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## Understanding the impact on children's citizenship of participating in community-based action research

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# Understanding the impact on children's citizenship of participating in community-based action research

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the lived experience of citizenship of working-class girls from a marginalised ex-mining town in northern England engaged as community researchers in participatory action research. The research aimed to better understand the relationships within their local community. Qualitative methods were used to examine the girls' experience of the research and its impact on their sense of community, which is discussed using the lens of 'lived citizenship' (Kallio et al. 2020). We conclude that children's experience of participatory research approaches can be understood as subjective or lived citizenship. This contributes to understanding how they perceived their acts of citizenship, particularly in relation to others in their community. Supporting the international literature on subjectivity in citizenship studies and the critical appreciation of intersectionality in participatory research, this paper demonstrates how such involvement can lead to positive subjective outcomes in groups experiencing marginalisation, such as working-class girls.

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## Introduction

Children are rarely afforded an equal right to participate in society in a way that draws upon their inclusion in their communities (Lúcio and Panson 2015). This is despite Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) specifically stating 'that every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously' (United Nations 1989). Degrees of participation also differ among children, impacted by intersectional factors such as class and gender (Taylor-Collins 2022). Working-class girls are often vulnerable to multiple marginalisation in accessing opportunities to participate meaningfully in society, encouraged to adopt traditionally feminine positions within communities centred around homemaking and low-skilled employment (Richards 2017).

This paper draws upon empirical research conducted with a group of girls from an ex-mining community in northern England who were involved in participatory community research (Wilson and Morris 2020). The paper investigates the lived experience of

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involvement in a research project which sought to use participatory methods with a group of marginalised girls to promote social inclusion by providing opportunities to enact their citizenship studies. Within the exposition of the experiences of these girls, this paper proposes to provide two contributions. Theoretically, the underrepresentation of subjectivity in citizenship will be argued, highlighting a greater need to research citizens' lived experiences as they perform acts they themselves define as citizenship (Akar 2017). Through critically analysing the accounts of these girls, the paper focuses not on what forms of citizenship were enacted but on how these were subjectively experienced, thus emphasising a 'traditionally overlooked' aspect of citizenship (Kallio, et al., 2020, p.8) concerned with what thoughts and feelings were generated. It builds on the conceptual framework of lived citizenship offered by Kallio et al. (2020), which consists of four dimensions: spatial, intersubjective, performed and affective. Particular emphasis is placed on the spatial and intersubjective dimensions of citizenship to illustrate the critical role of relationships in lived citizenship.

This paper provides an empirical case study of the potential impact of participatory research methods on a very specific population. This group, working-class girls from a post-industrial community, are understood to be often overlooked in research, despite their vulnerability to marginalisation (Skelton 2001). The use of various participatory methodologies produced various insights into the experiences of participation in the research, tools which can be used in future research to understand the experiences of marginalised groups. Moreover, the findings and discussions presented in this paper contribute to the wider conversations and debate in the field of citizenship studies concerning the positionality of children as informed and capable citizens (Golombek 2012; Jans 2004; Nishiyama 2017; Ryder and Robson 2023; Sporre 2021; Theis 2009) and the role of intersectionality in citizenship (Cherubini 2011, 2023; Choi and Cristol 2021; de Jong 2013; Yuval-Davis 2007).

### *Literature review of young people's understanding of citizenship*

A rich literature offers numerous conceptualisations of children and young people's citizenship (for example, Cockburn 2007; Johnson 2017; Lundy 2007; Lister 2008; Moosa-Mitha 2005; Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss 2002). The term citizenship has multiple meanings and context-specific applications. When discussing issues associated with national identity and immigration, 'state citizenship' may be understood as rights associated with participation and integration in any country's democratic system (Justwan 2015). 'Active citizenship' is often associated with expressions of democratic participation, such as voting, or in the case of young people, belonging to a youth council (Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley 2004). It is also related to civic engagement, ranging from informal, individual activities such as helping a neighbour, to more formal, collective action such as volunteering (Adler and Goggin 2005; Boje 2010).

While providing a contribution to critical citizenship studies, this paper will draw on a conceptual framework concerning lived citizenship (Kallio et al., 2020), that is 'citizenship as it is experienced and enacted in various real-life contexts' (Kallio et al., 2020, p. 2) to offer new insights. In contrast with more formal models of citizenship, which draw on actors' relationship with the state, lived citizenship offers a framework that focuses on the mundane, everyday acts of citizenship within a less formal political field (Dickinson et al.

