Enabling Empowerment:

The Role of Adults in 'Youth Led' Climate Groups

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Abstract

This research explores young people's attitudes towards adult involvement within 'youth led' youth climate groups. Young people were acutely aware of their marginalisation and overall, there was a consensus that adults played a useful role as a resource, as experienced adult activists possessed knowledge that they lacked, or in offering practical support on legal issues or liaising with the police. The attitudes of young people to adult involvement is at times paradoxical in that whilst they were aware of its necessity, adults altered the dynamics of the groups, as there was a 'power gap' and that adult's views could take precedence. As a result, on some occasions the young people parted ways from the adults. A continual theme from the research was that young people's involvement in 'youth climate groups' gave them a sense of empowerment and they were much more aware of how to effect change, and to some extent they did need the support of adults in this process, often due to their structural disempowerment. The findings suggest that adult involvement was most successful when adults were committed to empowering young people and the researchers suggest that Kirshner's model of 'cycles of fading' is a useful framework for adult involvement.

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Introduction

This is a small-scale qualitative study of young people's activism within 'youth led' youth climate groups. The purpose of the study was to discern the extent, and nature, of the support young people had from adults, in their youth activism; as well as to explore young people's attitudes towards, and experience of, such adult involvement. The study was conducted primarily, but not exclusively in the UK. It was undertaken by researchers who are committed to combatting climate change, one of whom is an active member of Extinction Rebellion. Neither of the researchers are directly involved in the support of youth activists, however. The scope of the research was limited by Covid 19 restrictions. As a result, the number of interviews was limited and participant observation and ethnographic study of youth climate activist meetings, protests and strikes was prevented, as such this represents a preliminary study. The findings however offer insights into an important dynamic within youth activism, of the need for adult involvement, as well as a number of problems that such involvement brings with it.

The global rise of youth climate activism

The context for this study is the recent wave of mass protests, which have united young people across the globe in taking collective action to combat climate change. Despite predictions of the decline in environmental activism (Dalton, 2015) youth activism has led the way in recent years. At the heart of which is what is referred to as the youth climate movement, where young people articulate a radical critique of the prevailing political and social order. This is an exemplar of the political and revolutionary potential of youth. What Komun (2018) describes as a familiar manteau - the development of independent enquiry - which often leads to the questioning of the status quo.

This phenomenon of youth protest is not new, as Ginwright, & Cammarota point out: 'youth activism has always played a central role in the democratic process and continues to forge new ground for social change' (2006, a, p. xiii). Similarly, many: 'of the notable U.S. social movements of the 1960s and 1970s - associated with anti-war, feminist, gay rights, and free speech - drew their leadership and base in part from politically committed youth activists' (Hosang, 2006, p. 6). There are also

examples of youth environmental activism in the UK, for example where grassroots US protest movements such as *Greenpeace* and *Friends of the Earth* inspired the creation of affiliated groups in the UK, introduced direct action as a new protest strategy. Direct action is described as: 'the beating heart of Greenpeace. [examples include] preventing damage to the environment and disrupting business-as-usual' (Greenpeace, 2021) Later groups such as Earth First! (Wall, 1999) used direct action, and particularly the tactic of non-violent civil disobedience, which created an important legacy for future movements such as the current climate movement.

The current youth climate movement was sparked by the Swedish youth activist Greta Thunberg. Greta's first school strike took place in August 2018, when the then 15-year old, alongside other youth activists, decided not to go to school but sit in front of the Swedish parliament to raise awareness of climate change instead. With the help of social media, their initial three-week strike picked up momentum and inspired a new youth movement, resulting in huge numbers of strikes and protests around the world. Just a month later, in September 2018, 'over 7.5 million people worldwide refused to go to work and school' (Extinction Rebellion, 2020) to strike for the climate. Interestingly historically school strikes are part of a long tradition of protest, even predating Barbara John's school walkout in 1951, where a young black student Barbara John managed to: 'convince the entire all-black student body to walk out of school and not return until the government gave them a bigger, better building — one like the white students had' (New York Times, 2021). There are also accounts of school strikes in the UK, dating back to the late 19th century, with students striking against violent punishments by cane in 1889 (Grayson, 2015). More recent examples include school strikers 'in coalfield areas during the Miners' Strike of 1984–85 [and] walk-outs by thousands of school students [in response to] 'Blair's invasion of Iraq in 2003' (Grayson, 2015, p. 28).

