

Wells Not Buckets: Does Critical Pedagogy
Offer A Way Forward
For Baptist Youth Work In The North East?

by Dan Holland

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Declarations

This dissertation is the product of my own work and does not infringe on the ethical principles set out in the University's Handbook for Research Ethics. I agree that it may be made available for reference via any and all media by any and all means now known or developed in the future at the discretion of the University.

Signed Daniel Holland 19th May 2024

Abstract

The focus of this research is learning in youth groups. As a long-time youth worker, I had become somewhat dissatisfied with the approach to learning that I had ended up with. When I came across the metaphor of buckets and wells to describe different methods of helping young people to learn, I wondered if there was a better way forward. Within the 'bucket method', young people are treated as empty buckets to be filled with knowledge, whereas the 'well method' views young people as wells to draw knowledge out of. I wondered whether something of a critical pedagogy for learning offered a different way forward which seemed hopeful, a way which was collaborative and built on critical questioning.

To test this idea, I undertook a literature review focusing on the wider field of learning and youth work practice. The resulting insight demonstrated a lack of emphasis on the views of young people within this area of study. I then completed a piece of research seeking to hear from young people about their experiences of learning within their church youth groups. The research included participants from four Baptist churches across the North East who participated in focus groups. These groups were led with open-ended questions which sought to get a broad sense of their individual and group perspectives on their learning. Using a thematic analysis approach, I developed coded themes which summed up the data from the groups.

The input from the young people was frank and extremely helpful. I was able to get a sense of their current experience and an insight into what matters to them. I was also able to glean their thoughts on the concepts of buckets and wells. The resulting themes offer a timely challenge to youth workers seeking to facilitate learning with young people. The themes are as follows:

Youth group is a safe space

Youth group is led by trusted adults

Learning occurs through a back-and-forth discussion

Learning is growing together

All too often, adults write about what young people need without asking them. The strength of this piece of research is that young people's voices have been brought to the forefront.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Declarations	2
Abstract	3
Table of Contents	5
Introduction	6
Chapter 1: Review of Literature	10
Chapter 2: Research Methodology	25
Chapter 3: Research Findings	34
Chapter 4: Discussion of Findings	44
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations	54
Word Count: 15378 Words	61
Bibliography	61
Appendices	66
Appendix 1 - Ethics approval form	66
Appendix 2 - Example of Participant Consent Forms	67
Appendix 3 - Participant Information Sheet	71
Appendix 4 - Focus Group Outline and Questions	74
Appendix 5 - Examples of cards used for research	76

Wells Not Buckets: Does Critical Pedagogy offer a way forward for Baptist Youth Work in the North East?

Introduction

A large stretch of my local high street is being torn down. Enormous mountains of rubble dominate the skyline, and what's left of the shopping centre looks like something from a war zone. Stockton-On-Tees' town centre's deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction have drawn plenty of abuse online. Some residents mourn the loss of what's gone without realising that times have changed. The high street, for years underused, will be brought back into connection with the river Tees via a large, urban park. The hope is that this will draw more people into town. The reality is that people don't shop in the same way they used to; online shopping and out-of-town retail are more convenient than the traditional town centre. The council saw the need for change. The old way of operating no longer fits the modern world. They bravely chose to try something new, to find a new way of operating. Their plans have already won awards and acclaim and it's been suggested that this model could pave the way forward for other towns to do the same.

I feel like my approach to youth work needs a similar deconstruction and reconstruction. For many years, I have suspected that my praxis hasn't met the needs of the young people I work with. The model of youth work that I inherited, through both my church upbringing and the ways I've been taught to be a youth worker, just doesn't cut it for me anymore. I am grateful for the love and faith that was modelled to me by brilliant volunteers who taught and guided me as a young person, but it was their example, rather than their teaching, that made a difference to me. Their love for Jesus and for the young people they served impacted me more than what they said.

I'm ready for a different way of operating. The metaphor of buckets and wells encapsulates both my experience of youth work up to this point, and my hope for a new way forward. The bucket method of learning treats children and young people as if they are merely "empty vessels into which the teachers deposit knowledge" (Darder, 2017, p. 56). The alternative is to treat young people more like wells; collectively, knowledge and insight is drawn out of young people through good and deep questioning. In this model, control is shared amongst the group rather than focused on the 'leader' to lead.

As my understanding of how young people learn has been shifting, so has my practice. I have spent more time trying to find good questions to draw out answers from young people, tried to offer them experiences to reflect on rather than pat answers, and sought to be led by them rather than by what I thought they needed to know. While I find myself stepping away from the model of youth work that I inherited, I still feel unsure quite what to step into next. Perhaps like Stockton-On-Tees High Street, I need to recognise that drastic change might be needed. Perhaps beyond the concrete, traditional model there is something beautiful and more free-flowing to be found.

I am struck by the work of Freire and others who frame education as the freeing of young people. I want to look further into Friere's work and consider how the notion of 'critical consciousness' might benefit Christian youth work. What does a youth-led session look like? How do I help them develop a critical view of the world and of their own faith? Does it work in practice to abandon a curriculum and to learn with young people rather than teach at them? Who is operating in a Frieren pattern? What lessons can I learn in my search for a new way?

I'm challenged too by Jesus' method of teaching. Jesus often told stories rather than sermons, asked questions rather than give straight answers, and generally operated

so differently from how many in the church teach today. Jesus taught in parables, deliberately hiding the main point of what he was saying, seeking to challenge and prompt thought and questioning. Jesus spent lots of time eating with people and building relationships with them. He poured scorn on those professing to know it all, preferring to spend time with those prepared to question who were aware that they did not know. For Jesus, learning was about experience and questioning– a questing journey rather than a set menu to choose from.

While this dissertation comes out of my own sense of dissatisfaction with my youth work practice, I am not alone in feeling that change is needed. This is mirrored in the education sector, with the Department of Education bemoaning that “it does not have to be like this” (2010, p.18). Writing about whether children and young people will have faith in the future, Westerhoff does not hold back in advocating for a complete overhaul of the system:

“I have concluded, therefore, that the schooling-instructional paradigm is bankrupt. An alternative paradigm, not merely an alternative educational program, is needed” (2012, p.17).

We need a new approach that emphasises who young people are, rather than just what they know and what they do (Westerhoff, 2012, p.23). As Allan & Allan put it: “the foundations are shifting and a new way needs to be found” (2020, p.20). This dissertation seeks to explore what this ‘new way’ might be.

Outline of Dissertation

In chapter one, I will seek to deepen my picture of the current reality surrounding young people's learning, using literature from both Christian and secular youth work, as well as the education sector. I will use this learning to identify potential questions for my own research.

In chapter two, I will outline the research questions and methodology of this project. Through my literature review, I determined that I needed to gain perspective directly from young people, and designed a study that enabled me to do this.

Chapter three presents the findings of this research, seeking to offer an overview of the themes that came out of the focus groups. Subsequently, chapter four discusses these findings and their implications in conversation with the existing literature.

In chapter five, I will offer my thoughts about the future direction of youth work, and suggest areas where further research may be required.

Chapter 1: Review of Literature

Introduction

This work begins with the question of whether youth workers, like myself, need to change how we approach teaching young people in Christian youth groups. To explore the background of teaching within the context of Christian youth groups, I have considered literature from the areas of education, secular youth work and Christian youth work. I have read for breadth rather than depth, as I want to better understand how these areas reflect on each other and allow these disciplines to enter into conversation with each other. In this way, I hope to see revealed insights that couldn't have occurred in isolation. I have taken a thematic approach to framing this conversation and highlighted several key points and questions that I believe will shape my research going forward. My personal interest in this area allows me to use a heuristic lens within the research. In this way, I can be reflexive and increase my self-awareness whilst also understanding the area of learning within youth work to a greater depth. (Moustakas, 1990, p.9).

Time for change?

The Sunday School movement first demonstrated that universal education was possible (Snell, 1999, p.124). However, their model of education, predicated on passing information to the working class, has resulted in a limited teaching style both in and outside of the church. I suspect that this is a starting point from which education within the church began to look like what we're seeing in the educational system outside the church. What began with a desire to allow large numbers access to education with little resources has changed little in hundreds of years. Despite improvements in understanding of how people learn we haven't moved on from this model.

Westerhoff suggests that we need enculturation rather than education, emphasising that which each person has to offer the other rather than reliance on an individual (2012, p.39). Enculturation means that learning occurs by being part of the group and from those in it: "Enculturation emphasises what one person has to bring to another and the dialogical relationship between equals" (Ibid.). This collaborative approach treats each young person as having something to offer, allowing for a theology of personhood which understands that each person is "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14 NIV). This connects with the Platonic concept of learning as 'meno', with unique knowledge and understanding needing to be drawn out rather than merely imparted (Richardson, 2001, p.8). Gutiérrez & Vossoughi also suggest a similar focus, seeing the role of teachers as "draw[ing] out of students their unique forms of thinking and funds of knowledge" (2009, p.10).

Additionally, Macrine suggests a similar concept building on the idea of 'conscientization' developed by Paulo Freire. In this understanding, critical questioning sees the student immersed not only in existing knowledge but crucially through reflection and action open to and capable of producing something new that does not yet exist (Allan & Allan 2020, p. 49). Through a shift in the framing of the learning, knowledge and insight are drawn out of the students. Each young person is deemed as having important contributions and participation is encouraged.

