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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Initial Professional Education for Youth and Community Workers: Exploring Academic's Experiences

Pat Norris[1]

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Abstract

This paper reflects on a small-scale piece of research into the experience of academics involved in the initial professional education of youth and community workers in England during the period 2015–2016, when multiple factors were affecting degree-qualifying youth and community worker education. Interviews with six academics identify the influences of funding issues, changing contexts for fieldwork settings, varied perceptions of professional youth work to ongoing pressures within higher education which inform their experience. This research draws on Bourdieu's thinking tools of habitus and illusio as a theoretical lens to explore academics' ongoing commitment to professional youth and community worker education. The actions and messages from the research participants offer an insight into the varied situations academics are navigating at this point in time, and resonate with a contemporary, post-pandemic context. The paper concludes with areas for further research into the ongoing development of initial professional youth and community worker education.

Keywords Academics · Youth and community work · JNC · Initial professional education · Bourdieu

Introduction

This paper reflects on a small-scale piece of research into the experience of academics involved in the initial professional education of youth and community workers in England during the period 2015–2016. At this time, initial JNC degree-qualifying professional youth and community worker education (JNCPQEd) was experiencing multiple pressures with reducing levels of student recruitment (NYA 2020) and courses closing or under threat of closure. At the time of data collection in 2016,

✉ Pat Norris
PNorris5@uclan.ac.uk

[1] University of Central Lancashire, PRESTON, United Kingdom PR1 2HE

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there was limited research into youth and community worker education exploring how the changing context for JNCPQEd post-2010 — both within and beyond the HEI — was affecting courses, and the academics involved. This paper aims to contribute knowledge about the experiences and views of academics at this point in time and why they continue to uphold JNCPQEd and adds to knowledge about professional youth and community worker education.

Through exploring what this changing context means for six academics working in five HEI — how they responded and why they remained involved in programmes — and drawing on Bourdieu's thinking tools, the diverse ways academics champion the values of youth and community work emerge. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and illusio provide a lens to consider academics' experiences and draws on Widin (2010) and Colley's (2012; 2015) work on illusio as an uncertain and often unequal process and where engagement by actors is driven by beliefs in what is at stake. This paper acknowledges that since the data collection, there has been a global COVID-19 pandemic that courses taught through and learned from. Furthermore, the discourses about the nature the JNCPQEd curriculum and the introduction of a Degree Apprenticeships pathway has further developed JNCPQEd in England. However, the experiences of participants resonate both with theory and more recent research into professional youth and community worker education in the post-data collection period.

Background

Youth and community work is founded on principles of social learning, equality and empowerment (Smith 1988; Nichols 2012) and uses distinctive pedagogic approaches based on informal education (Batsleer 2008; Jeffs and Smith 2021), participation (Fitzsimmons et al. 2011; Farthing 2012), co-creation (Ord et al. 2022) and critical dialogue (Bright 2015; Smith and Seal 2021). Youth and community work is an established, values-led educational approach (Banks 2010; NYA 2024) with diverse contexts for delivery. This delivery is based on core principles of equality, participation and empowerment and draws on Freirean (Freire 1970) pedagogy. The practices of youth and community work begin within civil society, with a growing presence in the statutory sector from the mid twentieth century. Many leading voluntary sector youth organisations are in their second century of operation, and government-funded statutory youth and community work, using the Albermarle Report (Infed, 2013) as an approximate starting date (Infed 2013), is in a 7th decade of delivery. From these early roots, different youth and community work paradigms (Smith 1988; Cooper 2013) have developed, reflecting the amalgamated origins of the sector. These variously emphasis movement-based approaches such as politicisation or leisure or so-called professional work (Smith 2001; Lehal 2010, Sercombe 2015) were concerned with education or welfare. Drawing on the principles of youth and community work (NYA 2024), these varied provisions continue, although vastly affected by austerity measures (Bradford and Cullen 2014; McGimpsey 2018) from 2008 to 2010 onwards. However, uniformed youth organisations, open-access provision, detached work, award schemes, youth councils, peer to peer work, faith-based

youth work, residential trips and youth arts projects persevere, with new forms of delivery such as hospital-based health youth work (Marshall and Waring 2024) continuing to emerge. This enduringly developmental field of practice has broadened and crosses into related practice areas (Coburn 2010), contributing to alternative education programmes in schools, youth offending teams or within the family domain to support young carers, along with core youth and community work. This paper adopts a broad understanding of the term "youth and community work" and includes both the voluntary and statutory sectors, in recognition that the research participants engage with services and contexts across the full range of youth and community work activity.