2008; Dyck 2005; Isin and Turner 2007; Mitchell 2003). It seeks to provide a lens through which to appreciate the ways groups in marginalised positions, such as children and asylum seekers, operate, acknowledging 'the feelings, experiences, practices and actions of people outside the realm of formal politics' (Pain and Smith 2016, 2). The affective and performative dimensions, that is, the role of feelings and actions, shaping citizenship are well documented. For example, citizenship is experienced through feeling, in a sense of belonging, and through practice in relation to democracy and human rights (Solhaug and Osler 2018). Moreover, the complexity of these feelings and practices is recognised as multiple and context-dependent (Heater 2013). Recent examinations of the study of children's conceptualisations of citizenship appreciate the socially constructed nature of citizenship and advocate for fluid understandings of what citizenship means to different young people (Akar 2017).

The lived citizenship concept is presented within a framework featuring four named dimensions: spatial, intersubjective, performed and affective. The spatial dimension of the concept refers to how citizenship is experienced and enacted in a multitude of spaces, from transnational context to street-level interactions. The intersubjective nature of lived citizenship focuses on the intersection of relationships with others, influenced by race, gender and class (Habashi 2019; Kallio 2018; Wood 2013). These identities and relationships operate in a complex social world, where citizenship 'is not carved out in an isolated endeavour, but is lived, practised and shaped interpersonally and intergenerationally' (Kallio, et al. 2020, p. 717). Performed citizenship is notion that has received the most attention academically (Bargu 2022; Behrman 2014; Isin 2008, 2009, 2012; Kallio and J 2011; Larkins 2014; Pfeifer 2018; Puggioni 2014), refers to acts of citizenship, that is, referring to specific practices. Finally, affective citizenship relates to feelings of belonging and other emotions associated with being a citizen, such as feeling passionate about a local issue and experiencing pride in one's immediate community.

This builds on existing work seeking to draw attention to the embodied and everyday nature of expressions and experiences of citizenship, drawing heavily on critical feminist theory (Hall, Coffey, and Williamson 1999; Lister 2003, 2007; Smith 1987; Dyck 2005). Children and young people have formed the most significant contribution to knowledge concerning lived citizenship (Lister et al. 2003; Bartos 2012; Wood 2010; Kallio and Mills 2016). This paper thus contributes by providing a case study application of the lived citizenship framework within the specific context of English working-class girls and argues that an understanding of the subjective experience of citizenship is critical in promoting participatory opportunities for socially excluded groups.

### *Working-class girls as active community members*

In contrast to the adult-centric conception of community, there are limited ways in which children are considered as members of communities. The predominant means of describing the communities that children belong to make reference to school or family identity rather than to place or neighbourhood. Alternative ways of understanding children's community membership include belonging to formal groups of interest or to groups that are defined by their separateness or opposition to a perceived 'other' in recognition of issues of power, agency and relationships (Lúcio and I'anson 2015). As Percy-Smith and Taylor (2008, 390) assert, 'the social and cultural expression of

children's worlds need to be acknowledged and valued within the wider fabric of community life'. Drawing on literature concerning children and young people's community engagement, Davies et al. (2013) identified a gap concerning children and young people's perceptions of community development, highlighting the need to find ways to understand community and citizenship directly from the perspective of children and young people themselves.

In addition to the marginalised status of children, working-class girls are further excluded through their gender and class positionings (Sarti et al. 2018). Appreciating that class can be subjectively understood as a socially constructed phenomenon (Bourdieu 1987), a majority of conceptions of class in the educational literature refer to income, occupation, education, and material possessions (Rubin 2012; Sirin 2005). Here, working-class girls can be understood to belong to households with typically below-average income, unskilled or semi-skilled occupations and below-average levels of educational attainment (Hout 2008). This conception does not seek to position these households as deficient; rather, it is used as a tool to demonstrate the objective and material constraints which are present in their lives.

Critical consideration of the complex histories and geographies of communities has been argued to be central in understanding lived citizenship: 'as lived experience, citizenship cannot be divorced from its context – temporal and national' (Lister et al. 2007, 1) Central to their argument was a challenge to the dominant gender 'regimes', whereby women are expected to fulfil their citizenship obligations in keeping with the dominant culture, principally concerning private, unpaid care within families (Lister et al. 2007, 10). Although Lister et al. were concerned with the experiences of adult women, this can be extrapolated to understand the gender experience of girls in any given community.

