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Practice paper

Exploring the spaces in between critical and social pedagogy and its implications for learning and teaching in professionally qualifying youth and community work education

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Abstract

In neoliberal times, young people are routinely subject to adultist practices, they may live precarious lives and can be increasingly alienated from civic and political life. Youth and community work plays a crucial role in reworking adultist power relations, enabling young people to enact democratic possibilities. In England, however, over the past two decades, social policy has increasingly undermined this work through ideologically driven funding cuts and a move from open-access provision towards individualised behaviour-change interventions. Despite such constraints, many practitioners continue to resist neoliberal framings, sustaining relational, community-rooted approaches that

work alongside young people on issues that matter to them. This tension highlights the ongoing centrality of praxis in professional formation and pedagogies that, drawing on situated knowledges, engage the policy conditions shaping youth and community work and young people's precarious realities. Against this backdrop, we explore relational practice as the bridge between critical pedagogy and social pedagogy, and as a threshold where their convergence becomes thinkable. Writing as a collaborative method of inquiry with students, a graduate practitioner and university lecturers in youth and community work facilitates critical reflection on students' placement practices and explores implications for teaching youth and community work as a professional qualification in the twenty-first-century. Through this process, the concept of critical social pedagogy is seeded, offering generative possibilities for youth and community work with the potential to resist individualising narratives and reassert community, solidarity and relational learning. We propose writing as an ongoing method of collaborative enquiry through which critical social pedagogy can be further theorised as an emergent, socially just and equitable practice.

Keywords youth and community work; critical pedagogy; social pedagogy; adultism; adultification; relationality; praxis

Overview

This article uses collaborative writing as an experimental pedagogical approach within professionally qualifying youth and community work (YCW) education, bringing together placement-based reflection and critical dialogue to explore and extend understandings of critical social pedagogy (CSP) in both YCW practice and teaching. It is organised into four parts. First, we explore the contested nature of the concept of *youth* as an object of policy, professional interventions and age-related discriminatory practices. Second, we argue for the importance of working creatively with concepts to develop twenty-first-century analysis and contend that it is in what Fitzsimons (2007) refers to as 'the spaces in between' critical pedagogy and social pedagogy that new YCW insights and practices can emerge. Third, we draw on YCW students' placement practices to explore the concept of relationships as part of our enquiry. In the fourth and final part, we explore the implications for the teaching of YCW as a professional qualification in the twenty-first century. Across these four parts, the article uses collaborative writing as an experimental method to connect YCW practice and teaching, developing CSP as both a practice framework and a pedagogical approach.

The process

We write from our own situated contexts (Haraway, 1988) as critical pedagogues teaching and studying on a professionally qualifying YCW programme in the north of England (Curran et al., 2022).

We write while researching and developing our previous offer of 'Working with Children, Young People, and Families' into a new two-year degree provision, and while applying for Social Pedagogy Professional Association endorsement in which the ethos of social pedagogy will be embedded and orientate learning and teaching. This has piqued our interest in the convergences between critical and social pedagogy. While we are writing in an English context, we hope that the exploration of the concept of relationships linked to an exploration of CSP will hold wider resonance through the enmeshed pedagogical praxis. In this article, the term *students* refers to those enrolled on professionally qualifying YCW programmes, whereas *young people* refers to those aged 11–25 engaged in YCW practice. These terms are used intentionally and are not interchangeable. We offer four contributions from three students and a graduate practitioner of their own YCW practice and placement experiences in which they explored their professional relationships in working with young people. Two undertook a placement with secondary schools in well-being units and alongside small groups of young people at

risk of school exclusion. Another was in an outdoor education project working with young people on a story telling project and the fourth was in an open-access youth centre working with young people on a human rights project. These contributions emerged through a series of dialogical workshops in which lecturers and students worked together as part of the final-year professional practice module to reflect on the concept of relationship, its meaning and relevance within placement experiences, and its implications for CSP in YCW.

Flip charts captured key themes in relation to each of the placements, drawing on student's reflections. The ideas generated from the workshop have been used to orientate the writing of this article. The process of writing as a method of collaborative enquiry (Wyatt and Gale, 2017) has provided a space to extend thinking about the convergence of social and critical pedagogy that orientates our YCW teaching practices.

Writing as a method of enquiry

According to Wyatt and Gale (2017), writing as a method of enquiry is both a dynamic and relational approach to making meaning. Its underpinning philosophical methodology is about working collaboratively and, in our case, shifting power from the lecturer as *expert*, to dialogical equity with students as co-constructors of knowledge. Often, writing can be presented as a solitary activity but here we draw on Wyatt and Gale (2017) to emphasise how we worked collaboratively to explore emergent ideas about YCW practice. We consider that collaborative approaches to writing carry implications for YCW teaching practices in working alongside students and practitioners to theorise practice and co-create knowledge that can open new insights.

In this account of writing exploring CSP we have also been working to collapse the traditional binary divide between students, as subjects who need to be taught, and academics as knowing subjects, which links to Freirean (Freire, 1996) ideals of dialogical two-way learning – learner/teacher; teacher/learner – situated within critical pedagogy. Students and academics have worked relationally to develop knowledge and understanding through the writing process. Writing in this article can also be understood as performative, as it works to generate new understandings and insights about CSP, rather than as a mechanism to report pre-established ideas (Wyatt and Gale, 2017).

