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# Transition as ‘becoming’ through Danish and English youth arts programmes

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## ABSTRACT

Much public consciousness of youth transitions is imbued with deficit portraits of a generation at risk that lacks well-being and that is often not actively pursuing the path to an independent adulthood. Engaging in open dialogue with young people demonstrates a reality far from these figures of failure, revealing the highly complex transition work that ‘becoming an adult’ implies. Our project explored what kind of transition experiences marginalized young people valued in art programmes and what these experiences tell us about marginalized young people’s transitions today. This article recounts three shared transition experiences across different groups of marginalized young people in Denmark and England. Firstly, the negotiation of adulthood, whereby young people experienced new responsibilities but also opportunities to speak back to deficit narratives; Secondly, the negotiation of future work life, where young people valued the development of contemporary work skills through the programmes; Finally, and most important for the young participants, an orientation for care for themselves and others within their communities as key facilitators of transitions. We conclude that the third shared transition experience is an important orientation stemming from how young people reflect on their experiences of youth arts programmes in supporting their transitions to adulthood.

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Youth; transition; arts; Denmark; England

## Introduction

Youth arts programmes are frequently positioned as social cures and problem-fixing for the most disadvantaged young people in society, who experience fractured transitions and ‘risky’ lifestyles (Hickey-Moody 2013). Previous research has highlighted the benefits of arts programmes for young people, but also the ‘binary divide’ between arts programmes paid for by parents, and those with a social at-risk label attached who are ‘referred’ (De Roeper and Savelsberg 2009). However, more fundamental questions about ‘who’ arts programmes are designed for and ‘to what ends’, are rarely interrogated.

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This critical contextual background enables us to position our study, of eighteen 16–29 year olds, bridging the gap around what is valued about these programmes from a youth perspective.

Our research, undertaken across four arts programmes in Denmark and England, sought to explore *what kind of transition experiences marginalized young people valued in arts programmes and what these experiences tell us about marginalized young people's transitions today*. This is in contrast to more expected transition outcomes, such as taking up education and gaining employment, which are defining, but often misleading, indicators for the success of these programmes (Simmons 2017). Our research thus positions itself differently from societal discourses where youth transitions are charted through successfully achieving milestones such as education, employment and independent housing. For the past decades, research has emphasized how the negotiations of adulthood have become increasingly complex to navigate (Walther 2006) and that the transitions of marginalized groups of young people, frequently become limited by the normative and linear timelines embedded in contemporary educational, work and welfare systems (Flaherty 2013). In this article and as a response to both the general and more specific complexity, we follow a branch of youth studies that engages with young people's transitions through the concept of becoming (Grosz 1999; Worth 2009). Becoming is a concept that adds a more fluid and open understanding of young people's transition experiences, yet still permits looking for similarities, differences and patterns in the complexity. Through this concept of becoming, our research project explores the diverse types of negotiations of young adult life and future adulthood as they are carried out in four arts programmes directed at different groups of young people classified as 'on the edge of society' (Nielsen and Sørensen 2019) in Denmark and England.

Reflecting upon questions of being and becoming, our study delineates three key findings: Firstly, how arts programmes support a *negotiation of adulthood*, being disciplined but also developing one's own approaches; Secondly, how the skills developed in arts programmes enable a *negotiation of future work life*, acquiring new skills, learning new roles and how to live (financially) from your work; And finally, we highlight *orientations for care, for the self and for others*, which we will argue is most often overlooked in terms of importance by arts programmes funders, managers and surrounding society – but is highly valued by the young people themselves. We offer this analysis as a way to demonstrate the experiences of youth arts programmes in supporting their transitions to adulthood and broader reflections of what they tell us about young people's transitions today.

## Transition as 'becoming'

Young people's transitions have been of central interest in Youth Studies research in connection to times of great social, political and economic changes (Stauber, Walther, and Settersten 2022), but more recently also in relation to the global decrease in young people's well-being (McLeod and Wright 2016). This research has often had a pre-occupation with the milestones and trajectories that young people follow in their transitions into adulthood, such as moving out of the family home, finishing education, gaining employment and reaching financial independence (Johansson and Herz 2019). Research

tells us that young people's transitions in Western society overall have become more complex as well as less standardized and more individualized (Gale and Parker 2014; Krahn et al. 2018; Walther 2006), but also that the milestones and trajectories, young people follow in their transitions are inter-linked, class-based and heavily dependent upon economic and cultural capital (Flaherty 2013; Munro 2019) and related to social expectations (Pitti 2017).

At the same time, a new sequentiality, linearity and rapid succession of single steps provided by social institutions (Woodman and Leccardi 2015) and a high-speed society (Rosa 2020) have given the world a more fluid, unpredictable and uncontrollable character (Leccardi 2015). However, young people's access to experiment with life transitions balancing between 'fitting in and sticking out' (Miles, Cliff, and Burr 1998) has increasingly been delimited by a growing impatience with the individual young person's capacity to manage and control his or hers own life and move goal-oriented and punctual through the educational system (Vogt 2018). Accordingly, many young people find themselves caught up in cultures of achievement and perfection and narrow norms for how one can behave and who one can be – not only in the educational system but also in their social life (Krogh and Madsen 2024).

