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The Edges of Belonging: Youth Work, Participation, and Everyday Resistance in the Gaps of Policy

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Abstract

This article explores youth work as a form of everyday resistance and relational care that emerges in the cracks of policy and provision. Drawing on practice-based experience in a grassroots youth project in Glasgow and doctoral research using photovoice methods, it considers how young people experiencing structural violence through poverty, criminalisation, housing precarity, and exclusion co-create alternative forms of support and belonging outside formal systems. These young people are often described as 'hard to reach', yet their daily acts of resilience, refusal, and mutual care reveal complex survival strategies and political agency. This article argues that informal, care-based youth work does not simply supplement statutory services but actively contests dominant discourses of resilience, participation, and wellbeing. Through a first-person, reflective narrative, I explore how small acts form a radical practice of care rooted in solidarity, not service logic. This survival work frequently falls outside official outcome frameworks but is essential to the relational trust that underpins meaningful youth work. I critique tokenistic models of youth participation and argue for reframing wellbeing as collective, structural, and co-produced. In doing so, the article contributes to theorisations of radical youth work, affective labour, and ethics of care. It calls for greater recognition of the moral tensions and emotional demands of practice in austerity contexts, and more honest engagement with the political nature of care. It ends by asking: What does it mean to practice belonging in a world that so often denies it?

Keywords: Youth work; Participation; Belonging; Structural violence; Care ethics; Everyday resistance

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Introduction

Over the past several years, my work as a youth worker and researcher has been rooted in relationships, especially with young people living through structural violence. This includes those navigating the care system, insecure housing, criminalisation, poverty, and mental health struggles — often all at once. Their daily realities reveal material deprivation and exclusion from systems of care, recognition, and belonging. This article reflects on youth work as a form of resistance and relational care that emerges in the cracks of policy. Drawing on frontline experience in a grassroots youth project in Glasgow and doctoral research using photovoice methods, I explore how young people articulate wellbeing and participate in creating alternative forms of support. Across these contexts, I argue that informal, care-based youth work does not merely supplement statutory provision but challenges the narrow terms of participation and offers a radical model of social justice in practice. I write in the first person deliberately, to reflect the relational nature of this work and to situate myself within the practice, not apart from it.

In the Cracks of the System: Survival Work as Care

The youth project I work with consistently shows up for young people who have been let down time and again by the very systems meant to support them. This includes those navigating housing precarity, school exclusions, contact with the justice system, and constant negotiations with bureaucracy and surveillance. The real work rarely aligns with formal outputs. It looks like helping someone reapply for a bus pass after a school exclusion; sitting with a young person during a housing tribunal; quietly translating housing letters; chasing a social worker who has not returned calls; stretching a youth work budget to pay for groceries, phone data, or a train ticket to court. None of these acts feature in our outcome frameworks but are central to the relationships we build and the trust we sustain. Phoenix and Kelly (2013) describe this as invisible care work. It is the kind of care that emerges not from entitlement

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or entitlement-based policy but from a relational ethic of showing up. Though it is not formally recognised or remunerated, it is the bedrock of our practice. This form of practice sits uncomfortably within dominant policy discourses that increasingly valorise standardisation, measurable impact, and professionalisation in youth services (Ord, 2016). Care is often seen as soft, informal, or peripheral within these frameworks. However, as Smith (2002) reminds us, informal education and care are not merely add-ons but are essential to creating contexts of meaning, belonging, and learning.

Our project is not a crisis service. We are not a food bank or housing charity. However, in the absence of these, we became a kind of ecosystem of care that tries, as best it can, to hold young people when more formal structures leave them exposed. This echoes Banks et al. (2019), who argue that ethical youth work frequently involves navigating tension between institutional mandates and everyday moral commitments. In our case, that means operating in the cracks, where needs are urgent but fall outside statutory thresholds. This is what Cooper (2011) calls radical youth work. It is a practice grounded in solidarity rather than service provision, and a commitment to meeting young people where they are, even when that lies outside what is institutionally legible. Radical youth work rejects the logic of resilience as individualised adjustment and instead insists on the right to care, support, and justice, especially for those rendered surplus by mainstream systems.

In this context, safety cannot be reduced to safeguarding protocols or risk assessments. It is not the absence of danger but the presence of dignity. It is someone noticing that you did not show up. It is having your reality recognised and responded to, not dismissed or deferred. In this way, safety became a political and relational practice, not simply a procedural one. hooks (1994) describes, in her work on engaged pedagogy, how care becomes a radical act when it creates spaces of recognition, affirmation, and possibility. This survival work is not an anomaly. It is happening in youth work projects across the UK and beyond. It sustains young people when formal institutions become impersonal, extractive, or harmful. Moreover, as austerity shrinks the welfare state, youth workers and community practitioners

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are increasingly expected to absorb the fallout (Arrieta, 2022). This form of practice is both vital and unsustainable without structural change.

Who Does the Work of Belonging?

