, ***"it's an intricate thing, even if the young person is not saying very much there's usually dialogue, and I think that's where it happens, that's where the development happens"*** (FG1). Another respondent suggested that a stronger relationship would enhance the level of dialogue. The interconnectedness of relationship building and conversation was prevalent with all the respondents. While the focus groups were not always clear about the significance of conversation there was enough emphasis to pursue the theme in the interview process.

Within the interviews the most dominant theme relating to the purpose of conversation and dialogue was its place in building relationship. 10 of 24 interviewees made this connection. One interviewee presented a young person's perspective on the connection between conversation and relationship building, with a belief that young people engaged in building this deeper relationship with a tacit understanding that this would also lead to more challenging dialogue - ***"… they're actually committing themselves to be part of something that will challenge them or move them here; they'll actually have to speak about things and learn about things… .that they agree to be part of that process"*** (R5). Essentially, that deeper relationship meant deeper dialogue and greater self-discovery. Another interviewee reflected this sentiment, stating that the ***"relationship is the foundation, and therein lies the trust, the confidence in the youth worker, from the young person, to be able to explore, to open up those aspects… "*** (R22). Both relationships and dialogue were described here as built upon trust. Another interviewee went further proposing that, in entering into dialogue with the young person, the youth worker demonstrates real care and

warmth for them – that this investment in conversation is symbolic of deep regard for the young person: ***"young people know that they're valued, and somebody actually cares enough to have conversations, to ask questions, to engage with them, that they're getting that sense when they come in the door*** **…** ***. these adults care about me"*** (R9).

Several respondents emphasized that conversation was the vehicle to build the relationship. For one interviewee, there was a slow process of utilizing conversation to create and hold connection: ***"how can you build relationship up without having a conversation with young people, without spending time with them, without understanding them; so to me that's probably one of the biggest processes in youth work is actually engaging in conversation, trusting in conversation and understanding the process"*** (R19). The contrasting and sometimes contradictory view proposed the reverse; *conversation was the purpose* for building a relationship with a young person. These contrasting views are exemplified in the following statements - one person stated, ***"conversation is more the purpose of youth work… the conversation is the reason why we're establishing that relationship"*** (R22) while another argued ***"it's a vital cog in building relationships"*** (R5). Relationship building and conversation were understood variously as method or outcome. This dichotomous view illustrates how purpose and process are intertwined. Some viewed relationship building as an end-goal while others view conversation as a purpose in itself.

Conversation as a purposeful process

While the nature of the link between relationship building and conversation was open to debate, there was broad agreement that conversation was a process which helped to bring about learning and change within young people. One person simply said, ***"I think conversation's important because young people are able to learn about themselves"*** (R20). Others developed a more complex analysis of conversation and dialogue. One respondent suggested they use ***"conversation to pull out what they're*** (the young person) ***saying or challenge what they're saying or encourage them to do something better"*** (R 11). Another stated ***"conversation probably is going in, looking at things deeper than the initial words that are said at the start and also getting them to think and develop things for themselves into something a bit bigger"*** (R 8). The emphasis on learning through conversation was evident in over half of the respondents. One person cemented this view by saying ***"I believe it's through conversation that young people change, that young people reflect, and that young people grow"*** (R 22).

Furthermore, while the concept of conscientization was explicit in a few of the interviews, it was inferred in many exchanges. One explained the

concept as ***"you are supporting young people to develop their critical thinking skills. You don't really know where that will end up, you're not really in control of that process and you're not necessarily seeking to turn out young people who are all 'A's"*** (R 2). Another respondent also emphasized the non-directive nature of true conversation, while acknowledging its role in helping young people to make sense of their lives:***"basically encouraging young people to express themselves but also challenging them in a way that allows them to be OK in the world"*** (R24). Helping young people to think critically about themselves and their world was viewed as a central component of conversations with young people. This critical pedagogical viewpoint was prominent in the data with an emphasis on change, developing critical thinking and accelerating growth for the individual.

Dialogue and conversation builds an equal partnership

While the focus groups elicited little about the equality created through conversation, the interview data was more definite. However, one focus group comment on this theme is noteworthy, from a worker who differentiated between the relationship with *his children* and t*he young people with whom he worked*. He stated that the conversations that took place were ***"hopefully without power or a desire to control. I mean if I'm having a conversation with my daughter that's a different conversation than a real youth worker would have with my daughter because I still have the father-daughter relationship. In school it's a different relationship because they have to churn out 5 GCSEs A-C level, so youth work, hopefully the conversations happen on a more… "*** another respondent interjected ***"equal basis"*** (FG1). This focus on a balanced relationship within an informal youth work context shows that conversation tips the balance of power toward young people, creating a more equal space.