Alongside other areas of education, social policy exerts a continued sector-wide influence on youth and community work practice (Jones 2018), and this has consequences for JNCPQEd programmes. The de-regulation, along with the marketisation of much state-funded youth and community work (Nichols 2012; Ord 2012; Boagey 2015) from a neo-liberal approach to public services (Bright 2015), has fragmented and reduced youth and community work provisions (Bradford and Cullen 2014; NYA 2016a). The austerity measures from 2008 onwards have led to a rapid disinvestment in youth services (McGimpsey 2018). Within this context, state funding for youth and community work has a reduced year on year (Finnegan 2019) accompanied by a loss, integration or reconfiguration (UNISON 2014; Davies 2018; UNISON 2019) of youth and community work services. Alongside reduced provision are ongoing moves away from youth and community work towards a youth impact agenda (de St Croix 2017) based on performativity and target-driven practices (Lehal 2010; Davies 2015). Perhaps the most dramatic is the move from the Department for Education into the Department for Culture and Media, which Jeffs (2015, p. 79) notes is "an extraordinary rupture with the past". Associated with these moves is the loss of critical dialogue with young people within youth and community work practice which Cooper (2012a, b) identifies as a form of symbolic violence though policy and pedagogic actions (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) that reduce access to this educational process. The combined results from policy changes are a diminished capacity across the youth and community work sector.

Connected with youth and community work practice, and therefore affected by what happens through policy and within practice, are the workforce education systems. The impact of changing policy and disappearing funding and service closures (Youdell and McGimpsey 2015) includes, as Middleton (2024) notes, the withdrawal of local authority–funded places on JNCPQEd and reducing confidence in youth and community work as a viable career plan. At the point of data collection in 2015/2016, JNCPQEd HEI were working within a context of year-on-year reductions in students on JNCPQEd programmes (NYA 2023). The overall 5-year trend for applications falls from 1470 students in 2008 to 793 in 2014 (NYA 2016b). The situation worsens, and by 2020 the number of entrants to JNCPQED has fallen to 257 across 20 HEI and 28 under- and postgraduate courses (NYA 2020). However, the sector at a macro level has continually worked to progress both for youth and community work provision and developments within JNCPQEd.

Focussing on JNCPQEd, this is an area of higher education concerned with initial professional education (Ebbutt 1996). In common with teaching, social

work, medicine or nurse education, the programmes are characterised by substantial work-based learning modules and more recently include Degree Apprenticeship (NYA 2021; IfATE 2024) pathways to professionally qualified status. The application of theory into practice, learning through fieldwork placements and the assessment of professional formation against sector and National Occupational Standards are central processes. University involvement in professionally qualifying youth and community work education arrives later than other public service–oriented disciplines. However, Bradford (2008) notes the move for youth and community work into a higher education context brings some elevation in status. This status is supported further in 2010 by a move to graduate entry (Jones 2018) conferring claims for a graduate-level, formal knowledge base and professional identity (Wiles and Boahen 2018) and potential parity with aligned practices. However, although sharing key features of professional higher education with other graduates, cross-disciplinary peer recognition is hard to secure and is imbalanced (Infed 2013; Banks 2010; Jay 2014) and problematic. Jay (ibid) for example notes the lack of status afforded to youth and community works in safeguarding work, with serious consequences arising from a lack of perceived professional parity for youth workers by other professionals.