Gutiérrez and Vossoughi are secular educators but these concepts seem similar to suggestions made by Christian educators. In this way of thinking, children and young people are treated as full persons with a valid faith of their own— questions, doubts and all— rather than aiming for them to have an 'adult faith' as young people (Ingersoll, 2014, p.4). If the faith of children and young people is treated as real and valid they can have a hand in directing the experience and can generate learning that might even go beyond what we know and might expect (Gough, 2018, p.42).

Nye characterises the types of spaces where co-learning happens with the acronym SPIRIT - space, process, imagination, relationship, intimacy and trust (2014, chapter 4). With these foci, Christian youth workers can offer times of mutual learning through conversation (Batsleer, 2008, p5), shared experiences, storytelling, celebration, action, and reflection between and among equals (Westerhoff, 2012, p.393).

Taking this approach, youth workers can focus on whether young people are growing a real living faith rather than primarily focusing on who is committed to coming along on a Sunday (Cartwright, 2023, p. 67). This seeks to help young people learn in groups that give time to hear from others but also space for them to contribute in turn. Westerhoff writes, "We are shaped and shape, influence and influenced" (2012, p43). In this way, young people are viewed as having value and something unique to offer.

A youth work based on the 'rich young person'— rich in potential, rich in resources and therefore rich in difference— could be transformational to the wider church (Batsleer, 2013, p.288). Batsleer is a secular youth worker, but the framing of young people in this way echoes the Christian view of the *imago Dei*, and how each of us reflects the image of God in our individuality and creativity (Gen. 1:27). The *imago Dei* reminds us that we each have something to offer; young people should be seen as capable of producing and participating in the newness that God can bring (Brueggeman, 2018, p.14; Macrine, 2020, p.4).

Time to take a risk?

To facilitate this kind of faith practice, Bright & Simpson suggest that spaces should be created that hinge on risk and grace, leaving room for connection to the divine (2023, p.6). Risk and unplanned time are not often big themes for youth workers, but

these are key points which need reflection (Allan & Allan, 2020, p.211). Are we able to relinquish control to help create space for others or God to fill?

Sometimes a structured, planned session feels like the best use of time, but, as Yaconelli suggests, effort needs to be made to leave room for the work of God in the group and space to connect to him (2011, p.3). Often we try to teach children and young people to catch glimpses of the divine, yet Jesus invites his followers to notice what children might have to teach them about the kingdom of God (Luke 9:48; Baptists Together, 2015, p.33). Allan & Allan highlight the impact of making space to recognise where God is at work in young people's lives– this validates their faith journey (2020, p.244). Together, young people and youth leaders could move beyond a one-way transmission of information about God to helping each other know God personally (Breen, 2017, p.28).

Jesus gave his disciples opportunities to do as he did, first by modelling and then allowing them scope to be involved in what he was doing (Breen, 2017, p.31). A good example is in Luke 9; when faced with the task of feeding a multitude of people, Jesus asks the disciples to feed them. Earlier in Luke 9, Jesus had imparted the disciples with power and authority (vv1-2) and yet they were unable to see their potential for creating change. "Instead of a direct answer, the disciples get directions for organising the crowd into dinner parties of fifty apiece" (Nolland, 1992, p.447). He gave them a part to play in what he was doing, including them as participants (Ibid). How could we do the same?

Jesus also wanted his disciples to challenge and change the world along with their thinking (Breen, 2017, p.31). Leopardo suggests that spirituality must result in action (2017, p.217). The disciples were to "seek the kingdom of God above all else" (Matt 6:33), pointing to and enacting a new way of living, and indeed a new world. Brueggemann's notion of the 'prophetic imagination' suggests that disciples are to

develop a consciousness that allows us to imagine an alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us (2018, p.14).

Hearing from young people

The literature suggests that amplifying young people's voices is a necessary step to achieving the sort of paradigm shift that is needed (Allan & Allan, 2020, p.271).

Darder, an educator, argues that "shifting the emphasis from teachers to students" is key (2017, p.xiii). To do so is to affirm the God-given identity of each young person, making space for their unique voice (Growing Faith Foundation, 2023, p.9).

This dignifying focus on the contribution of the individual within the group is often missed in the education system (Smith, 2022). A recent report revealed that teachers were unable to take questions in the classroom for fear of not getting through the prescribed curriculum (Education for 11–16 Year Olds Committee, 2023, p.23). Giving space for challenge and questioning is not easy and it will take more time, but generates a greater depth of understanding (Feely & Karlin, 2022, p. 87). A key question for youth workers is: are we willing to plan sessions that are rooted in the lived reality of the young people we work with? (Baldrige, 2020, p.619). If so, we open ourselves up to the insight they have to offer.

Recent studies highlight the damaging impact of this disempowerment on young people's well-being (Quilter-Pinner et al., 2023, p.44). One such report explained that children's happiness in school was, for many, linked to whether or not they felt listened to (Children's Society, 2022, p.4). Another article pinpointed the value of participation to young people's well-being (Nash, 2009, p.241). Young people's participation in their learning does not only benefit the development of the group but also the well-being of those within it. If we want young people to have improved

wellbeing then we need to be allowing them to engage in church life as participants rather than observers.

If we are seeking to empower young people, agency is important for their learning and development (Darder, 2017. p.185). If they know that what they have to offer is encouraged and welcomed, they are more likely to offer it. If the model only gives space for young people to repeat what they've been told, they won't share any ideas or thoughts that contradict this. On the other hand, if education can demonstrate and encourage deepening participation in the world and young peoples' role in it, they will start to understand the key role they can play (Darder, 2017, p xii).

Interestingly, Macrine observes that "without a sense of agency young people are unlikely to pose significant questions" (2020, p.84). A collaborative learning experience which invites questioning offers opportunities for young people's voices to be heard. As Richardson explains, such instances allow participants to build upon each other's contributions creating increased learning in unexpected directions (2001, p.126). This requires the youth worker to lay down control and reject the hierarchy of student and teacher (Leopando, 2017, p18-19). Instead, they must be confident enough to encourage young people to take the lead. Friere describes this as "reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (2017, p.45).

The focus needs to be on creating environments and relationships rather than merely drilling knowledge into young people (Smith, 2022). Yust found that often "children are viewed as vessels that need filling with the 'correct' religious information before they can participate in communal life" (2002, p.4). This leaves young people without a voice or a role to play in their learning and development. This shift requires and is predicated on, the faith of the young people themselves

rather than a pre-set list of beliefs to accept (Root, 2017, p.100). This is not a faith mediated by another, but something wrestled with and owned by the young person (Allan & Allan, 2020, p.40). Allan & Allan go on to explain that this is the kind of learning which young people want anyway with young people suspicious of wisdom that is unearned or dropped from above (2020, p.70). As Nye suggests, the focus needs to be on the learning process and not a product (2014, chapter 4) this focus validates the faith of the young person as it is rather than pushing them towards a fixed spiritual goal. Creating the kind of spaces which are open-ended enough to allow this to take place is important (Ibid.)

Macrine identifies one challenge with this way of working, in that its outcomes and development are somewhat unknown. By focusing on the young people and letting them lead, we leave ourselves open to the unexpected shapes and rates of their "growing and becoming" (2020, p.82). A clear curriculum with focused steps of faith development gives way to facilitating and supporting the young person's journey—even if it may conflict with what we think is right (Cartwright, 2023, p. 89).

Connecting with the real world

Root argues that too often Christian education becomes about getting "young people to consent (to stick) to certain beliefs and institutional participation" (2017, p.100). This focus on belief can miss out on the lived experience of the young people. Jesus' teaching and theology were ways of describing reality, and he showed his disciples how to live in that reality" (Breen, 2017, p. 34-5). Teaching that isn't rooted in lived reality and experience ends up disempowering those involved (Darder, 2017, p.40). Freire writes that this type of engagement ends up further pacifying the student, rather than allowing them to critically engage with and shape their world (2017, p.49). We cannot seek to disciple young people while speaking about reality as if it were "motionless, static, compartmentalised and predictable"

(ibid., p.44). Christian education should offer an alternative perception of reality that allows for their participation in it (Brueggemann, 2012, p.56). Leopando, reflecting on Friere, offers something of a model for how this might look in practice: "(education) should foster an interventionist and creative stance toward the status quo" (2017, p.8). In short, this way of teaching brings engagement and connection with the wider world.

A recent report on the state of education noted that the lack of engagement with topics that touch the lives of young people led to them becoming increasingly disengaged (Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee, 2023, p.3). Batsleer describes this type of education as a "flattening of being" (2013, p.288). Darder argues that "the way we educate our youth is related to a future that we hope for" (2017, p.xiv). So, what kind of future do we hope for? If it is one where young people live to make a difference then we must model and teach in ways that help facilitate this (Leopando, 2017, p.8). A shift in emphasis is required to allow for young people to question their world and share what is important to them (Macrine, 2020, p.50). Instead of assuming we know what their world is like, practitioners can be led and guided by young people as the experts of their own lived experience (Baldrige, 2020, p.619).

Freire builds on this idea, explaining: "to exist truly is to name the world, to change it" (2017, p.61). We want young disciples to truly exist in this world, to see it for what it is—good and bad— and be convinced they have a part to play in the coming kingdom; we want young disciples to be living it out now, learning from the world, learning from God and God's participation in it (Westerhoff, 2012, p.22). With encouragement, young people can learn the "conviction of grief and hope that escapes the restraints of the dominant culture" (Brueggemann, 2012, p.57) and, beyond that, be active in it (Allan & Allan, 2020, p.20).

