Article

Youth Work, Music Making and Activism

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Abstract: Music making holds great potential for youth activism. When combined with youth work, that potential is significantly heightened. This article applies Kuttner's framework for justice-oriented cultural citizens to data gleaned from five youth workers across three different cities in the East Midlands of England. Each of these youth workers was interviewed about their involvement in music-making activities, from providing instrumental tuition to facilitating lyric-writing workshops, and their perspectives on youth activism. Data from this study highlights the affordances of youth music making in relation to three layers of activism: self-activism, community-level activism and wider social activism. This article concludes by arguing for the importance of music-making spaces for young people and music making practices within youth work.

1. Introduction

Youth activism has a growing global visibility. The activist stance of Greta Thunberg over climate change, the death of George Floyd which sparked the Black Lives Matter movement, and the community organising within the Free Palestine movement have inspired this generation of young people. However, some young people feel that the 'net is closing in on them' in terms of opportunities to speak out. Within the UK context, the government's Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill (https://www.bigissue.com/news/activism/how-priti-patels-new-policing-bill-threatens-your-right-to-protest/ (accessed on 30 February 2022), which plans to introduce a range of anti-protest measures, is being resisted as an infringement on citizen's rights to public and peaceful protest. Music has an established role within protest, whether that be 'folk-protest music' [1], 'punk performances' [2] or DIY music scenes [3]. The creation of music within these movements has previously been termed as 'Music Activism' [4].

Youth music making is defined as intentionally broad to encompass a wide range of technological, DIY and 'bedroom' music practices and associated cultural practices [5] that young people engage with today. Taking place outside of formal education spaces, opportunities for music production in various forms are often found within spaces of informal education such as youth clubs, spaces of youth culture and other youth settings. Whilst music is often referred to as a form of empowerment [6], it is less often considered as a 'tool' for youth work. This article explores this consideration by investigating the affordances of music making for both youth work as a form of resistance and youth worker's music making practices. Data gleaned highlighted the importance of music making in terms of supporting voice, offering alternative narratives and opportunities for activism.

This article explores the intersection of youth work and music production in an attempt to argue for the importance of music-making spaces for young people and music-making practices for youth work. Kuttner's (2015) framework [7] for justice-oriented cultural citizens is drawn upon to highlight the potential of music for re-framing activism within youth work spaces. Three layers of activism are identified through the youth workers' narratives, which include self-activism, community-level activism and wider social activism that enables young people to speak back to the deficit discourse of youth.

Through signposting these affordances, youth work that is responsive to young people and offers creative and authentic engagement, whilst also supporting grassroots activism and social change, can be championed.

2. Youth Work and Music Making

Music programmes have been demonstrated to have positive outcomes for young people. Music making has been engaged with as a strategy for informal education, a vehicle for personal and social development and social change. For example, El Sistema is a key international youth programme that uses music making with young people for social good, despite critiques around the reproduction of class-based inequalities [8]. Drawing on the 'positive youth development' framework, Barrett and Bond [9] identify five domains of impact of music programmes: competency (musical, academic and social), confidence, connection, character and caring. There is a clear alignment between these goals and youth work practice; however, there is a lack of research into music making in youth work settings that are less formalised, more experimental and more improvised.

Previous research has demonstrated the utility of music making for 'dis-engaged' youth [10] in relation to identity and self-esteem. As a youth work approach based on personal development, music making has been shown to be effective in supporting young people's self-determination [11]. A key offer of youth work practice lies in its authenticity as a response to young people's lives and cultural interests [12]. A study by Steenis [13] highlighted young people's agency in the creative process of music making through collaborative work with others and powerful lyrics that communicate lived experiences. This also had connections to the social and political contexts of the youth work settings. However, we need to be cautious of the increasing instrumentalisation of these programmes in terms of viewing young people as 'projects to be worked upon' [14].