There were key ingredients to enabling more collaborative approaches to working and writing together, including building trusted relationships, which takes time, thus the practice also draws on an increasing need to slow down to ensure that co – as in a representation of equity of engagement – can happen. In our practice, this is established through ongoing dialogue during reflective placement learning sessions and triangulated placement supervisor, student and academic conversations each convened by Smith [co-author]. Ulmer (2017) encapsulates an approach to imagining 'a Slow Ontology that offers modes of writing scholarly research that are *not unproductive*, but are *differently productive*' linking to the 'the Slow movement, a significant global phenomenon that promotes living better, creating balance, and moving at different speeds at different times' (p. 201).

As Covey (2008) explains, 'change moves at the speed of trust', which strongly articulates the importance of time because trust needs to be developed within relationships. This also links to Barad's (2007) conceptualisation of intra-action because this approach is emergent and interwoven. For this to be enhanced, slowness of time is needed for emergence to arise, in which reflection and reflexivity play a part in terms of exploring what is coming through, often manifested through the concept of head, hands and heart. Diab et al. (2016) posits that '"we" have found that self-work often begins by being attentive to our emotions – that is, checking in about not only what we think (head) and plan to do (hands), but also how we *feel* (heart)' (p. 28). This also links to Brühlmeier and Mitchell (2010), who have drawn on this in education and social pedagogy as discussed below. Integral to writing as enquiry is attending to what concepts such as relationship make possible, particularly in terms of opening new ways of thinking about emergent YCW practices. This is especially relevant at a time when the sector is reimagining the role of contemporary YCW in creating democratised practices that support young people to flourish in the twenty-first century as a matter of social justice; an issue we explored in a previous writing-as-enquiry article (Christtmass et al., 2024).

Neoliberalism, precarity and the crisis of YCW

Part one of this article recognises the complexity of the framing of young people and we set out some of the lenses that create the dominant narratives that shape policymaking and ways of working. In this article, we use the term *neoliberalism* to refer to the market-driven restructuring of welfare, education and public services that extends market logics into social life, producing competitive individualism and responsabilisation and eroding democratic and collective possibilities (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2014).

In the Western world, young people continue to be conceptualised, categorised and governed through labels such as *teenager*, *adolescent* and *youth* that reflect dominant social and policy constructions rather than lived realities (Corney et al., 2021; Jeffs and Smith, 1999; Wyn and White, 2013). The concept of *youth* as a sociological category is a site of ongoing contestation in terms of how young people are constituted, who can be counted as a young person and which young lives are made to matter more than others (Braidotti, 2021). Furlong et al. (2011) highlighted that *youth* is a problematic concept and that identities are increasingly multiple and liquid. This sits at odds with normative policy interventions that index access to entitlements and that create structural distinctions and inequalities in relation to the diverse ways that young people are categorised. In contemporary policy, *youth* is often positioned in deficit terms and linked to criminality and anti-social behaviour.

In his seminal work on moral panic, British sociologist Stanley Cohen (2011) examined how particular social groups are constructed as threats to dominant social values, and how the role of fear in this process remains influential today. More than 50 years later, Kadir (2025), drawing on Cohen, highlights how fear remains 'one of the most influential psychosocial determinants in shaping public attitudes, legal orientations, and state policy' (p. 202). Alongside this, young people's subjectivities, notions of self-hood, sense of belonging and civic identities are shaped in relation to a range of different affects and influences, including ethnicity, gender, sexualities, class, disabilities, and are routinely the object of social policy and state intervention (de St Croix, 2017). Professional interventions in the lives of young people are often focused towards enabling them to make successful transitions into adulthood (Furlong et al., 2011). In contemporary times transitions are highly varied, complex and dependent on a person's own situated contexts. Neoliberalism has placed an increased emphasis on the responsabilisation of young people in transitions to adulthood, with little regard for the structural impacts on individual journeys and difficulties encountered as personal failings (Blackman and Roger, 2017; Furlong et al., 2011). Policy narratives in the UK often frame young people as a risk to be managed or as at risk and in need of care and protection (Batsleer, 2013) or as social investments (de St Croix, 2022). There are deep concerns and evidence that neoliberalism brings new forms of inequity and discrimination in which young people are responsabilised, medicalised and pathologised for their success or failure, irrespective of their starting points and the challenges faced (Blackman and Roger, 2017). Chronological age, while a blunt instrument, is the most common way of defining who can be counted as a young person, as an organising principle through which rights and entitlements are distributed, as well as the basis for professional interventions and access to services. The United Nations (n.d.) for example states that:

Youth is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence. That's why, as a category, youth is more fluid than other fixed age-groups. Yet, age is the easiest way to define this group, particularly in relation to education and employment, because 'youth' is often referred to a person between the ages of leaving compulsory education and finding their first job. (p. 1)

While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a deep dive into the adequacy of age as a marker of a distinct period in the lives of young people, it is worth highlighting that this is not as straightforward as it might first appear. In common with other European countries, a young person in the UK is, for example, legally defined as a child up to their eighteenth birthday; after which, full legal rights and responsibilities – in theory at least – are afforded. In some countries, access to youth services extend beyond the age of 18 in recognition that the transition to adulthood is not a linear process and that some young people may need additional support. For young people with disabilities up to the age of 25 supported by Education Health Care Plans in the UK and in other countries such as the Netherlands, Estonia and Finland, support can extend beyond this, up to the age of 29. For example, in Pakistan and small island states such as Mauritius, young people are typically defined as those aged 15–29.