Following Jesus' example

Jesus frequently sought to engage his disciples in dialogue using questions (Collinson, 2004, p.68). Wanak suggests that he was not just concerned with 'what to think' but 'how to think' (2009, p.170). Jesus' use of questions shows that he was not primarily concerned that his listeners acquire knowledge, but rather that they change the way they thought (ibid). The story of the rich young ruler in Luke 18:18-32 demonstrates something of this emphasis. In this passage, Jesus questions the man on his knowledge of the Torah before pointing out that to follow Him the man must sell his wealth and change his lifestyle. Jesus didn't just want to see what the man knew but how it had changed his thinking and his actions. Jesus' use of parables is another example of this, had he wanted to give straight direct answers he could have done so. In Luke 10 Jesus is asked "Who is my neighbour? (10:29) and instead of a direct answer, he offers a parable which requires deeper listening.

Jesus often asked the disciples questions in private to see if they'd been reflecting on what he'd shared publicly at earlier points (Breen, 2017, p.85-6). One good example of this is in Luke 9, where Jesus first asks "Who do people say I am?" (9:18) before asking the disciples "But who do you say that I am? (9:20).

Wanak explains that Jesus' method is reminiscent of a form of Socratic questioning: "Socrates taught by asking questions and thus drawing out answers from his pupils" (2009, p.170). This notion of 'drawing out' gives value to the student's ideas and experiences, making them key contributors rather than just recipients of learning (Nash & Whitehead, 2014, p.198). Learning via dialogue rather than monologue doesn't just deepen understanding, but helps empower young people to see they can make a difference in the world (Smith, 1992). The more young people see they have a role in their learning, the more they will be challenged to see their role in the world (Nash & Whitehead, 2014, p.198). As they challenge dominant cultural

narratives, young people can find new ways of engaging with and making sense of the world, forming new understandings along the way. (Freire, 2017, p.54).

Jesus's questioning countered the enculturated consciousness of his day. This is similar to Freire's 'conscientization', which enabled a greater awareness of the student's reality (2017, p.46). This allowed the disciples to view their world critically, often challenging the established religious elite (Wanak, 2009, p.167). Critical pedagogy challenges us to believe in young people and "their power to not only to become actors in their own lives but to transform the future" (Darder, 2017, p.130). If we limit our teaching within church youth work to simply passing on knowledge, we limit young peoples' potential to impact the world. As Nash & Whitehead see it, the role of the youth worker is "to collaborate with the Spirit... as young people are drawn into the participation in the now and not yet renewal of the whole of creation" (2014, p.204).

Critical Questioning

Allan & Allan suggest that young people are often resistant to advice or wisdom that is unearned or dropped from above (2020, p.70). To encourage learning and growth, young people need safe spaces and people with whom they can critically challenge and explore the world and their part in it.

Freire's critical pedagogy offers one such method. Freire saw the need and potential for education to develop people's critical consciousness, which, in turn, would result in them becoming transformers of the world (2017, p.46). Freire was critical of the banking method, which treated students as empty vessels to be filled with the teacher's 'narration', or version of reality (2017, p.44-5). Freire believed that the banking method led to further oppression of already marginalised people; he wanted to see changes to the educational system whereby students were taught to

question the world around them in order to make new meaning (Nash & Whitehead, 2014, p.198). By encouraging critical questioning, students would be invited to engage in their world as co-creators and participants rather than just subjects of it. Freire imagined a "loving and 'dialogic' community of mutual exploration and transformation" (Leopando, 2017, p.22).

I recognise there is work to be done in translating Freire's ideas into the context of Christian youth work. Friere was referring to the oppressed lower and working classes trapped in poverty by systems designed to keep them there (2017, p.46). However, I see value in his ideas and believe this task of translation to be vital to my ongoing reflections.

It is worth noting that Freire's work has encountered opposition. For some, Friere's work was too idealistic; even Friere himself admitted this was a challenge (2017, p.11). But perhaps this idealism is key. Friere's hope and Catholic faith were key driving factors in his search for a better way of education (Leopando, 2017, p.4). Why wouldn't we want to have high hopes for young people and their potential for a positive impact on the world?

Others such as Smith have suggested that his emphasis on being 'for' the oppressed or 'against' them is too simplistic and that Freire's outlook gave little scope for nuance and grey areas (1992). Smith's role as someone who teaches and trains educators might locate him on the side of the oppressors in Freire's eyes-- he might not have given his opposition much notice.

Critical pedagogy is designed to help "students locate themselves in the concrete realities of their daily lives whilst furthering the understanding of the limits of those same conditions" (Darder, 2017, p.xii). Perhaps this should be a key focus for Christian youth work to further the young people's understanding and critical awareness of

the world and help them see their role in changing it. As Root describes faith is often seen as “what I give my personal time and commitment to... I am what I consent to and participate in” (2017, p.100). A bigger view of faith and the potential and hope of a life lived with God is perhaps needed as Brueggeman puts it, “hope that escapes the restraints of dominant culture.” (2012, p.57)

Experienced and equipped teachers

In a changing world, we need youth workers who are able to teach in ways that fit and engage today’s young people (Allan & Allan, 2020, p.244). Youth workers, both paid and voluntary, offer so much to young people, but the truth is that most are “practising with limited resources..., on the front-lines of trauma and adversity with our youth” (Johnson-Goodstar, 2020).

Unfortunately, training for Christian youth work is in decline. A 2022 study suggests that the number of individuals training for Christian youth ministry has halved in the last ten years alone (Howell, 2022, p.3). Meanwhile, recruitment to professional youth work courses has fallen by 75% (Howell, 2022, p.5). This is a concern, as studies have shown that the quality of teaching and teachers is a huge factor in how students do in their education (Department of Education, 2010, p.9). If we want the best outcomes for young people, it may be that changes need to be made to the training and development of youth workers. No matter how well-intentioned or well-meaning youth workers may be, they can still become complicit in leading young people in ways that may not be beneficial or could even be detrimental to their growth in faith (Darder, 2017, p.40).

Communities of learning

“No generation has a monopoly on truth. We need each other, for it is about what we learn together” (Cartwright, 2023, p.33). Westerhoff suggests that we are made to be in community with others, and therefore our interactions with God and others are key to how we learn (2012, p.22). Mutual learning and mutual support are important for discipleship (Holmes, 2012, p.157). Meaning and understanding are developed alongside others, so each can build and develop their thinking with the other.

Often it seems that learning is transmitted from one person to a group of others. One tool that I have come across in youth groups is the Biblios kit– a brilliant board game-style resource with interactive videos, engaging maps and opportunities to learn. Yet the teaching is delivered in videos, rather than through the game itself. It's a top-down approach even if it is done in an interactive and fun way. A different method is needed, one where we act as a community of faith rather than a basic educational model based on passing along information (Westerhoff, 2012, p.29). We are all lifelong learners and none of us can claim to 'know it all' or be experts in our discipleship (Breen, 2017, p.21). Allan & Allan maintain that the church works best where generations intermix and learn from and with each other, and I would suggest that Christian youth work sessions operate best when the same is true (2020, p.30). As Westerhoff posits:

“Education grounded in Christian faith cannot be a vehicle for control; it must encourage an equal sharing of life in community, a cooperative opportunity for reflection on the meaning and significance of life” (2012, p.16).

This equal sharing of life is vital for learning and discipleship (Ibid.). God is present in every area of our lives and is working in all aspects of our day-to-day experience.

Every part of every young person (and leader) should be included in the learning process (Nash & Whitehead, 2014, p.194).

Conclusion

This review of the literature around education, secular youth work and Christian youth work has been extremely useful. I came to the reading wanting to see if there is a basis for and a need for a new approach to teaching within Christian youth work. It became clear to me that this sense of needing change exists within the education system, but that isn't the focus of this work. The key themes I have picked out sum up what I've read and also offer some points of emphasis for a different approach, which could look like:

- A youth work which keeps the voice of young people at its core, validating their own expressions of faith
- A youth work willing to take risks in order to allow young people to grow
- A youth work that invites critical questioning that is rooted in the real world and lived experiences of the group
- A youth work which seeks to follow Jesus' example of discipleship through questioning to 'draw out' knowledge from young people, and giving opportunities to do what Jesus did
- A youth work which develops communities of learning with space made for exploration
- A youth work led by trained and experienced practitioners who understand what is required to engage and support young people in their learning

All of these points combined may sound a little idealistic, but they represent something of my reading and something to aspire to.

It is almost ironic that one key area missing from this report is the voice of young people. In a project written with the sense that young people need to be more involved in their learning, there seems to be very little literature asking questions of the young people that are the focus of that education. The Good Childhood Report is research based on young people's answers to questions, but generally in the fields I've covered, the literature focuses overwhelmingly on the experts' views. I can't help feeling that to truly work out a way forward that is appropriate for young people, I need to be guided by them.

Recommendation

For my research, I have decided to ask young people what they think about their experiences of learning in their Christian youth groups and what they think should be taking place. The young people's opinions and reflections will help me get a fuller picture of what is happening in their groups and what changes or insights they have to share.

Chapter 2: Research Methodology

Introduction

My review of the literature gave me a good overview of what a slightly idealistic Christian youth work might look like, but my key reflection was what do the young people think? Experts and practitioners have written volumes about what young people might need, but I want to ask them directly and allow my thinking to be guided by them. While I have views about the outdated nature of the 'bucket approach', they should not necessarily dominate reflections on how young people might learn best in a youth work setting.

In this chapter, I will explain the how and why of my methodology, firstly by exploring the philosophy guiding the research, and then detailing the means of data collection and analysis.