JNCPQEd is navigating a context with further complexities. Firstly, the issue of interprofessional parity for youth and community work, where there are also arguments for being semi-professional (Tiffany n.d.) rather than being afforded professional recognition, creates a tension within the sector. Secondly, debate exists on whether professional status, graduate or otherwise, is desirable (Fusco and Baizerman 2013) and if this undermines the democratic nature of practice, for example, altering the nature of the workforce (Johnston-Goodstar and VeLure Roholt 2013) away from valuing experience gained outside of formal education. Graduate entry potentially undermines the democratic nature of the workforce, through the gatekeeping and access to higher education or, once enrolled, institutional assessment processes not aligning with prior experiential learning and the value of "lived experience" as a workforce attribute, leading to processes of social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), Thirdly, "professional youth work" and moves into a broader "youth impact agenda" support the rise of hybrid professionals (Seal and Andersson 2017; Colley and Gurey 2015), as youth and community workers and other professionals work within a shifting policy focus that pushes practice and associated employment options into alternative youth-focussed work, early help teams or hybrid roles. Fourthly however, professional status gained through a graduate education route supports the generation of body of knowledge and critical enquiry (Bradford 2008; Emslie 2013) and critical practice, drawing on youth work values and principle as well as skills. Sustained critical debate is a core principle of youth and community work practice and, as Smith and Seal (2021) state, a necessary central premise within JNCPQEd. Furthermore, Jeffs and Smith (2021) raise concerns that the expertise to draw on critical pedagogy and other informal education approaches is being lost from the workforce, as professionally qualified youth and community worker numbers fall (NYA 2023), as part of a wider loss of informal educators, resulting in serious concern for continuing youth and community work practice. The interviews with the research participants take place within these contexts.

Bourdieu: Habitus and Illusio

Against a context dealing with issues of sector change and of youth work as profession, Bourdieu's thinking tools are relevant in making sense of why academics remain involved in professional youth and community worker education in England. This research explores the local situations of academics across England and the "distinct totality" of local situations that Ferrare and Apple (2015, p. 45) identify helps to provide a frame for the research interviews. Bourdieu's work on field and habitus provides a lens to explore what academics teaching on JNCPQEd programmes are encountering. Resting on the sense of habitus or "community of dispositions" (Bourdieu 1977 p35) is the idea of "interest" (ibid) and actors engaging with the wider "field". Grenfell (2013) explored the idea of interest as the interaction of field and habitus in a space involving often multiple actors. For academics teaching on JNCPQEd courses, *habitus* frames the shared values of youth and community work practice held by educators, as durable dispositions, across the sector. Bourdieu (1990) later uses the term illusio as a concept to explore the interests and the reasons why actors engage in the spaces connecting the concepts of field (i.e. youth and community worker education and youth and community work practice) and habitus (i.e. the durable dispositions embodying the values and principles of youth and community work). The metaphor of "playing the game" is also used to explore how habitus and field connect (Grenfell 2013) and introduces a sense of competition, the effort needed to remain engaged and the potential for loss. The presence of multiple actors makes this space and the outcomes less certain through by placing the academics as one of several players, which include external policy makers and financial decision makers in the HEI's. Olivera (2005) adds to the concept of illusio the conscious knowing of the stakes and risks in the situation and still decisively continuing to engage. Inherent in the metaphor "playing the game" are considerations of the power relations, the interplay between structural and agentic factors within a context and a sense of the uncertain and changeable nature of any context. Illusio examines "how we are caught up in the game, our belief it is worth playing, therefore an individual's commitment and investment in the stakes" Colley (2012, p. 324), and this potentially provides a way to explore why academics remain committed to youth and community worker education.

To explore further, Widin (2010) highlights three aspects that are of particular relevance to the application of illusio in this context:

a) The multiple groups of actors in the field bringing different interests.
b) The need to identify the actual stakes that people are "playing" for — including what is beneath organisational or professional rhetoric.
c) That the stakes in the game are learned and developed through participation and can include ethical beliefs.

Considering Widin's above aspects in action, illusio has a disturbing quality arising from the in-balance of power between actors. Illusio implies the potential for futility in terms of a situation improving. This features in Colley's (2012)

work showing how social positioning and unequal power result in high personal costs to youth support workers from sustaining their commitment to their field. The concept of illusio also highlights the struggle and ongoing barriers in Empson's (2015) research into trying to retain professional identity in the accountancy sector. In considering the previously mentioned challenges facing the JNCPQEd sector, Bourdieu's concept of illusio therefore offers a way of thinking about and deconstructing the situation of academics and their reasons for remaining engaged.

Methodology

A qualitative, case study approach (Yin 2017) is used to explore the experiences of academics. A qualitative approach enables the construction of understanding from conversation with academics about the "distinct totality" (Ferrare and Apple 2015, p. 45) of each research participant's context within a group of JNCPQEd higher education providers.