In this article, we use the concept of 'becoming' to retrieve a more open-ended approach to young people's transitions. Becoming is an approach that suggests understanding transitions as lived experiences and processes of becoming that are defined by multiplicities and in flux dynamics (Gale and Parker 2014; Worth 2009). It thus permits us to consider the inherent complexities of contemporary youth transitions as well as explore more in depth what kinds of transition experiences marginalized young people value in arts programmes. The article combines an awareness of well-known socio-economic conditions of young people's transitory pathways with insights into what kind of processes of becoming marginalized young people in Denmark and England carry out through their engagement in four youth arts programmes. The aim is to gain better knowledge of the issues of collective importance emphasized by them in their transition experiences. The article thereby offers a glimpse into what Roberts and France define as the 'shared script' (2021) of young people facing specific social conditions and their transitions in Denmark and England during their engagement with four youth arts programmes.

### Arts programmes as spaces of becoming

Transition as becoming is a theoretical approach that is not only anchored within youth transition research but also draws upon a body of theories and research within the field of art and culture. Art and culture have long been positioned as a vehicle for 'becoming' and as a privileged space for young people to 'try on' different identities, learning about and producing their identity and new ways of being in the world (Hickey-Moody 2013, 2022) in gestures of reproduction as well as emancipation (Willis 1998). Research has shown how art and culture can develop young people's possibilities to connect to others and their sense of belonging, offering building blocks for shaping new self-concepts and collective imaginaries (Tawell, Thompson, and Daniels 2015; Ennis and Tonkin 2018). Research also suggests how young people's engagement and experimentation with art and culture can resist negative labelling, as well as strengthen their possibilities to navigate, make sense and deal differently with their life biographies (Travis and Bowman 2012).

With an emphasis on art and culture as experimental, open-ended, challenging and enjoyable, previous studies have shared how young people, who finds themselves positioned at the margins of society, view themselves and become seen differently by others (Hickey-Moody 2013; Howard 2022a; Nielsen and Sørensen 2019). Whilst the limitations of these studies overlook the difficulty in accessing creativity and negative perceptions about the arts, we can gain key understandings of the role art can play in young people's lives and how art programmes work, as well as what kinds of transition experiences they allow young people to engage in. By reflecting together with the young people upon questions of being and becoming, we suggest that we can glean important insights into young adults and their broader processes of becoming.

## Design and methodology

Our study was designed to include four youth arts programmes in Denmark and England, which we categorize as socially oriented arts programmes. The programmes were carefully selected with the aim to cover different groups of marginalized young people and different locations, aims, sizes, terms, access points and art forms to identify patterns of similarities and differences. The young people in the study all, in different ways, had faced complicated transitions. One group of participants were defined by their working-class background, while in the other three, the young people were targeted: young people in special education with special needs spanning from physical, mental and socioeconomic challenges and young people in the category of NEET.<sup>1</sup>

The two countries were selected due to the increasing integration of arts and cultural activities for young people into non-formal education spaces targeting marginalized young people, and the intention was to explore patterns of similarities and differences across them. The study thus offered a possibility to map shared and different kinds of access points, approaches and dilemmas across different countries, different programmes and different groups of marginalized young people (Howard and Nielsen 2025), as well as differences and similarities in the young people's transitory experiences. The latter being the focus of this article.

The two English programmes were based in the East Midlands of England, with one programme being directed towards rural youth who lacked employment opportunities and were outside of education and the other being an urban programme aimed at supporting young people to enter into creative industries careers. The two Danish programmes were located in a smaller provincial city and an urban setting in the second largest city, thereby spanning similar conditions for young people's transitory pathways and opportunities for cultural involvement and access to education and employment. In addition, both Danish programmes explicitly worked with young people who had experienced poor psychological well-being and were outside education and employment. Three of the programmes were offered by arts organizations, whereas the remaining one was programmed by charitable and voluntary sector organizations. All programmes were associated with contemporary English and Danish cultural policy discourses, holding aims to integrate marginalized communities as well as serve as mental health initiatives for vulnerable youth. Fieldwork took place between May and June 2023, with both authors attending all settings.

Across the four programmes, 18 young people were asked or volunteered to be part of the study, but many more young people were attending the programmes. The majority of participants were female (12 out of 18). The youngest participant was 16, with the oldest being 29, yet the median age was 20. With the Danish programmes, some of the young people had been attending for over a year; however the English programmes were shorter in duration with young people attending for 3 to 6 months. Programmes were already known to the researchers from previous studies. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with programme leaders and arts-based focus groups with young people, who described various reasons for attending or being referred to these programmes, including being 'kicked out of school', entering the youth justice or mental health systems and feeling unable to integrate with mainstream formal education and employment. The young people were largely ethnic white and many with working class background. Whilst we recognize that intersectional characteristics are particularly impactful upon young people's transitions (Harris and Idriss 2024), in the design of the study, we were limited to those participants attending the programmes and upheld voluntary participation.

