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Turning things upside down? - An *ethics of activism* in youth co-research

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This article discusses how researchers and young people can co-create democratic spaces of inquiry in which research becomes relevant to young people's development on their own terms and how researchers can position themselves ethically within such processes. We argue that ethical dilemmas are intensified when young people participate as co-researchers, as youth – as a developmental period – is tied to a broader societal task of "being young and doing youth". Drawing on a practice research tradition and empirical examples, we unfold how researchers can become co-researchers in young people's lives in partnerships, thereby reshaping researcher-researched dynamics and challenging conventional notions of researcher authority. We further explore how research can support young people's critical engagement with their everyday life conditions and foster collective agency through their shared participation – while resisting the imposition of predefined directions of change. We conceptualize these dynamics as an ethics of activism, understood as a commitment to moving beyond constrained positions and pursuing social justice through the development of collective transformative agency.

Keywords: Ethics of activism, youth, collaborative methodology, researcher position, democratic spaces of inquiry, relational agency, collective transformative agency

Introduction

Eight young people (aged 16–19) from three different residential care homes are gathered around a large table in a research workshop. They have been invited to talk about what it takes to feel a sense of belonging and how professionals can support it. The room is set up with large sheets of paper, markers, magazines, and scissors, and the day is tightly facilitated by four researchers.

At first, the conversation moves cautiously and the energy feels a bit dead. The researchers are unsure of how to proceed, and the young people ask for a break.

The young people move into the courtyard, and soon voices overlap as the conversation fills with energy. They light cigarettes and begin comparing everyday lives across their respective residential homes. Who gets to decide what? Which rules are negotiable? How visible are their rights? They explain these things to one another leaning forward, interrupting, asking follow-up questions. Some describe how staff at their particular home talk openly about rights, while others shake their head and say it works very differently where they live. They explain what they are entitled to, how decisions are made, and where they have – or lack – real influence. Through their conversation, the differences between the three residential homes become evident, but so do shared experiences of living under conditions they did not choose.

The researchers decide to abandon the planned facilitation and their prepared questions and follow the young people into the courtyard. One group talks about their home, where the young residents decide how shared spaces are furnished. Others describe being given a budget to decorate their own rooms. At one home, a handwritten note listing their rights is taped to the refrigerator. "It matters," one of them says. "It keeps things open between us and the adults." The others listen carefully. For some, this openness feels far removed from their own experience. They exchange glances, then begin to talk about what they might try to change when they return. Some of the young people talk about wanting to speak more publicly – to represent others in care, to explain what it is like. Someone mentions the organization Conditions for Children and Young People in Care (De Anbragtes Vilkår). At the end of the day, one girl, speaking softly, says that she has always wanted to be a politician but never thought it was possible "in my situation." She pauses, then adds that being part of this group has made her reconsider that assumption.

As the day unfolds, the researchers increasingly set aside some of their facilitation and follow the young people's own initiatives. They join them in the yard, share a few cigarettes, try to take notes and jot down keywords on their phones, and record whenever possible. The day develops in ways none of them had planned or anticipated.

This empirical case draws on the research project *New Relational Horizons for Young People in Residential Care – Loneliness and Belonging* (2024–2027), conducted by, amongst others, the first author (Tybjerg). The study examines how young people in residential care experience loneliness as a barrier to participation across everyday contexts and explores how teachers and social workers can support their sense of belonging, relationships, and participation. The empirical materials include participant observation, interviews, writing workshops, and participatory workshops such as the one described above (Steno et al., 2025; Tybjerg et al., 2025).

The workshop example reveals multiple dynamics. Here, we highlight two in particular. First, as the conversation unfolds, the young people – who do not all know each other beforehand – begin to connect and serve as sources of knowledge for each other. Through sharing and comparing their experiences of residential life, a sense of collective engagement and growing courage emerges over the course of the day: a willingness to question and potentially transform shared conditions and, for some, to participate in public debate. Second, these processes develop with limited reliance on the researchers' planned facilitation – yet not *without* their presence and participation.

Young people and researchers' agendas

Like others, young people are actively engaged in shaping their lives. They pursue aspirations, respond to social norms and expectations, and continuously negotiate these as an integral, ongoing part of their everyday life practice. Whether they have clear goals or are still searching for direction, these orientations are developed, negotiated, and enacted collectively through shared engagements across their various everyday life settings (Tybjerg, 2023; 2024; Tybjerg et al., 2025; Pedersen 2021; Pedersen & Bang 2016a; 2016b). How, then, can the encounter between young people's ongoing – and ever-present – negotiation of intentions and directions *and* the researcher's simultaneous transformative and scientific agenda become productive for both parties?