The experiences of being a young person defined within distinct age categories may vary significantly across and within countries. For example, concerns have been raised about child labour

and exploitation in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where young people may be mining minerals for smartphones (Kara, 2018), and in India, where young rural migrants are assembling smartphones and other electrical gadgets (Gaffar and Kämpfer, 2023). This contrasts sharply with the UK, where the focus of concern may be young people's use of smartphones and the impact on their mental health (Carter et al., 2024).

Young people in the West may be more likely to use fake identity cards to enter adult-only spaces (Brown, 2025) in contrast to young people fleeing war-torn countries who may be undocumented and unable to prove that they exist, let alone verify their age (Lind, 2020). Experiences differ from country to country, but also within countries. Despite the UK being one of the richest countries in Europe, there continue to be some of the highest levels of child poverty, including food poverty that impacts young people's life chances. Meanwhile young people who are neurodivergent are more likely to be excluded from school and are over-represented in the criminal justice system (Barnardo's, 2024; Bokor et al., 2024; Trussell Trust, 2023). Age linked to rights and entitlements is further complicated by the contradictions between what young people can do, with age as the arbiter of the right to go to war, to marry and to work. These examples, while broad brush, are offered to illuminate the complexities involved in using age as a major social division to define who counts as a young person and the discrimination experienced as objects of policy and state intervention.

This article now briefly explores *adulthood* and *adulthood* as two concepts that account for discrimination experienced by young people on the grounds of age.

Adulthood and adulthood

In the UK it is illegal to discriminate against young people on the grounds of age. Various reports highlight the diverse ways in which particular groups of young people are discriminated against, stereotyped and stigmatised. Theorists such as Tyler (2013, 2020), Blackman and Roger (2017) and MacDonald et al. (2020) have documented the discursive ways in which youth as a social category is constructed in deficit terms masking the complexities and challenges of lived experiences in contemporary times. Fowler and Gasior (2023) highlight that age-based discrimination is under-researched, despite frequent reference to ageism experienced by young adults in contemporary times. Smith (1982), writing four decades ago, highlighted how ageism and adultist practices cast young people as 'empty vessels' rather than creators of a future yet to come. Adulthood and adulthood are two emergent concepts that help to complexify the understanding of ageism and age-based discrimination. The concept of *adulthood* makes visible the processes of discrimination that Corney et al. (2021) identify as working in parallel with other forms of discrimination, including sexism, racism and intersections with other major social divisions. Similarly, the concept of *adulthood*, although under-theorised, highlights how interventions in the lives of young people, especially Black young women, can often frame them as older than they actually are (Ikomi, 2023; WISH, 2024). The practices associated with adulthood leave young people vulnerable to expectations about standards of behaviour and hold them accountable for crimes that they may have been victims of and consequently fearful to access support they might need (Ikomi, 2023; WISH, 2024). In contemporary England, one of the most significant structural injustices experienced by young people has been the systematic dismantling of services for youth, including YCW, compounded by policy failures to address new and enduring inequalities (de St Croix, 2017). Over the past decade, YCW scholars have documented how shifts in social policy have resulted in sustained disinvestment, severe funding reductions and the erosion of voluntary, open-access youth provision (Davies, 2024; de St Croix et al., 2019; Youdell and McGimpsey, 2015).

Research shows the continuity and breaks with social issues that impact on young people in the UK. Class, for example, continues to be significant in determining academic achievement as an enduring social issue in the UK (Pickett et al., 2024; Standing, 2011). Other writers highlight new social issues such as loneliness (Batsleer and Duggan, 2020), mental health and well-being (Christmass et al., 2024), the rise in mental health issues (Ní Charraigh and Reynolds, 2024) and the rise in youth violence and social unrest (Peer Action Collective, 2023).

In the UK there has been a renewed interest in *youth* as a social category in recognition that, especially since Covid-19, the social consequences and impact of the policy disconnect between youth and community alongside the erosion and underfunding of services for young people has undermined their right to flourish (Christmass et al., 2024). The renewed interest has resulted in a policy commitment

to reverse the impact of under-investment in youth services and to create opportunities for young people locally. In pursuit of this, young people are engaged in co-producing a national youth strategy (Coleman, 2024). Policy renewal opens a space to explore a vision for the role, purpose and values of the contemporary YCW professional (Thompson et al., 2025).

In part two of this article, we shift focus to explore the convergence between critical and social pedagogy and the implication for YCW. We discuss this from our own situated contexts and do not seek to claim to speak other than from our own perspectives.

Critical pedagogy, radical YCW and the politics of relational practice

Critical pedagogy has had a radical influence on the theory, teaching and practices of YCW in the UK since the early 1970s (Batsleer, 2008; Corney et al., 2024; Seal, 2016). Proponents of a critical pedagogy for YCW are concerned both for the young person in the here and now, the oppressions that they experience and for how processual and relational practices prefigure a democracy yet to come (Batsleer et al., 2022). The distinctive methodology of YCW includes a commitment to relationships that foster voluntary participation and in which critical emancipatory educational practices tip 'power in the favour of young people' (Davies, 2021, p. 6). Seal and Smith (2021) have articulated Freire's influence on YCW, including his critique of forms of education that operate through what he termed the 'banking model'. This involves the depositing of knowledge by an expert into passive learners, which can close down, rather than open up, possibilities for young people to emerge as knowing subjects (Braidotti, 2013). Freire's critique is not a rejection of education itself, nor does it suggest that all formal education functions in this way. It is acknowledged that educational theory and practice have advanced since Freire's original critique, and many contemporary approaches seek to disrupt hierarchical teaching. For example, relational and dialogic digital pedagogies (Douglas et al., 2024) and flipped learning models are examples of diverse approaches that facilitate participation and shared knowledge-making. However, Freire (1996), along with other critical pedagogues such as hooks (2010), Darder (2015) and Giroux (2020), continues to offer a vital challenge to pedagogies that prioritise transmission over transformation. Such theorists advocate a problem-posing approach that begins with lived experience rather than prescribed subject knowledge. This creates possibilities for equity in practice (Rancière, 1991) by working alongside young people to name their world and unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions.