To explore young people's negotiations of young adult life and future adulthood, we employed a visual narrative methodology to encourage open dialogue. Knowing that our participants were adept at creating art, but their verbal communication skills were unknown to us, we used an arts-based research method called 'journey mapping'. This involved a group interview situation, whereby participants had been tasked with drawing, illustrating and/or writing about their journey to and through the programme (Hall 2005; Nielsen and Bruselius-Jensen 2021). Drawings on large pieces of paper using coloured pens and pencils were shared within the group setting to accompany young people's narratives of their journeys. For example, Figure 1, one of the drawings from

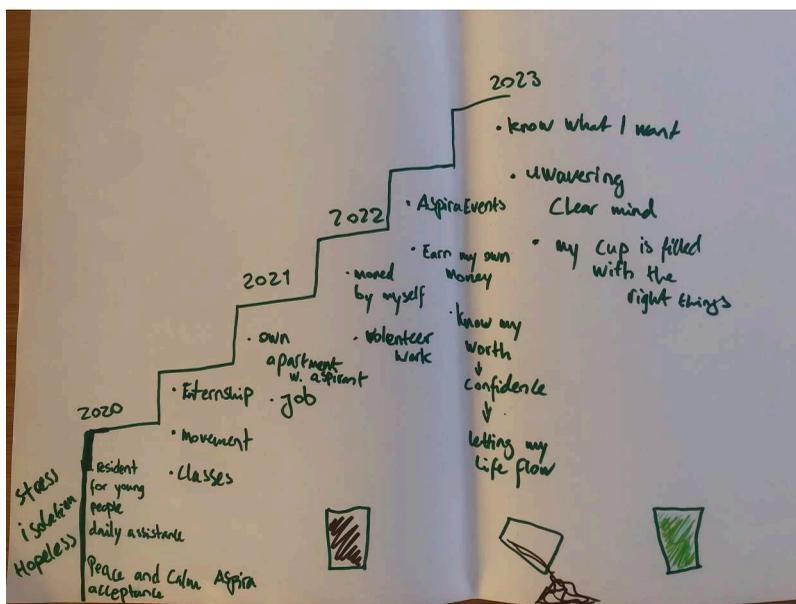


Figure 1. Filling up your glass.

our data set, shows a chronologically dated journey map, with steps showing each year passing and underneath the young person has listed key life events. The interviews began with the young people recounting their individual journey and subsequently discussed and reflected upon their experiences in groups, facilitated by the researcher. Discussing the drawings within the journey maps was a vital aspect of the method, as meaning and metaphor could be unpacked. For example, in this same journey map, there is a drawing at the bottom of three glasses, which the young participant explained in the following interview, that the first glass was full of 'bad' things and that they chose to 'empty this glass' and chose to refill it with 'good' things that made them happy. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and illustrations were photographed or scanned (some being included in this article). Thematic analysis was conducted through several rounds of coding, which identified three shared key themes in the young people's narratives of their transition experiences across programmes and countries. The limitations of this method, and of this study, include the subjective nature of these responses and challenges in interpreting artistic outputs.

### **What kind of transition experiences do marginalized young people value in arts programmes?**

In the study, we identified three shared key themes, which characterized what kind of transition experiences marginalized young people value in arts programmes. Each shared transition experience demonstrates how the young people emphasize becoming as relational, co-produced and collective. The three shared key themes are:

- A. Negotiating adulthood, whereby young people experienced new shared responsibilities, but also opportunities to speak back to deficit narratives.
- B. Negotiating future work life, where young people valued the shared development of different kinds of work skills through the programmes, both within their discipline and for future work.
- C. Orientation for care, for themselves and others within their close communities.

We refer to these as 'negotiations' and 'orientations' as this shows the complex nature of how young people enter, traverse and get the most from these programmes. Foregrounding the lived experiences and multiple processes of becoming, as emphasized by the young people we present in the following analysis, how young people's transition experiences are organized by these key themes.

#### ***Negotiating Adulthood***

The first key theme touches upon how the youth arts programmes in the study offered the young people a space to negotiate what adulthood can mean. We refer to this as an 'orientation' due to the way young people negotiated the cultural norms and values of adulthood as part of their transition experiences. Consistently, in our interviews with the young people, they repeated how youth arts programmes allowed them to reflect upon, experiment with, adapt to and challenge numerous aspects and dilemmas of what becoming an adult means. They found that arts programmes offered a space to

explore different ways to navigate new responsibilities, roles and future dreams and supported them in following a variety of different trajectories of what it involves becoming a young adult, as well as redefining the representations they attribute to the concept of adulthood. To frame these narratives, we identify the following sub-themes of taking responsibility, being trusted, adapting, speaking up for themselves and challenging stereotypes and assumptions about themselves.