Philosophy

The driving focus of my research is hearing the views of young people; I wanted to ensure that my research encouraged and allowed them to share openly and honestly about their experiences of youth work in Baptist churches. My role in this was to facilitate the kind of space where they could share in this way. This participative-led philosophy meant that the research I designed was built around the voice of the young people. I agree with Groundwater-Smith et. al, who argue that the methodology underpinning the research is critical in promoting participation (2014, p.102).

I chose to use thematic analysis to frame the research and allow space for the young people's experiences to direct the research process. This aligns with a sense

of seeking to empower the young people and to show them that their views and experiences are valid and important (Thomson, 2009, p.1).

Research aims and objectives

I wanted to explore the concepts of 'buckets and wells' and whether a critical pedagogy offers a new way for Baptist youth work.

My research objectives were:

- to hear what a sample of Baptist young people think
- to seek to understand what their experiences of teaching in their youth groups have been like
- to explore what they might like them to look like as an alternative.
- to gain participants' feedback on the concepts of buckets and wells and the helpfulness of this metaphor

Before conducting this research, I reflected that the teaching methods commonly used with Baptist young people seemed designed for a different era (Hopkins, 2023, p.8.). The broad aim of this research was to explore what new ways of teaching might fit today's young people and whether they feel this is necessary.

Research design

This is a qualitative piece of research using focus groups to facilitate a conversation with young people about their experiences of teaching in their church youth groups. Focus groups are an effective means of facilitating the kinds of conversations I was seeking to achieve (Ward, 2017, p.159). This approach allows for the group as a whole to generate learning and insight through the process. Interestingly this reflects many of the benefits of a critical pedagogy outlined by Friere (2017, p.58). The looser

format of focus groups creates space for participants to speak more freely, rather than simply in response to a question (Cameron & Dulce, 2014, p.109). Hopkins found that this kind of focus group enabled young people's self-discovery (2023, p.2).

I used approaches from visual ethnography to ensure that the young people were free to engage and connect with the topic as much as possible and without too much leading from me. Using images in research can allow young people to offer rich reflections which description alone may not provide (Hackett, 2016, p.69). This method encourages collaboration and also builds on young people's visual literacy giving them more ways to express their views (Bradford & Cullen, 2013, p.86). In addition, Groundwater-Smith suggests that images can help serve as organisers for the narrative of the conversation (2015, p.107).

I used a set of images from the board game *Apples to Apples: Big Picture Edition* as it consists of one hundred diverse photographs offering a range of subjects. These cards are diverse and random, allowing for the young people to interpret them as they see fit. These visual clues work well with young people and can act as prompts or 'trigger photographs' (Thomson, 2009, p.12) to promote a range of discussions (Groundwater-Smith, 2015, p.106). Participants were also given the option to draw their own images should the images on offer not reflect their experiences. The use of the cards also meant that participants could change their minds and adapt their thinking during the research (Groundwater-Smith, 2015, p.107).

The focus groups were asked open-ended questions intended to begin the conversation. Participants were asked to make use of the images to respond. Follow-up questions were asked by myself and the participants, to further our reflection or clarify meaning.

I included a single closed question based on the 'bucket and well' concept, but only to gain their views on my own reflections. For the full list of questions and an outline of the focus groups see Appendix 4.

Participants were encouraged to initiate the analysis of their responses together. After hearing from each participant, I asked them to sum up what they had heard from the group as a whole, and share what themes they noticed. Taking this approach, I aimed to let their analysis lead my own.

Participants

Four youth groups from Baptist churches across the North East took part in this study. My role as CYF Facilitator for the Northern Baptist Association enabled me to identify churches that might be willing to participate.

This sample size allowed for a wide range of feedback from distinct groups with a variety of backgrounds. Each focus group represents a different part of the region with differing socio-economic backgrounds, as well as varied experiences of ecclesiology and Christian experience. This gives the research a broader scope.

Group 1: Urban Baptist Church

A large youth group with twelve present for the research session. The group is made up of seven girls and five boys ranging from 13 to 18 years of age. Urban Baptist Church has an established youth work and a full-time youth worker. This group meets every week with sessions taking place in a volunteer's home.

Group 2: Coastal Baptist Church

A small group with five present for the research session. The group is made up of three 18-year-old girls and two 13-year-old boys. The group is led by volunteers and they meet each week to eat together and study.

Group 3: Rural Baptist Church

This was a small group of four including a junior leader, comprising two girls and two boys. While the youth group is typically larger, exams meant that only a small number were available. Rural Baptist Church is a large church with a full-time youth worker and a substantial team of volunteers. The group meet every week and offers extra sessions focusing on teaching life skills at other times of the year.

Group 4: City Baptist Church

City Baptist Church is a large church in the centre of a big city. They have a large youth group, of whom I met with a selection of 8 young people. There were four boys and four girls in the group, ranging from 14 to 18 years old. The youth group is run by volunteers.

Data analysis

I used thematic analysis (TA) to explore the data collected from the focus groups. TA felt flexible enough to fit with my aim of hearing from and being led by young people. Essentially, thematic analyses move beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data (Guest et al, 2012, p.10).

I chose an indicative thematic approach, meaning the themes are based on what emerged from the focus group and not tied to pre-existing, presupposed ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.83). This may mean that the themes may not directly relate

to my research question, but this ensures that they are a truer reflection of the content of the focus groups.

Rather than looking for what I thought I already knew (i.e. a confirmatory approach), I used an exploratory approach, which is driven by the content of the discussions (Guest et al, 2012, p.7). This aligned with my goal of being led by the young people and their perspectives.

The theoretical freedom that TA allows provides a rich and detailed account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.78). TA allowed me to ask young people questions, give them space to reflect on their experiences, and then synthesise the expressed views in themes which work across the data set. By using a thematic approach to build upon the initial analysis that the participants have offered, young people's voices have been able to permeate through the entirety of the project.

TA involves searching across a data set to find repeated patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, p.6). The key here is that meaning is located within what is shared by the young people rather than the researcher making sense of the data (Guest et al, 2012, p.49). This locating is achieved through a process of coding which is then developed into a set of themes. Braun and Clarke, recognised as key contributors in the field of TA, outline six phases (2021, p.35) which I have undertaken for my analysis:

Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with the data set

I transcribed each focus group audio recording myself; this allowed me to become familiar with the narrative of each session.

Phase 2: Coding

To codify the focus group sessions, I read through each data set adding brief notes to describe each segment. This phase is about identifying concepts and single meanings; no themes were identified at this stage.

Phase 3: Generating initial themes

At this point I began to collate the various notes and codes from phase two, seeking to produce a summary of each focus group, and highlighting quotes and talking points that the participants made. These themes are short phrases offering a summary of the meaning from across the data set.

The key was to synthesise what was said– not to force my question onto the data, but allow the true voice of the young people to speak into my question. Braun and Clarke argue that good themes are reproduced by the researcher not produced (2021, p.230).

Phase 4: Developing and reviewing themes

I looked over the themes again, reading across the data set to ensure that my themes offered a summary of the content and output of the groups. I took care to ensure that where groups offered suggestions on themes I included their thoughts.

Phase 5: Refining, defining and naming themes

This next stage is a fine-tuning of analysis, which left me with five themes which reflect the whole of the data set. (See Chapters 3: Research Findings and Chapter 4: Discussion of Findings)

Phase 6: Writing up

I began weaving together an analytic narrative with compelling data extracts. This was done by outlining the findings of the data and then discussing the meaning and implications of the findings. (See Chapter 4: Discussion of Findings).

Limitations and potential problems

To gain the most reliable data that I could, I identified some potential problems and limitations that I sought to address through the design and implementation of my research.

One limitation is the research setting itself. I came into their spaces and imposed a different aim and focus to their usual youth sessions. Despite my attempts to make them feel at ease, they may have felt that they needed to behave a certain way or give me 'right' answers. I sought to create a safe environment and encourage young people to share but even as I tried to shift the power dynamics in their favour the opposite could have been true. I believe this is called the researcher effect. I encouraged their engagement and sharing but made it clear that they were under no obligation to do so.

Working with pre-existing groups could have meant that established group dynamics were at work, with dominant voices taking over (Cameron & Dulce, 2014, p.118). I believe I was able to negate this by giving time and space for each person to share if they wanted to.

I am also aware that this type of group might end up answering carefully so as not to seem like they are being critical of their youth worker or youth group model. I reassured the groups that they could feel safe to share honestly and openly without answering as they felt anyone would want them to.

I also tried to mitigate this by leading the focus groups without the primary youth leader present, specifically the person who does the teaching with the young people. If I want an honest reflection on their experience, it would be difficult to do so with their leader in the room.

I was aware of my potential to influence the discussion and sought to remain a facilitator and investigator rather than a participant. This meant holding back my opinions about their answers and asking follow-up questions to allow participants to continue developing their own insights. Clark et. al highlights the need for my own reflexivity in this process (2013, p.9). By being aware of the assumptions and biases I bring with me, I can seek to ensure that they do not shape the research itself.

Conclusion

This research project is designed to help me hear a true reflection of young people's experiences of teaching within their youth groups. Throughout this process, I have sought to amplify their voices and reduce my own. Both the design of the project and the thematic approach to analysis have hopefully served me well in drawing out themes and conclusions that reflect their experiences. In the next chapter, (Research Findings) I will outline the findings of the research drawing together themes from the insights of the young people.

Chapter 3: Research Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the findings of the focus groups, offering a synthesis of what was shared. Having used thematic analysis to draw a unifying sense of the data, I will offer themes that sum up the narrative of the focus groups. I will evidence these themes with direct quotes from the participants, which have been transcribed in the manner in which they were spoken.¹

Outline of my four themes

Theme 1: Youth groups offer a fun, safe space away from normal life which can be hard. Their groups offer a community-like family where they can be themselves.