Working-class, ex-mining communities offer a specific context in which to reflect on the role of girls as active community members. Characterised by historically and culturally embedded attitudes towards masculine and feminine identities, the working generations have had to adapt to an evolving economic landscape where traditional values and practices in more recent times have been challenged (Renold et al. 2020; Renold and Ivinson 2014). There, gendered and class-based roles indeed have temporal and national contexts where expectations are made of girls from an early age.

A report by the Children's Commissioner for England that focuses on northern England in the UK, reflected on the significance of emerging differences between the career aspirations of boys and girls and their beliefs about what their local areas offered them. Despite girls outperforming boys nationally in terms of educational achievement, their aspirations are shaped by the male-dominated nature of both traditional industries and regeneration (Children's Commissioner for England 2018). Previous studies have found that girls from such communities modify their life aspirations as they progress through secondary school, reverting to traditional gendered roles in work and family life and tending to remain living close to their families (Richards 2017, 2022). These occupational and aspirational barriers illustrate the ways in which working-class girls are more vulnerable to marginalisation than working-class boys in the UK.

The evidence above outlines the importance of understanding the multiple marginalised positions occupied by work-class girls regarding structural barriers and their subjective experience of inclusion and exclusion. Although this paper draws upon a small, specific sample in one country, the findings are considered in an

international context in light of the aforementioned Article 12 of the UNCRC (United Nations 1989). Working-class girls' experience of citizenship in the UK, including their rights to express their views, resonates with similar sectors of the population in other countries (Xu and Stahl 2023; Bhana, Nzimakwe, and Nzimakwe 2011; Taft 2011).

Moreover, Article 13 of the UNCRC advocates for 'the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice' (UNICEF UK 1989). As girls from ex-mining communities are rarely included in research, their participation offered such creative opportunities for self-expression (Renold and Ivinson 2014; Beissel, Giardina, and Newman 2014).

### *Study context*

The research discussed in this paper was conducted in an ex-mining community in northern England, UK. Identified as being 'left behind' by the Local Trust (2019), the area is characterised by multiple forms of deprivation (Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2019) and experiences both geographic and political isolation. This does not detract from the many assets existing within this community (not least the girls themselves) that are described elsewhere (Wilson and Morris 2020). This paper draws upon the first author's experience in leading a local Connected Communities project (Parsfield et al. 2015; Ridley and Morris 2018), demonstrating how participation in research which seeks to understand and contribute to local communities can lead to a sense of citizenship and connection with others for the child community researchers. This paper focuses on the children's experience of involvement in community-based participatory research with young people. The findings from the Connected Communities study itself are discussed elsewhere (Wilson and Morris 2020). For context, the children as community researchers in the Connected Communities study surveyed their neighbours about wellbeing, social networks and experiences of loneliness.

Although membership in Girls Gang was fluid at times, nine girls consistently attended the weekly sessions, with 14 girls being engaged overall. The girls were all aged between 10 and 11 years when the group was formed. To facilitate processes of democratic participation in the research, the first author worked closely with a local councillor to establish a children's community researcher group. Participation in the group was free of charge and was intentionally located within a local community centre rather than a school or other public building, thereby reducing the potential for social and cultural barriers to participation (Kiili and Larkins 2018). While it had not been the intention to recruit only girls into the group, in primarily reflecting existing friendship groups within the school, the self-selection recruitment process meant that the children's community researcher team was comprised solely of girls. From the outset, they bonded as a group and chose the name 'Girls Gang' by which to identify it. Subsequently, a registered charity was formed to enable Girls Gang to continue their community activism as a youth council beyond the lifetime of the research

project, which expanded the opportunity for other local children to also become involved.

## Research methods

Qualitative methods were used to investigate the meaning and impact of participation for the girls who took part in the Connected Communities project. A range of creative data collection methods, including participatory reflective sessions, focus groups and peer interviews were used to explore the girls' perspectives (Ivinson and Renold 2021, 2016; Arcidiacono et al. 2016). Informal participatory sessions were organised inviting the girls to voice their opinions about their involvement as community researchers. Creating democratic spaces that fostered meaningful interactions was vital, and the regular use of a ballot box at these sessions served to symbolise an essential aspect of democratic processes more generally. At the first participatory session, the girls established the aims of the group and ground rules that were subsequently read out at the start of each session by a different girl. Their stated aims were 'to have fun', 'spend time with friends' and 'challenge littering' in their community. These became central to how Girls Gang operated and were reviewed regularly by the girls.