Here, two participants from the rural English programme reflect on the value of 'showing their worth' and enacting what they envisage everyday adult life looking like. These participants, both female and attending alternative education, discussed their growing responsibilities:

P1: It's a lot of pressure being this age, you know, knowing that you're on the verge of being able to vote. And people haven't had expectations of you being technically an adult.

Interviewer: Do you feel the same pressure? Is it like the future is not opening up?

P2: It's kind of both at the same time. You know, there's a ton of opportunities for you out there, but like sometimes at this age you just begin to blind yourself into those and you start to find yourself, doing things that you're capable of doing. And that can be scary sometimes.

P1: Yeah, we've got more responsibilities ...

Interviewer: What kind of responsibilities?

P2: Like time keeping, taking care of your money ...

The reference in this excerpt to 'a ton of opportunities' highlights the blurred future visions young people can develop, as their sense of what is possible in their own personalized futures becomes a meritocratic misnomer. In the arts programmes, young people report that they get to look upon their life in new ways, both dreaming big and taking new responsibilities upon themselves. For example, this participant from the rural English programme wanted to prove that her peer group, by hosting a cultural day for families, could challenge assumptions about their perceived inactivity. Through the programme, the young people planned and carried out an event targeting families in their local area defined by low-income housing:

P2: I think what's important is that we give the families a good time and share with them that young people can do something for other people. Planning this, we had to overcome a lot of challenges, like thinking about the theme we wanted and the decorations. But then at the end of it all, it's seeing the smiles on peoples' faces and knowing that we have done that. Because there's a stereotype of all teenagers, people think they're lazy, but I want this ... we all want to use this event so us teenagers can prove that we can do something. That we are capable of it, but we just want people to believe in us ... We're not lazy. Yeah, everyone has lazy days, but we get up every day same as adults, we're not adults, but we get up, we go through our day and we all go home ...

Enabling young people to think about their everyday life and explore their place in it afforded opportunities for them to 'speak out' as young adults against negative perceptions and stereotypes. This kind of enactment through arts programmes was especially important to young people from low socio-economic neighbourhoods and was seen as a way to 'give back' to their local communities. This was echoed by participants in the inner-city Danish programme targeting young people, who have been out of education

and jobs long-term and were often struggling with multiple mental health issues, where they describe the same kinds of stigma felt by being part of 'the system' on welfare:

P17: In the system's eyes we're lazy. They don't trust us to do what we can manage and instead question every decision and assuming we're just lazy. Like most people do.

In this programme, the young people highly valued the opportunities that engaging with art making and cultural production offered in terms of creating a different narrative. They repeatedly pointed out how the creation of cultural activities for a local audience was connected to being respected and gaining the right to make decisions. Often these experiences of trust and responsibility were closely connected to time as a key concept that young people across the different programmes kept returning to in our discussions. One participant had even drawn a large clock diagram (see [Figure 2](#)), through which we were able to further unpack the meaning of time through the programme:

P1: It's also about time management, because this (programme) has a due date of the 11th of June. So, it's also for your time keeping and being able to keep up with it.

Interviewer: Is that important when you talk about responsibilities and being 18?

P1: Not only do you have to manage your time with this, but you also have to manage your time of getting to classes on time. Make sure you're handing in assessments on time, you know?

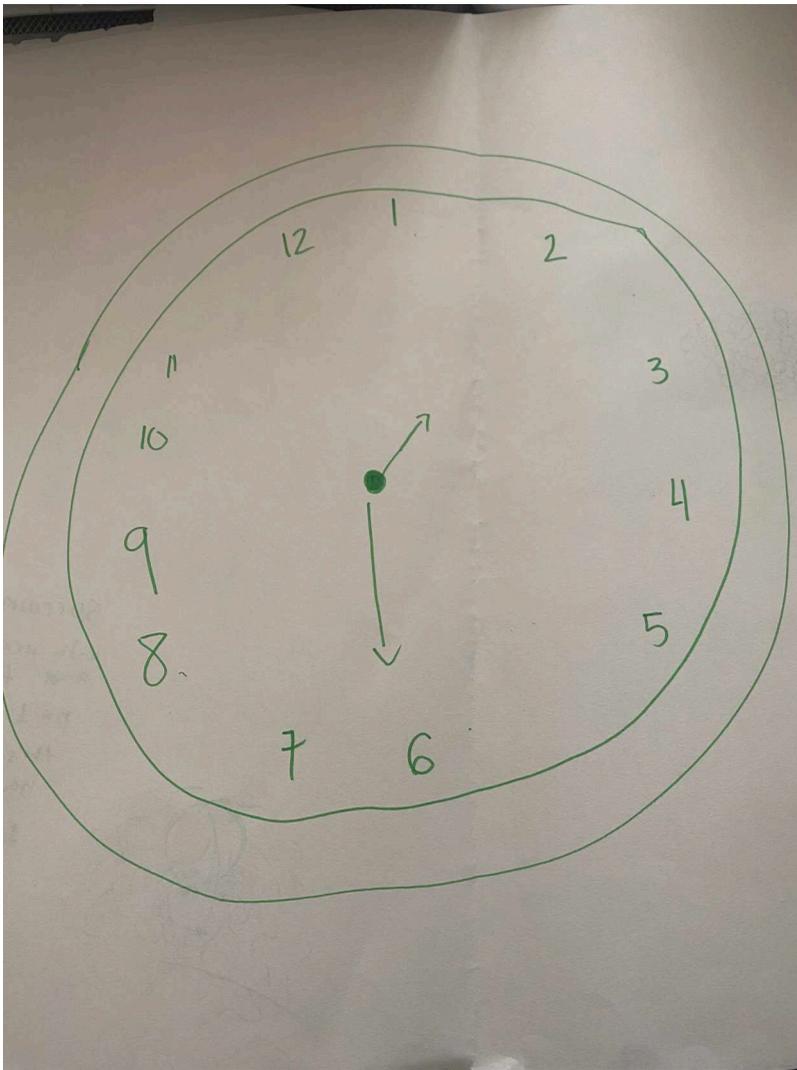
Interviewer: Has time become an issue in your life in a different way?