In short - Youth group is a safe space

Theme 2: Learning in youth groups is directed by the youth leader. The chance to learn from those further on in their faith journey and those who care for them is important.

In short - Youth group is led by trusted adults

Theme 3: Learning takes place around conversation and deeper discussion. Young people share openly, knowing they are listened to and listening to others. Learning is developed by building on each others' responses.

In short - Learning occurs through a back-and-forth discussion

Theme 4: Learning is communal, about an engaging time of growing together, understanding God better and connecting their faith to their lived experience.

In short - Learning is growing together

¹ Transcripts of the focus groups are available at the examiner's request.

Youth group is a safe space

Theme 1: Youth groups offer a fun, safe space away from normal life which can be hard. Their groups offer a community-like family where they can be themselves.

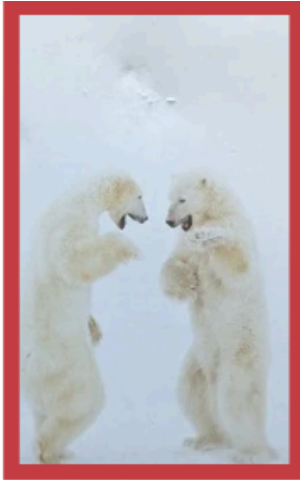
Across the focus groups, it was clear that the participants' youth groups were a vital part of their week. Learning may be one focus, but the young people spoke of how their youth group acted like something of a sanctuary from the stresses and challenges of the week. Participant 17 commented: "I think being a youth and that it can be hard and that. Like up and down relationships and certain times can be hard."

For the young people represented in the focus groups, their youth group was something of a refuge providing somewhere they could "be yourself" (Participant 21). This sense of a safe space included fun and games, meeting new people, eating together and talking about everything. Participant 7 chose an image of a reporter in a storm to depict how significant coming to their youth group is: "I've got this one of a weather reporter in a storm because we make it, whatever the weather, to come here."

This sense of how important their youth group was to them became clear from each focus group. Participant 1 described the group as simply "a safe space", while Participant 13 went further and described their group as "like a big, happy, loving family." The nature of this familiar community included having fun, playing silly games and getting to know each other.

Participants reflected on how the safe environment helped them feel able to share and connect with others. Participant 22 chose an image of polar bears, explaining:

“(they’re) just getting on with each other because there’s a good environment where you can speak to everybody, really converse and meet new characters.”



This community of characters would be another way to sum up what participants shared. Community or family was a theme that the young people from each group came up with. Participant 1 expressed something of this closeness, explaining that “you actually share”– pointing out that perhaps in other groups that isn’t the case. The community the young people have found in their groups has been significant in their learning experience and even makes it possible. Interestingly, each group also mentioned the importance of their youth worker in helping to create and lead the learning environment.

Youth group is led by trusted adults

Theme 2: Learning in youth groups is directed by the youth leader. The chance to learn from those further on in their faith journey and those who care for them is important.

In all four focus groups, participants reflected upon the strong significance of the adults who lead their youth groups. Participant 22 expressed something of this:

“When we come here we get this chance to speak to authority and get advice from people that are, like, have had a longer relationship with the Lord than we have and can strengthen our relationships.”

leaders “helped them a lot.” The help and support were key for their learning. Participant 11 expresses this similarly with this image: “Then I’ve got one of an older guy sitting with a child and that’s key that words are exchanged between old and young.”



Participants viewed their leaders as a strength in their youth groups and appreciated the role they played in their learning: “They express a desire to know us and be for us, you can tell they care a lot” (Participant 9).

This honest love and care shown by the leaders goes some way to enforce what was shared about the safe space created in the group. It was clear from what the participants shared that they love and respect their leaders and they are a central part of the familial-like community of the group. Participant 27 reiterated this saying, “I like that I feel comfortable to speak and to ask my questions.”

What was also clear was an obvious discomfort in saying anything too negative about their leaders or their group as a whole. I took this to be more out of their affection for their leaders than a fear of being honest. What did come through was the reality that the leaders set the direction and content of each gathering. When I asked who set the topics or theme of the night, Participant 5 simply answered, “Not us.” There was a sentiment expressed by some participants that they would like to be more involved in the process: *“In general we do do relevant things, but to start with a topic that really relates to where we are, everyone would have more involvement”* (Participant 9).

Participant 8 suggested it would be good to “bring something to the table” and it was clear that some in the groups would like to be more involved.

Generally, the young people didn’t seem to have a problem with the youth leader setting the agenda, as they valued what was on offer and saw that the leaders brought something of a “stimulus” (Participant 9), initiating the conversations with a structure. Participant 8 noted that youth leaders brought, “something to start the conversation and then sharing and discussion.” Participant 13 expressed a simple idea explaining that “she (their leader) always asks us what we think when we go in there, then we go there in the end.”

‘In the end’ is a good phrase to sum up this idea; the group dynamics allowed for conversation to flow back and forth without purely focusing on a specific learning goal. Participant 27 explained that “it’s open for a conversation. There is an agenda but not a strict ‘follow this, follow this’.” In this way, learning is about growing and sharing together with the leader helping this to take place.

Learning occurs through a back-and-forth discussion

Theme 3: Learning takes place around conversation and deeper discussion. Young people share openly, knowing they are listened to and listening to others. Learning is developed by building on each others’ responses.

The nature of how learning took place was another key theme across the data set. Each group spoke about how conversations and discussions flowed, allowing each person to share. Interestingly, Participant 9 chose an image depicting someone doing ‘jazz hands’: “because someone always says something new, and deep, and philosophical, and there’s always a conversation, a back and forth.”

The depth and nature of the actual discussions would vary between each youth group, but Participant 22 summed up this clearly saying, “We communicate and share and communicate properly.” This communication and sharing concept was expressed time and time again. Participant 9 chose an image of a conductor because “we get these really deep conversations with everyone chipping in like an orchestra”.



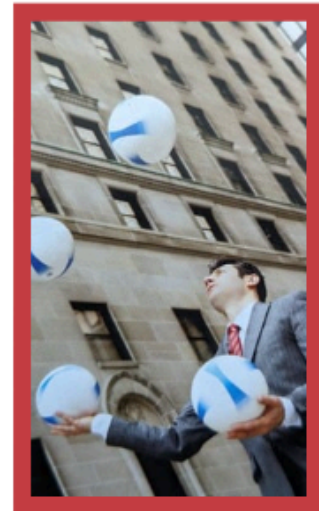
In each focus group, some participants didn't want to share, but it was clear that the others in the group were used to encouraging them without adding pressure. The lack of pressure speaks to the safe space mentioned above. Participant 13 spoke on this:

“I think a good thing about the group is we have freedom to say what we want. If [youth leader] asks a question about what we've learned and we have the freedom to say what we have done and we're not restricted.”

This freedom and sense of safety were really important to the young people. They also expressed that they felt heard in a significant way. Participant 19 explained: “We always get a response and we are always listened to.” Participant 15, from a different focus group, made a point of sharing that their leader “gets really passionate about the Bible and what we have to say, she really does.” It was clear that the input of the young people was valued and welcomed. Even if the sessions were directed by the youth leader, the young people felt part of what was going on and were free to speak and engage in conversation around the chosen topics.

Through this dialogical way of learning, “you get everyone's opinion” (Participant 2). In this way, learning goes in directions that can't be prescribed. Participant 17 chose a juggler for one of her images, explaining:

“This guy juggling the balls because there's a lot of things like you're able to juggle all the things like all the ideas and everyone's putting in all their ideas to make one good final thing.”



This juggling concept expresses another key narrative from the focus groups. With the right environment and encouragement, more of the youth group feels safe to share and more learning takes place by building on what everyone has to say. As Participant 28 expressed: “We discuss it and talk about it and add to each other's point.” Learning develops by layering each other's thoughts and feelings:

“You hear from others and understand together, hearing from everyone, you bringing your idea and they help fine tune it and discuss it and make it better.” (Participant 27)

Participant 17 explained that she was able to speak even if she wasn't sure of the answer. This reticence is normal, but the sense of a safe space to share and be listened to is so important.

While youth leaders were key to participants' learning, so were their peers: “We share with others and get from other people” (Participant 19). This sharing and receiving from the rest of the group speaks to mutuality in their learning. Participant 8 explained that what is generated is “shared knowledge” that comes from different people in the group. This sharing of knowledge links to another key theme, which is

their understanding of how learning works in their groups. It was clear that to the young people learning was something done in collaboration.

Learning is growing together

Theme 4: Learning is communal, about an engaging time of growing together, understanding God better and connecting their faith to their lived experience.

This theme seeks to sum up the young people's view of what learning is. The first theme sums up their experience of the learning environment, and the second is the nature of who directs that learning, but this theme is taken from what the young people have expressed regarding learning specifically.

"We come here to learn and develop our growth about God". Participant 13 expresses the view that learning is about growth in understanding. Participant 10 echoed this view explaining that "we grow together". Learning and growth happen alongside each other and not in isolation. The shared experience demonstrated a desire to hear from each other and a sense from the youth leader that helping young people share was important.

Participant 25 describes learning within their youth group as "like investigating things, working it out together". Collaborative learning was important to each focus group. Participant 9 talked about how good it was when "we were asked what we thought about something."