In the example above, the researchers aim is to generate knowledge about belonging, while the young people reorient the research agenda by directing attention toward experiences of social injustice. At the same time, they negotiate the very conditions under which the research process can unfold. This illustrates how researchers

can engage with young people's collective engagements – which may themselves expand and shift through co-research – without prescribing trajectories of change or defining what agency should look like or how it ought to manifest. Very important is, that this does not imply reducing research to a merely descriptive exercise that documents young people's collective engagements or limits participation to tokenistic "voice-giving". Rather, what we seek to highlight and explore is *how* shared engagements in research also transform – or have the potential to transform – people's lives. Not necessarily in large-scale or immediately visible ways, but in the significance of everyday interactions. From this perspective, research is not external to the processes it studies; it is part of the very "mattering" of social life.

Theoretical foundation, aim and structure

In this article we discuss an overarching ethical and methodological issue that arises when researchers collaborate with young people as co-researchers in participatory youth research. Specifically, we examine how to conduct co-research with young people, who are simultaneously engaged in developing independence in relation to adult perspectives, in ways that allow the researchers' activist agendas *and* young people's own engagements to coexist and become mutually enriching. The empirical foundation for our discussions draws on two independent participatory youth research projects in which we, as authors, are currently engaged, and where the first illustrative example has been introduced. These examples serve as an illustrative, empirical basis for discussing collaboration between researchers and young people.

Our point of departure is that collaboration in research processes always entails methodological and ethical challenges; it is never uniform or simply conducted "by the book". However, we argue that these challenges are intensified when researchers seek to collaborate with young people why the purpose of this article is to discuss the following question: *How can research become mutually relevant in collaborations with young people – contributing to their development through shared engagement – with particular attention to ethical issues concerning the researcher's position when aiming to contribute to young people's collective transformative agency?*

Our methodological approach is grounded in critical psychology (Dreier, 2020; Højholt & Schraube, 2016; Holzkamp, 2013, 2005) and a practice research tradition that

emphasizes collaborative research processes (Kousholt & Højholt, 2023; Røn Larsen & Højholt this issue). To further elaborate on the collaborative dimensions, we draw on cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (Stetsenko 2008, 2012, 2013, 2016; Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2010; Hedegaard, 2012; Chimirri & Pedersen, 2019), particularly the concepts of *collective transformative agency* (Stetsenko, 2016) and *relational agency* (Edwards, 2013).

Practice research is guided by the ambition not only to interpret but *to transform* shared life conditions through a critique of structural constraints and the collaborative development of practice. Context-sensitive research designs aim to illuminate issues, possibilities, tensions, and dilemmas in people's everyday lives. In this sense, practice research can be understood as an effort to democratize knowledge production by incorporating diverse perspectives and recognize knowledge as distributed among the participants (Jensen, 2001). Each participant contributes situated knowledge grounded in their particular position, which becomes accessible through processes of mutual learning between researchers and co-researchers (Højholt & Kousholt, 2018). To further emphasize its transformative orientation, we draw on Stetsenko's notion of *Transformative Activist Stance*, which highlights that people are *always-already* engaged in shaping and transforming their worlds through meaningful activities. It is this engagement that we, as researchers, must engage with if we are to contribute to processes of change (Stetsenko, 2008, 2012, 2013, 2016). From a CHAT perspective, the emancipatory agenda is thus distributed among participants rather than confined to the nominal researcher position (Chimirri & Pedersen, 2019).

Building on this theoretical grounding, we explore and discuss the ethical tension that arise around the researcher's position in our work with young people's participation and shared engagement. While the two projects we draw upon differ in design and purpose, they reveal instructive commonalities in how the researcher position is called into question. In the first example (outlined above), the workshop was designed as an inclusive and highly structured dialogue format. In practice, however, it evolved into something quite different, requiring flexible and situated researcher positionalities. In the second example (presented later in the article), the collaboration was intentionally more exploratory. Here, the aim was to create a shared space for engaging with the challenges of everyday youth life and to co-develop a method to support young people's relational

agency (Edwards, 2005, 2011, 2017). Across both projects, a key commonality lies in how the researcher position must be continuously revisited – and, at times, reconfigured – when co-research, particularly with young people, fosters collective transformative agency and generates new possibilities for action.

