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Re-Envisioning Community Gardens: exploring the value of community gardens in supporting young people's development through informal education

Pippa Edwards

Young Carers Support Worker in Telford and Wrekin, MA Youth Work Leadership and Practice (JNC) from Nottingham Trent University.

Abstract

After feeling the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, access to outdoor spaces as sites for learning, growth, and connection has grown in importance for young people's learning through play, creativity, and risk-taking. In addition, government cuts to youth and community work alongside restrictions within formal education, demonstrates a greater need to protect and re-envision how we view spaces like community gardens as valuable learning grounds for young people to access outside schools. This article aims to demonstrate the importance of learning in the outdoor environment of community gardens. Drawing on data from both Youth Workers and young people, it will advocate for the significance of community gardens for the growth and progression of young people through positive education development using informal learning techniques. It concludes that informal education is vital for young people's educational growth and development, particularly in outdoor settings like community gardens focusing on hands-on experiences and learning through play and the senses. After advocating for the importance of community gardens, it outlines how funding for youth and community sectors like community gardens could be increased and prioritised to maintain active sites outside of schools.

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Introduction

This article demonstrates why young people value community gardens, focusing on their educational development through informal education techniques practised by youth workers. Key topics such as physical space, creativity, and risk-taking will be explored as fundamental to engaging young people in learning through relationships based on trust and openness. Particularly since the pandemic, the overall significance of community gardens for young people's development has heightened in response to the restrictions on social gatherings and increase in technology use. These social conditions have been supplemented by detrimental funding cuts to the youth sector, meaning that young people's use of outdoor spaces in their leisure time has been decreasing.

To demonstrate the importance of learning outdoors in community gardens, this article will initially explore existing research into the impacts of community gardens on youth development, focusing on informal education techniques. Informal education approaches, such as creativity and intergenerational relationship-building are found to be crucial towards youth development in various life aspects as they encourage risk-taking, autonomy, and confidence by exploring the physical site of the garden in foundations of trust.

The research methodology utilised a qualitative approach, with interviews and observations made over four months. Consent was received prior to starting the research, keeping names anonymous and destroying all data after completing the research. The findings are discussed in relation to previous, secondary research and the current social context, focusing on the effects of Covid-19 and funding cuts to the youth sector. The results from young people and youth workers are explored individually and comparatively throughout to enable greater insights into the impact the community garden has on young people from the local area.

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This article concludes by defending the influential value community gardens can have for the development of young people, using informal education techniques. The physical space and mirroring techniques practised through youth work, to enable the unrestricted growth of children, highlight how important they are as spaces outside schools for young people to learn through collaboration. Thus, by voicing the experiences of both young people and youth workers, this article argues that community gardens should be better prioritised and funded to ensure their various benefits can take effect within young people's lives.

Exploring the value of community gardens

The impacts of community gardens on individual health and well-being have been recorded across various countries and contexts. However, less research has explored their educational impact on young people in UK city contexts, particularly since the pandemic.

Community gardens are accessible spaces for young people to find a sense of belonging. As Allen et al. (2008) discuss, activities outside school actively support the well-being of young people and improve school performance, but can be expensive to attend regularly. Thus, community gardens offer a free opportunity for young people to gain positive experiences by engaging with the activities, people, and natural environment that is particularly important since the impact of the pandemic. With the role of youth workers in community gardens, informal education is emphasised as critical to engage young people in learning. As Harris-Evans (2017) argues, informal education through risk-taking and the outdoor environment is a tool for youth workers to educate young people in different settings to safely explore and learn about risk. This can improve decision-making skills and resilience by being exposed to these situations in safe environments. Youth workers are effective in facilitating this because of their non-authoritative and voluntary relationships where this exploration can be done

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collaboratively through trust. Schusler and Krasny (2010) underpin this, emphasising that adults are fundamental to facilitating learning by creating safe spaces and building relationships to grow young people as citizens by planning and taking action in transferrable ways to everyday life.

Similarly, Pevec (2016) demonstrates how gardens create different behaviour settings than classrooms, with more equality between children and workers than with teachers. These outdoor environments encourage different expected behaviours and experiences in less formal ways, enabling more meaningful guidance and learning through care. For instance, the garden could enable more play and learning through the senses. This is a common theme throughout the literature as young people recorded more benefits from this full-body experience. Chang et al. (2016: 789) discovered that 97.7% of participants found the 'hands-on activity' crucial to contribute toward six other benefits, including relieving school pressures. Similarly, Alexander and Grannum (2022) revealed time outdoors restored focus, inspired creativity and curiosity, and showed better academic learning and benefits for ADHD symptoms. Therefore, evidence suggests outdoor environments create a more universal learning experience through their physical nature. Particularly for young children, McFarland et al. (2023) underpin how important it is for adults to harness their innate interest in nature to engage them in lifelong learning that encourages delayed gratification, useful for social and cognitive competence. In community gardens, this is useful because they are safe spaces filled with natural resources that can offer various benefits for youth development outside school that should be better funded and recognised to reduce pressure on youth workers (NICVA, 2020).