P2: I think with time, it's for you to know how to manage your responsibility with different things. But it also shows you that you might not have long, because you can't pause time. You can't stop time. And time always continues no matter what.

P1: So, it reflects the planning of this event and how to split it up and we're all inconsistent in our own ways. We can be a bit inconsistent, but I feel like it's just a matter of time keeping.

The young people reflected upon the pressure and discomfort associated with the increased significance of time as part of their becoming adults. They often felt time was running away from them. This sense of lack of control signified an inability to delay activities and an acceleration of life around them. Many of the young people found that the programmes offered ways to balance inconsistencies and gain better control, but also that the focus of many programmes on the 'now' enabled an escape from the ongoing demands of projecting oneself into the future.

Our data shows that youth arts programmes can support young people to embody young adulthood in liberatory but also responsabilizing ways. The young people shared how programmes can offer a space to navigate, experiment with, work around and at times resist and reorganize the societal norms, logics and orderings and experience that changes can be dealt with in new ways. As part of the programmes, young people are offered a space to explore different ways to navigate new responsibilities and roles, as well as shape new representations of what they attribute to the concept of adulthood. We argue that the youth arts programmes offer alternative – non-deficit-based trajectories – where young people, who may have been deemed unsuccessful in other aspects of their life, can be seen as 'successful'. When young people are offered trajectories, where they experience being trusted, given decisions to take and responsibilities to live out, they can start to explore, adapt to and negotiate changes in their lives.



**Figure 2.** Clock drawing.

Whilst programmes were largely able to adapt to diverse trajectories and afford opportunities to speak back to deficit discourses on youth, some promoted what we call ‘arts programme rhetoric on risk-taking behaviour’ from the young adults (Baker & Homan 2007; Howard 2022b). This encompassed an awareness of the programme’s intended aim and outcomes for participants, by the young people, which were frequently repeated back to us during the interview: including the narrative of ‘taking responsibility’, self-improvement and self-reflection towards more socially acceptable identities.

### ***Negotiating future work life***

The second key theme reflects how the youth arts programmes in the study offered young people a space to learn skills and acquire knowledge, through which they can

begin to negotiate their future work life. In our interviews, young people reflected upon how youth arts programmes permitted them to consolidate their skills, acquire new ones and take on new identities as young professionals within their field. They found that they developed a new kind of respect around their artistic passions and engagement that most of them had been lacking in their experiences with formal education. To frame these narratives, we identify several sub-themes, including moving on with their artistic passions, from bedroom culture to professional practice, joy and engagement, direction and collaborative-working.

For the more entrepreneurial programmes, young people appreciated learning new technological skills in relation to film editing, sound engineering and live music mastering. Young participants felt positive about acquiring these skills in terms of future employability with the creative industries. One participant's journey map, from the urban English programme, had drawn an image of making money through the arts (Figure 3). This participant had completed education, but was at that time unemployed, so making a living was important. New ways of working, particularly with industry-standard equipment or in connection with music or theatre professionals, were held in high regard in terms of preparation for self-employment and often resulted in short-term paid work for young people as production assistants, social media content creators or live event sound engineers:

P10: The most important thing I like to do in my life is make music. That's like my driving passion. Yeah, perform it and all things related. Now, unfortunately, the way that life works, is there's an industry. There has to be an industry if you want to make money and make it sustainable. So, what I found valuable from this programme is it helps you understand how to have a sustainable career and create some longevity out of the music industry.