To ground our discussion, we begin by situating these concerns within broader tendencies in youth research, particularly within qualitive participatory approaches. We outline how youth research might move *beyond* conventional notions of participation by engaging in less adult-controlled forms of collaboration, both in terms of research design and the framing of the object of inquiry. In doing so, we position the article within a collaborative approach to youth research and discuss the ethical tension involved in conducting practice research with young people when researchers simultaneously seek, in activist ways, to contribute to transforming young people's lives.

Following these broader ethical discussions that frame our endeavour, we turn to the second empirical example, which addresses how relational agency can be developed as a collaborative process through the ongoing exploration of shared conditions and tensions. The example illuminates the potential of researchers to connect with already unfolding developmental processes in ways that are flexible and situated – yet not arbitrary – and shows how such engagement places the researcher's position in ongoing, productive tension. Importantly, the empirical examples are not intended as normative or best practice examples but rather serve as the empirical grounds that made us reflect upon the inherent ethical tensions in our own youth co-research practice. As such, they merely serve as a way to empirically ground our discussion.

Finally, by looking across the two empirical examples, we discuss how shared and mutual engagement can enable youth research to contribute both to knowledge production and to the development of young people's relational and collective transformative agency. This potential becomes particularly evident when young people connect, become social resources for one another, and experience both the research focus and the process itself as relevant to their everyday lives.

On this basis, we propose the methodological concept of *ethics of activism* as a way of conceptualizing the researcher's positionality – its movements, intentions, and dilemmas – in practice research with young people as co-researchers. The notion of activism refers back to Stetsenko's point about people always-already being engaged in

transforming their worlds through meaningful activities – and we could add a layer here of the researchers' desire of doing-something-with-someone. Such movements disrupt conventional hierarchies by positioning *the researcher* as a co-researcher within young people's ongoing conduct of everyday life, rather than positioning young people as co-researchers in agendas defined by others. In this sense, the (nominal) researcher's ethical ideal is, in part, to become superfluous: to support processes in which young people take responsibility for – and actively engage in – developing relational and collective transformative agency by connecting with one another and acting as each other's primary social resources for change.

Methodological and Ethical Challenges in Youth Research

> *"Thinking through how we conceptualize, position and represent young people as subjects of research allows us as researchers to create an understanding of not only what leads us to researching particular aspects of young people's lives but also the changes and challenges experienced by young people in the 21st century and beyond."* (Billet, 2020, p. 1)

Research has long pointed to a persistent limitation in youth studies: the relative lack of explicit methodological reflection. Discussions of *how* research is conducted are often only briefly addressed and tend to focus primarily on distinctions between quantitative and qualitative approaches (Cieslik & Simpson, 2013). Several scholars have noted that large-scale quantitative studies risk overlooking the social and local dimensions of young people's lives, whereby young people as actors may disappear behind abstract societal structures and categories (Evans & Furlong, 1998; Madsen, 2018). Similarly, Pedersen & Bang (2016a; 2016b) argue that reliance on generalized narratives of youth – such as being pressured, demotivated, or experiencing poor well-being – can obscure the subjective and situated contexts in which young people's lives unfold. At the same time, qualitative and culturally specific studies have been critiques for insufficiently addressing the role of structural and institutional conditions in shaping local practices (Ødegård, 2016). For instance, Billet et al. (2020) highlight how youth research often overlooks the internal social dynamics of institutions such as schools and argue for approaches that engage more directly with young people's lived experiences within these contexts (see

also Mardahl-Hansen & Tybjerg, 2025). Taken together, these critiques point to a need for approaches that overcome this limitation (e.g., Furlong et al., 2011; Madsen, 2018; Ødegård, 2016), and some researchers specifically argue for more dialectical approaches (Tybjerg, 2023; Juhl, 2019; Pedersen & Bang, 2016a).

According to Wyn & Dwyer (2000), much youth research is governed by an adult logic, whereby, for instance, interview questions posed to young people are informed by the researchers' own memories of youth. As a result, assumptions about the relevance of structures from previous generations are carried into contemporary research, with the risk of overlooking important aspects and nuances of young people's current lives. We regard this as a key ethical concern. To move toward a more grounded understanding of how young people shape their lives from their own perspectives, Wyn & Dwyer advocate for conducting research *with* young people. Along similar lines, several scholars argue that research with – and about – young people must be situated in specific times and places (Wyn & Dwyer, 2000; Côté & Tyyskä, 2014; Cuervo & Wyn, 2017). Mørch (2010) likewise emphasizes that young people's engagements, subjectivities, and actions should be placed at the centre of youth research. He argues that by exploring "the societal" through the study of concrete and shared everyday youth life practices, youth research can develop empirically grounded understandings. These perspectives point to a central methodological and ethical challenge: how to explore young people's perspectives collaboratively in ways that capture the complexities of their everyday lives, while also situating these within coherent analyses of broader societal structures – including the inherent limitations, dilemmas, and tensions of such an approach.

