YOUTH OPTIONS

A report in to current and future practice of
Alternative Educational Provision.

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Executive Summary

This document reports the findings and suggestions made by researchers at The University of Winchester and the University of the West of England regarding current and future practice at Youth Options. The research explored 'what works' in creating a legacy, encouraging behavioural change, and increasing educational engagement of children and young people.

We reviewed academic and practice literature. We then interviewed Looked After children and young people, other children and young people with Special Educational Needs or Education, Health and Care Plans, a range of Youth Options staff and two headteachers.

Areas of significant strength were found in the approach taken by Youth options staff towards the children and young people whom they support. Suggestions are made for future practice; a Good Practice Guide is provided as is a full review of current academic and practice literature of alternative education provision in England in 2023.

Harrison. R. and Johnston, C. Youth Options Final Report (2023)

We found that the Youth Option Projects delivered vibrant, attractive experiences to a diverse range of disadvantaged young people. The projects developed their educational legacies using methodologies which ensured that a range of activities were offered which were accessible and affordable. We found activities were organised and delivered in a caring way using a supportive relational style. These characteristics helped to ensure that all Youth Options sites met and exceeded their participation goals.

Each of the Youth options sites identified different target groups within a small population of disadvantaged children and young people and created informal educational programmes that seemed attractive to them. The sites used by Youth Options delivered a range of educational and social activities; however, they each also had individualised and innovative stories regarding their work with particular groups and individuals.

Acknowledgements

This research and final report would not have been possible without the willingness of those who went out of their way to organise and take part in interviews and those who shared their thoughts and experiences so fully and frankly. We offer thanks to the following groups of people:

Madeleine Durie, CEO of Youth Options

The staff at Youth Options

Head Teachers

Parents and guardians who gave permission for their children to take part.

We would like to offer particular thanks to the many children and young people who agreed to take part for their contributions to the research and to this report.

We are also grateful to the Clinical Research Network for their funding of this project and our respective Universities.

PURPOSE

The research project focused on providing possible options for future directions for the charity Youth Options by interviewing a range of stakeholders including Looked After children and young people. The research and this subsequent Report and Good Practice Guide created identified four key areas for consideration:

(1) the purpose and value of the Alternative Education Provision delivered by Youth Options,

(2) the challenges of delivering Alternative Education Provision,

(3) what could help in delivering Alternative Education Provision and

(4) possible future directions.

We provide practical suggestions for planning, marketing and recruitment, location, activity type, staff and leadership, retention of children and young people and of staff, progression of children and young people and staff, and the development of volunteering opportunities.

Youth Options intend to use this report to create their own evaluative tool to better understand their current and future service delivery. Youth Options also intends to use this report to enable them to apply for longer-term funding than they can currently access, therefore extending the scope and reach of their offer.

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Youth Options Mission:

Youth Options is a children and young people's charity based in Hampshire that provides opportunities to children and young people to achieve a better future. In 2022 Youth Options engaged over 3500 children and young people across a range of services and activities.

The work focuses on three key areas:

- Prevention
- Targeted Action
- Progression Opportunities

Prevention work:

is primarily community work including open access centre-based early years, after school, holiday and youth clubs and street-based youth work, primarily in areas of need.

Targeted Action:

are bespoke activities, often grant funded or commissioned, targeted at children and young people aimed at reducing the impact of negative life experiences.

Progression:

opportunities focuses on providing a positive way forward for children and young people facing the greatest adversity. Delivery of all of this work is through trained early years practitioners and youth support workers, supported in some areas by volunteers working alongside trained staff. They work with the children through a pathway of engagement, developing and empowering children and young people with the skills and knowledge to give them the opportunities to take personal responsibility for their future.

"It's really important that this research is happening. Charities do not usually have the money to do this kind of research, but it is important for charities to be able to plan for the future. I'm pleased to be involved".

Youth Options
Staff Member.

Background

Alternative Education Provision is arranged by Local Authorities for children and young people of compulsory school age who, due to school exclusion, short or long-term illness or behaviour issues would not otherwise receive suitable education in mainstream schools (DfE, 2013). Broadly speaking, Alternative Education Provision may include informal settings such as outdoor provisions or formal settings such as Pupil Referral Units, alternative provision academies, free schools, and hospital schools.

According to the Department for Education report in January 2022, the number of pupils attending Alternative Education Provision (including Local Authority alternative provision, independent schools and other providers that are not able to register as a school) has increased by over 3,100 (10%), to 35,600 since 2020/21 (DfE, 2022).
A House of Commons briefing paper in 2018 reported increasing numbers of children and young people with mental health needs in alternative provision, with one in two pupils having social, emotional, and mental health conditions as their primary category of Special Educational Need. There is also a growing recognition that pupils' mental health and wellbeing influence their educational attainment. Most alternative educational providers therefore aim to facilitate re-engagement with learning, as well as promoting social and emotional development, with the ultimate outcome of pupils reintegrating into mainstream education.

Research Objectives:

This research sought to explore the role and value of alternative education provision delivered by Youth Options through consideration of the following objectives:

(1) the purpose and value of Alternative Education Provision delivered by Youth Options

(2) the challenges of delivering Alternative Education Provision

(3) what could help in delivering Alternative Education Provision

(4) possible future directions.

Consent for this project was received through The University of Winchester Ethics Committee on 13.12.2022 (application RKEEC221001_Harrison) and The University of the West of England (application RKEEC221001)

Methodology

The research project involved evaluation of the provision delivered by Youth Options, an alternative education provider in South-West England, and those involved with or participating in this initiative. The research incorporated a sample of participants (children and young people, managers, practitioners and headteachers) which provided an opportunity to gain insight into the project as a whole and to gain a sense of the ethos behind the range of activities that were offered. Interviews and informal observations of activities occurred within each Youth Options site.

The focus of the data collection was on gaining an understanding of how to create a sustainable 'what works' provision for disadvantaged children and young people. Youth Options wanted to gain insight into good practice and possible options for the future. The research project was designed to inform practice and contribute to the success of Youth Options. Data was thus collected throughout the duration of a school term (January – May 2023). In addition, we adopted a participatory ethos in our approach to data collection by encouraging project staff and participants to help us to understand what issues were important to them.

We engaged two sites that were most representative of Youth Options and were reflective of the background and characteristics of the participants. We attended several of these sessions in each area.

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Methods.

The research project was coproduced with Youth Options. Meetings were held with key staff to determine the most effective methods to be used to achieve the research aims. Methods agreed were interviews and observations.

Formal and informal interviews were therefore held with participants which included children and young people, managers, practitioners, headteachers and the CEO of Youth Options. These took place in person wherever possible. When this was not possible, online interviews were held. Interviews with adults were audio-recorded (whether online or in-person). Many of the children and young people we met did not read or write. Children and young people were given the option to be audio-recorded or to have their words written down verbatim. All chose to have their words written down by researchers and some asked for these to be read back to them at the time of the interview. We were careful to interview participants involved in different activities across each of the Youth Option sites and ensured that we included individuals who represented the demographic composition of the projects. Interviews with selected children and young people occurred throughout sessions in order gain a sense of what was important to them, their initial aspirations and the changes that they may experience through the course of their sessions. Where appropriate, children and young people were visited more than once, in order to build trust and create a relaxed atmosphere. Some children and young people were happy to talk throughout their session, others did not want to miss activities or stay too long after their session was over. Subsequently, in addition to their usual outdoor settings, interviews were also held in various settings (including meeting rooms, hallways, the dining areas of Youth Options centres, in offices, café areas as well as outside in parks and playgrounds).