To gain a perspective from across the sector, a purposive sampling method for data collection (Wellington 2000; Silverman 2014; Patterson 2016), informed by the geographical location of courses, is used to identify courses and invite involvement from JNCPQEd teaching academics. This method brings together firstly an element of insider knowledge of the sector, developed through academic networks, to help identify courses. Any HEI where pre-existing links exist, for example involvement in validation or external examining, are excluded from the sample at this point, to try to reduce unconscious bias in the final participant profile. However, many colleagues teaching in this sector have long-standing work connections and know/know of each other, via the sector networks. While pre-existing links can facilitate initial contact, Hellawell's (2006) suggestion of an insider/outsider continuum within the research participant profile also informs participant recruitment. Therefore, what Colley (2015) and Patterson (2016) refer to as a snowball approach is also used to reach out to previously unknown participants. When approaching the identified HEI, the request to participate is open to any member of the programme team rather than a targeted individual, to introduce an element of randomness to counter unconscious bias and to take account of interests and work pressures within teaching teams. Secondly, a spatial filter, to select JNC-awarding courses from five English regions, is used to support an insight into what is happening across England. Adding a spatial approach supports retaining the anonymity and confidentiality of individual participants, who may be teaching anywhere in England. This is important as JNCPQED is a well-connected field. Secondly including a spatial filter in the research design improves the chances of gaining a national cross-sector view.

The final sample population covers approximately 20% of active teaching programmes in 2016. The participant group includes participants who are both known and unknown to me. The research participants have between 5 and 15 + years teaching experience on JNCPQEd programmes and work across five English regions. Additionally, participants have at least two ongoing forms of engagement with the youth and community work sector including student fieldwork coordination, part-time youth work, consultancy, organisational governance or membership of

professional networks. However, given the small-scale nature of the actual sample size, any generalisations based on the findings need to be cautious as sector knowledge can support data reliability but also include bias.

In total, six interviews with academics from different regions within England are undertaken. Single, individual, semi-structured (Denscombe 2014) research interviews started with themes focussing on:

- How are you finding teaching on JNCPQEd at the moment?
- What is supporting or challenging the viability of your course?
- What are your thoughts about the future?

and leading into a more open discussion about the local context. The interviews lasted 45–50 min either online or via phone were undertaken, drawing on Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) on openness with a focus on descriptive, normative and ethical perspectives. The data is transcribed and analysed to identify themes — starting with the initial question themes and using Bourdieu's thinking tools to explore the data.

Findings and Discussion

The following abridged and annotated accounts highlight the experiences of participants.

Participant "Ash" trained as a youth and community worker, practicing and managing statutory and voluntary sector services for 20 years before taking an academic post to join a JNC-qualified teaching team. "Ash" sees the long-term programme viability at their HEI closely connected to a strong research presence. They see research as a counterweight to "the annual worry" about student recruitment levels and their consequential work internally to champion the programme. Ash outlines their experience of what is happening in the wider sector "Courses are falling by the week it seems. That's my ongoing concern. Cuts in LA services have impacted on student's belief is that there is a career". This links to discourses on the interprofessional parity of youth and community workers (Banks 2010; Infed 2013 and Jay 2014) and Middleton's (2024) view on the pressures on workforce recruitment. A further reason to remain engaged emerges "yet we did some research and currently employers can see the value that a qualified youth and community worker brings – that is going to be lost when fewer students graduate". Here the nature of the "stakes" (Widin 2010) becomes clearer which is their belief in the value of youth and community work. However, Ash is looking ahead and at the possibility of an impending workforce crisis. The range of actors appears through the actions by one group, i.e. policy makers on other actors, i.e. service providers/employers, potential students and academics in the HEI. Ash suggests a need to challenge the changes in the wider sector "it's a long time since we have been a campaigning service – but who will do this if not youth and community workers in one guise or another?" A further reason to stay, and the actual "stake" Ash is pushing for, which is securing a viable long-term workforce, is set out, appears to link to an enduring

disposition, which is the understanding of why youth and community work matters. As Ash notes that "Employers say we want them (students on placement) to do this or do that – lots of placement opportunities in schools and other settings – addressing issues of behaviour management rather than helping young people to understand their place and the possibilities in the world and experiencing democratic processes" and the youth impact agenda (de St Croix 2017) and presence of hybrid working practices (Colley 2015; Seal 2017) become evident a programmes extend fieldwork into alternative forms of youth-focussed provision. Regarding the hybrid roles working with youth people, "they employ people who might share the values (of youth and community work) but not have the principles of practice – who don't have the same deep understanding– so could be a much more manipulative service not meeting the needs of young people". This resonates again with de St Croix's (2017) research and the drift away from core youth and community work practices. On why Ash stays involved, "we need the maintain the approach based on the values and practice based on the principles to counter the individualism", which links with the ethical purposes Widin (2010) identifies within actors. Ash addresses this tension through their teaching with students, drawing on critical dialogue (Smith and Seal 2021) to discuss and help students understand the wider influences and be aware of this in their practice.