The youth climate movement is made up of a variety of different climate activist groups including *Fridays For Future* (*FFF*), the *UK Student Climate Network* (*UKSCN*) and *XR Youth* (*XRY*), which is part of the group *Extinction Rebellion* (*XR*). These groups are autonomous but act collaboratively and in solidarity with each other. Their demands share many similarities with each other, focussing primarily on pressurising governments 'to take forceful action to limit global warming' (FFF, 2020)

by declaring ‘a climate emergency and implement a Green New Deal to achieve Climate Justice’ (UKSCN, 2020).

In order for their demands to be heard, climate activists use a wide variety of protest strategies. Their tactics range from petitioning and exposing governments and corporations’ climate destroying activities, to organizing global protest rallies, as well as speaking in front of world leaders at high profile events such as the United Nations and the World Economic Forum. Most of the groups also encourage civil disobedience through mass school and work strikes, with some using non-violent direct-action approaches such as roadblocks and lock-ins to get their message across.

The climate movements’ main demand: to tackle climate change, is based on scientific evidence by independent scientific bodies such as the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (*IPCC*), which, in 2018, stated that ‘there is only a dozen years for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5°C, beyond which even half a degree will significantly worsen the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people’ (The Guardian, 2018). Beyond their call for action on climate change, all of the grassroots youth climate groups are fighting for what is referred to as ‘climate justice’, a term which acknowledges that: **‘**key groups are differently affected by climate change’ (Yale Climate Connections, 2020) and that climate change disproportionately effects those who have historically been marginalized. This means that their struggle is directly linked to the wider fight for social justice, which is evident in demands such as *Fridays For Future’s* call for ‘Climate Justice and Equity for Everyone’ (FFF, 2020a, 2020b). Prominent Ugandan youth activist Vanessa Nakate underlined this point, stating that ‘for us in Africa, it is not Fridays For Future, it is Fridays for Now. The climate crisis is already here’ (FFF, 2020c).

This important connection between climate justice and social justice is regarded as one of the key foundations of the global youth climate movement. The *UK Student Climate Network’s* fourth demand to ‘Empower the Future’, calls ‘for the government to incorporate youth views into policymaking and to lower the voting age to 16’ (UKSCN, 2020). The group is very critical of the state of Britain’s representative

democracy and considers the country's electoral system as deeply unjust due to the exclusion of people 'on the basis of age, citizenship, permanent address [and] incarceration' (UKSCN, 2020). In their view, the current climate crisis cannot be solved through amendments to environmental policies alone, instead they state that 'systemic change is needed far beyond the electoral politics of any one country to achieve climate justice' (UKSCN, 2020). This call for systemic change, and its inherent critique of the establishment, aligns climate activists with social movements such as *Black Lives Matter*.

This wider contextual view of a dysfunctional system means that groups like *FFF* make attempts to tackle these issues through anti-racism workshops, and by exploring how 'colonialism impacts climate change' (FFF Exeter, 2019). Similarly, *Extinction Rebellion*, of which *XR Youth* represents the youth arm within the group, has recently started internal debates around how to incorporate the issue of decolonisation within its key demands and activist activities. One of the many autonomous *XR* groups has described this focus on decolonisation in terms of a 'just transition that prioritises social justice; establishes reparations and remediation led by and for Black people, people of colour, minority, poor and vulnerable communities for decades of environmental injustice' (Extinction Rebellion Norwich, 2020). *Fridays For Future's* response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, labelled 'support a Just Recovery' (FFF, 2020,d) further underlines how closely social justice is aligned with the movement's aims. The group has called for support for 'our workers and communities, not for corporate executives, [as well as encouraging] solidarity and community across borders [while demanding to] not empower authoritarians' (FFF, 2020,c).