Too often, the emotional labour of survival is offloaded onto the most marginalised; those with the least institutional power and visibility. In youth work spaces, this includes not only practitioners but young people themselves. They are expected to be resilient, to self-regulate in the face of chronic adversity, and to engage with systems that routinely fail to meet even their most basic needs. While policy frameworks increasingly use the language of early intervention, resilience, or participation, these terms can obscure the structural violence young people navigate daily (Brown, 2015; Goldson et al., 2020; Muncie, 2009). For many young people, particularly those who are racialised, disabled, queer, undocumented, or care-experienced, belonging is conditional. As Ahmed (2012) argues, inclusion is often extended only on the condition of conformity; you can belong, but only if you behave, comply, or do not challenge the terms of inclusion. Youth participation, then, becomes a performance. Those who ask difficult questions, resist being instrumentalised, or speak from places of anger or grief are often pathologised or excluded altogether (Mutsaers, 2023; Thomas, 2007).

The young people I work with recognise this dynamic acutely. They are not 'hard to reach.' They are paying attention. They know when they are being surveyed rather than supported, observed, or included. One young person told me bluntly, 'They only want us to speak when they already know the answer.' Another confided, 'I'm tired of filling in forms that don't change anything.' Their words stay with me. They reveal the deep exhaustion that comes with being continually asked to prove one's worth, not just for services, but for recognition. Macleod and Emejulu (2014) describe this as the burden of hope placed on marginalised communities: the expectation that, even amidst systemic exclusion, people must continue participating in the structures that exclude them. It was these insights that shaped the direction

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of my doctoral research. I was not interested in extracting more testimony from young people for systems that were not prepared to change. Instead, I wanted to co-create a space where they could speak on their own terms. I turned to participatory visual methods; specifically, photovoice, as a way of shifting both the content and the form of dialogue (Luttrell, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997). Through this process, young people used photography and dialogue to explore what wellbeing meant in their everyday lives. Their images were complex, textured, and politically charged. One young person photographed a broken window and said, 'This is what my mental health feels like.' Another captured a dark stairwell and explained that this was where they went to be alone when everything felt too loud. Others shared images of takeaway chips, football pitches, empty bedrooms, memorial sites, quiet parks, and youth clubs. A landscape of grief and joy emerged, precarity and care, survival and resistance.

Their accounts powerfully challenged clinical, deficit-based, or individualised models of wellbeing. For these young people, wellbeing was not about being fine or fixed. It was not something they could access through referrals or interventions. It was relational. It was embodied. It was about being seen, being held, and being recognised. It meant having somewhere to go, and someone who noticed when you did not arrive. It meant not having to explain their absence before they were welcomed back. This echoes what Arendt (2018) called the human condition: the need for plurality, action, and recognition. In this context, wellbeing was not merely personal; it was political. It emerged through relationships, community, and the refusal to be reduced to pathology. As a researcher and practitioner, these insights continue to challenge and guide me. They remind me that youth participation cannot be reduced to consultation or compliance. It must involve asking whose terms are being set, who benefits from the framing, and who bears the cost when care is contingent on performance.

Everyday Resistance as Collective Action

In one photovoice project, a group of young people co-designed and led a participatory budgeting process to reimagine mental health support in their community. They were not interested in new diagnoses or therapeutic interventions. Instead, they asked for comfort, connection, and joy: warmth in

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the youth space, shared meals, music nights, art supplies, and time together without surveillance. What they created was not a service. It was not framed as trauma recovery or youth justice prevention. It was a self-determined space of collective care. It was, in every sense, a community. This profoundly shifted my understanding of what counts as collective action. In popular discourse, collective action is often imagined as public protest, legislative change, or formal organising. However, the young people I work with taught me that resistance is also quiet and relational. It happens in kitchens, WhatsApp groups, drop-in sessions, stairwells, and spontaneous acts of generosity. It is someone noticing you are missing and saving you a plate, someone passing you a coat, someone checking in without making a fuss.

In a context where many young people are excluded from public services or actively harmed by them, these acts are not incidental. They are survival strategies, refusal, and resistance. As hooks (1984) reminds us, care is not passive. When practised by those denied care, it becomes a form of political defiance. Similarly, Tronto (1993) positions care not as a private or apolitical domain, but as a set of practices that can challenge hierarchies and restructure power. These moments of care challenged me to reframe what counts as political. They were not mediated through official channels, nor did they always seek recognition. However, they held people together when systems did not. They functioned as what Cindi Katz (2004) calls counter-topographies, networks of solidarity that emerge in response to global and local conditions of abandonment and precarity. These practices do not mirror the system, but subvert it by concentrating on human dignity, where none has been offered.