A key approach in the literature on youth participation in research is Participatory Action Research with Youth (YPAR). YPAR is increasingly recognized as a means of strengthening young people, youth-serving organizations, and the communities to which they belong. It is action-oriented and engages young people as co-researchers (Teixeira & Kennedy, 2022), often working with peers who share everyday experiences and social relationships (Chen et al., 2007 in Kim, 2016).

Despite its progressive ambitions, qualitative researchers have identified a range of ethical dilemmas and challenges associated with YPAR, particularly in culturally diverse contexts (Bussu et al., 2020). Critical perspectives caution against oversimplifying young people's participation and misinterpreting their perspectives and

therefore stress the need for ongoing critical reflection on participatory action research with youth (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). At the same time, traditional adult-as-expert approaches in research often impose hierarchical standards that can limit participatory engagement of youth (Teixeira et al., 2021). Clark (2010) points out that youth researchers actively challenge 'adultism', fostering more genuine youth–adult partnerships and addressing oppressive dynamics throughout the research process – an essential ethical commitment in YPAR. Teixeira et al. (2021) further highlights both the potentials and challenges of YPAR, particularly with regard to ethical dilemmas and the power relations within collaborative research partnerships between young people and adults. This raises the question of the ethical imperative guiding such research. Within YPAR, ethics extend beyond the medical mandate of "do no harm" toward a commitment to "do good" by promoting social action and addressing inequities (Bromley et al., 2015; Cahill, et al., 2007 in Teixeira et al., 2021).

Our reading of the growing emphasis on relational, participatory, and collaborative approaches in youth research highlights a range of emerging ethical challenges, including the need to attend to social and cultural contexts as well as to researcher–co-researcher relationships over time. Despite this development, Loveridge et al. (2024) note that relatively few tools exist to support researchers in navigating the everyday ethical dilemmas that arise in such work, particularly in relation to power dynamics and sustained engagement.

Rather than offering a set of specific tools, this article focuses on methodological questions concerning ethical dilemmas related to the researcher's position within processes of mutual engagement when collaborating with young people. In doing so, we do not disregard questions of power or the significance of structural conditions. Rather, we explore how such dynamics can be engaged with in democratically productive ways, in collaboration with young people, within a practice-research framework.

Towards a Collaborative Youth Research Methodology

The practice-research approach (Holzkamp, 2005; 2013; Højholt, 2005; Mørck & Nissen, 2005; Kousholt & Højholt, 2023; Røn Larsen & Højholt this issue) emphasizes that researchers and (young people as) co-researchers share the task of exploring, for example, young people's lives in residential care, while holding different roles and understandings

of the issues at hand. This rests on a dialectical onto-epistemological assumption: that we participate in the same societal reality, but our different and sometimes unequal possibilities and positions shape our perspectives in different manners. Therefore, as researchers exploring young people's lives, we depend on looking *from* and *with* the perspectives of young people. This highlights a crucial point: young people are not the object of research in themselves; rather the focus is on the issues and conditions they experience as relevant in their everyday lives.

By examining young people's conditions for participation through collaboration *with* them – not simply treating them as research participants, but as mutual collaborators – this approach moves beyond individualistic understandings that focus solely on the young person as an isolated subject. Within a practice-based research design, young people are thus approached not merely as interview participants or objects of observation, but as co-researchers whose contributions actively shape the direction and content of the inquiry. While this form of co-research is inherently participatory, it also exceeds traditional notions of participation: the research process becomes a platform through which young people, in collaboration, can reflect on their shared situations and develop new collective possibilities for action. In doing so, they shape not only the research process itself, but potentially also their shared practices moving forward (Tybjerg, 2023).