All of these ambitions highlight that the climate movement should not be regarded as a single-issue campaign, but that the demands of these groups display a wider understanding and appreciation of the intersectionality of social and climate injustices.

Adult involvement in youth climate activism

It is acknowledged that the nature and purpose of climate groups is not fixed, and they can take on a variety of forms and functions (Diani & Donati, 1999). The youth climate movement and their associated groups are rightly characterised as youth led. This does not mean however that adults are absent from those groups or that adults have no place within or around them. Even Greta Thunberg looks to adults for support. For example, she acknowledges that the original idea for a school strike was inspired by her involvement in a youth climate group run by the adult Bo Thoren, a Swedish activist. He introduced the group to the idea of a school strike based on a protest by US students from Marjory Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, which was a response to a mass shooting that killed seventeen people. She also acknowledges that at times she seeks adult guidance:

> *I write my own speeches. But since I know that what I say is going to reach many, many people, I often ask for input. I also have a few scientists that I frequently ask for help on how to express certain complicated matters.*
>
> (Thunberg, 2019, p. 30)

Whilst youth climate groups do largely act autonomously as reflected in the organisational structure of groups such as the *UK Student Climate Network*, which describes itself as 'an organisation led by and for students' (UKSCN, 2020), they too are not entirely independent of adult support and guidance. For example, the *UKCSN* also published an online *Adult Allies Guide*, which provides advice for adults who want to support and get involved with the group. The document contains a section entitled 'letting young people lead', which outlines that 'it is important that the Youth Strike 4 Climate is led by young people and their voices are centred in their movement' (UKSCN, 2020). Youth climate strikers do however reach out to adults, as there are regular calls for adults to show solidarity in tackling climate change and systemic injustices. One of *Fridays For Future's* 2019 open letters, a direct call to action for adults, stated,

> *We're asking you to step up alongside us. There are many different plans underway in different parts of the world for adults to join together and step up and out of your comfort zone for our climate. Let's all join together*
>
> (FFF, 2019)

The role of adults in facilitating the participation and empowerment of young activists

In the 1980s, youth practitioners and adults working with young people in informal settings began to shift their focus to the participation of young people within decision-making processes (Podd, 2010). This right, for young people to participate in decision-making processes, was firmly rooted in Article 12 of the 1992 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which outlines that 'parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child' (UNICEF, 1989). In addition, the UK Children Act (1989) further stipulates the 'recognition of the right of the children and young people to participate in decision making' (The National Archives, 2020). Later, in the 1990s, in policy terms the concept of youth participation and empowerment was viewed 'as a means of addressing the democratic deficit', a term used to describe 'young people's alienation from conventional politics' (Podd, 2010, pp. 22-23).

Youth participation remains however a contested idea, due in part to what Podd (2010) describes as a lack of '*shared* understanding of what 'participation' and 'empowerment' mean across the various agencies and fields of practice'. Broadly speaking, there are two contrasting perspectives of youth participation, which are articulated by the *Youth Directorate Council of Europe*:

> *One needs to be clear whether the ultimate aim of participation is enfranchisement i.e. helping young people make the most of opportunities available to them, under existing systems and structures? Or is it about 'empowerment' which recognises that young people may demand to change the current systems and structures?*
>
> (1997, p. 30).