Interviews with adult participants explored issues such as barriers, challenges, attractors, participation levels, changes in attitudes, skills and knowledge as well as addressing their perceptions of Youth Options itself. The opportunity to conduct formal interviews with adult participants was impacted by the location of the activities which meant that there were not always 'ideal' spaces in which to conduct interviews. All those interviewed however went out of their way to make themselves available either in person or via online interviews.

Limitations.

There were some limitations to the research that may have impacted the findings:

• Although every effort was made to interview young people from different social and cultural backgrounds and levels of dis/ability this was not always possible. Therefore, the views of children and young people who were most accessible are more represented

• The qualitative data is primarily based upon the input provided by children and young people who were eager to participate in the research or who had a close connection with a staff member. This could mean that the views of young people who were less engaged in the programmes are under-represented

• Every effort was also made to give young people enough time to complete the interviews. However, procedural bias may have occurred. Some of the children and young people asked to be interviewed at the end of a session and, thus, may have been more likely to answer questions without fully considering their responses. However, we have no reason to believe that the young people were not attempting to answer the questions truthfully

• Every effort was made to contact and interview as many Youth Options staff as possible. Not all staff responded, and many did not work specifically with the target group of Looked After children and young people which this research project was funded to research, so it is possible that this too influenced the responses we gained.

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The table below maps the different phases of the study, the key stakeholder groups we engaged with, which objectives that specific phase sought to address and the methodological approach that was employed.

Stakeholder Goup	Objectives	Methodological approach
Managers/Directors Lead Practitioners	**To** foreground the voice of managers to gain insights about the nature, purpose, and value of alternative education; **To** identify barriers and facilitators to engagement with and in alternative education; **To** examine how well alternative education is resourced and what training is provided for those who 'teach' on each site.	Interviews
Children and Young People	**To** foreground the voice of children/young people to gain insights about the nature, purpose and value of education **To** identify barriers and facilitators to engagement with Youth Options education	Interviews and observations

Thirteen adult participants were interviewed, and eleven children and young people were interviewed and observed. Sixteen site visits and eleven online interviews took place.

All participants actively chose to take part and reported their experiences of being interviewed as positive.

Supporting Statements:

Madeleine Durie, CEO of Youth Options stated, "Youth Options was delighted to be able to participate in the research project. As a charity, it is very challenging to find resources to look at the impact of our work beyond our own internal assessments and feedback. To have a university-led research project carrying out that research has been invaluable and will not only help our own improvements but also help other organisations working with Looked After Children to consider how they deliver their services. Dr Craig Johnston and Rachel Harrison worked with me and the delivery team to ensure that the research approach was appropriate for the children and young people who were involved. Their research and professional experience of the needs and challenges of these young people was essential to making this project successful. The collaboration between our charity and the University, thanks to this funding, will extend beyond this particular research project and help us to continue to improve our impact and ultimately better outcomes for children and young people".

Regarding the work Youth Options has done with her pupils a Headteacher stated that Youth Options, "is lifechanging" for young people involved. The Headteacher wanted to be interviewed so she could share her view that Youth Options should have funding to provide opportunities for far more children and young people.

Children and young people fedback that they enjoyed being involved in a research project. They indicated that they valued being listened to and having their words written down and read back to them.

Findings from Interviews and Observations.

Qualitative findings – The transcripts from all individual interviews and observations were analysed using deductive thematic analysis techniques. As a result, several themes were developed that relate to:

(1) The value of Youth Options

(2) Terminology around Youth Options' Outdoor Learning Provision

(3) Learning at Youth Options

(4) Youth Options and Schools

(5) The challenges of delivering alternative education at Youth Options and

(6) Suggestions for future directions

All words and phrases presented in quotation marks " " are direct quotes from research participants.

FINDINGS

1. The value of Youth Options

A key strength of Youth Options which was consistently presented was the value of simply being outdoors in nature. This was extremely important in terms of children and young people understanding themselves to be valued human beings. Participants in this study typically identified mental health, general well-being, improved confidence, and social skills as key outcomes from attendance at Youth Options. There was a strong emphasis on using a relationship-based pedagogy which included focused play and /or learning opportunities as a vehicle to improve these aspects of the lives and development of children and young people. The specific opportunities this relationship-based approach took differed across settings and with different children and young people, according to their individual needs.

What came across very strongly and consistently in interviews therefore was the concept of sessions being "child and young person-led". Children and young people were clearly placed at the centre of the work which staff undertook. A staff member gave a typical example regarding one child who "hadn't attended school for months, attended with us, and she wanted to build a den in the woods…So [we've] given that young person what she needs. She needed to play".

Role-modelling appropriate behaviour, particularly in terms of relationships with oneself and others, was a clear focus. One staff member related being told by one child, "'I just feel like I'm a good boy when I come here'. So you give him the opportunity to be positive and [for children to] have self-worth about themselves". Every child and young person was described by one staff member as getting "the same level of investment in care and development" irrespective of their background or educational ability.

Actively listening to children and young people, acting on their ideas and respecting their choices were identified as core actions within this child-centred approach. These were strong themes for staff "they come to us all closed off and curled in on themselves, it's our job to open them up, you know? Empowerment that's what we do". Staff described having a range of activities available for children and young people to choose from and explained the importance of being flexible to meet individual needs.

Alternatively, children and young people could choose their own activities not suggested by staff. When this happened, staff viewed this as positive. One child for example was observed refusing all activities offered by one staff member but instead decided he wanted to build a large nesting area for a bird he had just seen. This was actively encouraged by the staff member, who supported the child to consider appropriate nesting materials and praised his ideas as innovative. This approach was typical in observations made by researchers. Another child offered his own ratings system for his experiences: "I like school 5 out of 10. I like cooking here 11 out of 10. I like Youth Options 1000 out of 10".

There was also an important emphasis on children and young people being supported to feel comfortable and safe. One staff member explained, "You know sometimes this is the only two hours every week that they are actually safe. A place of safety once a week where they know they are safe, for some kids that's what we are". Several adult participants were clear that this was particularly important for some children and young people such as those known to professional services, who were vulnerable to exploitation or who were Looked After. The relationship-based approach Youth options took was therefore considered to be highly relevant.

> "I like school 5 out of 10. I like cooking here 11 out of 10. I like Youth Options 1000 out of 10".

2. Terminology around Youth Options' Outdoor Learning Provision

Despite the overwhelming value to all aspects of mental and physical health and wellbeing which Youth Options was considered to provide, there was a lack of clarity expressed by many participants regarding what it was that Youth Options did in relation to its Outdoor Learning Provision. Descriptions typically produced the statement "Like a Forest School but not a Forest School" for example. When questioned about meanings of phrases commonly used by participants to describe Youth Options, particularly 'Outdoor Learning' and 'Forest School', some described Outdoor Learning as less structured than Forest School, others described it as more structured than Forest School.

There was also a general lack of clarity about what these two terms meant. 'Outdoor Education' was also often used but not always clearly defined. In addition, some participants had a clear understanding of the education system in the U.K., others did not. All participants who expressed an opinion about the education system in England felt it met the needs of a select few pupils but was not fit for purpose for all pupils. It was felt that Youth Options was essential in part because the existing education system was failing children and young people.

Children and young people specifically, as is typical more widely of children and young people in alternative education settings, usually stated that they did not know why they were at Youth Options except that they were "not allowed to go to school". Most children and young people interviewed stated they thought Youth Options was "good", one described it as "a solid set-up", for example. Children and young people consistently expressed satisfaction with the Youth Options staff with whom they worked and very much valued one-to-one working or being in small groups "so I know how to do things". Staff were routinely described as "nice".

Children and young people who attended a range of alternative education settings saw Youth Options as part of their alternative education routine. Most children and young people could list a range of practical skills they had learned at Youth Options, such as fire-building, cooking, using a hammock and creating wooden objects. Children and young people typically stated they did not have their own short- or long-term goals beyond wanting to go back to school full-time. However, two young people stated they were keen to attend college, whilst another who did have long-term goals stated his aim whilst at Youth Options was to learn "anything that makes me feel smarter".