Participant "Robyn" moved from a youth officer role into a local HEI, firstly on a part-time then moving to a full-time role during the New Labour youth policy era. The programme came about through local demand for youth work expertise. "There is still an acknowledgement of that need for informal education (Batsleer 2008; Jeffs and Smith 2021) – helps people do the job better… and helps keeps (youth and community work) philosophy and principles going". Robyn indicates a reason to remain involved and how the "rules of the game" are changing away from educating youth and community workers into a more nebulous yet still valuable form of workforce education. They note the need for adapting their teaching approach to take account of the emerging hybrid roles (Colley and Gurey 2015) and "can see youth work skills being used—but not necessarily by people who call themselves youth workers" and another reason to stay engaged emerges. "We need to support this – help people explore the values behind this unrecognised youth work practice (Coburn 2010) and become more aware of the potential of their role". These new roles use only part of the overall skills set of professional youth and community workers (Coburn 2010) as youth work practices moves into related sectors. This touches on the concerns of both Smith and Seal (2021) and Jeffs and Smith (2021) and retaining critical perspectives and informal education practices in the work with young people. In raising this point, Robyn, and like Ash, indicates a durable, ongoing commitment to youth and community work. Robyn also identifies potentially constructive opportunities through connecting people with youth work pedagogy. "Robyn" reports their programme "is under review in terms of financial viability based on recruitment levels". Adding that it is "a fight to be recognised internally due to pressure on ITE" indicating issues of professional parity internally, as well as externally (Banks 2010; Infed 2013). Alongside this lack of parity is an internal hierarchy where JNCPQEd programmes compete for resourcing, "due to external inspection pressure on ITE

and the institutional risk attached to losing ITE", illustrating the local issues some programmes face.

Participant "Charlie" was a youth worker but moved into HE to develop research interests that can inform practice. "Charlie" stated their programme is no longer recruiting and due to close. Working with two local authorities, when particularly severe cuts to the youth sector came, LA-sponsored places ended, illustrating Middleton's (2024) position, and "at end of the day we did not bring in enough students". With HEI fiscal policies for programme viability taking precedence over other reasons to retain JNCPQEd, Charlie notes that, with little support from the wider sector, this leaves "academics having to promote and champion locally" the value of the JNCPQEd programmes. For this reason, Charlie sees the Centre for Youth Impact, offering "more a robust evidence base" and "building clearer analyses" of practice as one of the few perceived helpful influences at this point in time. However, Charlie also notes rising institutional admissions standards are problematic in relation to recruitment "by choice courses would prioritise students that are passionate about the work and then have space to support their learning and development, but UCAS points are key" and illustrate how HE expectations potentially work against educating a widely representative youth and community workforce profile — concerns that Johnstone-Goodstar and VeLure Rohalt (2013) raise. Charlie is now seeking ways to take forward personal and social education into other degree-level programmes because they "can see a point in the future when a re-shaped youth work might return" linking to Colley's (2012) view of *illusio*. This illustrates firstly how academics use their knowledge of the "field" to constructively support and continue insight into youth and community work values and principle within higher education and secondly the durable dispositions that locate youth and community work as a valuable educational process.

Participant "Dev" came from face-to-face practice into higher education as part of a long-term career plan. They report a sense of programme security. This is based on multiple factors including "strong partner support" and "established reputation" and is the only participant to mention "an understanding of pedagogy / approach at a senior level within institution" as an actively positive factor upholding programmes. Although optimistic, they note the loss of services means "younger students may have little personal, direct experience of youth work—that makes it difficult" and arrive with limited participatory experience of youth and community work. To counter this, Dev and colleagues draw on all their professional and HE resources. They see that student's "still have this fire in their bellies" that accords with youth and community work values. However, Dev notes the key role academics play in firstly enabling students to locate this "fire" within an approach to working with people ethically and secondly that teaching now has to include "the basics" of practice. Again, the influence of policy emerges firstly "people are starting to see youth and community work skills popping up in all sorts of different places" (Coburn 2010) but "the danger in that is it loses its sense of what is youth work what is it about? Not social control". Dev's concern is the pressure on practice to lose the critical pedagogic dimensions and how to retain this within the course — again resonating with de St Croix's (2017) research and the drift away from core youth and community work practices and with Smith and Seal (2021) more recent work highlighting