The participatory reflective sessions took place quarterly throughout the project (between 2017–2019) during which questions relating to their experience were posted by the first author on flipchart paper and placed around the room, and the girls invited to write on post-it notes within a specified time. This tried and tested method – termed by Quigley (2012) as 'post-it note pedagogy' – was used in lieu of questionnaire surveys. It was possible for the girls to express their likes and dislikes anonymously on post-it notes. The informality of the post-it method, combined with physically moving around the room to complete the task proved popular. This method produced data concerning practical elements of the research, for instance, their preferences for different activities and research methods.

The girls also undertook paired peer interviews. This interview method has been successful in understanding the experience of children in schools (Niemi, Kumpulainen, and Lipponen 2018), and in community projects (Lile and Richards 2014), along with exploring place-based disadvantage (Warr, Mann, and Tacticos 2011). The rationale for adopting this approach was threefold, it increased the girls' scientific knowledge of social science research methods; the method itself promoted the credibility and trustworthiness of the data in that it was grounded in the girls' experience (Devotta et al. 2016); and it resonated with the ethos of the research, which sought to challenge traditional power structures in research wherever possible (Schäfer and Yarwood 2013). A one-hour training session on interview techniques was provided, and the interview schedule used was co-designed. The girls decided on peer interview pairs, and each pair took turns interviewing one another using the co-designed schedule. Five separate peer interviews were conducted in this way, lasting between 20–50 minutes, and these were digitally recorded.

The peer interviews provided a more intimate understanding of the complex group dynamics existing among the girls, which the researchers were previously unaware of. For example, one pair spoke about how they felt unheard by their peers at times and how



they felt others sought to dominate the sessions, revealing hidden tensions. These findings did not arise within any other data capture and thus demonstrate the value of peer-led methodologies.

Anonymised transcripts from these interviews were then analysed inductively to identify emergent themes, and the text was sifted further according to how clearly quotations explained the key themes. For reasons of ensuring complete anonymity, this stage of analysis was entirely adult-led. However, the validity of interpretations was tested by discussing a summary of the results with the girls before writing up the results. The identified key themes were shared with the girl's group alongside background about the coding process that had generated these themes. Discussions took place concerning each code, where the importance of honest critique was emphasised. The girls were also invited to approach the first author on a one-to-one basis if they had additional reflections.

Two focus groups, each with five participants and lasting 45 minutes, were facilitated by the first author. Focus groups are an acceptable and effective method for eliciting children's voices, with an ideal sample size of four to five young participants (Gibson 2007). The focus groups collected data about how the process had changed participants' self-perception and about the relationships within their local community. Although the first author facilitated the focus groups, the girls had active roles in reading questions from the topic guide aloud, and this contributed to redressing the obvious power imbalance in such a process. Audio recordings were transcribed, and the first author summarised themes before sharing and discussing these with the girls, as with the peer interview data.

Ethics approval was granted by a University of Central Lancashire Ethics Committee. Recruitment of children to the project was guided by ethical considerations, particularly concerning children's freedom to consent and confidentiality (Alderson and Morrow 2020). Freedom to withdraw at any time from participation in Girls Gang was assured and reinforced by the offer of alternative activities organised in parallel to the evaluative feedback sessions.

Data corroboration entailed combining analysis across the different data types (i.e. focus group and interview transcripts, post-it notes, and flipchart data). Standard methods of qualitative data analysis (Silverman 2020) were applied by the first author who immersed herself in the data to identify themes. An inductive data-driven thematic analysis identified four core themes (Braun and Clarke 2012), which were then considered from a deductive perspective, applying the lived citizenship conceptual framework (Kallio et al., 2020). This hybrid analytic method is common in international studies across a variety of subject areas including health care (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006), and education (Roberts, Nganga, and James 2019), and is argued to offer a widely applicable method with proven validity (Proudfoot 2023; Alhojailan 2012). Direct quotes are presented in the analysis and pseudonyms have been applied to protect their girls' identities.