3. Learning at Youth Options

Outcomes for attendance at Youth Options were usually set by schools or external agencies. These were often nebulous and not related to outdoor skills. Rather they related to improved attendance at school, or improved behaviour at school. One staff member explained outcomes are often, "massively varied...[it] could be they need to develop communication, or it could be that they are struggling to build confidence and self-esteem and so being able to do these things which aren't academic. They don't have an academic focus and not having to sit down and be quiet and read and write and do other things. That could be a real struggle. But they are still able to succeed in other ways and showing them that there's more than one way to succeed and that they are good at things I think is really, really helpful for them".

Youth Options staff consistently focused on children and young people as holistic beings who needed and deserved adult approval and praise. Staff regularly described children and young people as "bright" and "eager to learn".

Staff members were clear that children and young people were "learning skills but they don't realise they are learning". The "soft" skills being learned which were most often described included listening, following instructions, learning to undertake tasks in a step-by-step way, dealing with failure to undertake a task successfully at the first attempt, making friends and taking turns.

Staff, however, did not see themselves as 'teachers' and often described the ways in which they actively worked to show children and young people that staff were different from their (school)teachers. 'Learning' was described in passive ways, children and young people learned skills whilst at Youth Options but were typically not described as being taught those skills. One staff member summarised this approach "I'm not a teacher, I'm here to give you the opportunity". Staff members gave numerous examples of the ways in which they had autonomy in what happened in their sessions which they very much valued "the way we deliver is up to us". The "Youth Options Way" of working, however, always included talking through (rather than teaching) safety rules before any activity was undertaken.

Children and young people were encouraged to take risks as appropriate to them as individuals and continually supported to consider the consequences of their actions. It was important to staff that they supported children and young people to understand actions and consequences in a non-judgmental way.

In addition, it was often noted by participants that the sessions were valued because they could contribute to the development of social skills among young people. This was deemed especially important because participants stated that most young people under their charge lacked those important skills. There was emphasis placed on the importance of developing social skills to be successful at school, to ease the transition back to mainstream school, and for life in general, both currently and once young people have left school. One adult participant explained "I think in a lot of circumstances it's a need just for a chance to develop positive relationships...safe adults particularly, I'm thinking of our young people, which are living in care, looked after children, a lot of them [are] in need of a safe, trusting relationship".

Children and young people learning from one another and teaching one another was highlighted as another key strength of the Youth Options approach to learning. This was particularly evident in group sessions where new children and young people joined existing groups and were taught practical skills by existing attendees. A staff member stated "when a young person successfully uses a tool or builds a fire and is able to do that in a safe and sensible way...I think that really goes quite a long way in helping them build confidence and self-esteem, especially when they can come back and potentially then somebody else joins a session. They were able to show them how to do it. That's really beneficial, realising that they can build relationships". Children and young people were supported to learn how to make friends whilst at Youth Options. One staff member related that a child had realised the value of friendship and had used this new skill when returning to school. The child had explained, "I've realised school's a lot easier when you've got friends".

> "I think in a lot of circumstances, it's a need just for a chance to develop positive relationships..."

4. Youth Options and Schools

Adult participants, children and young people described differences between the ways in which school staff could view children and young people, and the ways in which these same children and young people were viewed at Youth Options. All Youth Options staff were keen to stress their understanding and respect for many school staff. They felt that staff were often working with large numbers of children and young people and often may feel they have no option but to focus only on those children who were successful (behaving in socially normative ways, achieving good grades, with regular attendance).

Some school staff, however, were felt to have negative assumptions and low expectations of children and young people using Youth Options. One staff member explained "Social Workers are saying to us, 'please don't view this young person negatively because the school always views them negatively. And I promise you they're not. They're great, you'll see'. And they have been great. They just aren't great in a school environment". One young person felt there should be "less criminalisation of young people at school. For example, if a young person wears a tracksuit they are thought of as a bad person at school. I was blamed and seen as a troublemaker and chucked out of school. To be fair, I built that reputation. I was quite naughty and rude in school. I was not as nice to classmates as I could have been, I was young, about 12, and immature." He felt school could be improved by the employment of "better teachers that want more from you".

Youth Options was felt to offer a non-judgmental space for children and young people to learn as opposed to school, "in school when you're told to do something, it feels pointless. You know, if you're doing schoolwork, what's actually the point of doing that? Schoolwork? It's boring and...not getting anything out of it". Despite this, all children and young people who expressed an opinion stated they wanted to be at school. There was a strong sense that skills learned at Youth Options were transferable to school settings. One staff member explained "Building self-esteem and building confidence is definitely something that they can carry through into school, into situations where they previously didn't feel confident. That might have shown itself in disengaging with the class or some kind of other behaviour which was viewed negatively [in school]". One adult participant described the ways in which school pupils using Youth Options had grown in confidence, which had led to them gaining improved skills in subjects such as Maths and English. This also included children and young people who were significantly marginalised and under-represented, including those who had Special Educational Needs, those with Education, Health and Care Plans, and/or those who were refugees from a range of countries.An adult participant reported this difference in school attainment was evident to parents also, who were keen to find ways to pay for their children to attend Youth Options more regularly, despite those parents being disadvantaged and often living in poverty. One adult participant described the work which Youth Options staff undertook as "life- changing" for all who attended.

5. Challenges of Delivery

Practitioners and managers identified some barriers that impacted on the overall delivery of the sessions. These included knowledge and skills, appropriate facilities, transport and communication difficulties with schools and external individuals.

Staff reported feeling a level of confidence in knowing why children and young people may act in ways which can challenge others. They also expressed satisfaction with the levels of support and offers of training which were made by senior staff. Several practitioners and managers did though query the appropriateness of their own (and others') knowledge and skills. Practitioners and managers explained that it was difficult to recruit staff with the expertise needed to work with disadvantaged children and young people. Accordingly, there were many instances when non-specialist staff were working with children and young people. Often, this was a person who had an interest in and participated in outdoor activities outside of work.

In addition to the range of training opportunities available as part of Youth Options' formal training programme, staff felt formal qualifications were needed and their suggestions for future training were broad ranging. They included training on how to deal with children when they are in extreme distress, mental health training, training on a range of Special Educational Needs, training on how to support children after they have experienced a safeguarding event, training in the psychology of children and young people, training on how to deal effectively with children who do not respond to consequences approaches, de-escalation training, counselling training, and training in human development and behaviour including brain biology and behavioral triggers.

Participants also mentioned the value of having appropriate facilities and equipment. While some were content with the space and facilities, they had available, most said that the types of activities that they could offer were restricted by the lack of space and facilities available. Some practitioners had resorted to trying to use classrooms to deliver sessions, but these spaces were deemed inappropriate for Outdoor Learning activities.