the importance of critical pedagogy within JNCPQED. Secondly, Dev is concerned that policy change "affects the programme in a very raw way in that people don't think there are youth work jobs anymore, so people don't want to come and do the course" which Middleton (2024) later confirms as a sector-wide workforce issue. As with Ash, Robyn and Charlie, Dev draws on their conviction that youth and community work remains valuable, along with the value of the workforce education.

Participant "Eli's" journey from practice into academia happened gradually and they retain a link with practice. Their programme is due to be close in 2 years. Concerns about "the policy framework is freezing out youth work" and that "moving to Culture and Media a big signal to the youth sector about how little this is valued" — a move from the Department for Education which Jeffs (2015, p. 79) notes is "an extraordinary rupture with the past". This highlights again the unequal power of players in this "game" (Grenfell 2013) where educators had no influence. Crucially the reasons for remaining engaged with the wider youth and community work sector emerge "…the practice of youth and community work has never been more important – communities and people are struggling". Eli is clear of the location of youth and community work practice within an educational spectrum and the role of critical dialogue — "it works with young people to understand and to takes action to challenge, beyond what teachers can do". Eli notes the contribution of the programmes internally "Professional youth and community work programme punch above their weight both within the University and in the community" indicating their confidence in the wider contribution of JNCPQEd, such as input into HEI employability or partnership agendas. Their programme is due to close in the next 2 years and no longer recruiting and "the impact of the programme closing on this wider community –it's there and not been considered- communities loose out". When considering the future, "I think it now about us (as a sector) proving our worth – we quietly get on with it and we don't shout about what we do—if we don't go out and prove the work no one else is going to" some of the pressures academics such as Ash are experiencing identifies re-emerge "…it's down to us now" along with an indication of the habitus (Bourdieu 1977) that academics in this field draw on. Eli is hugely concerned by the loss of wider understanding (Jeffs and Smith 2021) and is actively presenting research beyond the sector, trying to develop new groups to take on the cannons of youth and community work practice.

Participant "Amal" moved from practice into youth worker education and then into HE. They describe finding ways forward internally and externally as why they remain involved. Amal agrees with Eli's view that JNCPQEd contributes internally "there is a wider transferable usefulness to higher education", and notes "although difficult to accommodate in target driven culture" (Lehal, 2010). They raise the combined "pressures on Universities, in the broadest terms austerity,, the changing nature of students into becoming consumers" compounding JNCPQEd programme-specific influences including student recruitment. Amal raises the challenges they face when working with students that are "less about student's vocation and more about making yourself competitive when going into the employment market" and "changing nature of services and employment destinations" (Lehal 2010; Davies 2015). Amal is clear the skills set of JNCPQEd academics is relevant in many HEI contexts, indicating confidence in what JNCPQEd academics can also engage

with. They note the complexity of the issue facing the HE sector. "Can't hang on a single element – if we address one problem will not solve". Thinking about how JNCPQEd relates to practice, Amal sees a key challenge in "how to keep a community-grounded skills set (that supports emancipatory practice) when the increased expectations of youth workers (re what work they undertake) and changes of services on the ground pull against". Amal, along with Ash and Eli, identifies research into youth and community work has the potential to make a greater difference. "we need to show the impact of academic research within civil society" suggesting that there is a "lot of individual research but not a strong collective research voice – impact outside – even just within wider institution". Particularly if predicated on the distinctiveness of youth and community work research methodology (Gormally and Coburn 2014), Amal notes this can be a powerful collective voice. Amal continues to uphold the value of JNCPQEd, despite the reduced demand internally with risk of programmes closure and a changing external practice environment — linking to Colley's (2012) *illusio* and that continuing is worthwhile, even when the outcome (Widin 2010) of programmes continuing is uncertain.

Considering potential bias within the findings, no participants raised or indicated concerns for their individual tenure within their HEI. Participants were concerned about the consequences of lost opportunity for young people, and all showed confidence in the value of their work, including within their HEI (Eli and Amal). While the pre-existing relational connections may be of some significance in participants of engaging with the research, my impression of why participants engaged with this research again stems from the value they attach to youth and community work and its workforce education.