The particularity of youth co-research

Most of the issues raised above are not specific to youth co-research; they are equally relevant to research involving, for example, children or individuals in marginalized positions. What distinguishes youth co-research, however, is the significance of youth as a particular developmental and societal phase. Conducting co-research with young people therefore requires specific methodological orientations, as young people occupy a position shaped by contradictory expectations: they are expected to adapt to institutional demands while simultaneously developing and demonstrating increasing independence. Mørch (2010) conceptualizes this as *the societal youth task.*

Regardless of whether they live in residential care or not, young people navigate this double demand. They are expected to comply with institutional expectations – for instance, by following the pedagogical frameworks of schools and care settings – while also being required to act autonomously, make decisions, and take initiative. This tension

becomes particularly salient in research contexts, where such dual expectations shape how young people participate, negotiate, and position themselves in collaborative research processes in dialectical ways.

According to Tybjerg (2023), the *youth task* – when explored from a youth perspective – can appear intensively contradictory, as youth is a period characterized by the simultaneous coordination of multiple developmental contexts. Everyday life involves navigating questions of who to spend time with, who is included in social activities, and how to balance part-time work, increasing school demands, friendships, leisure activities, social media, sports, romantic relationships, and relations with adults. In these processes, young people rely on one another in shaping their lives (Mardahl-Hansen & Tybjerg, 2025). All of this must be negotiated within the institutional contexts in which they participate. From a youth perspective, such contexts can therefore be understood as central social arenas where young people live their everyday lives with their peers – an essential condition for personal development (Pedersen, 2021).

The youth task thus constitutes a fundamentally tension-laden condition. Its contradictory demands can give rise to dilemmas and, at times, experiences of isolation when these demands cannot easily be reconciled. Institutional conditions can intensify these tensions. For example, residential care homes serve as important social arenas where access to youth communities is crucial for development, while simultaneously functioning as challenging links to other contexts of belonging that young people must integrate into their everyday lives. Concretely, youth care is a residence where young people are placed and share everyday life with each other, while pedagogical staff provide a framework of available options for action. At the same time, young people are actively shaping their own lives, continuously negotiating and acting to expand their possibilities (Tybjerg et al., 2025).

Overall, youth can be understood as a period of negotiating autonomy and societal participation dialectically. Consequently, researchers must also negotiate access to young people's lives and to co-research collaborations in ways that take seriously the dilemmas and possibilities inherent in the youth task. This entails a set of ethical orientations concerning how researchers can become relevant to young people, and how research itself may contribute to supporting them in navigating this task.

Ethics in Collaborative Youth Co-research

We draw on the understanding that practice research entails extensive and multifaceted ethical work, in which multiple ethical aspects unfold simultaneously throughout the research process. These aspects have been conceptualized in different ways, including e.g. as *situated social-practice ethics* (Mørck, 2021) and *ethical imperatives* (Kofoed & Kousholt, 2012). Building on these perspectives, we propose the concept of an *ethics of activism* to capture how researchers position themselves in relation to an explicitly activist agenda. This involves an ambition for research to contribute to the development of collective transformative agency – while, importantly, avoiding the imposition of adult-defined norms about what such transformation should look like. We return to this point below. First, however, we briefly outline three key aspects of ethics that inform this concept:

1) *The framing and procedural ethical aspect* of the research concern establishing the conditions and boundaries for ethical and collaborative engagement. This includes gaining access to the field through transparent communication with young people and professionals, clearly presenting the research interest, and fostering ongoing dialogue with participants/co-researchers. It further involves ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality, while continuously negotiating and renegotiating collaborative relationships throughout the research process, rather than relying on a one-time formal agreement.

2) *Ethical imperatives* (from Kofoed & Kousholt, 2012) offer an approach to engaging with co-researchers. In Tybjerg's (2023) work, four such imperatives are described as supporting both the development of a flexible researcher position and a foundation for engaging with young people: a) do not single anyone out, b) meet the young people on their own terms, c) avoid appearing mysterious, and d) engage all co-researchers in solidarity. Much like a research project's problem formulation can function as a guiding-tool for knowledge production, these ethical imperatives can provide a basis for collaborative processes. However, Tybjerg argues that they may fall short of enabling a sufficiently flexible researcher position in youth co-research, as they risk framing researcher positioning in ways that do not align with young people's situated actions, intentions, and perspectives

– even directing this critique toward her own approach. Consequently, ethical imperatives must be continuously negotiated and critically examined in collaboration with co-researchers, guided by a situated ethics that remain attentive to their perspectives within specific context of interaction.