> "Schools aren't always the best at communicating".
>
> Paperwork from schools listing goals for children or young people to achieve was often taken "with a pinch of salt".
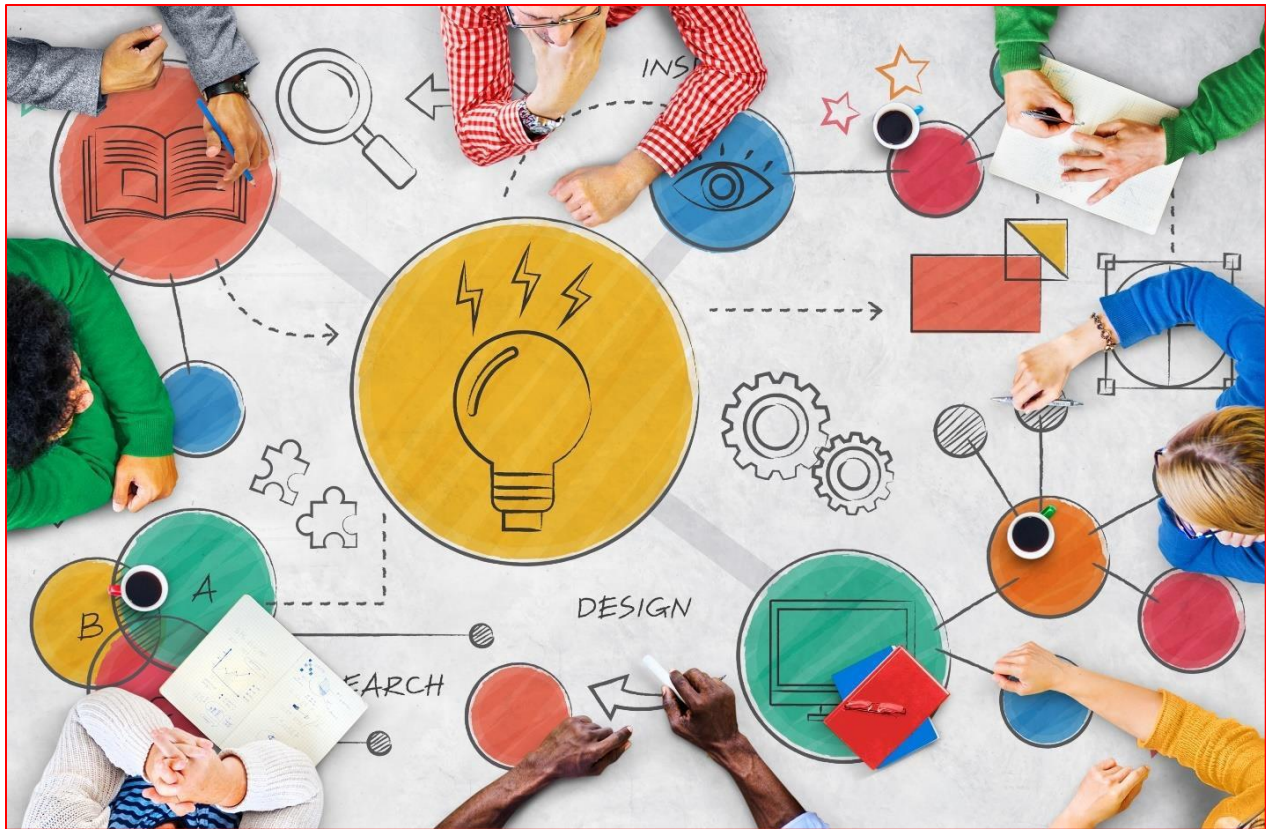
Staff acknowledged that engaging young people in the outdoors and particularly in woodland areas with ponds and streams has an inherent higher risk than delivering within a constrained site but that this brings opportunities to engage positively with nature. Working in spaces where children and young people could physically leave if they wanted to was considered to be a safety issue by some staff who dealt regularly with particular children or young people who had a history of running away from spaces or situations. However, staff explained that both sites have fenced off areas for delivery and, at Bishopstoke Road, a high gate and fence to stop access onto the road. Staff also explained there are risk assessments put in place for each child depending on their need.

There were also issues which affected the amount of time children and young people had at Youth Options. Transport was reported by adults, children and young people to be a key barrier to participation in Youth Options. Transport used was often taxis, which were reported to be unreliable, with sometimes unhelpful or aggressive drivers A staff member explained "The kids hate taxis mainly…taxis are useless. Don't drop them off in the right place and don't turn up on time…You can see their frustrations with them".

Some practitioners were able to use local community facilities for education, but again there were concerns about education time-loss, as well as cost, travel and transition concerns. One adult participant relied on borrowing a minibus from a nearby private school and a Youth Options staff member travelling back and forth to drive it. Lack of reliable, effective, affordable transport was considered to be a side-effect of ineffective funding, which may fund a place at Youth Options, but did not fund the much-needed transport costs to get a child or young person there and back.

Despite significant efforts by Youth options staff, difficulties in building and maintaining good communication links with schools was also identified as an issue which could negatively impact Youth Options as an organisation, its staff and the children and young people it supports. When communication worked well it relied on relationships which staff had spent significant time and effort to build and maintain with interested and engaged adults who supported children or young people. When those adults moved to different jobs or did not engage with Youth Options staff for other reasons, fragile networks were often broken, and new networks took significant time and effort to be established.

The issue of identifying a key person within a school and then getting contact with that person was considered to be difficult and took considerable time. When communication did not work well, staff reported this hindered their ability to gain insights into the needs of children and young people while they were attending Youth Options. They also reported a lack of information regarding follow-up and progress of children and young people they had supported: "They're just kind of gone and then that's it". This included not having accessible school staff, social workers, or foster carers to contact, and difficulties when changes to these people were made.

There was a "running theme that schools aren't always the best at communicating, and again we will understand why. Because they are incredibly busy with lots of things that they're trying to juggle". Paperwork from schools listing goals for children or young people to achieve was often taken "with a pinch of salt" because it was so inaccurate. Information about triggers for children and young people was identified by staff as essential but often missing from paperwork they received. Accurate and clear information was desired but considered to be unlikely without "a magic wand".

6. Suggestions for future directions

Adult participants had some suggestions for future directions for Youth Options. Some staff felt that an environmental focus would be helpful. This was useful in terms of the sustainability of the sites and of the planet. Clarity about Youth Options' mission and aims was suggested by participants. All adult participants wanted Youth Options to offer more spaces and sessions to more children and young people if funding was available to enable this. This funding could be used primarily to enable the expansion of the staff team.

Having an effective, reliable and child-friendly transport system to enable the safe and efficient movement of children and young people to and from Youth options was also considered to be an essential way to enable those with chaotic lives to gain regular access to the stability Youth options offers.

Induction days for pupils, visiting and working in schools and better communication with schools, parents, carers and Social Workers were listed as ways in which Youth Options could ease transitions for children and young people due to start attending at Youth Options. It was felt that this would also improve its current service, increase their customer-base and build on its successful relationships with children and young people. A significant advertising campaign so that Youth Options was widely known and recognised was also highlighted. Some participants explained they had heard about Youth Options only inadvertently by word of mouth, one gained funding to send pupils to Youth Options through their own professional networks (rather than any official channels). The short-term nature of funding was also thought to be detrimental to the future hiring of high-calibre, experienced and qualified staff. It was felt that it was only funding that was holding back the significant expansion of Youth Options.

Harrison. R. and Johnston, C. Youth Options Final Report (2023)

Building Good Practice: A Guide

The Youth Options projects often delivered fun, rewarding and active educational experiences to disadvantaged young people. This good practice guide reflects the learning from the project that can be used to inform other projects and can contribute to 'what works' and the growth of the provision.

Youth Options sessions were designed to engage children and young people in safe spaces and therefore cost, safety and convenience were important in all cases. In addition, the trusting, friendly relationships between the staff and the children and young people were crucial to the success of each of the interventions. Similarly, the informal delivery style which emphasized fun personal and individualized interactions appealed to children and young people. Finally, the importance of good referrals in the development aims of children and young people and the sustainability of programmes emerged in most cases.

This Good Practice Guide covers the following topics: Planning and initiating a new session; Marketing and recruiting children and young people; Location; Type of activity; Staff and leadership; Retention and Progression

Planning and initiating a new session.