The Research

This study took place in a city-based community garden, investigating how community gardens could impact young people's experiences of education through informal practices. Qualitative

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research methods were used through conversational, semi-structured interviews and direct observations over four months for a deeper understanding of the thoughts and behaviours of young people.

I used open-ended questions and probing to encourage participants to describe their narrative, taking questions in ways they felt familiar with. O'Reilly and Dogra (2018) importantly described how the interviewer plays a pivotal role in the process, and with children, it is best to be friendly and patient to follow their lead. Thus, when I conducted the semi-structured interviews, I allowed flexibility and openness, led by the young person, and encouraged their answers by relating to their unique attributes and experiences in the garden.

I had pre-established relationships with the workers and young people and used purposeful sampling techniques based on prior experience and observations. I interviewed two young people and two youth workers from the organisation, with questions focused on the experiences of the children. With the young people, I conducted interviews as we worked together on gardening activities, enabling a task-based approach. Then, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with the workers. **Young Persons 1** and **2** (**YP 1**, **YP 2**) both lived near to the garden and attended sessions regularly. **Youth Worker 1** (**YW 1**) had worked and lived there for over two years as a key voice in the community, and **Youth Worker 2** (**YW 2**) also worked there for over two years as a university student whom the young people looked up to.

Before initiating research, ethical and consent forms were approved and signed by participants and their guardians. To best protect confidentiality, names, and identities were anonymised with data securely protected, and later destroyed. All interviews were audio recorded,

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transcribed, and colour-coded to establish categories. Codes then formed four themes: relationships between young people and workers, creativity, physical space and community, and nature and mental health. Transcripts were placed side-by-side to enable comparative analysis across cases and generations to thematically compare both perspectives.

Findings: what young people valued

The research highlighted how both young people and youth workers view community gardens as crucial for positive educational development, valuing learning life skills outdoors through relationships that encourage youth agency and enjoyment.

Young people demonstrated positive responses to learning outside, using play and exploration through nature to foster eagerness to learn. Creativity was a key theme amongst them by harnessing this excitement in nature to encourage educational development. They showed various imaginative skills alongside enjoyment, vital to engagement, by having the agency to play. Vygotsky (1978) reinforced play as essential for creativity, and attributes like empathy, underpinned by the garden's open environment filled with natural resources, such as trees to climb. Across sessions, **YP 1** explored this natural landscape using flowers, bugs, and various materials as inspiration for drawing, painting, and creating things like 'mud cities' for worms. In the interview, she stated she loves and wants to draw:

'A rose. A pink rose! Or white, or red. Roses. [gasp] I wanna draw a pink rose! I need .... is there any pink?'.

She audibly gasped and spoke fast-paced about her love of roses. Most sessions involved this excitement, finding new flowers to identify and draw while demonstrating respect for plants, and instructing others not to pick and kill them. As the youngest participant, this reflects McFarland et al. (2023) who found younger children have an innate interest in nature that adults

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can utilise to translate into lifelong learning, like respecting nature. Giving her the freedom to follow her excitement is similar to Alexander and Grannum's (2022) finding that this emphasis on enjoyment creates more universal learning experiences through informal approaches such as more hands-on activities.

YP 2 also stated, through the garden:

> 'My dad teaches me obviously how to use a mower and strimmer, but… it's been winter, so I forgot. The first time I did it, I didn't really do a good job. And then, I came here, used a petrol one, and now I'm very good at it. Plus, I find creative ways to use things'.

The garden encourages him to express creativity by trying new methods, using the space itself. He improves his skills by practising in the garden in innovative ways, developing knowledge and skills he later tries at home, showing motivation and passion. Like Schusler and Krasny (2010), this can only occur because the adults facilitate a safe space to explore different ways of learning through relationship-building. This is reflected by the young people's eagerness to help workers and learn. The shared, social environment of community gardens invites excitement, encouraged by youth workers to develop skills by having more agency and control. Often, **YW 1** and **YP 2** work together on various jobs like fixing the lawn mower. **YW 1** led the activity, and over time **YP 2** became more vocal in his suggestions, taking more agency that he described positively by expressing enjoyment of 'doing the job and talking' in this social environment. As Ness (2020) usefully adapts Vygotsky's (1978) Zones of Proximal Development, seeing this as an innovative activity allows for mistakes and risk-taking because of the established environment of mutual support. Underpinned by Harris-Evans' (2017) emphasis on risk-taking in youth work, this shows how using tools and machinery involves

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risk but in controlled ways, positively empowering **YP 2** to use them safely. Thus, risks are implemented with care and motivate him to want to learn, and should be encouraged safely rather than denied, showing trust in his capabilities that can inspire lifelong learning.