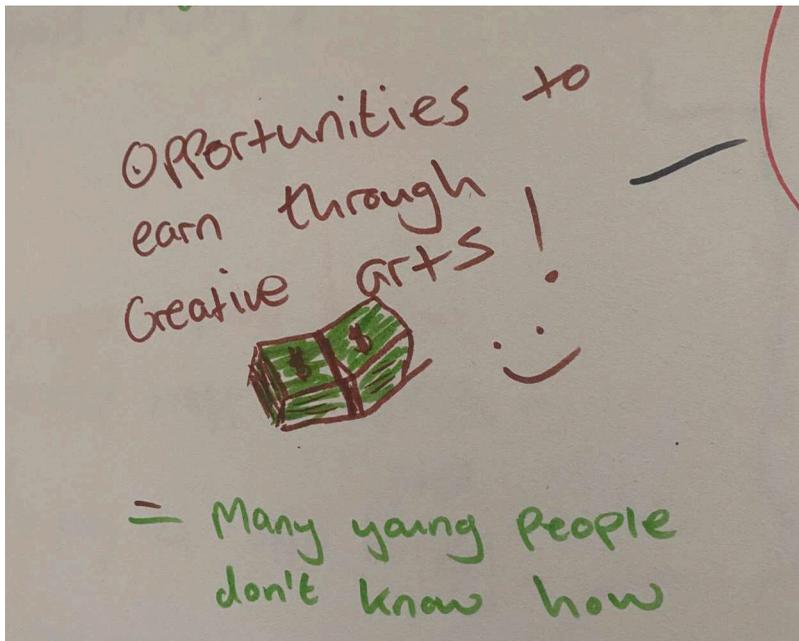


Figure 3. Making money.

Examples of skills acquisition and putting their knowledge into action also included community facilitation, such as music session planning and delivery, learning how to collaborate with others and being a 'freelancer' running workshops. Whilst some participants described 'burnout' through previous programmes, most participants communicated a sense of 'creative energy' and joy from being part of the programmes and 'being busy' as beneficial for their futures:

P11: I want to be busy all the time and really get into promotion. Keep developing the programmes, queer events, events shaped by neurodiverse people. I've got contacts for queer artists in Nottingham that I want to like build into some kind of directory. And then I also want to keep developing the scene ... I also want to develop the freelance stuff I'm doing. So, I want to do more freelance writing that is paid - because I've done a decent amount of writing unpaid, and keep assisting of workshops because I really enjoy it. Try and develop my own workshops, artistic workshops which I was talking about earlier.

There was a clear sense from participants that the programmes represented a 'coming together' or consolidation of their skills, which then tied into how they viewed their plans in the future. It involved a professionalization of skills that they had often developed as part of a bedroom culture (Willis 1998) and the experience of being taken seriously by the programmes. A participant from the urban English programme, who was a carer for their parent, also reflected upon how valuable it had been to have the time to pause and think about their future while experimenting with new forms of transitions:

P12: Even identifying future goals, which I had to do for the interview ... I wrote all of my future goals down and that alone was really helpful for me because then I could see what I wanted to achieve back then. And then since then I've found steps to how to action that a bit more and move that on ... It's like gaining insight into the work ethic I want. To see like the future for us and inspiration through seeing others in the collective as well make it impact. And I think that's been important and it adds like a first for my community programme but also just to make an impact and to consistently learn to improve my creative ability and breadth to my skills.

However, not all skill acquisition was so future-focused and genuine as the examples above. As with the *Negotiating Adulthood* theme, we noted that some young people repeated 'expected' answers as had been instilled by the programme leaders, sharing the intended outcomes of the programme. These included responses such as 'this programme will help me get a job' and 'will look good on my CV'. This was most evident with programmes that were short-term and event-focused, where organizational tasks were allocated within teams and more tightly controlled by the adult supervisors of the programme. The excerpt below is an example of this arts programme rhetoric where young people are made to feel 'only as good as their skills':

P7: Everyone needs to work together to, like, get everything done. You can't work on your own because it won't get done in time. And doing this event will help me with people skills because when the event is going on, I have to walk around and ask if people are having a good time and stuff ... And then with organization, it's really important for this programme as we all need to be prepared, because if the day comes and we haven't got everything properly done, then it's not going to be good.

For young people who attended programmes that were more tightly controlled by the adult staff, didactic instructions, fear of failure and assumptions about limited ability

were more commonplace. In those cases, tokenistic forms of participation, very little co-production and several examples of 'adult control' risked overwriting the skills and knowledge building and wider learning experiences that youth art programmes can offer.

This data signposts that youth arts programmes can support young people to explore new future trajectories. The young people shared how programmes can offer a space for professional skills acquisition and putting their knowledge into action. For some, it involved preparation for future self-employment and short-term paid work within the creative and cultural industries. We argue that youth arts programmes allow young people – many of whom have been lacking social integration by being excluded from formalized structural pathways – to professionalize their skills and explore how they can enact and construct alternative trajectories. When young people are introduced to new skills and new ways of working, particularly with industry-standard equipment or in connection with professionals and in professional settings, they experience 'being taken seriously' by the programmes. This transition experience involves employing their skills and negotiating future work life and professional identities, whilst building their local art community.