## Findings

The findings are organised and discussed under four emergent dimensions of the children's lived citizenship, which relate closely to Kallio et al. (2020) conceptualisation

of lived citizenship. These highlight the importance of safe spaces for children's citizenship to develop, how participation fosters a sense of community connectedness, how through participation, children's empathy with others grows, and that participation increases the sense of collective agency or performative citizenship. The data are presented under these discrete categories, but these should not be read as mutually exclusive as they are overlapping in many respects and are deeply interrelated.

### *Importance of safe spaces for children's citizenship*

Providing a physical and symbolic safe space for the girls from the start fostered a culture of inclusivity and participation, highlighting the importance of the spatial dimension of lived citizenship. An underused youth space in a local community was chosen and paid for by the researchers prior to recruitment. The community centre was in the heart of the community, providing a familiar location which was within walking distance for the girls homes. In order to foster a feeling of ownership over the space from the inception of the group, the girls were asked what they would like to see in the room during the first session. The girls expressed they would like sofas to create a space where they can relax and talk between themselves. By the second session, a number of sofas had been acquired in order to demonstrate that we wanted to meet the girl's needs and to offer a comfortable and welcoming space.

At the first session, for example, the girls were invited to choose both a name and an aim for the group and to identify ground rules that they were happy with. This ethos of democratic participation was evident throughout the project, as highlighted by Eva, who commented in her peer interview:

No one really has control of the group, we all just share it, because we all share our opinions, like there's not one person that just goes 'right everybody, listen up, I'm talking now'.

Ensuring that everyone has a chance to have their say can be challenging for any group facilitator, but as Eva's comment above typifies, openness and inclusivity were aspects of how the group operated and this was highly valued by all the girls. Sharing views through peer interviews revealed that the principal reasons for continuing to attend the group were that the sessions were fun, their friends were attending, and also there was 'nothing else to do' in the area. As Courtney told her friend when interviewed:

When [first author] came into school I wasn't sure, but I was like, I'll come to it, have a go, see what it's like. I came, most of my friends were there and I barely played out anymore, so it was a chance to be with my friends.

Providing a designated physical space within the local community centre building served to engender connection and group identity both between the Girls Gang members and between the girls and the wider community they lived in. Lucie summarised this sense of identity and collaboration:

It's like we are our own little community . . . I know we're part of this big one, but we have our own little one together.

This was expanded upon by Lucie who, reflecting now on the most memorable elements of the group highlights the importance of developing friendships and relationships, as well as sense of purpose within the group through regular group meetings:

I think just coming to the group and being in that room . . . sitting there talking . . . that's when I feel most connected . . . We like really connect and we all show our feelings, and at school and other clubs we just don't. . . You don't actually realise how, once you've got together round just a little table, how important that is to you.

A key factor contributing to the lack of attrition among members of the group was that alongside the work associated with being a community researcher on the research study, there was time for fun and unstructured activities in the group, in a safe space where the girls could bond with their friends outside of school. During a peer interview, Katie reflected on this and the impact on her feelings about the project overall:

I know we do like serious work and stuff, like organising events . . . but we do have fun . . . We have down time and it literally is just that, even though we're doing serious stuff, it just makes it a whole lot more fun.

Providing a safe space, both physically and emotionally, a place where the girls could share their ideas without fear of criticism, was, thus, a key contributor to their continued involvement in the group and benefited the girls in ways that were not anticipated including enhancing their emotional wellbeing. During another peer interview, Belle alluded to how helpful the group had been to her generally:

Before, I was really in a down place, I would get bullied, but now I know I can stand up for myself, it's boosted my confidence a lot because it [the group] is always there for you. . . making new friends isn't that scary, I wouldn't have learnt this otherwise because I really wasn't sociable but now I am because of it. [the group]

The girls' reflections on what coming together as a group in the community centre meant to them provides evidence of the importance of creating an accessible and inclusive space for children as community researchers. This helped foster meaningful engagement and required the time and resources of researchers to be invested in relationship building.

### *Fostering community connectedness*

The intersubjective dimension of lived citizenship, that is, the girl's relationships with others was an important part of Girls Gang. In addition to bringing the girls together to act as community researchers for the research study, being members of Girls Gang provided an opportunity to explore more broadly their ideas about 'community' and ways they could envisage being active citizens within their community. Project activities such as involving the girls in data analysis of the community survey, served to generate a strong collective group identity. Aligned with this was the developing sense of pride reported by many of the girls in respect of walking together as a group in the area to conduct the community survey. This was further enhanced by their high level of participation in implementing the research study in practice: for instance, the girls were actively

involved in selecting which streets would be surveyed and deciding upon roles they would take in the door-step interview survey. Their sense of pride and group identity was then further reinforced by receiving positive comments from residents about the work they were doing, as summarised by Belle:

I loved how people were looking at us because they were looking at us with a big smile on their faces and people were saying ‘you’ve brought humanity back’, I just felt like I was a hero.