3) Mørck's (2021) conception *situated social-practice ethics* highlights what is at stake in lived experience and in specific situations – for both young people and in their relations with the researcher. This perspective emphasizes a lived and situated ethics that places the researcher in ongoing, productive dilemmas concerning participation and the continual negotiation of their position. From this standpoint, the youth researcher seeks to let each situation inform how to participate in a context, attending to what is at stake for the young people and how they invite the researcher into their practices. These ethical considerations become visible in the youth workshop example, where the researchers follow the young people beyond the courtyard and respond to their insistence that the dialogue address social injustice rather than belonging.

The above reflections on the ethical research practice can be understood as pointing to multiple, overlapping ethical orientations with distinct purposes, unfolding simultaneously – and in diverse ways – within concrete research practice. These forms of ethical work are shaped by a project's specific knowledge interests and by the conditions for collaboration within the social practices in which the research is embedded. However, the three aspects outlined above may be critiqued for primarily addressing social relations within practice and the establishment of collaborative research approaches. To a lesser extent, they engage with how the activist aim of practice development and collective transformative agency informs the researcher's positioning and ethical orientation – both in terms of recognizing young people as agentic actors in their own lives and in relation to the potential of the research process itself within their current societal youth task.

In this article, we argue that activism – understood as striving to move beyond constrained positions and to pursue social justice through the development of collective transformative agency – can emerge within the engaged, collective space of inquiry cultivated through research collaboration over time. This is illustrated in the workshop example. Importantly, it is not the role of the researcher to "solve" or define the problems

of others. As Chimirri & Pedersen (2019, p. 626) argue, *"the purpose of emancipatory (co)research cannot be to help (institutionalized, professionalized) welfare users address and overcome problems troubling them in their everyday lives"*. This points to a fundamental tension in the purpose of research: while it aims to contribute to change, it cannot predefine the direction of that change. Rather, such directions must emerge through the research collaboration itself, in open-ended ways. How co-research with young people can be designed, and how researchers might conceptualize their ethical stance within this tension, is explored in the following sections.

Relational Agency in a Collaborative Methodology

Our second example stems from a practice-research project conducted by the second author (Pedersen) at a high school in Zealand, Denmark[1]. The project originated from a teacher's concern about the growing number of students experiencing mental health challenges and difficulties participating in the social life of the class[2]. Rather than designing an intervention-based project (e.g., psychoeducation), a class of first-year high school students (class 1.K) was invited to co-explore their experienced challenges and to co-develop ways of engaging more collaboratively and collectively. In this sense, the project had a dual purpose: 1) to support student well-being and foster a sense of community, and 2) to co-develop knowledge and methods relevant to other high-school contexts. A key premise was that the problems to be addressed were not pre-defined but would emerge through the collaborative process. The co-explorative approach was also intended to strengthen students' capacity and confidence in sharing and reflecting with one another. More broadly, the open-ended agenda aimed to challenge the tendency to individualize difficult emotions and to move beyond the privatization of students' struggles. For 1.K, it quickly became apparent that a shared challenge – although experienced in different ways – concerned questions of community. Many students

[1] The project – *Shared spaces for critical reflection* – began with a pilot in 2024 and subsequently developed into a collaboration with class 1.K (anonymized name) starting in November 2024 when the students had settled into their permanent class configuration. The project consists of co-exploratory workshops organized thematically around issues raised by the students themselves. It is co-organized by the researcher (second author, Pedersen) and the class teacher.

[2] In Denmark, high school students typically begin in provisional class groupings before transitioning, after approximately three months, into permanent classes based on their chosen academic track. The project was initiated in connection with this transition, as the new class configuration became established.

described feelings of being "outside the group" and referred to an abstract idea of a class community to which they did not fully belong or struggled to access.

The structure of the workshops was developed and facilitated by the researcher in collaboration with the teacher. However, the teachers adopted a co-exploratory role, often sharing their own uncertainties with students during group work. Across the consecutive workshops, students identified themes and contradictions in their everyday practices, which then shaped the focus of the subsequent sessions. In addition to recurring discussions of community, they highlighted experiences of being misunderstood by their parents. This led to the development of a separate workshop with parents, designed by the students. The aim was to enable transgenerational dialogue by "translating" students' experiences into forms recognizable to their parents – and, in turn, translating parental perspectives back to students – thereby establishing a shared foundation for continued conversation.

Over time, the students identified and co-explored contradictions between their narratives about group behaviour and their actual practices. Despite this, they continued to struggle with the social dynamic in class. In particular, divisions and experiences of exclusion persisted among the girls, who constituted the majority of the class.