The interviewees talked more about the potential of conversation in reducing the power imbalance between the youth worker and the young person. Conversation was deemed to be a two-way process which immediately makes it a different educational or learning tool to other didactic methods of communication; 5 of the 24 interviewees stated that conversation was a two-way process. One expressed the view that ***"It is definitely two-way conversation, young people have complete ownership"*** (R19), while another commented that ***"it's listening, it's actually hearing what they're saying and not just nodding your head in the right places"*** (R18). Another interviewee described this two-way process, which required the worker to listen well while the young person holds the power in the conversation: ***"you have to have a nonjudgmental approach and the young people have the freedom to say something and for me to be skilled enough to be able to listen and***

***actually here them… that's a core element of a relationship*"** (R19). This desired level of engagement showed a commitment to the process beyond the instrumental and toward an emphasis of equal power sharing.

Conversation toward equalizing power

The power dynamics which conversation and dialogue seek to address were mentioned by almost all of the interviewees. One respondent stated that the relationship that conversation creates meant that they were ***"involved in a reciprocal process of mutual learning and mutual respect"*** (R2). Another stated that youth work is based upon equality ***"it's based on an equal relationship between the young people and the adults"*** (R5). Furthermore, there was an assertion that it cannot be dialogue unless the power is shared. As one respondent stated, ***"I think it isn't dialogue or conversation if there isn't a balance or a flip of power - if the power structure isn't right in that situation, then you're not in dialogue"*** (R7). This emphasis of sharing power emerged as a central tenet of the youth work process.

Implicit within all the interviews was an embracing of a participative working alliance with young people. This perspective placed emphasis on young people leading the conversation and young people driving the agenda. One interviewee said that conversation helped ***"to put a young person at ease, to make them feel welcome and valued, especially if you're going to encourage them down the line with the participation stuff and becoming more involved"*** (R9). There were some implicit connections made between the process of participation and conversation. However, the process of participation was not articulated in any great depth by the respondents.

Discussion

This research evidence demonstrates varying degrees of awareness regarding the process and place of conversation and dialogue. Some respondents talked of conversation in inspirational terms while others initially glossed over the process but subtly showed how they frequently engaged young people in this type of dialogue. However, while there was some ambivalence regarding the importance of dialogue, the data included many examples of the process and practice of conversation. In many instances the process of conversation and dialogue was inextricably linked with that of relationship building. Some of the respondents saw one leading to the other with more prioritizing relationship building over conversation. These minor contradictions illustrate the intertwined relationship between these two processes across the youth work parlance and epistemology. The

connection between these two processes demonstrates interdependence, which are symbiotic in nature and iterative in function – building one from the other. This reflects the connection made by Mezirow (2003) in deciphering how dialogue and building strong relationships work to enable transformative learning. He outlines the vital part which relationship building plays in creating a critical discourse with the learner.

The level of critical discourse in dialogue was not something which the respondents discussed in any depth. However, the descriptions of the quality of purposeful conversation illustrate the value attached by workers to interactions that are analytical and reflective. Dialogue and conversation were referred to as a process to get beyond the initial contact and rapport and ***"getting them*** (the young people) ***to think and develop things for themselves"*** (R8). The literature indicates that moving beyond the initial phase of chit chat and banter is essential in moving into a more intentional and purposeful engagement with the young person (Ord, 2016). Furthermore, deepening the discourse aligns with Jeffs and Smith (2005) view of conversation and the level of engagement that is needed to help facilitate change. The authors promote the idea of '*trusting in conversation*' to be with the young person "*rather than seeking to act upon them*" (Jeffs and Smith 2005, p. 31). The respondents recognized that this type of conversation fosters a two-way relationship and brings about understanding and learning.

While respondents illustrated a deftness in the practice of conversation and dialogue, few explicitly mentioned theoretical perspectives, models or concepts. However, their responses were aligned to and reminiscent of ideas found in the literature. For example, while not referring directly to Freire, some of the interviewees illustrated elements of his conceptual thinking. Developing a critical consciousness is a primary focus of Freire's view of dialogue, whereby, "*critical understanding leads to critical action*" (2007, p. 40). The focus for the youth work practitioners was reflective of this in enabling young people to think more deeply about themselves and in turn change or act upon their new self-conceptualization. The youth worker's role, as suggested by one respondent, is to draw out what the young person is saying and challenge them ***"to do something better"*** (R11) or as another put it ***"I believe it's through conversation that young people change"*** (R22). This emphasis on change certainly aligns well to the action orientation which Freire (1970) advocates.

Power and the equalizing of power in dialogue emerged as the most critical condition to achieve some of the philosophical outcomes of conversation. In the first instance, the power status and hierarchy between the youth worker and the young person was significant. A dominant assumption of the respondents was that theirs was a different type of learning relationship than the assumed hierarchical relationship of formal educators.

The young person would have ***"complete ownership"*** (R18). This high aspiration delineates the notion of power tipped in favor of the young person (Davies, 2021) within the learning process and juxtaposes youth work against the formal education of schools. The ideas of Martin Büber resonated with the aspirations of the respondents who thought of conversation as a two-way process which endeavors to find mutual ground. This philosophical perspective reaches for what Buber (1970) suggests is the 'space between' and intimates a leveling out of a potential power imbalance between talker and listener. The reciprocity and equality of which Büber writes was evident in much of what was said by the respondents.