From the research we undertook we identified several good practice steps that help with initial planning:

- Sessions can be promoted via appropriate lesson planning and through appropriate work with schools to ensure that the children and young people are directly engaged by individuals and organisations they trust

- Successful sessions are those where organisers have taken time to get to know and understand what young people are interested in, what enthuses them, and what they find challenging or difficult. It is important to consider the needs of children and young people within the context of school and the local community (school lessons and sports activities for example)

- Partnerships with local organizations can help initiating initial engagement of the children and young people

- Youth Options could work much more closely with Schools, Youth Services, Police, Youth Offending Teams and Health professionals. These partners can help deliver or promote sessions, provide joint funding, or further refer children and young people

- Partnerships may be used to develop long-term networks for education pathways and progression routes

- The informal style was effective; however, some partners may be more used to more formal approaches. For example, some teachers may be uncomfortable with the informal approach of staff

- Children and young people could be even more involved in designing and organising sessions.

Marketing and Recruiting Children and Young People.

A wide range of methods need to be used to attract children and young people beyond referrals. These may include:

- Word of mouth

- Attending meetings in schools and through community groups and clubs

- Introducing taster sessions

- Using social media/online (e.g. Instagram pages, Twitter) to publicise activities

- Asking staff to publicise the sessions in schools and other organisations

- There are a significant number of success stories. Success stories can help to highlight the achievements of programmes and sessions and more especially the achievements of the children and young people

- Young people identified having fun with staff whom they trust as key to their sessions. Advertising that reflects these elements, therefore, may be effective.

Location.

Travelling to sessions can be a barrier for many disadvantaged young people in terms of cost, not having someone to take them, territorial concerns, and safety. For most children and young people, holding sessions in local and accessible venues was crucial. Key issues relating to location include:

- Accessible and convenient - delivered in accessible venues, at appropriate times in the school day

- Safe and secure: it is important that young people feel that they are secure in the venue

- Comfortable: location in which young people feel physically and emotionally safe and at ease

- Neutral: not linked to or identified with a specific group

- For many schools cost is a key factor in their decisions about participation

- Most sessions were provided free to users. This facilitated continued attendance and accessibility for many children and young people at the sessions

- Charging a fee for additional services may help with sustainability of programmes.

Type of Activity.
There was no one activity that met the needs of all young people, however:

- Offering individual outdoor activities was the best way to engage children and young people, including some who may have been negative about such activities. These activities were also used successfully to bring together children and young people from different and similar backgrounds and neighbourhoods

- Variations of activities was welcomed and should be continued

- Children and young people stated that they like to try new activities. Some participants preferred outdoor activities which were non-traditional or more technically challenging such as boxing

- 'Trendy', culturally relevant activities can also be appealing, and children and young people expressed a desire to try activities that they had seen on television – this may require additional equipment.

Staff and leadership.

The skill and expertise of those delivering the sessions are crucially important to the success of the session. The staffs' informal style and approach (which is built on a range of personal rather than professional qualities and characteristics) enable them to effectively interact with (and potentially influence) children and young people. We found that the following are important:

- A relaxed approach to delivery

- Appropriate qualifications, training and experience for both staff and leaders

- A passionate commitment to improving the lives of young people through a relationship-based approach to learning

- A good understanding of local facilities and people as well as more formal skills ensures that sessions are fun and challenging

- Flexibility in approach and sensitivity to the needs of children and young people

- Younger participants valued knowing that there was a responsible person supporting sessions.

Retention.

Staff used different strategies to engage and retain children and young people. They ensured that the sessions were fun, interesting and inclusive of individuals and their needs:

- Fun means a range of different things to different people. On the whole, fun is about being involved, 'fitting-in', being active, gaining a sense of achievement and spending time with people they like. Children and young people should continue to be asked about what they think fun is for them

- Clear communication between staff and children and young people is essential; children and young people need to know what going on so that they can plan their own involvement and attendance

- Fostering open dialogue and opportunities for feedback during the sessions to review progress and resolve any problems when they arise

- Where appropriate, mechanisms for keeping in touch with children and young people could be introduced

- Successful sessions may be linked to other future activities such as residential experiences, clubs or local events. This allows a broadening of children and young people's experiences, the potential to increase social networks and the possibility of opening up new pathways

- Successful staff may act as catalysts to identify, train, and be supportive to volunteers who themselves may develop the knowledge and skills to be involved in outdoor learning

- Include young people in the organisation and running of sessions including the development of rules and rituals in games

- It could be possible to further embed children and young people involvement in a session by assigning responsible roles, such as team captains, leaders or peer mentors.

Progression.

The most successful sessions that we visited encouraged children and young people to progress and develop their capacity (either in terms of activity skills or social competence, for example). Successful sessions place a value on pathway progression. Volunteering and peer mentoring may lead to experiences and training that help young people develop personal and social skills, and knowledge. Volunteering or peer mentoring may provide an opportunity to realize and build the potential of young people as well as helping with the sustainability of programmes. Volunteers may benefit Youth Options by helping with sessions, providing support to young people, serving as peer role models and mentors. Volunteering may help young people to acquire the knowledge and skills to plan and deliver activities as well as developing a range of professional, technical, and personal skills. Volunteering may also facilitate entry into the labour market:

- Youth Options could recruit their own under-sixteen-year-old participants who demonstrate potential and are eager to become future volunteers

- These volunteers and peer mentors could provide informal encouragement and individual support

- Volunteers and peer mentors could provide formal skill and knowledge development

- Volunteers and peer mentors could provide opportunities to directly assist staff on projects to increase their comfort in leadership roles

- Volunteers and peer mentors could provide opportunities to broaden the horizons and career aspirations of children and young people using Youth Options

- There may be benefits to providing funding, such as gym passes or free training (or other tokens) to volunteers and peer mentors to encourage progression or continued involvement

- Many staff assisted participants in getting help to address a range of personal and life issues, e.g. bullying, mental health and welfare advice. This requires that staff have knowledge and training to identify these needs and make appropriate referrals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This section of the report identifies some of the existing evidence that could help to inform how Youth Options might focus their support for interventions with children and young people.

Overview: Children (and/or young people) and alternative educational provisions.

The review of literature about alternative educational provisions (AEP) suggests the need to create sustainable opportunities for children and young people (CYP), particularly those from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, having care experience is a key factor reported as having a significant impact on children's access to education, the shaping of their experiences of education and is identified in literature alongside other forms of disadvantage (Department for Education (DfE), 2018a; 2018b). CYP with care experience are overrepresented both in AEP and in school exclusions statistics (DfE, 2022; 2023). Although we do not look at the evidence of AEP in relation to a specific group, it is important to acknowledge that children who access AEP settings are not a homogenous group. Social difference such as race, gender, place and disability, for example shape CYPs views of education, their experiences, and their level of participation in educational activities (DfE, 2019). It is well known from research that outcomes for pupils who experience AEP or exclusion tend to be poor at the end of their compulsory schooling (HM Government, 2022). This should not always be seen as an issue with the quality of some AEP providers. The outcomes each CYP achieves in the sector can represent significant achievements given the factors that led to them accessing AEP. But relative to the general population, the outcomes for this group of CYP are poor and persist into early adulthood. Improving their post-16 (and beyond) employment and education prospects ought to be a policy goal (see Beynon, 2021).

The DfE's 2023 measure of the relative propensity of different groups in the population accessing AEP demonstrates very clearly that there are differences within the population of the CYP accessing such provision. However, the index does not go on to identify the reasons for the variations. A review of existing evidence about CYP likely to enrol in or be referred to AEP suggests that in general:

1. 66% of pupils in AEP were aged 14-15 (compared to 13% in the state school sector),
2. 80% had special educational needs (compared to 15% of all school age pupils),
3. 40% were eligible for Free School Meals (compared to 14% in the state sector).

In summary, those attending AEPs are on average 14 to 16, have SEND and are from 'poor' backgrounds.