It is argued that the latter notion of participation is the only valid basis upon which involvement with young people can successfully facilitate their development, fulfil their aspirations and enable them to address their individual, social and political concerns. 'Participation is ultimately about power, if it is to be genuine participation' (Ord, 2016, p. 68). The concept of participation is therefore strongly linked with empowerment and adult involvement with young

activists should be ‘supporting young people in taking collective action’ (NYA, 2020, p. 24). As Larson et al. rightly argue ‘young people become active participants and learners when they hold the reigns’ (2005, p. 59). The challenge for adults who are involved in youth led groups is to be led by young people, in the way characterised by writer and activist George Monbiot in his expression of support for climate strikers in a 2019, youth climate activists ‘have issued a challenge to which we must rise, and we will stand in solidarity with you’ [and] we will be led by you’ (Monbiot, 2019). Or as one of *XRY’s* female activists, Savannah Lovelock, proclaimed that:

> Adults need to be accountable to the young people, and if that means going on the streets and getting arrested in the thousands so we can have a chance of getting to the government and saying what we think should happen, then I think that should be the strategy.
>
> (The Guardian, 2019)

Complexities of adult involvement

Despite the saliency of a commitment to youth led empowerment principles when operationalising adult involvement in youth climate groups, they are often characterised as an oversimplified dichotomy between youth led and adult led approaches. Youth-led approaches are ‘often used in programs where the primary goal is not just youth development, but community change’, with the aim of empowering ‘and promoting youth development of leadership’ (Larson et al., 2005, p. 3). Adult-led approaches are by contrast, based on the idea that young people can draw ‘on the expertise and social capital of adult activists’, who ‘facilitate meaningful and competent participation by young people’ (Kirshner, 2006, p. 54). The resulting polarised debates about whether collaborative work between young people and adults should be youth-led or adult-led belies more complexity.

As Kirshner points out ‘although the ‘youth-led’ notion is politically appealing because it affirms the capacity of young people to be capable democratic actors, it leaves unexamined the critical role that adults can, and often do, play’ (2006, p. 40). By polarising the discussion and forcing practitioners to position

themselves on either side, the overlap and the grey areas between the two approaches is ignored. Kirshner refers to this dilemma as the ‘youth-led versus adult-led trap’ (ibid) It is therefore important to recognize that these practices don’t necessarily stand in opposition to each other, but that each has its own benefits and risks and is dependent on individual contexts and circumstances, and adults can play a variety of different roles within their relationship to young people. In recognising that the relationships between young people and adults are in constant flux, it becomes obvious that it may be counterproductive to scrutinize them based on over-simplified categories such as youth- or adult-led.

This fluctuating quality of youth-adult relationships becomes particularly clear when looking at Kirshner’s interpretation of Rogoff’s concept of guided participation. Within this approach, the adults ‘view their role as temporary, ‘fading’ over time to enable youth to take progressively more responsibility for activities’ (Kirshner, 2008, p. 62). From this perspective, youth practitioners may work with young people in a more adult-driven way to begin with, but gradually allow their involvement to ‘fade’, in order to make space for young people to self-organise. Kirshner described this as ‘cycles of fading’, a process which perfectly illustrates the transient nature of youth-adult partnerships.

Methodology

This was a small-scale qualitative study of the individual experiences of youth activists and is set within an interpretivist paradigm. As Hammersley (2013, p. 26) points out interpretivism is essential ‘to draw upon our human capacity to understand fellow human beings - from the inside - through empathy, shared experience and culture’. The research was therefore designed to create a space for young people to express themselves in their own words and for their voices to be heard. Adopting an interpretivist approach the research is premised on the assumption that people understand the social world they live in through their own unique perspective on reality. This view stems from the recognition that people ‘make sense of their environment and of themselves [with reference to] the particular cultures in which they live; and that these distinctive cultural orientations will strongly influence not only what they believe but also what they do’ (Hammersley, 2013, p 26). This

research therefore attempts ‘to develop a greater understanding of the participants’ lived experiences’ (Holley & Harris, 2019, p. 5).