Belle exemplified how the role of community researcher broadened the reach and influence of the girls within their community and strengthened their subjective sense of being valued within this community. Anonymous responses from the girls on post-it notes typically referred to the importance of ‘meeting new people’ and ‘speaking to new people’ as the most valued aspects of their involvement.

Being able to exert some control within the research process was also important. Katie, for example, said ‘I liked how we could go anywhere on that street’. The intentional horizontal power relationship between adults and children created within the research team was critical in this respect increasing the girls’ sense of agency. As in other Connected Communities projects (Ridley and Morris 2018), local residents determine how community relationships are explored and exercise some agency in the research process (Parsfield et al. 2015). The impact of having an equal voice alongside others in the group and feeling valued was captured in this comment from one of the girls, Louisa, in which she compares participation with her experience of being at school:

I definitely have a say [in Girls Gang], unlike school. Everyone gets a chance to speak. Like in school only one or two people get chosen all the time and I feel like here everyone actually gets a chance to speak for themselves.

The intersubjective accounts of lived citizenship highlight the interplay between the dimensions, where relationships with others impact on the girls’ sense of belonging (affective) and subsequent behaviour (performative).

### *Increasing children’s empathy with others*

The girls’ subjective feelings, particularly surrounding how they felt they belonged within the community impacted on their participation as their awareness and understanding of the needs of the local community developed. The doorstep survey they conducted as community researchers highlighted hidden social issues such as the existence of loneliness and the experience of bereavement, and this offered a powerful learning experience for the girls. For example, Eva said she learned ‘that you can have some really sad stories and still be a nice person’. When debriefing after data collection sessions, the girls often commented that they did not realise so many social issues existed within their own neighbourhoods, suggesting participation helped them develop their awareness of issues facing their community. The increased understanding and empathy with others developed through the process of the research is illustrated in Charlie’s account of interviewing an elderly female resident living in her street whom she had not spoken to before:

I think the main thing I remember is this lady, she was lonely ... so we stayed with her longer. And when we asked [specific survey questions], they were really bad [uncomfortable] questions if you had something wrong with you. We were being nice to her about it, and then we were like, 'OK thank you for your time, we like you very much, wish you the best'. She was really nice, she was smiling, well she was smiling at me down the road.

The growing empathy that the girls felt towards others through undertaking the doorstep survey resulted in a critical reflection and re-definition of the purpose of Girls Gang. Initially concerned with having fun and challenging the dropping of litter, Girls Gang's aims shifted to become more communitarian, to wanting 'to help everyone' and 'make sure that everyone's happy' in their community. This demonstrates how the girl's subjective feelings, especially towards others in their immediate community, influenced their behaviour. Analysis of this process highlights the interplay between the dimensions of lived citizenship where the development of empathy (affective) through relating to others (intersubjective) changed the focus of the groups (performative).

### *Increased sense of collective agency*

Learning and reflecting on the research findings inspired the girls to co-design interventions that would cultivate and increase community capital in their immediate neighbourhood (Parsfield et al. 2015). The research process ignited and strengthened the girls' sense of social responsibility and increased cumulatively their belief in themselves as agents of change. This was exemplified in this comment from Katie's peer interview:

I have found that not everyone is proud to call this community their home but as a group we know that we can change that.

Others similarly felt motivated to make positive improvements in their community that went beyond the role of the research, suggesting longer-term impacts on the girls. When reflecting on the future of the group, Charlie envisaged an ambitious future for the group:

Once we've done all this and all the things we've planned, we could just change the whole community!

Another girl, increasingly conscious of her own agency and social responsibility, foresaw the future potential for positive collaboration between community members and public authorities:

As much as they help us, if they're really busy, I also think of it as we're helping them; if we're changing the community, they're [Police] going to be more free.

The girls felt empowered both to act in the present and note positive potential actions in the future. One girl, Eva, predicted that later in life, she would look back at her time in Girls Gang and would appreciate better than she could at present what its impact had been both on her community as well as on herself. This sense was bolstered by reports in the local newspaper that praised the girls' efforts.