For most of the CYP included in the research undertaken by Malcolm (2021) the idea that alternative forms of education could be understood as fun and enjoyable was more important than some of the other benefits offered by a diverse and growing range of AEP providers. In essence, relationships matter. Malcolm goes go on to conclude that there is a lack of good quality and long-term research that evaluates the effectiveness of interventions, especially in England. This is not to say that interventions are not effective, rather that the evidence is not available, as rigorous evaluations are often not undertaken. As Malcolm further points out, although CYP have clear views on barriers and supports to participation, research so far has failed to take proper account of these, particularly in relation to the views of children in care. The overall message here is that it is crucial to understand the views of different groups of children in relation to participation in AEP and to take these as a starting point in developing both policy and practice.

Understanding Alternative Educational Provisions – where do Youth Options 'fit'.

Although AEP is neglected in policy terms, research that does exist highlights some key issues and concerns. To begin with, there is the problem of defining the sector and the theory underpinning these programmes, described by Page (2023) as 'wide-ranging and disparate'. Page discusses the diversity of forms of AEP: Local Authority/Council run, privately owned, linked to outdoor education and work-based learning settings and special schools. As such, Taylor defines AEP as 'where pupils engage in timetabled, educational activities away from school sites' (Taylor 2012, p.4). This definition is suitably all-encompassing: schools or programmes that are set up by Local Authorities, schools, community and voluntary organizations, or other entities to serve CYP whose needs are not being met and who, for a variety of reasons, are 'failing' in a traditional learning environment. For Pennacchia, and Thomson (2016a) the defining factor of AEP is their emphasis on innovation in pedagogy, caring relationships, and a restricted curriculum – a definitional lens that focuses on CYP rather than the organizational type. This focus on the child is a common theme across the literature: Jalali and Morgan (2018) highlight the sense of belonging and connectedness not experienced in mainstream schools; Malcolm (2018a) discusses the emphasis on relationships between staff and children, the flexibility of structure and curriculum; tailored to the interests and goals of students; O'Gorman et

al (2016) emphasize the prioritization of care that creates the setting as a 'safe space'. A definition that focuses on child-centeredness and flexible pedagogy stretches the boundaries to include a variety of outdoor settings such which may be actively chosen by Local Authorities – in this case, Youth Options.

From our observations and site visits, it is similarly hard to define Youth Options - although the prioritization of care, child-centeredness and safe spaces link to the ideas above but also closely align with the role of outdoor education and Forest Schools. Outdoor Education settings and Forest Schools advocate CYPs independence, learning is encouraged to be constructed by the CYP themselves rather than sitting in a classroom and being told how learning works. O'Brien et al (2007) support the fact that 'Forest Schools' and outdoor education both align with constructivist learning theory due to the key skills and styles of learning that is used in the schools. They state, Forest School allows for constructivist learning to take place in which the "children construct understanding and meaning through the activities they undertake on their own and with others" (Ibid, p 252). In these cases, CYP in outdoor learning spaces produce their own meanings and understandings of different aspects of the outside environment. They have the freedom to explore the skills they are being influenced to learn as well as exploring a 'real' setting rather than an artificial setting: the classroom. The obvious difference between Youth Options and emerging ideas of Alternative Provisions in more traditional learning environments (i.e. a structured classroom) is the settings. At Youth Options CYP are predominately exploring and learning in woodland areas rather than indoors at a desk and table in a room. There are significant other differences between Youth Options and a traditional classroom such as the role of the 'teacher', the learning motivation, the collaboration and the responsibility of the learner.

Bruner (1995) coined the concept of 'scaffolding' to represent what the relationships between a teacher and a learner look like in outdoor learning settings. Scaffolding in Youth Options is a shared understanding of space between the 'teacher' or educator and CYP. This can lead to a mutual interpretation of what is being learned. At Youth Options the responsibility is on the learner to actively guide their own learning. In a school classroom, students tend to be more passive as responsibility for learning resides with a teacher.

AEP and CYP from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The literature indicates that some negative attitudes, perceptions and preferences that children from disadvantaged areas have toward education and those associated with education are shaped by the different spaces, places and resources that they have

available to participate and engage in education (Pennacchia and Thomson, 2016). This is often significant in relation to the nature of the education provided, to individual participation and to important life outcomes such as CYPs lifestyles and their social and cognitive development (Pennacchia et al, 2016). The 2022 Children's Commissioner Report indicates the extent of differences between attendance and positive outcomes in England. It shows the growing divide between the richest and poorest families in the U.K. with large concentrations of poverty in the Southwest of England. Dean's (2018) research also shows that that poverty has continued to affect the attendance and participation of CYP and that the gaps between these measures for the richest and poorest families have widened over the last ten years.

A survey of school attendance also found a bias towards the more advantaged classes in society, noting that poverty affects CYPs progress and achievement through education more than any other individual factor (Dorling, 2014). This is important because sociability and participation partially define social inclusion and 'normality' and because poverty is a significant risk factor in becoming excluded, with all the implications this has for identity, health and well-being. CYP in care are frequently seen as the most at risk with society, yet their capacity to participate in differing forms of education is invariably shaped by social inequality and exclusion. In practice this means 1.8 million pupils persistently absent. Ministers have expressed fears about persistent absence, which has been exacerbated by the Covid pandemic. Based on data from around half of Councils in England, a report from estimated that almost 1.8 million pupils (22 per cent) missed more than 10 per cent of sessions in the autumn term last year, while 124,000 (1.5 per cent) missed over half. These findings mirror those published by Beynon (2021), which showed that over 20 per cent of primary pupils and over 30 per cent of secondary pupils were persistent absentees.

In line with these concerns, the literature suggests that disengagement from education is increasing. Indeed, some researchers suggest that there is a moral panic surrounding non-attendance among CYP (Parsons, 2005), especially around those who grow up in poorer communities. Consecutive Governments (and more recently the Children's Commissioner) have identified CYP living in poorer communities as a target for alternative interventions as outcomes for this group relate to a range of wider inequality issues in England. While all segments of the English school population are affected by disengagement, one of the common myths that exists in the British press is that CYP in care at most at risk (Jones, 2013). In this generalization, two facts commonly are overlooked: a) the relation between dis/engagement can vary by gender, ethnicity, disability or age and b) while disparities in attendance are closing, those with a lack of AEP in their area are becoming more disengaged.

AEP in disadvantaged, or 'poor' communities, have also been identified as important in keeping young people away from crime and increasing community cohesion (Timpson, 2019). Timpson's review of AEP also highlighted a common perception that exists in the AEP literature: that any educational activities in poor communities will have an identifiable influence or effect on the lives of CYP who live there. However, Timpson also identifies a lack of evidence relating to the impact of these projects (especially large development initiatives) in poor communities. Timpson's review indicates for example, that AEP may provide a context which develops strong bonds through shared symbols and identity as well as common purposes, all of which are conditions for promoting a sense of belonging, trust, and to "combat the pernicious effects of apathy and cessation of motivation". The Timpson review also identified evidence that those who participated in AE were more satisfied with life, more trusting, more sociable and healthier whilst in these provisions than they were whilst at school. Extending this analysis, Malcolm (2021) suggests that AEP increases subjective well-being generally. Indeed, it is ubiquitously maintained that participation in AEP has a positive effect on improved educational results, social networks, social cohesion, as well as increasing confidence and sense of self-worth and reducing offending behaviour.