Problem-posing is an educational, relational and processual practice that aims to develop critical consciousness and the ability to take informed and committed action (Freire, 1996). All those engaged in the process are simultaneously teachers and learners in dialogue and negotiation orientated to making a difference in the world (Gormally and Coburn, 2019).

Social pedagogy

Kornbeck and Rosendal Jensen (2009) describes the history theory and practice of social pedagogy as both a 'movement and a profession' (p. 3). As a practice, social pedagogy is well established across many European countries, although it has gained less traction in the UK until recent times. Social pedagogy can be described as an approach that works holistically with people, driven by a concern for well-being and through integrated approaches, particularly in relation to education and care. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) was a Swiss educator and social reformer who was influential in the movement towards child-centred education and advocated for a 'head, heart, and hands' approach (Brühlmeier and Mitchell, 2010). In practice, such an undertaking emphasises a holistic approach to education and care that attends to a young person's mind, emotions and practical skills and enables them to play an active role within society (Cameron and Moss, 2011). Social pedagogy emphasises relationships based on mutuality, reciprocity, trust and collective responsibility in facilitating personal and social development. Learning, as with critical pedagogy (Darder, 2015; Freire, 1996), is experiential and emerges from everyday lived experiences. Social pedagogy focuses on the growth of individuals and, in doing so, contributes to the well-being of caring communities and by extension society (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011). We do not seek to claim in this article that there is a fixed definition that anchors approaches to social pedagogy, and we acknowledge that as a practice it is subject to ongoing contestation and revision. Here we emphasise that, like critical pedagogy, social pedagogy is an emergent practice that is negotiated within

relationships and is always situated and contextual (Haraway, 1988). We do, however, draw on Eichsteller and Holthoff (2011) to identify golden threads that are frequently articulated in social pedagogy and that they articulate through the Diamond Model. The model identifies four aims of social pedagogy:

... to enhance well-being and happiness at both individual and collective levels, in both the short and long term; to develop strong, caring and authentic relationships so that people experience themselves as interconnected, supported by and responsible for others; and to enable individuals and communities to empower themselves by taking responsibility for and control over their own lives. (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011, p. 178)

Eichsteller and Holthoff (2011) argue that these four areas work together to create a holistic and integrated approach, rather than representing discrete areas of practice. They posit that an integrated approach is essential to ensuring a focus on individuals within the context of their environment.

Tensions in conjoining the C and S in CSP

There are many points of convergence and synergy between critical and social pedagogy, particularly in their shared concern with care, dignity, connectedness and social justice (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011; Freire, 1996; Schugurensky, 2014). Simultaneously, some of the language associated with social pedagogy's relationship to social work does not align with the emancipatory and relational vocabulary more commonly associated with critical pedagogy and YCW (Fox and Thiessen, 2019). In some accounts, this brings with it the language of clients and interventions. Fox and Thiessen (2019), for example, describe an approach concerned with assessing clients, determining intervention and therapeutic goals. While care is also central to critical pedagogy, the language of clients and therapeutic intervention does not align with its emphasis on emancipation, critical consciousness and collective action. In YCW, the term *client* is often considered alien, as it carries connotations of power imbalance and a transactional rather than relational dynamic, in which meaning is negotiated and co-produced.

However, Sercombe (2010), a proponent of YCW, did argue for the revival of the term *client*, and the use of the term *primary client* is sometimes adopted to emphasise that the primary focus remains on young people. Fox and Thiessen (2019) also emphasise power sharing, arguing that the role of the pedagogue is to develop positive growth relationships with young people and that such connectedness can foster equality within reciprocal relationships. This draws alignment with critical pedagogy and the principles of YCW situated in the national occupational standards for youth work (National Youth Agency, 2020) with an emphasis on building relationships and supporting young people's personal, social and emotional growth. We therefore argue in this article that there is more in common than might first appear between critical and social pedagogy once the language differential is acknowledged and that this alignment can expand the toolbox of YCWs.

Towards a CSP in contemporary times

We argue that it is possible to identify strong connections between critical and social pedagogy, particularly in their shared emphasis on the intrinsic dignity and worth of every individual and the emergence of practice from relationships as part of everyday lived experiences. Although they originate from different contexts and have followed distinct trajectories, each has been influential in orientating contemporary practices including in YCW. For this reason, we argue that they align in meaningful ways that offer valuable insights for relational and transformative practice.