Findings: What youth workers valued

To enable these positive responses from young people, what youth workers valued in the garden space were the opportunities to encourage learning and enjoyment. The youth workers reinforced their perceived importance as educators, teaching real-life lessons. **YW 2** stated how:

> 'Teaching them to actually enjoy the earth, and actually have to look after it. I think it's, like, the most beneficial thing you can do for a child – is to teach them about this stuff earlier'.

Repeating the verb 'teach' underpins how she perceives her youth worker role, often teaching gardening skills like planting onions in the polytunnel. She described how excited children get, believing 'it should be brought so much more into the curriculum of school […] to see the actual live things' because 'they were honestly amazed'. The natural environment directly impacted their enthusiasm to learn and engage, which workers use to teach through various methods. Their educational development is explicitly referenced, relating to the excitement and positive reactions caused by the garden, contrasting statutory school curriculums. This is a particular issue as major cuts to school expenditures put more stress on youth workers to pick up where education falls short (Smith, 2014). This research shows how youth workers emphasise their teaching role, suggesting they feel they are teaching vital lessons that schools do not, particularly at such crucial young ages where facilitating this is vital (McFarland et al., 2023).

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Similarly, **YW 1** reinforced this importance within their role to be educators in informal, outdoor environments, stating:

> 'You get more learning outside in the real world… they learn that obviously things aren't just bought from a shop, you can actually grow something to get something'.

She discussed the outdoor environment as the 'real world', highlighting the process of growing food naturally rather than buying produce from shops. She mentioned how the space enabled young people to develop real-life skills that are 'more educational than school', inspired by their eagerness to 'learn' and 'help'. With **YP 2's** engagement using tools, they mirror previous findings like Pevec (2016), because the relationship focus and physical space of the garden create more equality between workers and young people than in classrooms, showing how greater equality and agency motivate young people to want to help because workers believe in their capabilities. In the garden, a strong sense of community emerged amongst all participants, creating an informal community of learning and sharing. One fundamental object observed as essential was the shared use of the accessible whiteboard to note ideas and tasks to do in the garden, including planning **YP 2's** birthday party in the garden. As Pevec (2016) found, this encourages more equality to contribute to taking action which Schusler and Krasny (2010) similarly found fundamental for youth development. By building relationships of trust in safe spaces, research exemplifies the importance of outdoor spaces to enable natural, inter-generational bonding for sharing knowledge. This is particularly important post-Covid with rises in social isolation and technology use, as young people showed various benefits and excitement of being outside with people from their community, in spaces outside schools that should be prioritised and better funded by governments to increase the positive impact they can have.

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Discussion

The findings conclude that community gardens are beneficial for the development of young people through informal education techniques, as all participants emphasised real passion and excitement for the sessions through aspects like decision-making and focusing on creativity. For instance, **YW 1** granting **YP 2** control with garden tools and machinery enabled him to feel more capable in his skills and encouraged him to continue learning with confidence, taking shared risks through a controlled environment of trust. He also found creativity within this to shape the garden, similar to **YP 1** who demonstrated a consistent eagerness to paint and draw flowers. Both youth workers discussed their importance as workers to teach and educate young people, crucial to these findings as this significance displays the importance of spaces like community gardens to provide critical lessons for both skill development and academic learning. Thus, community gardens are arguably pivotal sites for youth development because of their natural environment, sharing activities, and building relationships within the community to learn and grow within safe spaces that should be more recognised and prioritised.

These opportunities are particularly important since the pandemic as spaces for young people also suffered closures. With social distancing and isolation, young people find fewer places to meet others, learn skills, and develop personal attributes like confidence. Reduction in funding for youth services is also an issue with 70% decreased funding between 2010-19 (YMCA 2020). Although the Government Youth Review (2022) promised to create more spaces, they are arguably failing to provide effective services, since funding could be better invested in these pre-established places like community gardens that young people are familiar with and have established relationships with peers and workers. With better funding, workers would be more secure within their role and better able to provide the support young people need, like materials and time for gardening sessions, to pick up where education is also falling short to support

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young people. Community gardens offer a focus on the real world and life skills, demonstrating the importance of informal education for the development of young people because youth work prioritises learning through trusted relationships.

Conclusion

This article explored existing research around community gardens that revealed various benefits for individual well-being, such as increasing focus and attention. As easily accessible spaces outside schools for young people, my research also highlighted how the environment opens opportunities for risk-taking and learning through informal education techniques, like inter-generational relationships, to learn and explore individual development.

Thus, community gardens are regarded as beneficial and crucial sites for youth development that should have greater recognition and funding prioritisation in order to benefit young people and youth workers. Further research could explore the impact on the wider community and how community gardens influence young people's experiences outside of the setting.

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