Seven one-to-one semi structured interviews were undertaken with young climate activists, utilising open questions to enable ‘opportunities for young people to talk about their lives on their own terms’ (Heath, 2009, p. 79). A snowballing approach was undertaken to recruitment through a variety of youth climate groups. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic restricted the authors’ ability to conduct face to face interviews due to UK Government imposed social distancing measures and a period of nationwide lockdown from April 2020. Initial plans to undertake ethnographic observations of youth climate activist meetings, protests and strikes were also curtailed. However, the interviews were conducted online via video link which enabled the author to communicate with a variety of participants from both the UK and abroad. The participants’ authentic engagement with the study became clear from the start, as each participant showed a keen interest in having access to the findings, highlighting the activists’ genuine desire to better understand the process of effective cooperation between youth activists and adults. A distinct spirit of mutual support and encouragement, and a great sense of solidarity emerged as a result of the collaborative effort and the genuine commitment from both the research participants and the researcher. This type of intergenerational partnership work underlines the potential for embracing new ways of cooperative work between youths and adults by exploring forms of collaboration which go far beyond common paternalistic and hierarchical systems.

Following transcription, the data was coded in order to classify ‘ideas, themes, topics, activities, types of people, and other categories relevant to the study’ (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012, p. 98). This method was aided by systematically discerning what Owen (1984) describes as repetitions, forcefulness and recurrence. This type of thematic analysis enabled the author to recognise whether participants referred to the same thing several times, how strongly they expressed particular views and whether there were overlaps between participants. A number of themes emerged through this process. Throughout the coding and thematic analysis, findings were interpreted based on *grounded theory*, meaning ‘that researchers begin by studying individual cases or instances from which they eventually develop

abstract concepts' (Lapan et al., 2012, p. 41). *Grounded Theory* was considered particularly suitable to examine the data generated as it emphasises the study 'of individual and collective actions and of social and social psychological processes, such as experiencing identity transformations, changing organizational goals, and establishing public policies' (Lapan et al., 2012, p. 42).

The participants ranged between fifteen to twenty-one years of age and belonged to a variety of climate groups; including *Extinction Rebellion* (*XR*), *Extinction Rebellion Youth* (*XRY*), the *UK Student Climate Network (UKSCN*) and *Youth Strike 4 Climate* (*YS4C*), all of which have varying degrees of affiliation with Greta Thunberg's *Fridays For Future* (*FFF)* movement. Interestingly this research identified that it is common for youth activists to be members of more than one group and for youth climate groups to collaborate with each other.

Findings

Motivations of Youth Activists

Widespread concern among youth activists about the Government's political inaction in the UK in addressing the climate crisis was unsurprisingly named as the key reason for young people to join climate groups. One participant said that *'part of it is a lot of anger, part of it is just a lot of frustration about everything and this complete lack of action'*. Another stated that:

> *Government sets targets all the time, they don't necessarily meet them…when we looked into the statistics…they weren't doing enough and that just really annoyed me, so I kind of decided to get involved*.

A number of participants said that their motivation to act emerged as a result of learning about the gravity of climate change. Sources of information ranged from Greta Thunberg, Extinction Rebellion, George Monbiot, the IPCC report, and a geography lesson at school: *'I first heard of it when I was in year 7, since then I kind of just grew more interested in it and the issues…[and] I started going along to the*

strikes'. The severity of the crisis was felt acutely by many of the participants. One talked of the '*necessity to act'* and that the decision was based on a 'survival instinct'. Another said as well as '*frustration [there] is a lot of anxiety as well'.*

Impact of youth activism on young people

This research highlights a range of impacts on young people who are involved in climate activism. Many participants had developed a greater awareness of political and social matters as a result of their activism. One saying that *'I have become so much more aware of lots of other political and humanitarian problems and* […] *being able to discover where I really sit on the political spectrum'*. Other activists spoke of being '*more engaged with current affairs… and the Government and politics in general'*. This growing awareness was also translated into gaining specific insight into how to drive political change through targeted campaigns such as preventing an airport expansion, as well as developing the ability to assess the immediate impact of the; *'activism and seeing if changes have happened'*.

Young people's activism has also opened up new opportunities, as a result of having '*spoken in front of lots of large audiences…[going on to say] I've written speeches, I've written letters, I just had to get better at a lot of things'*. Another identified getting '*much better at managing time because I've never had a better reason to manage time before'*. Another expressed that *'all of a sudden you're open to a world of… possibilities and knowledge'*. Other aspects include a newfound determination to combat social and political problems and a sense of empowerment. As one young person reflected '*campaigning is definitely empowering, it shows you that you can change stuff rather than just complaining about it'*. This sense of empowerment arises from the autonomy and agency that young people have in youth led climate groups with '*young people being able to define their aims'*.