The evidence to support these views, particularly studies that include the views of CYP who live in poor communities is however, limited. This lack of research led Johnston and Bradford (2022; 2023) to suggest social cohesion and social literacy may not be due to failings in AEP. Repeated studies show no evidence of a change in the social patterning or other identifiable normative outcomes of those accessing AEP. Rather this is reversed: only one percent of those accessing AEP obtain 5 GCSEs and 14-to 16-year-old young people are also less likely to participate in paid work once leaving AEP than CYP accessing regular education. This evidence would seem to provide a rationale for building a coherent policy or rationale for those accessing AEP. However, many authors claim it is a fallacy to think that it is possible to change the aspirations, attitudes, preferences, and perceptions of young people through their involvement in AEP alone. Johnston and Bradford continue to argue for example, that the lives of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are determined largely by what happens outside of AEP.

These authors' concerns relate to the outcomes of AEP and the need for other enabling factors to be in place: changes in the physical environment, changes in social infrastructure and facilities and parity in resources. These enabling factors are related to concerns about the importance of AEP transformative potential, particularly in relation to providing CYP with the cultural capacity (or social capital) to renegotiate school and employment. Other authors are also sceptical of the role AEP on its own can play in transforming young people's lives. A wide-ranging review of recent academic journal

articles, (Johnston et al, forthcoming) that examines the role of AEP draws similar conclusions. This review notes that it was not AEP but aspects of the wider external socio-cultural and economic environment which most affected CYP. Thus, stakeholders in AEP should be aware of the limitations of any attempt to use AEP to deliver changes in the attitudes, aspirations, preferences, and perceptions of CYP in the absence of parallel initiatives in larger social, cultural, and economic environments and without closer partnership working with schools and stakeholders (Pennacchia and Thomson, 2016b).

The point is not to debunk the positive influence of AEP, but to suggest that the circumstances of some CYP are complex and solutions not as complete as some authors suggest (Solomon & Thomas, 2013). Gathering evidence from CYP is therefore crucial. This has the potential to challenge the naïve assumption that offering short-term provisions and increased opportunities for alternative educational activities will routinely achieve specific and/or long-term outcomes. It is also accepted practice to involve CYP in the developing, designing and delivering of provision, whilst aiming to increase effectiveness and accountability. However, there are few examples in the literature of how this might be achieved in practice. The messages from literature are that it is important to gain and understand the views of different groups of young people in relation to developing AEP and to use these as a starting point in developing policy and practice.

AEP: Developing the skills of provision leaders.

The claim that AEP is a panacea for CYP in poor communities and the associated assumption that leadership is a key component in successful programmes has certain weaknesses when looking to further the development of AEP staff and leaders. There is a continued failure to systematically monitor and evaluate the underpinning factors that may lead to establishing and maintaining positive relationships and to connect these with outcomes in CYP's lives, such as whether a sense of belonging can affect attitude change. Indeed, there is little insight into what these relationships look like, what form they take and what social processes underpin them (Johnston and Bradford, 2023).

The limited evidence in this literature endorses the potential of positive social relationships between leaders and participants (Archer et al, 2010). Some authors suggest that if programme leaders and staff are to make a positive impact on the lives of CYP, there is a need to offer them professional development on practices that are most likely to lead to establishing and maintaining positive relationships. IntegratED (2022) and Tate and Greatbatch (2017) promote three factors:

• Effective matching of CYP's needs with the specific project objectives
• Giving CYP the opportunity to work with others and, more importantly, work for the benefit of others
• Establishing positive relationships between leaders and CYP

Although it may be difficult to demonstrate that social relationships forged through AEP will, on their own, make a generalisable contribution to the solution of various social problems, Johnston and Bradford (2023) and James (2005) do argue the need to illuminate what types of learning or 'socialisation' furnish which outcomes (positive and negative) for which CYP and under what conditions. In other words, to maximise the impact of AEP it is important that we understand the 'social connections' made between leaders and CYP in AEP, what the intended and unintended effects and consequences of these relationships might be and how CYP's lives are differentially affected by social networks based on trust and respect. These findings may provide insights into the lives of older CYP, such as their ability to produce and utilise these bonds and connections to build new relationships, to resist negative social networks and to build resources to develop positive life-pathways (White et al, 2012; Levinson and Thompson, 2016).

Despite the limited amount of evidence available to support the view that leaders and AEP staff have a positive effect upon the lives of young people in disadvantaged communities, several issues have become apparent from the literature review:

• These adults are closest to CYP as participants (both proximally and emotionally) and are generally perceived as 'role models' who can exert a positive influence with CYP

• Role models are not always positive. They can promote negative social images, beliefs, and behaviours. This can apply equally to staff (particularly leaders) and parents as it can to celebrities and teachers

• In general, the most effective role models are those who focus on developing a long term, mentoring relationship particularly for individuals from socially disadvantaged groups and 'at risk' groups

• Role-modelling as a concept is under-theorised in the literature

• The capacity of AEP to evaluate their leaders' skill development appears limited.

Organisations (such as Youth Options) may need support and guidance to be able to undertake meaningful evaluations of the role that leaders play in CYP's lives.

Developing sustainable AEPs.

For many, not least the current Government, the apparent poor behaviour and poor engagement of some children and the development of AEP holds potential for educating a challenging part of the school population. However, there is much debate in the literature over how and whether this can be achieved. The evidence gathered so far that AEP increase participation and provide a viable long-term legacy, or positive political 'trickle-down effect' is complex. Historically, AEP has a weak profile both in political discourse and as an element in welfare state provision (Timpson, 2019). AEP are characteristically understood as a counterbalance to 'formal' education. An emphasis on the importance of AEP situates these provisions as apparently leading to more involved, responsible, and integrated young people. Political support for AEP may also be tied to its imputed capacity to reduce the 'burden' on regular schools who are failing to meet the needs of CYP with additional needs in regular provision. Thus, questions persist around whether the AEP is concerned with citizenship, efficiency or 'deficit reduction'.

One of the key messages from the DfE 2023 SEND Review policy document is that many of the positive benefits of AEP. Key benefits listed are; the development of relationships that may assist in nurturing transferable skills and community coherence. However, the Centre for Social Justice (2022) suggested that the scale of the challenge that AEP providers set themselves appeared too high for the relatively small amounts of funding that have been allocated in existing budgets. Certainly, several AEP's have made claims and predictions that their provisions will increase participation in formal education, particularly for CYP in some of their poorest communities. What is also evident however is that past governments have tended to avoid clarifying whether they expect participation in AEP to be long-lasting or short-term (in order to fix CYP) and then return them to school. The literature suggests that increases in short-term participation in mainstream school because of AEP are by no means guaranteed.

For example, Uncertainty over how the 2023 policy document will develop educational activity, mental health and well-being legacies through AEP across England and Wales is re-emphasized by Johnston et al (forthcoming) in their systematic and wide-ranging literature review of the evidence for increased value surrounding AEP. Other research available on AEP suggests that any gains made may not be sustained, and that the low numbers of AEP and the dearth of funding make it difficult to monitor the impact of AEP on long term participation in formal education (Dodman 2016; Done, Knowler and Armstrong, 2021; Ellis and Wolfe, 2019).

Bearing this in mind, a central pillar of Youth Options' strategy for securing their sustainable provision could be to increase the quantity and quality of staff by targeting and then developing staff members (and possibly volunteers). The idea that volunteers or graduates can be recruited from areas in which they live is not new (Thomson, 2014). Indeed, provisions at the local level are often dependent on volunteers. Volunteering has been a central feature of several educational initiatives, both within the UK and US, and research has highlighted the profound influence of local youth volunteers who have supported AE programmes for 'at-risk' CYP. Such an approach to recruitment is favoured not only because such recruits are often regarded as having more 'street credibility' (Nicholson and Hoye, 2008) than traditional coaches and other professionals, but the development of volunteering may also offer training, work-related skills and employment opportunities for those outside the labour market.