When questioned 'why music within youth work' when scarce resources might be best allocated elsewhere, research from a two-year music programme in Tanzania [15] signposts the value of spaces that allow for freedom of expression within a civil society. Keil argues for music as a neutral space, a 'safe habour' for those experiencing tension within society and a place to break stereotypes. However, there are other areas of research that have argued that music can reinforce negative stereotypes of young people as 'playing to type' [16,17]. This tension was conveyed in a study by Wilson et al., who argued that hip-hop 'controversies', as in what was viewed as good or bad hip-hop, were well negotiated within youth work spaces. They reported the youth workers' skills in terms of music production, mixing techniques and lyric writing, but other research has documented censorship in terms of editing music, guided lyric writing, and forbidden topics and languages [18].

Music making within youth work bears the characteristics of 'DIY musicking' [19] through activities such as composing, performing, listening and recording that all lie outside of industry. Research has shown that these experiences and the skills and social connections developed can lead to DIY creative careers in later life [20]. However, these experiences have received little attention within the domain of informal education and youth work. One key study [21] explored three community music projects and the diverse nature of young people's participation and decision making. Most striking was the conclusion that the more 'at risk' young people were deemed, the less freedom to choose, explore and develop musical practice they were given. One reason for this, was the clash of musical tastes between young people and youth workers, causing many participants to disengage from the project. This key example highlights the failure of music making projects that do not respond to young people's needs and interests.

Using music as a vehicle to connect young people to social issues has been well documented. This has been achieved through two diverse approaches, which can be seen to mirror youth work pedagogy. For example, Travis and Leech [22] argue that there are developmental narratives within rap music that can be used as a springboard for discussion within group work in order to promote positive change strategies for both individuals and communities. From the other position, Brown and Nicklin [23] have highlighted the

value of music-making practice for developing positive attitudes to learning and raising consciousness about global issues. Both these positions situate the young person as the active creator rather than the passive consumer [24]. It is interesting to note that the majority of these studies focus on hip-hop or rap music, and other music genres and instrumental music playing, for example, seem to be neglected.

3. Arts Education and Cultural Citizenship

In his seminal article 'Arts Education for Cultural Citizenship', Kuttner [7] argues that arts education, much like youth work, is greater than simply instrumental skills acquisition, and has the potential to develop 'orientations towards participation in the cultural life of communities' (p. 70). He draws upon a case study of a Boston-based youth organisation and a hip-hop project in order to argue for the re-framing of arts practice within the young people's broader socio-political contexts. Underpinning this, he argues, is participatory democracy and social change. Engaging with 'cultural citizenship' as a concept derived from Stevenson's [25] definitions of belonging and political struggle as a connection to particular social and cultural locations, Kuttner urges us to consider 'what makes a 'good' citizen'?

My question in this research is how can music making within youth work prepare young people to become cultural citizens? This study engages with this framework, for the first time, within the domain of informal education and youth work practice. To give a background to this study, the typology of culturally informed citizens now follows below (See Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of Cultural Citizenship. Taken from Kuttner [7].

Informed cultural citizen	• Has the capacity to understand, appreciate and critique works of art within a larger social, political, artistic or cultural context. • Has full access to what artists and scholars call the "aesthetic experience" and is confident in her right to attend museums, plays and concerts without feeling alienated or excluded. • Not a passive consumer, but engaged in choosing, critiquing and discussing art, thus involving her in the evolution of artistic tastes. • Has also tried her hand at a few art forms; so, although it is likely she does not identify as an "artist," she has a deep appreciation for the artistic process.
Participatory cultural citizen	• Sees herself as an active participant in the arts, whether or not she considers it to be a profession. • Is involved in producing, remixing and sharing original artistic works and has a strong connection to her own cultural heritage, along with the freedom to explore new forms of expression. • Uses the arts as a means of individual expression; she also sees the arts as a way to connect with and understand the broader communities of which she is a part. • Does not see a firm divide between "artist" and "audience," and is resistant to hierarchies among art forms and is likely to engage in "popular" or "folk" art forms that encourage wide participation.
Justice-oriented cultural citizen	• Has a critical, systemic analysis of power in the cultural domain. • Advocates for marginalised cultures and stories based on a strong sense of cultural pride and efficacy. • Feels responsible for, and capable of, using art towards justice in her multiple, overlapping communities. • Is dedicated to change through collective action utilizing multiple social change approaches.