Hans Thiersch (b. 1935) is a German critical theorist who is a key advocate of life-world orientation and CSP, extending holistic, relational education towards an approach that enables individuals to reflect on the social causes of personal troubles and to act in pursuit of greater social justice (Schugurensky, 2014). Although Thiersch and Freire (1996) developed their ideas independently and in different contexts, there is alignment philosophically and ethically. There is, for example, a strong emphasis across both pedagogies on emancipatory intent and the dignity and respect for all those engaged in the process. For both thinkers concepts of *care* and *education* are radicalised as tools to both foster the rights of individuals to flourish and to transform the world. Similarly, the notion of *community* holds significant value in shaping pedagogical practices. Relationships are central to their pedagogical approaches,

positioning practitioners alongside young people rather than as experts about them. The relationship, across both pedagogical approaches is viewed as mutual and co-constituted, with shared purpose and agency.

Relationships

Cooper et al. (2024) highlight that, while literature often refers to the importance of relationships as integral to the distinctive practices and processes associated with YCW, this is not always reflected in the language used by writers. They argue that language reveals how YCW as a social profession (Banks, 2010), is politically framed in contemporary times. This points to the need for conceptual clarity within YCW, especially given the potential of policy enactments to problematise young people. Over a decade ago, Seal and Frost (2014), drawing on Freire (1996), emphasised that language is never neutral and that the concepts used in YCW are always shaped by underlying philosophical ideas about the world – and, by extension, what practices are legitimised or marginalised (Barad, 2007). They caution that YCW practitioners often rely on taken-for-granted clichés about the profession's distinctive methodology, which can contribute to its under-theorisation and limit its potential to challenge oppression and injustice. In a similar vein, Ledwith (2007) argues that without a unity of praxis, in which theory and practice are synthesised, YCW risks privileging *doing* over *thinking* and leaving the structures of injustice intact.

We argue that in today's context there is an urgent need for YCW to account for and extend its practices through ongoing negotiation with both young people and policy-makers. Scholarly activists such as Doherty and de St Croix (2024) suggest that YCW practices always exceed language, pointing to the *magic* of YCW and the need for ongoing experimentation in how this is accounted for and valued in evaluation and by implication in relationships. This is especially important in creating pedagogical approaches to YCW that are relational and processual, and that challenge the neoliberal push to instrumentalism. Cooper et al. (2024) explicitly, and Seal and Frost (2014) and Doherty and de St Croix (2024) implicitly, demand a sharper focus on the role of relationships as both political and ethical dimensions that are at the heart of a pedagogy for YCW.

Crucially, we argue that YCW plays a vital role in planning and developing practices that combat adultism and adultification discussed earlier in this article. The concept of relationships creates a convergence between social and critical pedagogy, offering a powerful orientation to practice with the potential to challenge oppressive dynamics that arise from adultist assumptions, practices and structures. The emphasis on relationships as a bridge between social and critical pedagogy is further supported by emerging conceptual work within YCW practice. Hennell (2022), for example, developed a framework for youth work grounded in grassroots practice with young people. While the model does not explicitly align with either social or critical pedagogy, its focus on relationships at the individual and community level resonates strongly with an approach that centres relationships at the heart of practice. Hennell (2022) identifies four interconnected areas that align with the diamond model (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011) explored earlier. The four areas are: (1) relationship with self; (2) relationship with others; (3) supporting the relationships of others; and (4) relationships with and within the community. These dimensions offer a practical articulation of the role of relationships as part of a distinctive ethos and YCW methodology that reinforces its transformative potential.

The three Ps of CSP

Charfe (2025) highlights three Ps identified within the Danish model of social pedagogy. The *personal*, *professional* and *private* in relational engagement:

The social pedagogical concept of the 3 Ps aids social pedagogues to critically reflect on the 'professional' role within relationship-based practice. Whilst the 'personal' aspect assists critical self-reflection about what parts of ourselves we bring into relationship-based practice. Finally, the 'private' sets out what aspects of us we are not going to share as we navigate complex and ethical relationship-based practice. (Charfe, 2025, p. 529)

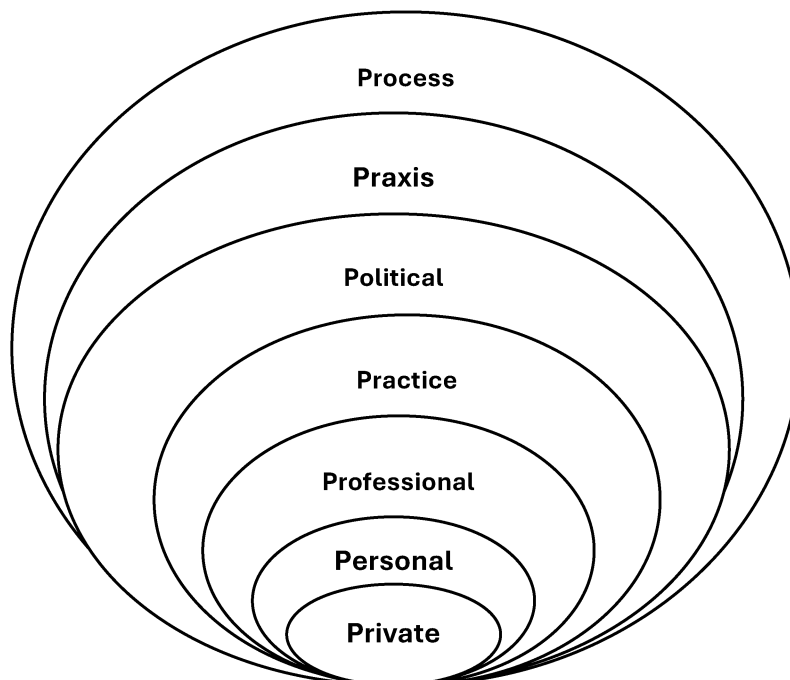
The 'p' for *personal* is a significant aspect of YCW, both as political (Batsleer, 2021) and private, as discussed by Murphy and Ord (2013) in relation to self-disclosure and the need for practitioners to be

clear about the boundaries and contours of the private, the political and the personal in terms of what is shared with young people.