Questioning is another aspect of this theme; Participant 7 spoke of how her leader asked a question and then simply "Let us talk." The freedom to share and express how they feel and think was important to the young people:

"It's all discussion-based, never a leader talking for three or four minutes. I think it's all through dialogue and not at all like a lecture. Not those are inherently bad. You get to have a discussion." (Participant 1)

The nature of their learning is about the discussion they have together. Ideas bounce back and forth expressing their sense of curiosity, "because we're all quite curious and have a lot to say about God" (Participant 7). The youth workers were able to create spaces where the young people could debate and discuss their faith and life together.

This is another key point that the young people expressed– what they learn about is related to their lived experience and not just Bible knowledge.

Participant 8 suggested that conversations "link into everyday things and link slowly, tracking it down to the Bible and we discuss it. It's just more involving if it's everyday issues that we talk about."

This was an idea suggested across the groups, that learning needed to connect to their experience and the discussions helped facilitate this. Similarly, Participant 9 expressed this idea: "I think we're really good at connecting to other things. So not tangents but branching out into different conversation topics."

Participants' learning was about them growing together and allowing their faith and development to impact their actual lives outside the group. Participant 9 suggested that it is better this way than "coming in once a week, sitting down and leaving, and it not really having an effect on our day-to-day lives."

Participants wanted their learning and growth to affect their lives; however, there was a sense that the young people could be more involved in this process:

"Sometimes even though the sessions are good they seem a bit far off where we

are“ (Participant 9). This suggests that in order to ensure that topics fit with young people’s lives, they should be involved in making those decisions. Participant 5 echoed this thought, suggesting that their youth group sessions should be looking at “general stuff about their lives.” To the young people, their lives and how they lived were as important as developing knowledge and knowing about God.

Learning for the participants, then, is about discussing and responding to the views of the other. Being heard and hearing others seemed foundational to their experience of their youth groups.

Conclusion

Each of the themes I have drawn together gives a sense of the story of the focus groups. What is clear is that the participants are happy in their youth groups and feel safe to be themselves while expressing their understanding of God and the world honestly and openly. While their sessions are guided and led by the youth leaders, the young people have a significant part to play in how knowledge is generated and the journey of learning that takes place. Each group relied on conversation and debate to facilitate learning, allowing the unique perspectives of each individual to be shared. The similes of jazz and a conductor bringing all of the elements together are particularly expressive. In the following chapter, I will discuss how these themes and reflections connect to my questions about a new way forward for youth work.

Chapter 4: Discussion of Findings

Introduction

This chapter seeks to bring meaning and explore the implications of the research findings. While the previous chapter laid out the narrative of the focus groups and themes that emerged, this chapter explores what these themes might reveal about youth work in light of my original question. My theory about critical pedagogy and a more collaborative method of teaching/learning needs to be checked against the views of young people. I will also explore the relationship between the research findings and the literature review.

Youth group is a safe space

Theme 1 - Youth groups offer a fun, safe space away from normal life which can be hard. Their groups offer a community-like family where they can be themselves.

Youth groups were a vital part of the participants' lives. They spoke about how it was hard to be a young person and how their groups had become safe spaces to be themselves and find community. This safe environment was foundational to any learning taking place; only when the young people felt acknowledged and at ease could they share their input and take in that of others.

Participant 1's assertion that their group was a "safe space" is an encouraging point, but perhaps also highlights that for many young people, aspects of their lives don't necessarily feel safe. The reality is that young people are living in a world vastly different to even that of their parents. The world has changed, and "the maps of growing up... no longer correspond to the territories the young people actually occupy" (Cohen, 2016, p.21). Young people are desperate to find their way and need safe spaces to be allowed to do the work of figuring it out. Youth work can

offer these spaces, and a faith journey which draws people into relationships with their peers and God can play a huge part in this.

If youth workers want to create engaging learning spaces that draw out knowledge and bring young people together, then we must first ensure that these spaces are spaces of sanctuary and safety– environments where young people feel free to be themselves and bring all they have to offer. If our youth groups are not spaces where young people feel safe and seen, then learning will be hindered. To borrow the analogy from the parable of the sower in Matthew 13, we need to ensure that the soil is fertile before any metaphorical seeds are planted.

My thoughts of 'wells' focused sessions with dialogical elements rely on the young people being willing to share and exchange views. In a safe environment, something of critical pedagogy can be used; together young people and youth workers can honestly acknowledge and begin to engage with a sense of struggling to navigate the world. Friere's concept of 'co-investigators' is helpful here; together the group can engage in learning that couldn't happen without the whole combined (2017, p.79).

In this type of setting, young people can be encouraged to critically reflect on the world around them. Friere offers an idyllic summary of this work, whereby:

"Teacher-students and the students-teachers reflect simultaneously on themselves and the world...establish(ing) an authentic form of thought and action" (2017, p.56).

This authentic thought and action sums up something of what I'm looking for, but it can't happen if the young people don't feel willing or able to share.

The sense of safety and trust that the focus groups described has come from consistent time together. Participant 13 spoke of the "freedom to say what we want", which I think is encouraging and challenging in equal measure. There is a part of me that sees safety in the "schooling-instructional paradigm" that Westerhoff speaks of (2012, p.10). Leaders can ensure that certain target points are met and the 'right' kind of information is passed on. Truthfully, I expected to hear more about this method of teaching during the focus groups, with the adult leading and controlling the dialogue if it existed at all. The reality in the four groups I met with seems to be less defined, and more open-ended conversations. I think that this open-ended nature of the groups can be attributed to the youth leaders and the atmosphere they were able to create. Darder points out the benefits and challenges of this way of working: "this process is almost always more rewarding though more demanding than following a prescribed curriculum" (2017, p.133).

Youth group is led by trusted adults

Theme 2 - Learning in youth groups is directed by the youth leader. The chance to learn from those further on in their faith journey and those who care for them is important.

Another theme of the focus groups was the participants' positive feeling towards their youth leaders. Each group talked about their leader and the role they played in the learning process. I expected to hear about how the youth leaders used traditional teaching methods, but generally, the young people spoke more about the discussions that the learning centred around. There did seem to be elements of leader-taught sessions, but the impression participants gave was that this teaching was to introduce topics and offer stimulus for the conversations that followed.

The young people spoke positively about the role of their leaders, which I think was an honest assessment rather than an attempt to be cautious when talking to me. Their youth workers were able to create the kind of safe spaces the young people needed and so had become 'safe spaces' themselves. Participant 15 spoke of how her youth leader gets "really passionate about the Bible and what we have to say" which hints at how their youth worker becomes part of the safe environment she created. She was able to encourage and affirm what the young people were sharing.

My thoughts of a critical pedagogy for youth work might hinge on giving space and voice to the young people, but in reality, it depends massively on how the group is led. Without leaders who are willing to give up some control and allow young people to lead and direct conversations, then a more Freirean approach can never happen. Perhaps the key is that the youth leader must lead in "a spirit of hospitality, generosity, humility and patience." (Leopando, 2017, p.219). Each of these elements was hinted at by the young people I spoke to; the youth leaders were able to develop groups that felt confident sharing and yet willing to be led. The idea that risk is required within youth work perhaps fits here, the youth leader must be willing to risk sharing control and responsibility with the young people to allow their unique insight to flourish.

Perhaps it is no surprise that the four participating youth groups have highly experienced youth workers. The literature review mentioned the importance of good teachers who were equipped and experienced; it seems the more seasoned the youth worker, the more they felt able to hold control of the group lightly and engage the young people in frank, honest debate and conversation.

That being said, some participants felt they could have been more directly involved in their learning. Participant 11 chose an image with someone holding a book and explained:

"This one represents what we do most weeks, and if we did less of that and more discussion it would be good. Could do both and would have more knowledge to put in our buckets."

I find his answer insightful; I don't think he's advocating for not using the Bible in their learning, but a shift in how this is balanced with discussion around it. His point that by 'doing both' everyone has more knowledge to put in their buckets is interesting. Other participants talked about how they would like a chance to lead and take turns planning the sessions. They liked what they do currently, but felt that they could add something and learn more by having the opportunity to lead.

Learning occurs through a back-and-forth discussion

Theme 3 - Learning takes place around conversation and deeper discussion. Young people share openly, knowing they are listened to and listening to others. Learning is developed by building on each others' responses.

I was pleasantly surprised that much of how participants learned in their youth groups was through conversation and discussion. The dialogical nature of their learning was not what I expected to see. I had imagined that often youth groups succumb to "the relentless pressure to reduce teaching to technique, assessment content transmission" (Leopando, 2017, p.219). Across the groups, participants reflected on how they had the space to share honestly and learn from discussing around the topic of the session.

As young people are growing and becoming, Macrine suggests it is important for them to find opportunities for voice and democratic participation (2020, p.50). This is what was modelled in participants' youth groups– a sense of dialogue and reflection. Rather than a more programmatic style with a focus on the end goal and set points to learn, the groups seemed to be more aware of the process of learning. This focus on hearing the voices of young people and allowing space for them to share and discuss topics reflects something of Westerhoff's 'community of faith' concept, which describes an "equal sharing of life in community, a cooperative opportunity for reflection on the meaning and significance of life" (2012, p.29). This cooperative community seems like a way forward for youth work. Working this way is much more participative and inclusive of the young people involved. By ensuring all young people feel like they can share and be involved in the learning, we empower them and can see them grow.

Once again, I think this model is something of Jesus' example. The disciples were ready to live out their mission because they had the opportunity to learn from doing as Jesus did. Luke 9 shows this practice in action. While some participants expressed interest in helping to lead their group, generally, most said that they appreciated that they were listened to and felt that their leaders would take their suggestions into account.