### *Orientation for care*

The third key theme touches upon how the youth arts programmes in the study offered young people a space to express care for themselves and their communities. We refer to this as an 'orientation' for care due to the way young people negotiated these values and sensitivities as part of their transition to becoming. In the interviews, young people expressed how their artwork was a vessel for emotions, and that the youth arts programmes were spaces where they could engage on their own terms and where values of care were operational on individual as well as on a social group level. To frame these narratives, we identify the following sub-themes: care for oneself/self-care, stress relief, 'chill-out time', calmness, building a close community of peers and gaining a new power and acceptance.

Working creatively often permitted young people to play and offered a counterbalance to the narrow norms and high pressures of contemporary youth life. Here, a participant from the smaller provincial Danish programme reflects on the value of focusing on feelings of peace and calm that emanated from her artistic interactions with nature.

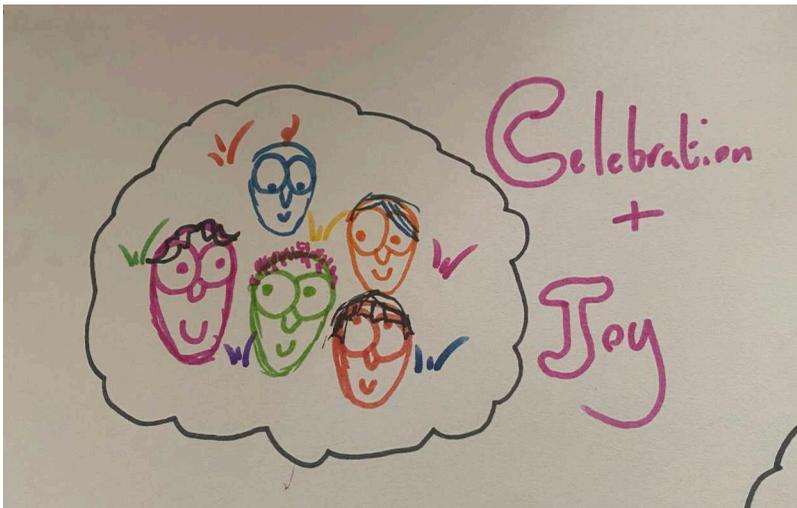
P13: I remember the most important thing for me was that there was no pressure when I was there. I could just be there and it felt peaceful. And I could just be and listen and I wasn't expected to do a lot of things, and because I had been very isolated, and I was getting used to being around a lot of people again. And it was very important for me to just find calmness. I think I wasn't really ready to explore what I wanted with my life or be creative and stuff. So, I just wanted to find some calm. So, I got the opportunity to do a video, that was just about peace, and we filmed nature and put on some nice sentences that reminded you of calmness.

Creating artwork as a vessel for emotions was positively reported on, as well as the high regard held for these programmes as spaces where the young people engage on their own terms. Two of the Danish programmes offered specialist psychological or professionalized social support alongside the artistic sessions, which young people valued. This was notably lacking in the English context, despite some programmes' claims to be

addressing poor mental health for the participants. This Danish participant from the inner-city programme describes the value that being able to 'fall into' her art bestowed for self-care:

P16: Self-healing and support, for me, is paramount. That I can have my creative art to fall into, but also having the support of other people with the same interest or the same troubles. It makes such a big difference ... I believe this place gives people, like many of us, who don't necessarily fit in the regular society, the place to be and a voice to be heard when we express ourselves through art and to show what art can do to many of us, for example, who are dealing with mental health.

It was significant in the young people's accounts that these values of care were operational, not only on an individual level, but also highly dependent on both a collective, social group level and on claiming their space and role in society. Young people frequently positioned the self within a community, as a self that can take care of others. The image of the self becomes something else, as young people's narratives described a shift from a deficit position of maintaining self-wellbeing, towards a caring self in solidarity and proximity with a community, where they and others could flourish. This is a valuable perspective as it breaks with those individualizing tendencies dominating the current well-being discourse (McLeod and Wright 2016) as well as the post-pandemic increase in delusive care discourses (Ndikung 2021). This participant from the urban English programme describes the importance of building community, also shown within Figure 4:



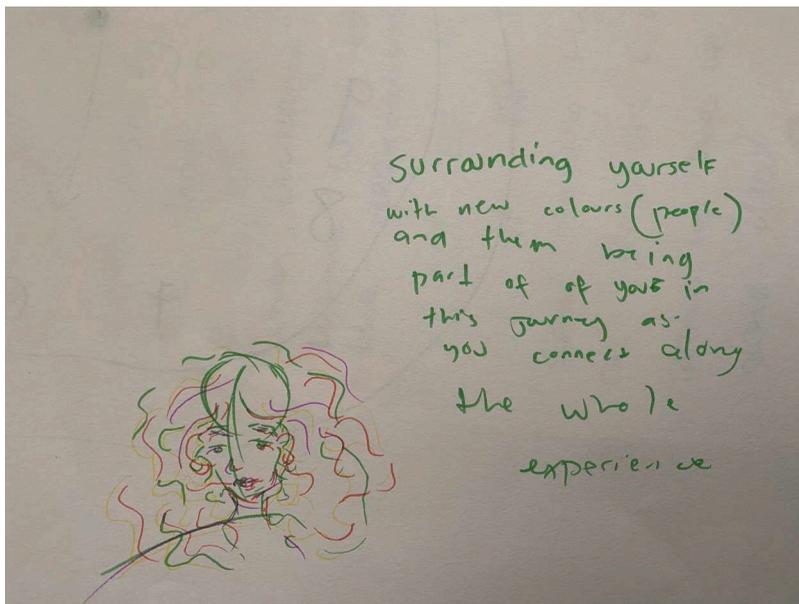
**Figure 4.** Celebration and joy.