In particular, Kuttner signposts within his case study the 'training' that young people receive to be cultural organisers who can use the arts to address injustice in their communities. He identifies three key affordances, which have been used as the analytical framework in this article:

1. The development of artistic skills.
2. The ability to analyse oppression, aligned with the concept of 'critical pedagogy' [26].
3. The desire and capability to take 'collective action'.

This framework has yet to be applied to youth work practice, and this article does so to show the potential of music-making programmes beyond what has already been demonstrated in relation to personal and social benefits. Within the wider literature on arts education, Kuttner's typology of cultural citizenship has been applied to a UK study that tracked arts learning in schools. The TALE project gathered 6000 responses from young people aged 14–18 in secondary and special schools around England [27]. Despite the utility of the concept for 're-framing' the purposes of arts education, the authors also found it troubling on two counts: with the context of mainstream UK schooling, the rigid curriculum has meant that arts subjects have been pushed to the sidelines, and not all young people possess the same cultural capitals and these capitals are not valued equally within the field of education. In addition, the use of creativity to 'transform' troubled youth has been previously critiqued. Denmead's [28] critical ethnography of an urban art studio highlighted the pressures upon these kinds of youth work programmes to generate creative citizens who can contribute economically.

Other research has explored the relationship between arts practice and citizenship. Li and Moore [29] drew on a case study of a community festival in Vancouver, Canada, to explore art and civic learning, whilst Varela and Palaré [30] investigated the symbiosis of artistic practices and citizenship in Portugal. Another study by Shields, Fendler, and Henn [31] highlighted how young people understand themselves as civic agents capable of starting and sustaining change. Finally, Gaztambide-Fernández and Arráiz Matute's work on cultural production and activism [32] has demonstrated that through engaging with the arts, young people can exchange ideas symbolically and expressively as a way of participating politically. These studies, which are situated within formal schooling, community and participatory settings for young people, have not yet explored the potential for the valuable domain of youth work to engage with activism through arts practice. This is the specific gap taken up by this piece of research in order to further explore an innovative vision of social inclusion through musical creation.

4. Methods and Sample

This research sought to explore the potential of music-making projects within youth work settings as a resource for activism for young people. Five youth workers were interviewed from three different cities across the East Midlands of England: Nottingham, Birmingham and Corby. Semi-structured interviews were designed to capture the youth workers lived experiences of running the programmes [33], as well as data on the way young people engaged with music making. The key research question investigated the affordances of music-making activities for young people. At this stage of the research, the decision was taken not to interview young people, although this study may be developed in the future to incorporate this aspect. Rich qualitative data [34] on the combination of youth work practice and music making was gleaned alongside narratives of social change and activist engagement for young people. The interview questions also captured stories of youth settings as alternative spaces for resistance, where youth work is 'done differently'. From a social constructionist perspective, identity development was also discussed alongside potentially contentious youth cultures such as drill music.

In order to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the youth workers involved, all names have been removed, as well as references to particular organisations, settings and projects. When names of young people were mentioned during the interviews, these were removed at the transcription stage and did not feature in the data. The participants, who were identified through purposeful sampling and the researcher's networks, are as follows:

- Youth Worker 1 (white male): folk musician and electronic DJ, working across two music programmes—one leading instrumental music tuition, i.e., guitars, drums, keyboard, and the other focusing on electronic music production.

- Youth Worker 2 (white male): Theatre Director, also managing a music project.
- Youth Worker 3 (black male): MC, supporting lyric writing, singing, rapping, recording and performance sessions for young people working with hip-hop, grime and drill genres.
- Youth Worker 4 (mixed-race male): DJ, running sessions on turntablism, live DJing and scratching.
- Youth Worker 5 (while male): working for a mental health charity running instrumental music sessions in piano, guitar and violin, often online.