Youth activism has allowed participants to extend their networks, meeting and connecting with other like-minded people. This is not just *'making new friends'*, but as one young person notes the '*people I have met have changed my own… experience [and my] knowledge has completely shifted'*. Another remarks *'I have met such incredible people'*. It is evident that these new social networks are fundamental

to many of these young people's well-being, as one participant identifies '*for my mental health this has been very uplifting and very inspiring'*.

Collaborations between youth activists and adults

Importantly all the participants identified at least one 'significant' adult activist who was instrumental in their own activism. Sometimes they were referred to as friends, other times as people they '*look up to'*, or as people who '*have been really influential and helped me to continue'*. Another participant spoke of the impact of an older activist couple who were affiliated with the original non-violent Gandhi protest movement, who they described as '*the biggest inspiration and just the biggest example of how non-violence is the only way that activism can work'*. One of the young people referred to a couple of teachers, who were deemed to be '*eco-warriors*'. The role played by adults was often *'about empowering people to go out and do things'*. At other times, the adults provided advice or '*emotional support sometimes when people feel… drained'*.

The significant adults also provided specific help within the youth-led climate groups, often assisting young people by providing help with practical tasks. One participant described how adults know *'how to phrase things [and how to] 'formally write things'*. Sometimes adults '*managed all the finances and also helped with some of the outreach'*. At other times adults provided transport, liaising with the police and acting as stewards at protest marches. Many of these tasks required the involvement of adults due to legal age restrictions and young people in the main accepted this. The role adults adopted was described by one participant as a willingness '*to be ready to take the role of being able to do work behind the scenes and organising'*. This enabled young people to focus on steering campaigns, planning actions and carrying out strikes and protests. For many this support was crucial as one young activist made clear *'I think support is really, really important, because I know I wouldn't be able to do what I do now without that support'*. Adults' involvement clearly contributes to the efficiency and effectiveness of the groups, as one young activist makes clear:

> *It creates a different environment which is a lot more professional and it's quite interesting as well because then you start to learn more, you know, you start to actually learn how to utilize these spaces and it's a lot more efficient sometimes as well. It's amazing, amazing to have their support, because you know there is a lot of guidance there.*

Potential problems in youth-adult collaborations

Ultimately young activists judged the success of the collaborations between young people and adults by the extent to which the distinctive *youth-led nature* of their youth climate groups was maintained. Commenting on one successful example of this intergenerational partnership, one young person insisted '*it's about ensuring that… we are the ones at the forefront, the ones speaking, the ones taking the action forward'*. There was consensus among the young activists in this study that adults should be prepared to give advice and help with organisational tasks but should not interfere with young people's decision making. Youth - adult collaborations therefore required a delicate balance of power and needed clearly defined youth and adult spaces and roles. As expressed by one participant reflecting on one successful partnership:

> *I don't feel out of place, I don't feel as though this space is being taken up by adults, I feel as though we're in this great balance and that's what's really important without taking away that perspective and you know that idea that we should really be focused on the youth.*

Youth activists recalled specific times when adult involvement in youth activist groups had resulted in problems. One of the main issues revolved around what one participant called '*the age authority gap'*, which, in another activist's words, created a '*weird hierarchy'*. In addition to this, adults were described as '*a natural threat to that flat structure'* within youth climate groups. A couple of participants thought that it was counterproductive when adults assumed that young people inevitably lacked experience and had limited abilities. It was also found that when adults tried to become involved in a more permanent way, that this '*can be derailing'*.

Collaborative work was unsuccessful when young people experienced the adults as trying to take charge. For example, one youth climate group decided to collaborate with an existing adult-led organisation as part of a specific campaign. However, the youth activists experienced adults as trying to steer the partnership project without adequate participation or consultation with the young people. One participant recalled that '*what ended up happening is that they took over [without us] actually having any input'*. The adults renamed the campaign and made key decisions without young people's input. The result was a *'tokenistic'* experience, where young people's experience of participation was empty and valueless, leaving them feeling used.