We argue for conjoining four further Ps – *practice*, *political*, *praxis* and *process* – to extend the approach into CSP. *Practice* refers to the relational and situated work of YCW grounded in everyday interactions and informed by professional judgement, ethics and care. It acknowledges that knowledge is co-produced through engagement with young people in context. The *political* and *praxis* dimensions are drawn from critical pedagogy to articulate and understand the broader socio-economic context that shapes young people's lives under neoliberal oppressions. The *political* 'p' builds on Freire's (1996) assertion that relationships are inherently political as they are shaped by power and systemic inequality. In this context YCW practitioners, in dialogue with young people, support the process of conscientisation (Freire, 1996), lifting the veil on social and economic structures that are often misframed as personal failings. The *praxis* 'p' engages with the tension between restrictive neoliberal narratives and the gaps in underfunded provision. For Freire (1996), praxis represents values-led, informed and committed action. In YCW it enables relationships to move beyond reflection into meaningful action that is responsive to young people's lived experiences. Finally, the *process* 'p' underpins how practice is emergent. *Process* is understood as dynamic and caring, fostering connection and responsiveness. Through the process it is possible to make connections and to tune into the potential for collective actions that advance social justice. Crucially, the process is an interweaving thread between the practice, political and praxis (Massumi, 2015). It brings the Ps into relationship to develop holistic practices that form pedagogical approaches through which YCW engages young people meaningfully and ethically.

As with the Diamond model (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011) we argue that the Ps are integral to each other, they cannot be disaggregated as they work holistically and relationally rather than in isolation. The seven P model – extended from Charfe's (2025) three P model – is articulated in Figure 1 below. In the third section of this article, we introduce four vignettes drawn from graduate/student experience and we exemplify the interweaving of the seven different elements at work in their practices.

Figure 1. The seven Ps of CSP



Dialogues from practice: youth and community students' and graduates' relational practice through the lens of CSP

To build on relationships as magical, political and ethical, and as a point of convergence between critical pedagogy and social pedagogy, this article now turns to examine the significance of relationships through the lens of an experienced graduate YCW practitioner and of current students. It considers how this focus can inform and deepen our understanding of CSP. Often the voices of students are underrepresented in contemporary debates, and this highlights the importance of an approach to the theorisation of YCW practices that are situated and contextual. This article builds on our growing approach of *writing with* student and graduate partners as opposed to *writing about* them, aligning with Christtmass et al.'s (2024) claim that students are 'often at the forefront of innovative practice as they research the YCW role and its possibilities in different spaces and places' (p. 144).

This article will now draw on dialogues between students and academics as part of the writing process, focused on student placement experiences alongside reflections from a graduate practitioner working with young people across diverse YCW settings. Each of the examples identifies the centrality of relationships as a distinctive aspect of YCW practice. All four examples illustrate themes that emerged through dialogue and reflection and that are distinctive to pedagogical practices in YCW.

Collaborative writing includes a commitment to ethical practice, and as part of this all names have been anonymised (Wyatt et al., 2017). Consent to include the material was embedded within the collaborative writing process and agreed by all contributors. The reflections are presented as four anonymised practice-based examples that illuminate the seven Ps discussed earlier. The names Noa, Soren, Azri and Lior are fictional and used to protect the identities of those involved.

Bridge builders

Noa was based in a well-being unit within a secondary school accessed by a high number of neurodivergent young people. While on placement they were tasked to work with a small group of young people who were at risk of school exclusion. It was mutually agreed between student and supervisor that they would create a space within the school day to work with young people as a group to explore issues that mattered to them (personal). The student secured an agreement with the supervisor that young people's participation in the group was voluntary (Gormally and Coburn, 2019) reflecting the ethos of YCW (professional). Noa highlighted the importance to them of planning an approach that prioritised building relationships, as they felt that this was foundational to their role and would create the conditions to co-produce sessions with students. Noa felt that the focus was not just on creating relationships with the group as a YCW but also on facilitating a sense of community and belonging between the young people (process). Noa felt that their role involved positioning themselves alongside young people rather than as an authority figure, to act as a bridge between them and the broader school structures and environment (political). Relationally working with the young person in the context of their environment was understood as an active approach to space-making with young people through building trusted relationships (personal). Reflecting on trust as a key ingredient to building relationships, Fox and Thiessen (2019) state that:

the social pedagogue seeks to build and sustain a positive secure relationship with the young person. This in turn assists the young person in having more trusting relationships, and this creates a pattern of healthy relationship building. (p. 4)

In youth work this is articulated by Fyfe and Mackie (2024) as:

Building effective and meaningful relationships are central to youth work. In principle, practitioners work alongside young people, with the educational focus firmly placed on issues of interest and concern to them. The interaction and relationship between adult practitioners and young people are mediated by principles of trust, respect, sincerity and above all, authenticity. (p. 1)

Noa stated that:

Relationality is crucial when working with young people, in fact I believe building relationships should be the priority in any youth work relationship [personal/process/practice]. Whilst on placement, I witnessed the positive difference in the way young people responded to the youth work approach I adopted in comparison to the way other professionals work with them [professional]. Young people could see I was genuinely interested in their lives and the issues that affect them the most and because of this, they increasingly became more willing to spend time with me, enabling us to create a relationship with mutual trust and respect at its core [process/practice]. The youth work curriculum is fundamental in creating relationships with young people as it affords youth workers space and creativity to adapt the way they work with each individual young person, creating environments that are young-person-led and more fit for purpose [praxis]. This helps young people feel heard and seen which, in formal education, is often not the case [political].