Reflecting on the six interviews, the following themes emerge. Firstly, all participants are working in a complex and multi-pressured context. The range of multiple actors and broader forces arising from austerity affecting JNCPQEd (Nichols 2012; Ord 2012; Boagey 2015) assert a collective influence on programmes. Research participants describe this experience as "difficult", "ongoing" and "pressure". The data includes comments indicating what this pressure means personally to participants; descriptions such as "fight to be recognised", "down to us now" or "proving our worth" emerge. Grenfell's (2013) view of competing interest emerges, as do the durable dispositions or habitus of youth and community work education academics. Colley (2012) and Oliveras' (2005) work on *illusio* speaks to the participants' determination to keep programmes working effectively, despite knowing the likelihood of, or impending, programme closures.

Secondly, participants note the denuding effects of policy from marketisation forces, on programmes (Nichols 2012; Ord 2012; Boagey 2015) and present a broad and deep understanding of the context or "distinct totality" (Ferrare and Apple 2015) in which they work. The unassailable position of student numbers as a determiner of programme viability presents a challenge. Although programmes make a strong contribution to multiple HEI aims, little counters this market-driven measurement based on minimum student numbers. Research participants maintain considerable awareness of the complex range of factors "rules" and "stakes" (Widin 2010). They refer to widening participation goals, equality and diversity objectives, innovative assessment approaches, partnership, knowledge transfer relationships, unique

HEI entry into local networks or employability outcomes. The research participants articulate an in-depth understanding of the rules of the game and of multiple actors (Grenfell 2013) and the power imbalances between these groups. This is, as research participants note, demanding. However, they bring to this field their full range of capitals and interest (Grenfell (2013) in support of youth and community work and the associated JNCPQED systems.

Thirdly, research participants need to counter the elusive profile of youth and community work externally, as well as internally. Their role in promoting youth and community with the wider sector appears to be increasing, with some extending their contacts through research or fieldwork placements in related practice areas. However, without reciprocal recognition of youth and community work within the wider children's workforce, the question of how the research participants sustain this effort emerges and connects to the risks that Olivera (2005) notes as illusio.

Finally, research participants repeatedly state their concerns about the loss of critical dialogue within practice, through the drift towards a youth impact agenda. This is potentially a symbolic violence on young people (Cooper 2012a, b; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) and participants identify the role of JNCPQEd in supporting the capacity for critical dialogue (Smith and Seal 2021) within the youth workforce. Research participants provide a robust reasoning for youth and community work practice to continue, along with the associated workforce education system for JNCPQEd, and all participants apply their knowledge and resources to try and secure this outcome. The commitment of participants emerges, based on their belief in the value and importance of this area of higher education.

A Post-data Collection Perspective

Since this data was collected, young people and the services supporting them have persevered through more than 2 years of a global health pandemic (Holt and Murray 2022). The impact on young people was widespread and severe across England (UK Youth 2021) and more widely (O'Donovan and Petkovic 2022), with service closures, and acute pressures on already limited and depleted resources arising from increased need for services. Many students and teaching academics are also engaged in youth and community work practice in paid or voluntary capacities and were navigating the pressures O'Donovan and Petkovic (2022) identify. The youth and community work initial professional education courses continued throughout this period, upskilling staff for a pedagogic change to digital delivery (NYA 2020) and managing periods of social isolation and campus closures. This was a challenging time, as Nunn et al. (2021) and Curran et al. (2022) highlight in research with undergraduate students. The hopes that Nunn et al. and Curran, Gormally and Smith identify — that positive outcomes are possible through critically engaging with difficult situations — resonate with the earlier hopes and critical awareness of the research participants. The possibilities for learning from the pandemic lockdowns to inform future JNCPQEd (Curran et al. 2022) and the value and importance of youth and community work practice post-pandemic (ibid) continue the durable commitments to JNCPQEd conveyed by the research participants.