The dialogical nature of learning for these young people also links well to my thoughts on a dialogical, 'well-based' method of learning. If the process is valued and the conversation can flow easily, then it gives space for the voice and insight of each young person to be heard. Friere justifies his approach by explaining that "human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action reflection" (2017, p.61). If we want young people to grow in faith and develop into adults ready to critically engage in the world, then we must encourage them to do so together and ensure there is space for this to happen.

Space is key, but even more so is permission. If young people are to engage in their faith and world critically, then this needs to be encouraged and even explained. Leopando, writing about Freire's methods of teaching, explains that he "imagined a loving and "dialogic" community of mutual exploration and transformation." (2017, p18-19). This mutuality in learning is only possible if youth workers can develop, resource and empower this kind of community. I cannot say that the groups I spoke to modelled this perfectly, but they were further forward on this than I expected.

Learning is growing together

Theme 4 - Learning is communal, about an engaging time growing together, understanding God better and connecting their faith to their lived experience.

The young people I spoke to understood learning in their Baptist youth groups as growing together and understanding God better. They spoke as much about getting to know each other as they did getting to know God. To them, they were developing and journeying together in their faith and this was invaluable. As youth workers, we must see the group's relationships as just as important as the topics and steps we want them to take. As conversations flowed during the focus groups, the young people bounced ideas and suggestions off each other. At some points, their questions elicited deeper responses than my own. They fed off each other and relied on one another; there was a "mutuality in support". (Holmes, 2012, p.157).

Jesus chose a community of twelve to be his disciples, and they had to grow and develop alongside each other. Perhaps he knew they would have moments of weakness and moments where they needed others to rely upon. The young people I spoke to are no different; the challenges facing young people have been outlined above, but simply put- they need each other, they need trusted adults and of

course, they need God and the work of the Holy Spirit. As Gough summarises everything we do “should somehow be designed to saturate young people with an understanding of God.” (2018, p.25)

I noticed that participants didn't share much about how they grew in their faith or sense of knowing God. This isn't to say that a sense of encounter and relationship with God wasn't present in these youth groups, but only that this didn't feature heavily in our conversations.

Nevertheless, Breen highlights the importance of moving beyond teaching *about* God to helping young people *know* God for themselves (2017, p.28). Perhaps this is something that we as youth workers need to take more time with. Safe space to share is successfully taking place, but perhaps we need to ensure that we give space for the young people to listen to and connect with God. This looks different for every person, but it seems clear that we need to be weaving “experience in tandem with theory” (Darder, 2017, p.xii). We must make sure that we don't neglect one or the other.

If part of the role of youth workers is to equip young people to connect their faith with their day-to-day lives, then we need to ensure that they know God rather than just about God. What do you think this looks like in practice?

In the focus groups, participants reflected on how they wanted to make sure that what they learned in their youth groups connected with their lives. As the literature review shows, young people need their faith and understanding of God to relate to their whole sense of self. Essentially this becomes about helping them connect their faith journey to their lived experience. Gutiérrez & Vossough explain further by asking:

“Who will draw out of students their unique forms of thinking and funds of knowledge in order to help students make a difference in their own lives.”
(2009, p.10)

They were speaking about education, but I see a significant commonality that can be helpful in this discussion. If the teaching that is covered doesn't relate to the lives of the young people then we are missing the point. We are to be followers of Jesus and not just those who can talk about him. Learning in youth groups must point people towards Jesus in such a way that they choose to follow him and spend their lives working out how to do so. Critical questioning of the world and their place in it can support this effort.

As Macrine notes, critical pedagogy is not a methodology, but a philosophy of praxis relevant to everyday life (2020, p.222). This relevance and connection with the lives of young people is vitally important. Allan & Allan write, “it is not enough for them to know about the truth”; they must know the person who embodies it (2020, p.176).

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to discuss the implications and meanings of the themes brought out of the focus groups with the young people. The four themes together express an overview of the groups that I spoke with, but they also offer something of a framework for youth work today. I came into the research with a certain view of youth work in mind, and I have been pleasantly surprised. What the young people expressed to me actually modelled much of what I was thinking would be a way forward.

The sense of safety they felt in their groups offered a foundation for them to share and talk honestly and openly about their faith and life as a whole. This openness in sharing and focus on dialogue was distinctive for each group. Despite teaching being led by youth workers, their ability to then 'open the floor' and give validation to the insights and thoughts of the young people is admirable. This not only allows the young people to feel seen and encouraged, but it also enables further knowledge as a whole. As Richardson writes, this allows "participants [to] build upon each other's contributions." (2001, p.126). In this way, each person draws out knowledge from the other, modelling the 'well' concept I introduced earlier.

Interestingly, the themes I have drawn from the research reflect the literature review. The key points that I surmised from the literature seem to fit well with the perspectives of the young people. They wanted learning that connected with the real world, and their youth workers seemed to be developing this sense of critical questioning that I have been reading about. There was a focus on hearing from the group and developing a community of learning where the young people benefit from the knowledge of the older leaders and vice versa.

This research has demonstrated to me so much that I hoped to see but wasn't sure I would find. The experienced youth workers I was able to meet and work with have so much to offer their groups but also youth work as a whole.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Reflections on the study outcomes

The experiences these young people shared with me demonstrated excellent youth work, overseen by youth workers who love and respect those they lead. Participants' reflections on learning demonstrate insightful, creative and impactful youth work. They also speak to the wonderfully diverse young people who made up those groups. It was a privilege to meet with them and get a glimpse into the vibrancy and fun of their contexts.

I came to this dissertation with a sense that it might be time for a new way to facilitate learning in Baptist youth work. I suspected that something of Freire's critical pedagogy offered an answer for this way forward, with a focus on critical questioning and collaborative teaching where the traditional dichotomy between teacher and student was ended (Leopando, 2017, p.22). I assumed that young people wanted to be more involved in their learning and that, crucially, young people were not currently experiencing learning in this way.

The truth is that in the four groups I met with, the young people felt involved in their learning and all spoke about how they were encouraged to ask questions and develop learning through sharing and conversation. My sense that often youth groups are subjected to the 'bucket' method and filled up with knowledge from their leaders mostly seemed off the mark. The 'well' method, with knowledge being drawn out together, was more prevalent than I had presupposed. I expected buckets but ended up finding mostly wells. I even had my thinking challenged when a young person pointed out that to draw out of a well you need a bucket. I came into the research with a binary view, and the young people helped me see that it didn't have to be so black and white.

I was also surprised by the young people's emphasis on their group being a safe space. Each group shared how hard it is to be a young person, particularly a Christian young person in schools/colleges. To them, their group became a sanctuary, a space to feel safe as they are and somewhere to share honestly because of this. I wanted to research learning and Christian education, but the young people helped me see the vital role youth workers have in helping create safe spaces, which no amount of learning can take place without.

Validity of the study

It was interesting that there was seemingly no significant appetite for the young people to have a greater lead in their groups. Three of the groups said that they wouldn't change anything and the others said they might like to be more involved but it wasn't a big issue. I had expected them to like the idea of having more control and taking more ownership of the group, but this wasn't the case at all.

On reflection, it was a lot to expect the young people to challenge the pre-existing dynamics of their group. Firstly, because I was asking them to reflect on something outside their experience. If they have not been involved and taken a role in leading the group, it might have been a big step to expect them to imagine doing so.

Perhaps this is an issue with the study itself; how can the young people talk freely about something unless they have been equipped with the tools to do so?

Secondly, this may have seemed like a criticism of their youth leaders, whom they might have felt defensive of. As much as I sought to explain that I wasn't being critical, the young people understandably could have felt protective of their leaders.

While transcribing the focus group recordings, I was disappointed to find my own voice appeared frequently in the conversations. As much as I wanted to hear the voices of the young people, I ended up hearing too much of my own.

At the time it felt necessary to clarify questions and offer help through the focus group process, but on reflection, I see something of the 'bucket' method in how I did this. I realised that as a youth worker, I still have some learning to do to align my practice with my values.

It would be interesting to hold the focus groups again with participants taking a question each and allowing them to facilitate the groups. This might offer a clearer set of themes and data.

As much as I sought to discern the themes underpinning participants' experiences, my own bias and ideas will have been present in the process, even in the fact that I designed the research. Were to do it again, I think that Participative Action Research (PAR) might better mitigate this issue. Taking a PAR would have enabled deeper reflection with participants, allowing them to shape the research process. As it was, participants talked about their experiences and I went away and drew those reflections into themes. Ideally, I would have taken my summary back to them to get their feedback. This would produce a richer set of themes giving a truer depiction of the participants' voice, rather than a version of their voice diluted by my own.

The very nature of this research meant that I changed the dynamic of the youth groups with my presence. As I have had reflected back to me, the sanctity of their group is important. As an outsider, I shifted their sense of safety. I don't think this calls into question the validity of the data or subsequent themes I have drawn together. I believe I got an honest, true reflection of their experience, but perhaps I could have thought through how my presence might impact the process of the focus groups.

All of this being said, the data came from diverse groups with varied ethnic, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds. While all of the groups came from the North East, the diversity of their makeup perhaps lends itself to representing a wider population of young people of similar ages.

Further research

As I have said above I would like to go back to the groups and let them reflect on the themes I attributed to their experiences. It would be a good way to challenge the thematic analysis and to ensure that they were robust. I also think it would be good to go back to the groups and get them to plan a session for one of the other groups to use. I would like to see the young people leading their peers in this way and to see what they get from facilitating and designing this process. I could then go back a third time to see what they found helpful/unhelpful in the session led by their peers. I believe this reflective process would provide deeper and richer insight.