One example of how this performed lived citizenship was enacted is through the girls' response to the research findings that older people were more likely to be lonely. The girls sought to improve older people's social networks through designing activities to help build better social networks for isolated older people. This involved participating in

training as Dementia Friends by the Alzheimer's Society and designing and delivering a local dementia-friendly café. This also reflects a growing awareness of the significance of adult-youth relationships in shaping young people's lives and citizenship (Canedo-García, García-Sánchez, and Pacheco-Sanz 2017).

## Discussion

Four key features emerge as key to supporting children's experience of citizenship in their communities, and these are consistent with recent dimensions of lived citizenship as identified by Kallio et al. (2020); that is spatial, intersubjective, affective and performative. The inclusive space at a local community centre where Girls Gang members met, fostered a spirit of participation which led to increased intersubjective connectedness both within the group and with their local community. The Connected Communities research process (Parsfield et al. 2015; Wilson and Morris 2020) engaged the girls as community researchers and resulted in them developing a deeper understanding of their capacity for empathy with others in the community whom they encountered. In turn, this led the girls to perform actions that were based on new understandings of what people in their community needed and wanted to change. Applying the four dimensions of lived citizenship (Kallio et al., 2020) in the context of this study, therefore, offers further insight for critical citizenship discourses concerned with intersectionality and inclusivity, in that it acknowledges the lived experience of working-class girls, a group recognised internationally as being vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion (Hampden-Thompson et al. 2015).

A contribution to indicators in Kallio et al.'s (2020) model is made by demonstrating the transferability of the model in the context of working-class girls. The findings speak to the value of relational practice in working with young people to foster lived citizenship (Biesta, Lawy, and Kelly 2009), contributing particularly to the intersubjective dimension of the model. Relationships with various individuals and groups were cited by the girls, including each other, the researchers, and their neighbours, and further research is needed to understand the interplay between these intersecting, intergenerational relationships.

The findings highlight the importance of community development approaches in conceptualising citizenship studies. The availability of inclusive spaces is critical for young people to negotiate their identities within these spaces (Hall, Coffey, and Williamson 1999). Through the creation of physical, social, cultural and discursive spaces (Moss and Petrie 2005), the girls were able to participate meaningfully, and this had inherent value in leading to the development of child-led social action. As Shier (2015) highlighted, creating authentic democratic spaces requires the investment of time, values, and resources. Direct engagement with the community whilst undertaking a community survey enabled the girls to reflect on how they were perceived by others, invoking an understanding of themselves as agents of change who can work collaboratively with adults to make a positive difference (Jans 2004). The role of the local political landscape and the ways in which children can become part of the process serves to support the case for community development approaches in understanding children's lived citizenship, providing local knowledge, expertise and relationships (Kallio and J 2011; Kallio and Mills 2016).

Furthermore, the emergence of what Freire (1996) refers to as a ‘critical consciousness’ was developed through the ownership by Girls Gang of the designated place within the community centre. This offered what became a safe space for the girls to explore their community and to transform and co-produce ideas for change (Larkins, Kiili, and Palsanen 2014; Percy-Smith and Taylor 2008; Lundy 2007). The reflexive processes and safe spaces contributed to democratic discourse, which was critical in the context of girls approaching adolescence – a point at which teenagers in general are framed as challenging, and teenage girls as being at risk of exploitation (Raby 2002). Additionally, this was important in the context of successfully encouraging the participation of girls from areas of socio-demographic disadvantage such as the marginalised ex-mining area on which the Connected Communities research was focussed (Richards 2017; Skeggs 2013; Reay 2001).

The importance of participatory spaces that facilitate opportunities for children to self-organise and claim their spaces in their community as one stakeholder group amongst others is now commonly recognised (Shier 2015; Percy-Smith and Taylor 2008). Related to this, Lúcio and I’anson posit an approach to understanding children’s participation and citizenship that is based on everyday experiences shaped by ‘communitarian interactions’ and relationships with others (Lúcio and I’anson 2015, 129). These findings resonate with accounts from the girls in Girls Gang, emphasising the strong interplay between spatial and intersubjective lived citizenship, that is, creating an inclusive space where children feel they can belong.