Significantly for JNCPQEd courses, the work across the sector to establish the Youth Work Degree Apprenticeship pathway (NYA 2021) to professional qualified status successfully introduced this route in 2022. Youth Work Degree Apprenticeships are very recent and an area that warrants further research. However, the close connections the research participants describe with the practice field suggests a pre-existing level of effective partnership to support the employer-led Degree Apprenticeship routes. Higgs (2022) notes the possibilities and challenges within Social Work Degree Apprenticeships for widening participation in HE. The loss of access to JNCPQEd, as application number declined, is a concern raised by research participants — with very early indications (NYA 2023; Middleton 2024) that Youth Work Degree Apprenticeships have the potential to redress this. However, Higgs also notes that it is too early to ascertain the views of graduates from the Social Work Degree Apprenticeships. These programmes pre-date the introduction of Youth Work Degree Apprenticeships by 3 years, so it may be some time before evidence from this new route to professionally qualified status emerges to inform further course development.

Discourse surrounding JNCPQEd has strengthened since the data collection for this paper. Yet the interviews from 2015 to 2016 and the central messages within the recent discourses share a purpose and energy. Jones (2018) brings a contemporary assessment of the professional youth and community work sector in England. Smith and Seal (2021) strengthen arguments for the central positioning of critical dialogue within pedagogic practice and the role of JNCPQEd to deliver this. Jeffs and Smith (2021) promote the intrinsic value of youth and community work and its link to informal education along with the need to review and revive opportunities to become informal educators. Sonnevelda et al. (2020) bring a comparative Dutch perspective promoting the value of professional youth and community work. Curran et al. (2022) put forward the possibilities for youth and community worker education post-pandemic. These debates connect with and also champion the reasons the research participants in 2015–2016 were working to continue access to JNCPQEd.

The learning from teaching through the pandemic, such as hybrid teaching; the development of new routes to professional qualification status and renewed focus on JNCPQEd within research, plus an increased policy profile (Finnegan 2019; Middleton 2024) and the promotion of a national youth work curriculum for England (NYA 2020), are all positive moves for youth and comment work. Encouragingly, the most recent NYA monitoring of JNCPQEd (NYA 2023) indicates a rise in both applicant and JNCPQEd programme numbers since the 2019–2020 data. Despite this, three of the five HEI involved in the research in 2016 have closed their programmes. However, two participating HEI remain active in the field of JNCPQEd.

Conclusions

The evidence suggests that in 2015–2016 the research participants are working at a challenging point in professional youth and community worker education. While only six conversations took place, the findings and the geography of programmes indicate the loss of dedicated youth and community work policy and funding has a widespread effect on youth and community work initial

professional education courses. Drawing on Bourdieu is arguably useful, to offer a broader theoretical perspective on what is happening at a local level, introducing the potential to align the individual effort of academics to secure youth work provision, i.e. "the stake", via JNCPQEd, to a wider struggle taking place through research and across the sector to support youth and community work.

The multiple factors impacting on JNCPQEd created a demanding experience for the research participants. The habitus of the academics on these programmes is rooted in their values, their practice experience and their higher education teaching. This durable *community of dispositions* (Bourdieu 1977) supports participants' ongoing engagement with the issues affecting their programmes, their conviction of the value of JNCPQEd and their work to sustain this area of higher education and arguably resonates with contemporary contexts for youth and community work practice.

Participants acknowledge the power imbalances across the field from policy, internal HE pressures and applicant levels. What *illusio* brings to this issue is a closer focus on the influences behind these the power imbalances, thus making the reasons for academic's continued perseverance and resistance clearer. The "stake" (Olivera 2005; Colley 2012) participants are working to secure is sustaining the youth and community workforce, and their pursuit of this goal is driven by their ethical beliefs in the value of youth and community work. This arguably requires considerable personal investment as well as professional expertise. However, looking beneath to why do (Widin 2010) the participants continue to "play the game", their understanding of why youth and community work practice is a necessary and area of education and the contribution of JNCPQEd to facilitating youth and community work that supports this disposition.

Recommendations for further research are to explore two areas of professionally qualifying youth and community worker education Firstly, exploring JNC professionally qualifying fieldwork placements undertaken in schools and other settings. Secondly, research participants are clear about the need for continuing JNCPQEd and therefore research into experiences of academics teaching on the recently introduced Degree Apprenticeships pathway is also recommended. This research offers a record of the experience and views of initial professional youth and community worker educators faced with multiple challenges to the JNCPQEd, their determination and hope, and an insight into the ongoing journey of initial professional youth and community worker education.

Declarations

Ethical Approval Ethical approval was obtained from York St John University.

Competing Interests The author declares no competing interests.

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