I also think a further piece of research on the concept of risk in youth work is required. The idea of sanctuary within youth groups was obviously so important for the young people, but if we're not careful then our sanctuaries can become echo chambers that stop being places for renewal and end up becoming restrictive. How can youth workers create safe spaces which encourage young people to go out and explore before returning to share what they have learned?

Jesus' approach in Luke 10 offers a model for this. The disciples are sent out, but come back to him to reflect with him about what went on. To put their learning into practice they had to step out in faith and take a risk. Jesus had to impart his authority and step back so they could grow as he knew they needed. Practical

examples of this were difficult to find in the literature and so I think that further study on risk and young people is required.

Conclusion

I began this research wondering whether there was a better way to teach young people than my current practice. Throughout the whole process, I've been reflecting on what I've read in the literature and heard from the young people and how this might inform my approach to learning within youth work. The following offers a summary of how I will seek to change my practice as a result of this research:

- **Safe space**

Learning can only take place within a group that represents a safe space for young people. I need to take the lead in helping this become the case.

- **Making room to be heard**

The insights and opinions of the young people are vital to the individuals and the groups learning journey. Time and room needs to be made available for this to happen.

- **Encouraging honesty**

I need to model honesty in how I approach the young people and help them feel comfortable enough to share honestly and openly. This helps create safe spaces where young people can be vulnerable.

- **Asking questions that I don't have answers to**

A more open-ended approach is required. By asking only questions I know the answer to, I can limit the scope for exploration and the young people's

journeys of understanding. They don't just need a right answer from me, but a process-orientated approach in which they can learn in more diverse ways.

- **Making space for young people to lead**

It is clear that young people want to lead and take more responsibility for their groups. I need to lay down control and let them lead in their own ways.

- **Relaxed programme– flexible, not directed by me, responsive to the young people's needs**

A more flexible approach which is responsive to the young people needs offers a broader scope than that I would bring alone.

- **Validating their stage of faith**

In all I do, I need to ensure the young people feel seen and acknowledged. Their faith is valid and full as it is, not only what it will be. Growth and discipleship look different for different young people, and I will seek to discern in more open ways rather than prescribed 'Christian' stages/milestones.

- **Helping young people be critically aware of the world and scope for God's work in them and it**

All that we do together must be related to their lived experience of the world. Learning must help them engage critically in the world and their place in it. It must be clear that to have faith is to become aware of what God is doing in the world and seeking to join in with it.

- **Sanctuary vs hideout– safe spaces but still allow growth**

I was struck by the need to appropriately create spaces both of challenge and invitation, helping young people feel safe but supporting them to grow into finding their place in the world with God's help.

I have learned much from the process of this research and especially so from the young people themselves. Reflection and reflexivity are key aspects of the role of a youth worker and in my search for a better way I will continue to question and reflect on my own practice and listen to the voices of the young people I work with.

Word Count: 15378 Words

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Appendices


Appendix 1 - Ethics approval form

CERTIFICATE OF RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

Wells Not Buckets: Does Critical Pedagogy offer a way forward for Baptist Youth Work in the North-East?
[updated application]


Module: CYM701

This is to certify that this project has received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Birmingham Newman University


Chair of the Research Ethics Committee

Date: January 2, 2024

Student Number: 2103949


Birmingham Newman University

Appendix 2 - Example of Participant Consent Forms



INFORMED CONSENT FORM - Young Person

Name of investigator - Dan Holland

Title of the research project - Wells Not Buckets: Does Critical Pedagogy Offer a Way Forward for Baptist Youth Work in the North East?

The purpose and details of this study have been explained to me. I understand that this study is designed to further scientific knowledge and that all procedures have been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Newman University.

I have read and understood the participant information sheet and this consent form.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions about my participation.

I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in the study.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any stage for any reason and that I will not be required to explain my reasons for withdrawing.

I understand that once the focus group has taken place, my contributions cannot be deleted from the audio recording or transcript

I understand that if I withdraw after the focus group has taken place that direct quotations will not be used in any work published by the researcher

I understand that all the information I provide will be treated in strict confidence.

I agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant:

Signature of participant:

Signature of investigator:

Date:



**Birmingham
Newman
University**

INFORMED CONSENT FORM - Parent/Guardian

Name of investigator - Dan Holland

Title of the research project - Wells Not Buckets: Does Critical Pedagogy Offer a Way Forward for Baptist Youth Work in the North East?

The purpose and details of this study have been explained to me and my child. I understand that this study is designed to further scientific knowledge and that all procedures have been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Newman University.

I have read and understood the participant information sheet and this consent form.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions about my child's participation.

I understand that my child is under no obligation to take part in the study.

I understand that my child has the right to withdraw from this study at any stage for any reason and that they will not be required to explain their reasons for withdrawing.

I understand that once the focus group has taken place, my child's contributions cannot be deleted from the audio recording or transcript

I understand that if my child withdraws after the focus group has taken place that direct quotations will not be used in any work published by the researcher

I understand that all the information provided will be treated in strict confidence.

I agree to my child's participation in this study.

Name of Parent/Guardian:

Name of Child:

Signature of Parent/Guardian:

Signature of investigator:

Date:



Participant information sheet

Study title

Wells Not Buckets: Does Critical Pedagogy offer a way forward for Baptist Youth Work in the North East?

Invitation and brief summary

I am a Christian youth worker currently studying for an MA in Youth and Community Work. I am interested in how youth workers teach young people in their youth groups. I want to hear what young people (you) think about their learning in their groups and how youth workers can include young people (you) more in how they learn.

Research ethics approval has been obtained from CYM via Newman University.

What's involved?

If you decide you'd like to be involved, I will come and meet you and others from your group in what's called a focus group. I'll ask you all some questions and will get you to think about your experiences of learning in your group together. As part of this, I'll show you lots of images and get you to choose the ones that best fit. The aim isn't a formal group with lots of questions but instead an informal discussion where everyone will get a chance to share. Ideally, I'll be the one speaking the least.

The focus group will meet on **(date/time)** at _____ Baptist Church for approximately an hour.

The session will be audio recorded so I can get an accurate record of what has been said. This recording will be kept on a password-protected computer and will be destroyed once the project is completed. Any mention of something you've said will be anonymous as will be the group you are from. I will be meeting three different groups to get a good spread of insight from different young people across the North East.

To take part, you and your parent/guardian will need to complete a consent form. These forms show that you are happy to participate in the focus group and that your parent/guardian also consents to you doing so.

Once the focus group has taken place, you have the right to ask that your direct quotations are not included in my master's dissertation or subsequent publications. However, due to the nature of group discussion, it will not be possible to delete your contributions from the audio recordings or transcripts. All data will be destroyed one year from the end of the research project.

What are the possible benefits and disadvantages of taking part?

I am hoping that it will be helpful to reflect on how you have been learning. The aim is to finish the session by coming up with some actions on what you think as a group could be done differently moving forward. This is a great opportunity to get your voice heard.

The disadvantage could be that reflecting on what has happened in your learning within the group has been difficult. If you're unsure at any point after being involved or feel that you don't want your contributions included I can remove them up until May 1st 2024.

Further supporting information

This study is part of my Master's course at university. I am a youth worker in a local church within the North East and I hope that this research will help me and others better include young people in their learning as well as get better at hearing the voice of young people. I'll be using the focus groups to feed into my dissertation to help me understand better how young people see their learning in church. There are no wrong answers and generally, I will be focusing on the results from the group as a whole rather than your specific bit. It'll take into consideration all the information rather than just yours.

It is worth saying that I know that each youth group has brilliant youth workers who are leading you well. This research isn't a criticism of them or what goes on but rather a series of questions as to how we can do better.

Privacy Statement

At Newman University we respect the dignity and worth of each individual and this includes the way we treat personal information collected for research purposes. We encourage you to read the 'Privacy Notice for Research Participants' (Available from: <https://www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/privacy-notice-for-research-participants/>).

Contact Details

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Supervisor - Robin Smith at CYM
Email - robin.smith@cym.ac.uk

Appendix 4 - Focus Group Outline and Questions

15-20 minutes

The group is shown the image cards. **Each participant is asked to pick three cards which sum up how they have experienced learning as part of their youth group.**

(there are blank image cards for them to draw their own if they so choose).

Ask each person to show the group their three photos/drawings and say something about what they represent.

(All of the photos to be spread out on the table by the end)

10 minutes

What stood out from what people shared/photos they picked?

If you were to add one of these photos/drawings to your three, which would it be? Why?

15 minutes

Are any of the photos/drawings similar? Can we group them together into themes?

Are any of the photos/drawings different? Why might that be?

Discuss the themes that emerge and check that these represent the views of the group.

10 minutes

Bucket and Well explanation

There's something I have been thinking about which I'd like to get your thoughts on: The classic way of teaching we often find in schools is the bucket method - the teacher fills up the children with their knowledge and the pupils are treated like an empty bucket that needs filling up. I've been reading about something called the well method- here the teacher and

pupils are more like wells with the knowledge to be drawn out from each other and shared. Here everyone works together to draw out what people know and ask good questions to develop what they know. I've got a picture of a bucket and a well.

Ask the young people to put their pictures on the spectrum between a bucket and a well. Why do they fit there? What do you notice about where people have put their pictures? Are there any patterns or themes here?

Follow-up questions (if needed):

Do you feel involved in your learning? How could you be more involved?

10 minutes

Based on our conversation are there any actions you want to take? What have you heard from the group today? Looking at the images again, which ones sum up what you might take away from this time?

2 minutes

Any additional comments?

2 minutes

Thank participants for their help, and explain that you'll send information once the study is finished

Appendix 5 - Examples of cards used for research