Where status does not easily allow for equalized power, the skills of the youth worker were invoked to boost the position and power of the young person. In dialogue, listening and the use of empathy created greater equality between the young person and the youth worker. This approach is not about telling but actively listening and hearing the young person. One respondent said, ***"it's actually hearing what they*** (young people) ***are saying not just nodding your head"*** (R4) that brings about the change. This concurs with Mezirow (2003) who argues that conversation involves high levels of interpersonal skills and insight. He denotes these skills as *"having an open mind, learning to listen empathetically, 'bracketing' premature judgment, and seeking common ground"* (Mezirow 2003, p. 60).

For a young person, having power over their own choice and direction in dialogue further enhances the dialogical features of the equalized conversation. One respondent illustrated the point by framing conversation as a process where ***"you're not really in control"*** (R2), whereby directionality in conversation is the preserve of the young person. While no respondents explicitly referred to Habermas' ideas (1987), the aspiration for constraint free conversation (cited in Ewert, 1991, p. 364) was evident from all the respondents. It is the absence of constraint in equal and shared conversation that can enable open learning to take place. The desire to have open conversations free from constraint was a defining feature amongst those promoting dialogue and conversation in their youth work practice. Habermas (1984) acknowledges this is a sophisticated form of dialogue that necessitates a high degree of maturity on behalf of the participants to create open and honest discourse. If young people are infantilised, then the power balance will remain with the adult worker and the growth and ultimate transformative learning will be stunted. As respondents talked of their views on conversation, it was evident that they saw their role as minimizing constraint in dialogue.

Equalized power in conversation can build a dialogical encounter with emancipatory qualities for reflective learning. Freire (1970) suggests that dialogue and conversation, alongside creating a critical consciousness, is about achieving greater equality between the learner and the educator.

He suggests that it is not one working for the other, but it is an equal partnership and a co-learning environment which is being created. Bakhtin (1986) argues that learning is dialogical and two-way. Dialogue of this nature, Freire (1970) suggests, is to emancipate in a way that emphasizes and creates ownership of the learning. Starting with the young person, enabling them to determine the issues and find the answers for themselves was an emancipatory notion expressed by most respondents as they spoke of the purpose of conversation.

The dialogical can build more comprehensive understandings of self or other phenomena; and in doing so can reveal or build some new truths. Bakhtin (1981) states that truth is not owned by one person but *"it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction"* (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 110). One respondent spoke of conversation for discovery '***because young people are able to learn about themselves"*** (R20). The truth-making can then lead to action which was widely recognized by the respondents as an outcome of conversation. Mezirow (2003) deems this type of learning partnership as transformative.

Contextually, this paper is part of a wider study on four key processes of youth work, namely, relationship building, conversation and dialogue, participation and experiential learning (Hammond, 2018). Prior to the study the PhD researcher anticipated that relationship building would be the dominant theme or process to emerge from the study. This was not the case. Upon in-depth analysis of the data, conversation prevailed as the most dominant and salient theme. The respondents' narrative pointed to a new awakening regarding conversation and dialogue. Figure 1 represents a

Figure 1. Conversation as the cog which drives the other three youth work processes.

model of how the respondents positioned conversation considering the other processes being studied.

The model shows how the data places conversation as the central cog which drives other key youth work processes. This demonstrates a shift in emphasis, away from the centrality of relationships and relationship building, often heralded as the central purpose of youth work, to conversation and dialogue that is to create a critical consciousness for young people. However, it is the nature and characteristics of this dialogue which can either open or close learning and emancipatory possibilities.

Conclusion

The findings illustrate the central role of conversation and dialogue in youth work, leading to self-actualising possibilities for the young person. The *quality* of this dialogue resonates with Habermas (1984, 1987) typologies of learning as instrumental, practical, or emancipatory; with *emancipatory learning* aligning most comfortably with the youth work conversation. A series of essential components for conversation emerge from the data; which can ascertain whether the chances of the encounter are more (or less) emancipatory for the young person.

First, the paramountcy of conversation was evident, not in what was explicitly stated by respondents, but through analysis of how the participants talked about the quality and process of conversation. Conversation is the cog that drives other youth work processes. However, conversation in and of itself is not enough. The second necessary component is that the power to learn is located with the young person. In this power context, youth work as a dialogical act is focussed on the agency of the young person. They are not passive recipients or consumers but rather, active agents and citizens who determine, with the youth worker, what and how they need to learn. The third core component is to create a climate toward the equalizing of power. The quality of true 'dialogue' endeavors to find level ground whereby the worker boosts the power and position of the young person to create greater equality for developing agency.

With these core components of dialogue as a central youth work process, the equalizing of power and the joint drive toward agency, the path is laid toward emancipatory learning. When youth workers work with young people in a shared way the learning that takes place is based on consensus, not domination. As Freire (1970, p. 71) states,

> … at the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages: there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know.

In informal and non-formal education, it is this point of encounter that becomes the point of youth work.

Disclosure statement

We wish to confirm that the authors have no competing interests nor any conflicts of interest to declare.

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