The literature also illustrates a view of AEP as being embedded in intrinsic self-interest, which relates primarily to personal development, with young people engaging in volunteering as a form of exchange or a transaction: volunteers offer their time in return for personal gain of different kinds. Most of the literature adopts a definition that encompasses only formal types of volunteering. Volunteering in these terms takes part in an organised form and includes young people who are finding it difficult to access the labour market or young people seeking other benefits. In addition to motivations, ongoing research with young volunteers shows that several practical and context-specific factors facilitate volunteering. Time and proximity seem to be important factors in supporting volunteering (Bradford et al, 2016). For example, the potential young volunteer, even if already motivated to volunteer, requires the time to participate and an opportunity to do so must be located close to home.

Similarly, a key facilitator for volunteers is that they can meet in a setting that is of interest to them or is in a context that they are familiar with. This includes young people who are not motivated by self-interest but instead by a desire to help others. Voluntary engagement in sport, for example, tends to be regarded more negatively by CYP than voluntary activity in other fields (Bradford et al., 2016). Yet, youth-based programmes remain a popular field of engagement for volunteers of all ages, particularly for young volunteers. The impact of young people from poor communities (especially those from BAME communities and disabled groups) on other young people and their communities is mostly absent. Consequently, there is only a limited body of evidence available that indicates what young people graduating from AEP in disadvantaged communities might gain from and contribute to volunteering. This suggests that volunteering is important in:

- Providing choice and variety in terms of areas of possible interest

- Providing enjoyment and an expression of shared enthusiasm

- Developing mutual understanding and breaking down social barriers

- Developing skills and confidence.

Bearing this in mind, there is a real need to involve stakeholders, including young people in the design and delivery of AEP development. This involvement may challenge myths about young people and validate the impact they have in their communities. There is little evidence in the literature that illustrates forms of voluntary engagement in AEP and how these engagements and voluntary roles may or may not facilitate the development of personal and social skills, develop self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-control in young people's individual and collective social lives. The scarcity of research on these engagements is perhaps a reflection of the lack of value given to the role of young people as volunteers graduating from AEP. Understanding the levels of involvement will validate young people's experiences and draw attention to the value of social relationships, social networks, and generalised trust in shaping effective service provision for CYP in their own communities. Our review of the literature suggests several factors that impact the provisions for CYP, and which will have implications for Youth Options. First, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the research evidence for many of the claimed impacts and social benefits of AEP on CYP, especially those from disadvantaged communities (McShane, 2020). These limitations arise from three broad factors:

• The lack of robust research into the benefits of AEP for CYP from disadvantaged communities and households – especially for those who have care related experiences

• The difficulties in measuring and defining many of the apparent benefits of AEP participation, such as social cohesion, and separating those benefits from other positive and negative influences and any access to social capital that may exist within CYP's lives

• Measuring the cause and effect of AEP (in this case between Youth Options' interventions and actual change) in CYP's lives presents some difficulties (i.e. what is cause and what is effect).

Nevertheless, Youth Options encompasses a spectrum of activities and settings and local facilities that are and can be adapted to meet the needs of CYP with differing educational levels. Furthermore, expanding the 'social side', often a key part of Youth Options' activities, may also serve to support CYP's continued involvement and enjoyment of educational based activities which in turn, might also help ensure some of the apparent health and social benefits of participation and sustainable provisions.

The literature review also identifies some key groups for AEP interventions:

I.   CYP from disadvantaged backgrounds (especially those with care experience)
II.   CYP with disabilities
III.   Girls and young women
IV.   CYP from BME backgrounds

Although there is a consistent identification of these groups in the literature, it should not be assumed that other disadvantaged groups do not exist simply because they are not referred to. For example, migrant, asylum-seeker and refugee children may have needs although there is little literature on these. Minority ethnic groups, disabled CYP and those on low incomes also face barriers to participation in regular education. For example, a decline in participation levels amongst disadvantaged CYP may be due to a range of similar but well documented barriers including health difficulties, lack of information, money, time, confidence, and the appropriate support to access educational activities (Children commissioner, 2022).

Regarding knowledge accumulation surrounding AEP, Johnston et al (2023) concluded that the quality of existing theoretical evidence underpinning AEP is often poor, which might hamper general understanding of AEP and the measurement of identifiable outcomes. On a related note, many of the existing studies in the field tend to be concerned with what activities young people do, instead of investigating why CYP chose to participate in a particular activity. Attributing any key changes in CYPs participation, aspirations or behaviours to AEP (or AEP activities) must be accomplished by focusing on any impact made from the perspective of CYP themselves. That is, from the bottom-up (from where CYP are- currently), rather than relying upon external top-down indictors. By including the former approach, the impact of AE programmes can be assessed through close consideration of what would have happened to CYP in the absence of AEP.

• The literature suggests that where interventions are successful, staff take full account of CYP's voices and involve them in planning, organisation, and evaluation

• Where projects are successful, they are flexible and take account of young people's circumstances and backgrounds (See O Brien, 2007)

• It is important to identify the motivation for participation. Many CYP value fun and are less compelled by possible formal or educational benefits. The point is that CYP attach different meanings to different types of educational participation and providers should understand these

• For some young people, good role models and perhaps (peer) volunteers are important sources of encouragement to participate

•Adults are important for CYP. Indeed, the role of relationships is crucial to increase participation in formal education and in breaking down social barriers more widely, and this implies that projects should consider staff and volunteer issues including recruitment and continuous professional development (See Malcolm, 2021)

•Much of the literature implies that successful projects are well connected in the sense that they involve the right partners and stakeholders. This means that they can draw on good local knowledge to best develop the work. CYP, their peer and friendship groups and families are stakeholders.
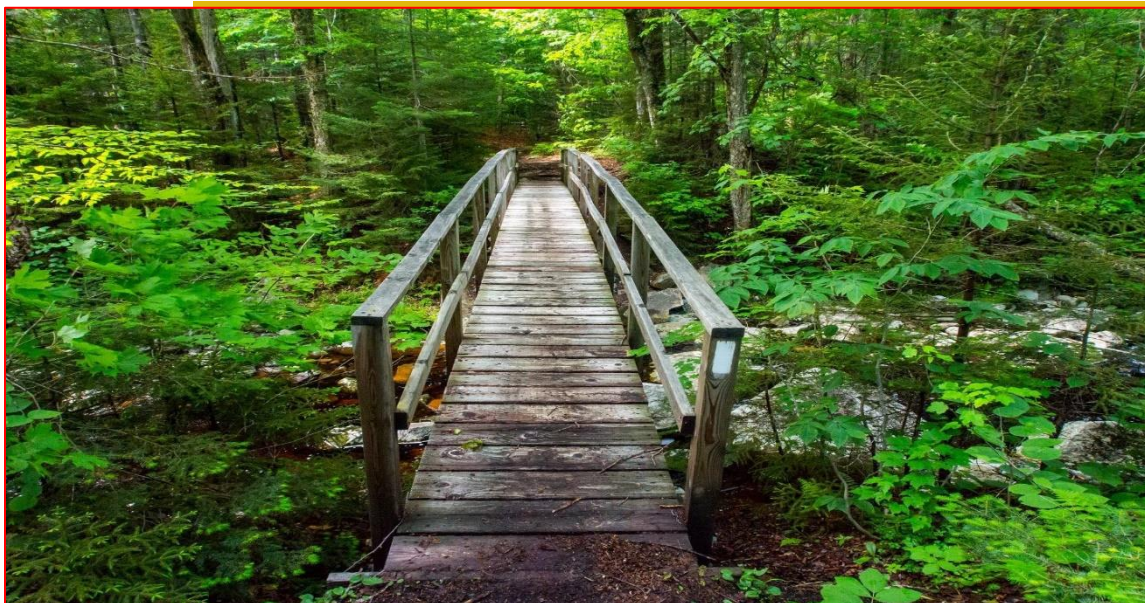
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