The latter point is crucial in the process of disconnection from education; drawing from YCW values to establish relational engagement outside of formal education opens the space for encounters that privilege the needs of young people before the requirements of the ideologically derived, narrow national curriculum (political), which contributes to the disengagement of young people who cannot relate to the subject matter or keep pace with delivery of the curriculum (Christtmass et al., 2024).

Advocating and enabling

Soren led a project that was a collaborative approach between YCWs and a secondary school aiming to improve young people's school attendance. Young people in need of this support were identified by the school, and although participation was not self-initiated, participation was based on YCW values, albeit a targeted initiative. The project was based in a youth centre as it offered a safe space for young people to talk openly about the challenges they experience with attending school. YCWs led the project, using the values of the profession, which foster a supportive and inclusive informal learning environment (professional), in contrast to formal education, which is more rigid and less concerned with relational engagement. Participants were young people aged 13–16 years who felt marginalised within the school environment. They attended as part of an initiative to bridge the gap between their needs and the school's support system. Young people expressed feeling voiceless in school, which Soren reflected added to the challenges they experienced and contributed to their disengagement from education (Christtmass et al., 2024). Soren felt that the issue of being unable to access support had been compounded by broader societal issues such as an increase in demand for support services, which were, in turn, underfunded (political). Consequently, Soren highlighted how young people felt they were living in a society where they feel undervalued across a range of issues, and for many, the relational approach of YCW feels the only place where they can have a voice and find someone who is willing to listen. According to Soren, YCW promotes critical thinking and dialogue through holistic, relationship-centred methods, which build trust (personal) and emphasise social, emotional and personal development. Soren noted that the project encouraged conversations that were open and honest about the challenges young people experience and the impact that these challenges have on their lives. Conversations were open for exploration as YCWs skilfully explore young people's perceptions, ideas and understanding (practice) through continual dialogue, conversation and reflection (process), sometimes gently challenging opinions and thought processes, drawing on critical pedagogy underpinning YCW (praxis). Coburn and Gormally (2017) articulate that:

Drawing on Freirean pedagogy, authors such as Beck and Purcell (2020), Coburn and Wallace (2011) propose that YCW practice begins when people start to question the situations and realities they live in, and to see these as problematic. They suggest dialogue as much more than conversation and see it as a deliberate act of transformation. (p. 163)

According to Soren critical pedagogy in YCW contributes to facilitating the empowerment of young people, who become authors of their own story and creators of the support structures they need to be able to flourish. The project amplifies the voice of young people, encouraging them to voice their concerns within the school, or let YCWs advocate for them if they lack confidence to do so themselves. This ensures that the issues they experience are listened to and the right support can be generated to

meet their needs. Soren felt that the most obvious and possibly the most enabling outcome was that young people came to understand that they have a voice and to realise the importance of it needing to be heard on matters that concern them. However, the broader impact for YCW is the reinforced message that YCW advocates and enables the voice of young people (process) and will work to hold those in power accountable for the care and humanity young people receive (political). The project is shining a light on relational engagement, as well as the importance of listening to young people's concerns and providing the time and space to talk through and reflect on issues that are important to them.

Soren reflected that the project was successful because it was rooted in the strong, trust-based relationships that YCW builds, which is fundamental to effective YCW irrespective of the setting (professional/practice). School staff were surprised by the depth of conversations and connections YCWs can establish with young people, which led to valuable insights into the lives of young people, generating the support they need to flourish within the school system and beyond.

This example has synergy with Noa's as it relates to the binary of informal/formal education and YCW/school spaces, which embody the 'border pedagogy' discussed by Coburn and Gormally (2017): 'We propose that border pedagogy offers a threshold concept which aids discussion regarding the future for CYW: where the unthinkable can be realised in new configurations of methodological praxis across a range of professional domains' (p. 171).

Connectedness and care outdoors

Azri's placement was at an outdoor education project. While on placement they worked with In Defence of Youth Work's distinctive storytelling methodology to create a project with young people in the outdoor environment (process/practice). Storytelling is a participatory practice that, through dialogue, enables collective approaches to emerge and holds resonance with writing as a collaborative method of enquiry.

Azri's starting point was to build caring unconditional relationships with the young people that enabled them to explore the outdoor space. This was in line with the placement organisation's ethos but also important from Azri's point of view, as they were mindful that young people's occupation of space in contemporary society is often contested (political) (Gray and Manning, 2022). Azri highlighted that how in terms of considerations about relationships, working in the outdoors with young people must be more than about the YCW relationship (professional and personal) extending to more-than-human matters connected to the relationship with the natural environment (political). An important part of Azri's role was working with young people in caring and connected ways, which is a strong feature in the principles of social pedagogy (practice), specifically in encouraging and nurturing relationships between young people and YCWs but also with the wider environment. For Azri, relationships are key to making outdoor spaces available to young people and to their role in fostering well-being.