This study builds on previous research through the participants in this sample and the youth populations within England that they work with. However, the limitations of this sample include all male and predominantly white participants, which does not fully reflect the protected characteristics of youth workers in this field. This small sample, whilst generating rich data, also cannot be generalised to the population as a whole.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis [35] and coded against themes from the literature: music as a 'vehicle', alignment with youth work practice, agency through the creative process, breaking/reinforcing stereotypes, DIY music skills for life and exploring social issues. Kuttner's framework of Cultural Citizenship was applied to the data in order to fully investigate the question of the potential of music-making projects within youth work settings for activism. The following section reports on three diverse layers of activism: self-activism, local-community activism and wider social activism, as well as recounting important narratives from the youth workers themselves about the value of this practice.

5. Results: Three Layers of Activism: Self-Activism, Community-Level Activism and Social Activism

Finding consensus across all five youth workers interviewed as part of this study was the argument that, both historically and contemporaneously, 'all music is activism'. One youth worker highlighted the organic connectedness of all young people to music through their social and cultural worlds and the connectedness of activism through musical genres such as punk and reggae. This practice continues today, and the alignment with youth work practice and youth settings will be further explored through this data.

There was a clear sense of the value of music as a vehicle for youth work in terms of eliciting details about young people's lives and encouraging, sometimes difficult, conversations. Youth Worker 2 describes the opportunities that music making, of many forms, affords for young people to speak about their lives and, more importantly, be listened to:

> We are finding that with providing these music opportunities for young people, we can speak to them in person and say: 'you know, tell me about your life and put into a song', but then you must be ready for what comes out of that and that's why you need the backing Youth Workers. (Youth Worker 2)

During COVID-19, when youth work practice diversified and projects, such as those run by Youth Worker 5, went online, the value of music making became much more about social connectedness and checking in with each other, as the relational aspect of youth work:

> When I was doing the online video calls, which were so much more than making music, I'm having a laugh with them (the young people). They were feeling like they needed somebody new to talk to and even listening to what each other is doing, was goo because it was something else going on outside of our houses. (Youth Worker 5)

5.1. Self-Activism

The youth workers interviewed as part of this study described the importance of their work with young people and music making for firstly taking the time to turn inwards and reflect upon themselves before then young people could start to think more widely about the communities and society in which they lived. Youth Worker 1 referred to this as 'self-activism', meaning that these projects enabled young people to activate something within themselves. Youth workers also referred to this as 'empowerment', an integral

concept within youth work practices that seeks to give young people power and control, such as designing their own rules and decision making. Youth workers argued that many young people are 'just trying to sort their own shit out, rather than trying to save the world'. But there was a journey that young people were at various stages on, whereby music making supported self-activism:

> *Whether young people are displaying activism yet on their journey, because they've got quite a while of self discovery and self questioning, it's a longer slope, isn't it? Like all the things with youth work... But for music, you just have to dig in a little bit deeper. And maybe it's because you're bearing more of your soul, because it's performative. But it is more of a journey and that activism will come, because they've hooked on to the music, haven't they?* (Youth Worker 1)

Youth workers, whilst maintaining the value of music for activism, argued that it has to be organically formed. Young people's music making has to come from their tastes and their interests; otherwise, it is forced activism, which reproduces inequalities and 'manages' young people. Youth Worker 1 argued that:

> *When you've got young people in an environment where they are reflecting, then it's activism for themselves. It's self-activism, where they act how they want to and communicate what they want. I've seen so many words, written by MCs, where they have taken the time to reflect on their lives and words. Lyrically, it's very hard because, like I say, it has to come from the individual wanting to do that and to be invested in that.* (Youth Worker 1)

This description of self-activism is most aligned with critical pedagogy, a key tenet of youth work practice, whereby informal learning activities can create a critical consciousness about the conditions in which people live. In particular, with lyric writing, when people reflect on their social circumstances, in the longer term, it can transform into forms of protest and resistance.