Enabling Empowerment

As has been clearly demonstrated, the involvement of adults in youth led climate groups is not straightforward. Young people clearly recognize the value of adult involvement within their activism. Every youth participant within this study named at least one significant adult who they regarded as a crucial resource. The adults provided practical support such as liaising with the police, managing finances, providing transport and acting as stewards at protest marches. As experienced activists they also provide valuable social and emotional support inspiring and guiding young people. As Ginwright, & Cammarota point out youth activists 'do not work in isolation; rather, they work closely with experienced adult organizers who can serve as critical social capital for young community activists' (2006, p. 1).

However, one of the problems is as one young person in the study suggested the young people's 'aims are assumed to be the same as the adults'. Indeed, few young people or their adult compatriots would disagree that they are all committed to collaborating 'across communities and political interests to facilitate taking individual and collective action for social change' (Coburn, 2010, p. 34). This does not however guarantee that the collaborations will be successful. Adult support and guidance may at times be necessary, but their presence alone is not sufficient for success. This

study demonstrates that success hinges on adult's appreciation of the power they wield and the extent to which they consciously empower the young people in the groups they are supporting.

Youth empowerment is however not necessarily embedded within adult activist culture. For example, Extinction Rebellion (2019) acknowledge that they are: 'failing to address adult privilege within our organisational and decision-making structures'. In collaborations that were unsuccessful adults often assume control and as one youth activist described, they assume it is their responsibility: 'to put youth activists to particular purposes and roles'; This, however, mirrors adult-led processes, based on the premise 'that adult's greater knowledge and experience position them to guide program activities' (Larson et al., 2005, p. 2).

The young people in the study were adamant that any involvement of adults in youth led activism can only succeed if the executive power remains in the hands of young people. Adult-led approaches within youth activism are therefore dismissed by youth activists as counterproductive and are seen as the manifestation of existing hierarchical structures which serve to re-establish widespread social injustices. In the eyes of youth activists, these commonly accepted hierarchal structures and their oppressive connotations need to be challenged.

Kirshner (2008, p. 94) offers a number of useful conceptualizations of the relationship between adults and young people, which avoids tokenism and encourages meaningful involvement of young people. These range from adults operating as 'facilitators', creating an 'apprenticeship model' and adults as partners in 'joint-work'. These approaches could be utilised by adults involved in assisting youth led groups to avoid the potential pitfalls. Within each of these models the adult is represented as a resource that young people are able to tap into when needed, while adult influence is deliberately restrained in order for youths to take as much ownership of the process as possible.

Successful adult-involvement is also promoted within the Youth-Adult Partnerships (Y-APs) model, which places an emphasis on 'shared decision-making', 'shared power', and 'a collective spirit, which emphasizes group success' (Ginwright, 2005,

p. 102). Within this type of partnership model, mutuality is seen as a cornerstone between adults and young people, with teaching and learning being regarded as a two-way intergenerational process (Camino, 2000). Noam Chomsky echoes this type of mutuality, stating that ‘you learn from participating…you learn from others, and you learn from the people you’re trying to organize’ (Chomsky, 2011).

Lessons from Intergenerational activism

The activism that this paper is concerned with is youth-led, as such it is implicitly organised by, with and for young people in isolation from adults. Our research demonstrates however that adults do perform roles within these groups, and it is therefore of merit to compare findings with research on intergenerational activism which is framed more explicitly as a partnership between young people and adults. Interestingly, as we shall see, many of the same issues arise.