Freire (2000) reminds us that the first act of liberation is naming the world. The young people in this project did just that. Through their images, stories, and decisions about budget priorities, they named what mattered, not what others prescribed. They challenged the idea that wellbeing could be externally defined or bureaucratically allocated. Instead, they articulated care in their own terms and made that care visible and actionable. In doing so, they shifted the terrain of participation from consultation to co-creation. These forms of everyday resistance are rarely celebrated in policy reports. They are not easily measured or commodified. However, they are transformative. As Audre Lorde (1988) wrote, 'Caring

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for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.' For young people pushed to the edges of belonging, collective care becomes both a sanctuary and a struggle. It is a way of holding each other when institutions cannot or will not. This form of collective action complicates dominant narratives of youth empowerment, which frame change as individual and linear. Instead, I witnessed interdependence; a web of mutual support, accountability, and belonging. It was not about resilience as bounce-back ability, but relational scaffolding and holding one another up when the world felt heavy. The young people I work with are not waiting for systems to validate them. They are already creating micro-worlds of safety, creativity, and joy, and those worlds matter.

Participation as Performance or Practice?

We are living in a time when youth participation is evident. Policy frameworks, strategic plans, and funding streams are increasingly peppered with terms like co-production, lived experience, and youth voice. On the surface, this signals progress and a recognition that young people should have a role in shaping the services and systems that affect them. However, beneath this surface lies a troubling reality as, for many young people, participation still feels hollow, tokenistic, or extractive (Kennelly, 2011). As Lundy (2007) argues, participation involves more than being given a platform to speak. It requires space, support, audience, and influence, each of which must be meaningfully embedded in the process. Without these components, youth voice risks becoming what Tisdall (2016) calls decorative democracy, a display of inclusion without the mechanisms for shared power.

In practice, I have seen this dynamic unfold in numerous settings. Young people are asked to consult on frameworks that have already been finalised. Youth advisory boards are convened without clarity, training, or remuneration. Requests for feedback come with short deadlines, jargon-laden documents, or decisions already made. In these cases, participation becomes aesthetic; a performance rather than a commitment to be honoured. This is the tension I carry. I have seen how easily voice becomes symbolic capital for organisations and is used to bolster legitimacy while leaving decision-making structures

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untouched. I have also seen the emotional toll this takes on young people who are repeatedly asked to share their stories without tangible impact. So, I continue to ask the questions:

- How do we honour young people's knowledge without extracting it?
- How do we ensure participation leads to transformation, not just consultation?
- How do we resist the idea that being heard must be earned?

True participation is slow, messy, and often uncomfortable. It demands that adults relinquish control, that institutions sit with complexity, and that relationships are prioritised over outputs. As Gormally and Coburn (2014) suggest, meaningful youth work happens in nexus spaces, where research, practice, and lived experience intersect dialogically, rather than being absorbed into pre-existing agendas. In this sense, participation cannot be about inviting young people to fit into broken systems. It must involve collectively reimagining those systems, questioning what is on the table, who gets to set it, and what it means to be at the centre rather than on the margins.

Conclusion: Belonging as a Political Practice

Dominant models of youth wellbeing are frequently tethered to individualised indicators: emotional regulation, school attendance, self-esteem scores, or mental health service engagement. These metrics often reflect a deficit-based logic, locating wellbeing within the body or behaviour of the young person, rather than in the social, material, and political conditions that shape their lives (Brown, 2015; Wyness, 2015). However, the young people I work with offer a different framework altogether. Wellbeing, for them, is not internal or abstract; it is social, material, and relational. It means having heat in the youth space, food in the fridge, and someone who cares if you make it home. It is the ability to be seen without explanation. To be included without condition. These everyday needs are often rendered informal or out of scope in policy and funding contexts. However, they are foundational. When care is excluded

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from formal priorities, it is taken up by underpaid frontline workers or falls through the cracks entirely. This reflects affective injustice, the systemic devaluation of emotional and relational labour (Crean, 2018). Worse still, the burden of wellbeing is increasingly placed on young people. They are told to practice self-care, build resilience, or reach out if they struggle, even as the infrastructures that make care possible are stripped away. In this context, resilience becomes less about thriving and more about enduring neglect (Joseph, 2013). Youth workers are often left holding this contradiction, expected to foster hope, stability, and participation in environments shaped by austerity, racism, and exclusion. They do so while navigating insecure contracts, limited resources, and growing emotional demands. As de St Croix (2016) argues, contingent care sustains communities but extracts heavily from those who provide it. It is both vital and unsustainable.

To move forward, we must reframe wellbeing as a collective, structural concern, not an individual trait to be measured, corrected, or optimised. That means valuing the spaces that offer warmth and trust, funding the activities that centre joy, and respecting the workers who stretch beyond their roles because young people need more than what the system is set up to give. Above all, it means listening when young people tell us what wellbeing looks like in their real lives and believing them. Building safe(r) lives rarely fits within institutional boundaries. However, it happens daily in youth clubs, stairwells, WhatsApp chats, and kitchens. It happens when young people advocate for each other and when workers show up long after their hours end. This is not peripheral to justice. It is justice. For those of us moving between practice, research, and policy, the task is clear: not just to include marginalised voices, but to centre them. Not just to celebrate participation, but to resource it. Not just to listen, but to be changed by what we hear. I carry with me the lessons taught by young people and workers alike: that belonging is not granted, it is built. That participation without power is performance. Moreover, that youth work, at its most radical, is not about helping young people fit into broken systems but about imagining and building something better, together.

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