5.2. Community-Level Activism

Social connectedness through music making was highlighted through the youth workers' narratives of the collaborative processes of making music, the performative aspect and the ability to turn young people's considerations outwards towards the communities in which they live. Youth Worker 2, for example, expressed a strong imperative in his work to 'push that button' on young people's thinking in order that they may able to question the conditions in which they live:

> *I think finding friendship, finding people who are on their same level and hearing songs from others that are saying exactly what they were feeling and that things ended up actually being okay, created a connectedness for the young people. And then it was our responsibility to go and 'open up this box' and get them talking about things like a lack of access to services that support them. I suppose it could be on us as leaders to start, you know, sowing the seed of: How do you feel about the fact that there aren't enough youth workers? How do you feel that it takes 6–8 weeks to get a response from mental health services? What do you think about? If we were to, 'push that button', we could engage in that kind of activism.* (Youth Worker 2)

In terms of young people's local communities, the music making projects featured in this study performed an important role in terms of collaboration across different groups of young people and different youth cultures. Youth Worker 3, who facilitates a music project that incorporates hip-hop, grime music, MCing and turntablism, commented on what it means for young people to feel 'part of that culture' associated with the musical genre. Working with music to encourage collaboration across diverse groups of young people was an important aspect of community building and often conflict resolution:

> *I think collaboration is one of the things that they (young people) have to learn to do because when it's bad between different groups, and they fall out or they have a fight, I've had to work with some really different characters in the (music) studio. But this is*

my opportunity to build that bridge, to bring those different personalities and characters together. (Youth Worker 3)

Within the music-making projects, many youth workers drew upon self-taught skills which they shared with the young people. These informal learning opportunities, ones for the arts that engage with a wider range of young people, created their own communities of activism. For example, with the turntablism project, a community of practice was built up around encouraging the 'next generation of turntablists, as described by Youth Worker 4:

There's a lot of stuff that he (young person) showed me, as well as me showing him. I was like, wow, how are you using those programmes? So, I think the whole point of this project is about nurturing the next generation of turntablists and educating them on what's been before, as well pushing them to create new patterns. The craft of turntablism and the whole scratch scene, it evolves very organically, a kind of DIY community. (Youth Worker 4)

Music as a mechanism for community activism was reported through opportunities for performance. This may not be through the particular content or lyrics of the music but through the collective act of performing together. Youth Worker 5 gave an example of working with LGBTQI+ groups where songs were not necessarily about gender and sexuality, but they were representing a community through music in an activist manner.

5.3. Social Activism

The third category of social activism emerged when youth workers reported young people making music in order to build a sense of identity and challenge often negative stereotypes about young people. This was most evident within the project that worked with grime and drill genres of music. Youth workers had a mixed reaction to this genre, some believing it was their role to steer young people away from and even censor misogynistic or violent content, whereas others reflected upon this as freedom of expression. Youth Worker 3, for example, reported that as part of his project, young people would take part in 'rap battles', which, despite verbal violence frequently occurring, physical violence rarely manifested. He argued that genres such as drill were young people's way of communicating and resisting, which is not always recognised as it is not to mainstream taste and adult cultural repertoires. This was supported by Youth Worker 1's more historical contextual view of grime music:

If you look at MC's, that is like the folk music of today because it is the voice of the people and they're telling it how it is. It's raw. And I know if we look past all the bravado and the guns and stuff, there's still a reason why young people are saying this. They are still seeing it as this kind of society and they want to change it. (Youth Worker 1)

Viewing youth music making through this lens of social activism enables us to position music as an important vehicle for young people's life stories, their reaction to what is happening in the society that constructs them, and youth work settings as safe spaces to explore this. Often, this can be a springboard for conversations about the 'bigger picture' and the development of critical consciousness to be able to communicate about how particular social inequalities impact them. Youth Worker 2 shares a narrative which conveys this sense of activism:

So, he rocked up saying 'I'm a Rapper, I've got some lyrics, where's the microphone?' And you get that a lot. Young people walking in off the street, with the pressure of the world that they live in today on their shoulders and they're navigating it through their music, without quite realizing. They say these really kind of outrageous, really strong lyrics, but we're not in the business of saying 'no, you can't do that', because that will push those feelings underground and that isn't really going to solve the problem. It's still there. So, you have to tease it out of them, tease it out and speak about them. Rather than banning things because it's problematic, we've got to work together on breaking that down. (Youth Worker 2)

In comparison, Youth Worker 3, who works on a different project that supports young rappers, has a zero-tolerance approach to offensive material. His justification is based on the importance of critical social consciousness and the avoidance of violence. Being able to see 'the bigger picture' when it comes to writing songs mobilises young people together as a way of challenging perceptions about young people in society today.

6. Discussion: Developing Justice-Oriented Cultural Citizens

As argued by Kuttner [7], to become justice-oriented cultural citizens, young people need to be aware of the power structures within society. Based on the examples given by the youth workers within this study, that may manifest in the negative perceptions of living in a particular neighbourhood, the monitoring and control young people feel as part of mainstream schooling, or profiling by the local police. These themes frequently emerge within the music that young people make in youth settings, and being able to speak out against these is of value to the young people themselves. These diverse levels of activism were identified within the data as self-activism, community-level activism and social activism. Firstly, self-activism, whereby young people can engage with music making as a way of reflecting upon themselves, can be seen as a canvas for agency with young people making their own rules and decisions. As coined by Youth Worker 2, 'being able to sort your own shit out' is an important process that activates young people's sense of cultural pride and efficacy.

The affordances of music making for enabling the stories of marginalised young people and diverse youth cultures were clearly apparent in the youth workers' narratives. There was a strong synergy with [36] critical pedagogy, whereby young people can make music in order to tell stories of and get justice for their local communities. Here, we see community-level activism manifest, with young people representing or being part of communities through a form of social connectedness, which youth workers encouraged through their important relational work with young people across the projects. The community level of activism not only addressed diverse groups within their project but also faced outwards with performative aspects inherent in the practice of music and sharing. Projecting a positive image of young people as a group to the wider community was an aspect that youth workers reported as valuable within these projects and was key to local conflict resolution.

Finally, the responsibility that young people felt to question wider society through their music making was also evident. For youth workers to be able to 'push that button' to enable young people to push back upon the 'bigger picture' was one aspect across all projects that has the potential to cultivate justice-oriented cultural citizens. Using music as an art form that can reflect upon the 'worst' in society as a way of starting to address those problems is an approach clearly aligned with social activism. Youth workers were clear in their narratives that music making was an important mechanism to speak back to how young people are constructed by society within a deficit discourse. Under the surface, youth music making projects can evoke change through collective action, which would see all young people as fully creative citizens with their own layers of activism and their own rights.

7. Conclusions

This article explores the potential of music making to open up new spaces for young people's activism. Within the United Kingdom, and more specifically, the East Midlands of England, where the research took place, music-making activities outside of formal education spaces have a growing and important presence. Musical creation is a high-value resource for youth workers in terms of generating strong social ties and community integration. Drawing on Kuttner's framework for Cultural Citizenship [7], this study has defended musical creation as a professional outlet for young people and as a form of protest and social resistance. It has been demonstrated that youth workers can support young people to become 'justice-orientated cultural citizens' and provide an opportunity for peaceful protest through music.

Analysis of data identified three levels of activism: self-activism, community-level activism and social activism, which were mobilised through Kuttner's typology, further strengthening critical pedagogy as a key principle for youth work practice and a tool for social struggle. This study has shown that young people use music to challenge negative perceptions, control and surveillance of their lives through processes of self-reflection, cultural appreciation and community building. Finally, this research has shown that music programmes can raise awareness of social needs, negate practices of power and fight against inequalities.

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