Following a natural break in the workshop sequence due to the summer holidays, the teacher reported escalating tension among the girls. In response, the girls and the two teachers conducted their own workshop to explore these tensions. During this session, the girls openly and vulnerably shared their feelings and difficulties. Importantly, the focus was not on calling out or labelling "bad behaviour", but on expressing experiences of insecurity, exclusion, and misunderstanding. The teachers facilitated the process by ensuring that all participants had the opportunity to share their perspectives. Although the session was challenging for everyone involved, it contributed to a shift in the social dynamics among the girls, according to both the teacher's observations and the students' own reflections. Previously rigid patterns of interaction, marked by clear boundaries of social affiliation, began to loosen, giving rise to more fluid and diverse social constellations.

This example illustrates how research can be designed to support and foster the development of *relational agency,* defined by Anne Edwards as *''capacity to align one's*

thoughts and actions with those of others in order to interpret problems of practice and to respond to those interpretations" (Edwards, 2005, pp.169–70). In the example above, we see how collectively creating a space to critical explore and reflect on shared difficulties – understood as a way of acting on what matters, together – became the basis for addressing what felt most vulnerable: the group's social dynamics. Because everyone had something at stake, it is unlikely that this form of shared exploration and emotional openness – capable of generating social change – could have emerged prior to the project. This does not imply a simple causal relationship between the project and its outcomes. Rather, it is important to note how the *cultivated ability to co-explore* and articulate what matters functioned as a scaffold for addressing social tensions. Edwards' notion of relational agency can thus be understood both as a collective capacity that can be developed over time and as a space that can be actively facilitated. In this case, the girls' ability to connect around matters of shared importance enabled them to move beyond established social patterns and collectively transform their social action space.

The overall aim of the project was to develop methods that enable young people to critically co-explore and analyse the difficulties they encounter, and to use these as a basis for local, social change and enhanced well-being. In this sense, the project sought to support collective, emancipatory action in relation to young people's concrete conditions. As the example shows, relational agency did not develop as a direct result of the researcher's efforts alone, but emerged through a collaborative process, shaped over time by what the young people themselves found meaningful. We therefore suggest that the project's preliminary outcome – students taking responsibility for what mattered to them and acting on it collectively – was contingent on young people claiming ownership of both relevance and content. This further implies that "outcomes" cannot be understood as discrete or final results, but rather as ongoing emancipatory processes set in motion through young people's engagement with one another, supported by the researcher.

Towards an *Ethics of Activism*

Practice research is driven by an ambition to contribute to processes of change. It begins with a shared engagement in a particular problem that researchers and co-researchers seek to explore and generate knowledge about together. Embedded in this ambition is a dual agenda: the production of knowledge *and* the development of practice – in this case, the

young people's everyday lives. In both empirical examples, we see how emancipatory processes can emerge within the engaged space of shared inquiry that develops through collaboration with young people in residential care and high school settings.

Returning to the first example of the youth workshop, we saw how young people were given opportunities to explore different aspects of their situations together. Their attention was directed outward, toward the social worlds in which they participate, in ways they themselves initiated. Rather than focusing inward on individual concerns, they engaged with the contexts they are part of and seek to shape. Encounters between young people from different settings became particularly significant. Exchanges around both similarities and differences – and the ways in which participants engaged with one another – reduced the need for researcher control and direct intervention. Such shared engagements and the creation of a democratic space for exploration can foster both relational agency and collective transformative agency, as co-researchers take initiative and create new possibilities for action together. This form of engagement also entails that young people co-create the research design itself, as illustrated in the example above. What might otherwise be considered a "research-error" – for instance, moments where facilitation does not go as planned – is better understood as part of an open-ended, collaborative co-research process.

From the perspective that people are always-already engaged in developing their conduct of everyday life and are – a priori – invested in expanding their possibilities for action, research collaboration can energize co-researchers' ongoing processes of transformation. Emancipatory potential emerges when young people, e.g., in residential care or high schools, engage collectively in the research process. Through this engagement, they can move beyond perceiving themselves as "the problem" and instead recognize how their situations are linked to broader, and yet concrete, social conditions and dynamics of participation. Both examples underscore an important point: *relational and collective transformative agency emerges when young people actively and collaboratively engage with one another in exploring the issues and concerns that matter to them*. In this sense, they become each other's primary social resources for change.

The empirical examples presented in this article illustrate how practice research holds an emancipatory potential for the co-researchers involved. This potential is activated through the engagement that participants *themselves* assume in the shared

process of inquiry. Rather than presuming that young people are automatically "liberated" through research or by the researcher, agency develops through the relations and connections between them – through their shared engagements. Research thus becomes a framework for mutual exchange, inviting participants to look beyond themselves and engage with the contexts they (and others) are part of and seek to transform.