Bent claims that intergenerational activism involves: ‘messiness and complexity’ (2016: 117) and that genuine partnerships between young people and adults are required which are committed to ‘mutual liberation’ (ibid). However, Taft (2015) discovered that many adults within intergenerational activism find it difficult to avoid what she describes as ‘habituated and hegemonic adult/child relationships’ (2015: 471) where adults invariably assume power and control. Adults, Taft found, also wrongly assume that the young people lack the necessary capabilities. As a result of this dynamic Taft observed that the children and young people in turn assume a passivity and wait for direction from adults. Given the structured inequalities in the context of age Taft argues there needs to be: ‘a set of structured methodologies and organizational practices’ which ensure that young people are able to exercise agency. In many ways the development of youth led climate groups can be seen as a reaction to this structured inequality in its specific framing of adults as peripheral to the nexus of power within them. A point emphasised by Gordan (2007) who maintains that young people are aware of their structured inequality and can devise strategies for circumventing it.

In their research on intergenerational activism in the US, Liou and Literat (2020) found that the most important role for adults is: ‘listening to youth and being

empathetic when listening' (2020: 4675). They also noted that adults can provide specific resources for young people, such as driving to rallies or help with fund raising, such specific tangible support echoes the finding of this research for the necessity of adult involvement in youth activism. Edell, Brown and Montano (2016) highlight that intergenerational partnerships inevitably bring differences in experience and knowledge between the adults and the young people involved and this needs to acknowledged and equally respected. Reflecting on feminist activism with girls they argue successful 'partnerships with girls require that we trust them as experts in their own experience' (2016: 706).

Ramey, Lawford and Vachon (2017) offer a variety of ways of conceptualising youth-adult partnerships however it should be remembered that youth-led climate activism is not ostensibly a youth- adult partnership but is one that places youth front and centre in the process. In this respect it appears Liou and Literat are right when they suggest that: 'the simplest way adult allies can demonstrate solidarity is by learning how to decenter themselves and stepping out of the way of youth organizers (2020: 4677). The research from intergenerational activism supports the premise suggested earlier which drew on research by Kirshner (2006) that the best way to frame adult involvement in youth-led climate activism is as: 'cycles of fading' where adults see their involvement as initially necessary, for specific identifiable purposes but consider their role as necessarily receding and for them to work to ensure their influence is helpful but not a burden and always works for the empowerment of the youth activists.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly more research is needed to identify how adult involvement in youth activist spaces is navigated and negotiated. For example, ethnographic studies of activist meetings, protests and strikes may well provide richer insights into how young people's activism is best empowered and how adults can maximise their role as supporters and enablers of youth activism. A wider breadth of qualitative data including the perspectives of adults would also provide additional insights.

The findings of this preliminary study however do identify a paradox at the heart of adult involvement in youth led climate groups. As, although it is evident that the young people need adult assistance, the findings suggest that adult involvement often undermines the operation of the youth activist groups and at times this results in acrimony and a parting of the ways. The conclusions of this research suggest that to resolve this problem collaborative work between adults and youth activists must be regarded as a partnership that pursues the young people's goals. It requires young people and adults to develop a clear sense about their expectations and the purpose of their roles within their alliance. Both young people and adults need to grasp the concept that their partnership-work is inevitably defined by contextually driven fluctuations, which may require different power dynamics at different times.

Young activists were, in the main, in agreement about the value of adult involvement within youth activism but were adamant that youth empowerment is fundamental to the successful collaborations. As a result, it appears that adults should respect young people's '*positions of leadership'*. The youth activists in this study regarded adult involvement as important in relation to '*work behind the scenes'* and to support and facilitate youth-led processes. But as one young activist pointed out *'as youth we have carved out these spaces, they haven't been given to us, and what happens often is that that's forgotten'*. Adults must remember that these are youth led groups established and driven by motivated young people inspired to bring about change and they must be encouraged and supported in this process – and be in the driving seat wherever and however they choose. Or in Saul Alinsky's words, the adults must see their 'goal in [the] creation of power for others to use' (Alinsky, 1989, p. 88). The most useful conceptual framework for adult involvement in youth-led climate groups would appear to be Kirshner's 'cycles of fading' (2006) where adults work to make themselves 'redundant', and they are always mindful of the need to empower the young people.

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