It must be noted that whilst every effort was made to conduct fully democratic research, there were times when the research adopted pre-selected research methodologies or activities. For example, the door-knocking methodology was pre-designed and was accompanied by a template survey used in previous studies. However, the girls reviewed and revised the survey in order to ensure the questions were relevant to their community, and the girls exclusively chose which streets and houses to survey. These examples serve to demonstrate how researchers can adapt and provide inclusive practice in youth participatory action research, even when certain elements must be pre-determined.

Relationships, both peer and intergenerational, were of great importance. The intersubjective dimension of lived citizenship demonstrates the potentially transformative role of intergenerational relationships in achieving social change and warrants further research, particularly in the field of community research (Wang and Stokhof 2022). Learning can be drawn from relational sociology, which posits that relationships are fundamental in social life (Crossley 2010; Dépelteau 2018) and that since ‘social reality is, in effect, social *relationality*’ (Donati 2010, 98). Relational theory is concerned with developing an approach that can be used not only to understand relationships but also to bring about positive social change for marginalised groups (Donati 2010; Dépelteau, 2015). By developing a more nuanced understanding of how positive intergenerational relationships function within communities, a more inclusive approach to participation can be developed.

The findings demonstrate the significant role that affect can have on children’s lived citizenship. Developing a sense of belonging is critical in children understanding their place in the world (Healy and Richardson 2017), and the participants in this study critically reflected on their position as citizens alongside other actors such as other

community members and public authorities. One of the main learning outcomes was the girls' increased understanding of the experiences of those within their immediate community. This resonates with international literature which links developing a sense of belonging through community development (Gorgul et al. 2017), and how affective experience can influence children's participation (Arnot and Swartz 2012). While approaches to developing a stronger sense of citizenship have traditionally focused on refugees as 'new citizens' (Solhaug and Osler 2018; Lee 2019), the findings from this research suggest the merit of also developing intergenerational empathic relationships within working-class communities through community development approaches.

The key benefit from participation in this project was the realisation of lived citizenship through direct action, fostered by the relationships formed between the girls and the wider community. Here, girls were 'brought back into the community' (Percy-Smith and Taylor 2008, 392), a significant factor in building sustainable models for participation (Percy-Smith and Taylor 2008). This has shown how opportunities for children to work collaboratively on social action have the potential to increase personal empowerment and a sense of citizenship (Bennett 2004; Fox et al. 2010). Contributing to the growing evidence for the value of community-based participatory research as a means of promoting a sense of citizenship and empowerment (Forbes-Genade and van Niekerk 2018; Larkins 2014), there is an argument for children to be seen as equal stakeholders in their communities able to work alongside adults to promote social inclusion and build sustainable communities (Percy-Smith 2006; Zeylikman et al. 2020).

### **Concluding comments**

Recent contributions to the literature present citizenship as a dynamic process of active negotiation in relation to context (Percy-Smith 2015; McMellon and Tisdall 2020), suggesting that from a policy perspective factors which may impact on the involvement of marginalised groups need to be considered in any democratic society. Firstly, governments and policymakers must consider how citizenship and capacity can be developed within the structural constraints of marginalisation and poverty, wherein access to resources such as travel and services are inequitable. Within this understanding, explicit consideration must be made concerning inclusive and exclusive practices surrounding policy participation and also the conscious and unconscious biases traditional power structures bring (Mannion 2016). Existing community-based youth provision faces extreme pressure and while more sustainable funding may become available, community organisations will require support if their knowledge and capacity to successfully generate the funding required to deliver these services is to be developed. Finally, the impact of geographic and cultural isolation on children's aspirations (Bajema, Miller, and Williams 2002), resources (Pasquier-Doumer and Brandon 2015), education (Curran and Kitchin 2019), and identity (Johnson and Lichter 2010) have been internationally recognised. The study generates pointers to the implications for an enabling local and national policy environment in this regard.

The findings presented in this paper were obtained from a small-scale, local study involving a group of girls from a marginalised ex-mining community in the north of England. Due to the self-selecting nature of involvement, boys were not included in the sample. Therefore, the findings cannot be taken as representative



either of the views and experiences of all children from this community or of poor communities more generally. However, although not generalisable, it contributes to filling what is an obvious and significant gap in the evidence base concerning children's citizenship from the perspective of children themselves. The child-identified impacts from this study resonate strongly with notions of citizenship as applied to adults and indicate areas for future research. Significantly, further research is needed to better understand, for example, the long-term outcomes of this citizenship (Body and Hogg 2019; Zeylikman et al. 2020) and the factors that influence the apparent underrepresentation of boys in social action projects.

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