However, when young people define the relevance and direction of the research, the researcher's position becomes fundamentally at stake. We argue that this introduces a democratic dimension in youth research that is not so much characterized by a lack of tools, but by a need for more adequate concepts and imagery grounded in research practices with young people. Against this backdrop, we are concerned with articulating a legitimate researcher position that involves making oneself available in responsive and situated ways – while also holding an aspiration to become, to some extent*, superfluous.* This position differs both from simplified "giving voice" approaches and from forms of micro-management in which participation is tightly orchestrated. While acknowledging critiques of tokenistic participation, we seek to move beyond them. From a practice research perspective, tokenism represents both a methodological and an ethical problem, as it invites young people into research without redistributing epistemic authority or creating space for their concerns to actively reshape the research process.

The *Researcher* as Co-researcher in Young People's Lives

Our ambition is to cultivate a form of mobility that remains responsive to what is already at stake in young people's lives and in their engagement with the societal youth task. For us, this is not merely a methodological consideration, but an ethical ambition. Working on young people's terms requires taking their practices seriously and recognizing that their engagements are already structured by complex social conditions and mutual dependencies.

As researchers in the field, we are dependent on those with whom we conduct the inquiry and on the conditions that emerge in practice. In this sense, a conventional distinction between "us" and "them" is transcended (Højholt, 2022). The idea of researchers standing outside practice and examining it, while others take part in it as so-called informants, becomes untenable. Instead, co-research unfolds within shared

practices, where *all* participants are implicated in and affected by the conditions under investigation.

The relationship between researchers and co-researchers develops progressively over time, shaped by dilemmas and conflicts that continually challenge and constitute the researcher's position. Against this backdrop, we propose the concept of an *ethics of activism* as a way of both guiding methodological choices (as illustrated in the second example) and making visible the dilemmas, possibilities, and limitations inherent in the researcher positionality in youth co-research (as seen in the first example). Perhaps most importantly, this concept offers a way of capturing the dual orientation – and balancing act – that researchers must navigate: a simultaneous commitment to engaged participation and to an ongoing aspiration of becoming, in part, unneeded.

In co-research with young people, participants constitute each other's primary conditions for exploration, placing the researcher's position in a state of ongoing negotiation. An increasingly evident democratic and ethical demand is to understand this position as fluid within the shared research engagement. While this may seem straightforward, it challenges conventional notions of the researcher as someone who operates with a fixed research question, a clear and predefined methodology, and the authority to determine focus and process (Law, 2007). In the absence of such authority, the researcher's professional self-understanding may also be unsettled. In this context, ethics extend beyond the collaborative development of relevant research foci to encompass the process as a whole – including, in a sense, working toward becoming partially superfluous as a researcher.

This requires the capacity to share responsibility, relinquish control, and position oneself in the service of other people's efforts to create meaning together. Co-research with young people thus places researchers in dilemmas that demand flexibility, particularly in relation to intention: how can one act responsibly while pursuing aims that are not fully one's own? This question becomes especially salient in the establishment of shared spaces of inquiry on young people's terms, where questions of *where*, *how, with whom*, and *when* research unfolds become central. Moreover, as young people are, as it is, already engaged in processes of developing independence from adults as part of the societal youth task, this further accentuates the need for flexibility on the part of the researcher.

As Wyn & Dwyer (2000) note, adult logics in youth research are difficult to transcend – an observation that also implies to us as researchers. Despite our intentions, we inevitably bring our own embodied experiences of youth into the research process, which may shape our interpretations and foci if left unexamined. Developing more situated understandings of how young people shape their lives therefore requires, in a sense, *turning things upside down* and aspiring to become *co-researchers in their lives.*

Creating relevant and meaningful spaces of inquiry – with the potential for young people to co-develop relational and collective agency – requires designing conditions that foster both engagement and courage. Within youth research, we have pointed to a central methodological and ethical challenge: how can research become relevant to the lives it seeks to engage? How can *the researcher* become a co-researcher in young people's efforts to collaboratively develop their everyday practices and possibilities? Addressing these questions requires ongoing negotiation, reflexivity, and a commitment to supporting young people's participation as an integral part of knowledge production. We suggest that these questions are not only central to youth research but can be understood more broadly as an ethical orientation – here conceptualized as *ethics of activism*.

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