Everyday lives and big issues

Lior undertook their placement in an open-access youth centre. While they were on placement, they were given the responsibility of working alongside young people to raise critical consciousness, a core feature of critical pedagogy (praxis), about their everyday rights (politics) and especially in relation to their use of the youth centre. Participation in the project, as in the previous three examples, was informed by voluntary participation as a cornerstone of youth work (professional/practice). Lior reflected that a strong focus of their approach was to forge relationships built on mutual respect. They felt that on one level it did not matter what project they were working with young people on; the *magic* was in the relationship, which includes sharing in dialogue (personal). As such, a focus on relationships was essential to their approach in working with young people to establish a rights-based project (politics). Like Noa, Soren and Azri, Lior chose not to begin the project with structured activities but instead prioritised getting to know the young people that they were working with and what mattered to them (process and practice). Lior highlighted the importance of being adaptable and flexible within their relationships with young people rather than applying a rigid agenda. Lior noted that 'the youth work approach is unique as it affords a more equal relationship. In fact, young people should hold a high degree of power in the relationship', this links to Davies (2015, p. 103) in terms of *tipping* the power balance, which we feel is key to critical pedagogy. Lior was keen to work with young people to raise critical consciousness and

make connections between their everyday lives and their rights and to provide opportunities to use their rights to influence practices in the open-access youth centre (process and practice).

The emphasis on power-sharing in relationships (Davies, 2021; Thompson, 2007) reflects a core value in YCW. Students felt this should be grounded in mutual respect and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1995). Such relationships enable practitioners to gain deeper insight into young people's lives and the issues that affect them most to inform an agenda for action (Hennell, 2022), which aligns with the focus of critical pedagogy. Hatton (2022) similarly argues that relationship-building is the foundation of YCW practice. This is an idea that is echoed across all four examples, where relationality was seen as central and distinctive to professional identity and approach as YCW practitioners. The conjoining of critical and social pedagogical approaches is reflected in the seventh P: process. The interweaving of the Ps helps to define CSP and has enabled us to identify both shared elements and points of divergence between the two approaches. These similarities and differences may have important implications for work with young people and communities. A convergence between the two pedagogical approaches could strengthen the ongoing relevance of relational practices that are orientated towards the pursuit of social justice.

Conclusion

This article has shown how collaborative writing can function as a relational and critical pedagogical approach within professionally qualifying YCW education, connecting CSP to both practice and teaching. Through this approach, we have brought together university-based learning and placement practice to explore how CSP can be developed as both a framework for YCW practice and a pedagogy for teaching YCW.

In part four, we acknowledge how the article has drawn on a YCW graduate practitioner perspective together with students' placement experiences to explore the concept of relationships and illuminate the potential convergences between social pedagogy and CSP. We argue that the space in between critical pedagogy and social pedagogy opens new ground that extends how we can think about YCW. We explored the integration of core elements of critical pedagogy: politics and praxis, to advance Charfe's (2025) '3 P' model of relationships. This approach has aimed to illuminate what it means to work processually and relationally with young people, while maintaining a sustained commitment to challenging contemporary forms of age-based discrimination perpetuated across all spheres of life and institutions such as schools. Including the Ps of process and practice completes the advancement of the model to enable the concepts to interweave to enhance emergent intra-actions (Barad, 2007). The examples highlighted that relationships are often more than human as they extend and connect to the wider environment and the need therefore to include the materiality of space and the value of association and community. A CSP for YCW gives recognition to practitioners as bridge builders and acknowledges that in working care-fully and relationally they create connectedness between young people, their environments and broader social issues that can inform agendas for action and the drive for social change. Process is integral to such an approach ensuring that practices are emergent and rooted in young people's lived experiences. Extending the three Ps – private, personal and professional – to incorporate the wider societal element of the political, praxis – drawing together theory, reflection and action – and process offers a conceptual shift. This shift moves beyond a binary analysis that compares critical pedagogy and social pedagogy towards an experiment in what becomes possible when the practices are brought into relation with each other. It invites the question of what new practices might emerge when the seven Ps embrace Barad's (2007) conceptualisation of intra-action, which emphasises the interconnectedness and mutual influence of all elements within a system enabling the emergence of CSP.

At a time of renewed interest and policy development in YCW in England, the dialogues and writing process opened up a space to think creatively with a new generation of YCW practitioners, where relationships are more than professional and young people are more than the labels applied to them. We have argued that although neoliberalism has marginalised YCW, the convergence of critical and social pedagogy, emerging as CSP, can reinvigorate practice in troubling times. The article concludes by advocating for continued experimentation with CSP as an approach to YCW. It emphasises the pressing need for universities to work collaboratively with YCW students and graduates, drawing on practice to theorise and co-develop an emergent approach to teaching and learning rooted in CSP.

This is especially important in enacting a commitment to co-production in the teaching and learning relationship, which we argue should model practices we want to see working alongside young people and in communities to address urgent societal and place-based social issues. Theorisation of practice that informs teaching, positions academics alongside students and practitioners in the co-creation of knowledge and meaning-making practices. We advocate for increased use of writing as an enquiry-based method to enable students, graduates and partners to equitably contribute to articulating the stories of how these approaches manifest. Central to this will be the need to enact relationally engaged learning, teaching and curriculum development with care and commitment, embracing head, heart and hands (Brühlmeier and Mitchell, 2010) in more-than-human ways.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that the research reported in this article was conducted in accordance with the UK Youth Work Code of Ethics 2025.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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