P11: Celebration and Joy. It's just what pops into my head when I think about the importance of throwing events. But I think like there's a lot of importance to mental health from building community, building relationships and just like taking a load off ... Just like finding people that are maybe outside of the typical networking bubbles. You kind of come across people that are not super integrated and obviously it can be hard to burst through sometimes into a scene. So, I think showcasing people like that is important.

We argue that for young people, the creative process of being part of these programmes becomes an act of exchange. Well-being is achieved when young people are seen, appreciated by others and allowed to 'give back' to others among young adults facing similar challenges, as shown by this participant trying to build future employment for himself and others:

P12: So, I began learning how to produce and then from producing began learning how to engineer and put on events and from that it just kind of snowballed into becoming this member of the industry that can support himself and others within that ... Once I have my own studio space, then I can then use the connections that I've built through being in the industry myself and I can begin publishing artists from my studio the same way my boss does it ... Right? Yeah, so then I'd be earning royalties and throwing events to pay for my own studio and helping other younger artists to come and do the same thing and the cycle repeats.

Young people described the social value of being with others as a 'creative energy', which harboured the common goal of self-exploration, encouraged inspiring each other and overcame their fear of failure. For example, [Figure 5](#) – a drawing of a young girl with multi-coloured hair – was explained as surrounding yourself with new people to work as part of an artistic community. Working collectively, which all the programmes encouraged young people to do, pushed the boundaries of what young people could expect from each other, giving and receiving recognition from others for their creative work and re-imagining themselves. Here in the words of a young woman from the inner-city Danish programme:



**Figure 5.** Girl with multicoloured hair.

P17: It gives us a place to truly be and to embrace and explore our creative side. For me it helped me realize that I even had a creative side! They encourage everyone to try new things. And then as we talked about it as well, there's no shame in not being able to do

something ... I love to watch both 3D and 2D, any art. Yeah, and I love getting inspired by everyone. And I love it when people are inspired by me. So, that mutual inspiration.

We argue that this aspect of valuing the 'self' in and through a proximity and solidarity with a 'community' among marginalized young people in youth arts programmes has not previously been given enough consideration. This notion of the self as closely interconnected with 'others' through collaborative work, mutual appreciation and loyal encouragement manifested itself in both peer-to-peer support and building the creative 'scene' for future young adults. The often thought of as self-focused benefits of working with the arts are in the young people's accounts exchanged for, and translated into, the social and collective strength of being with others in these programmes, as expressed by one of the young people:

P12: I think I've said it before, but when you are in a room with people that are all on your page and have the same references, I think there's a lot of power in that.

This orientation for care for themselves and their community is a relational catalyst for engagement, agency and experiences of power. We argue it should be valued as equally important as our other two themes: *negotiating Adulthood* and *negotiating future work life*. Yet these considerations are rarely seen within funders' priorities or programme organizers intentions when working with marginalized young people. Nevertheless, our data demonstrates that youth arts programmes are valuable for supporting young people in taking care for the self and for others in acts of solidarity with their communities. When programmes allow young people to engage in creative work on their own terms and at the same time encourage them to work collectively, receiving recognition as part of and in proximity with an artistic community, new orientations, identities and consciousness arise. This key theme makes visible that what marginalized young people value in their processes of becoming adults is related to a sense of agency as integrated in collective efforts of social change. Arts programmes have been previously reported as beneficial for wellbeing (Ennis and Tonkin 2018), self-confidence (Lee et al. 2020) and self-esteem (Travis and Bowman 2012) and our data echoed these sentiments with young people stating that they valued the programmes for the development of the self. In addition, our participants emphasized the caring self within a community and proximity with others as giving way to a strong collective awareness of and actions towards the distinctive social conditions, they share and face.

## Discussion

Our project explored, through multiple journey mappings, what kind of transition experiences marginalized young people valued in arts programmes and what these experiences tell us about marginalized young people's transitions today. Engaging with young people's processes of becoming as they unfold in youth arts programmes demonstrates a reality far from the figures of failure often sticking to young people in the margins and instead highlights the highly complex processes that 'becoming an adult' implies in contemporary Western societies as Denmark and England. We refer to these as 'negotiations' and 'orientations' as this reflects the complex nature of how young people with special social conditions enter, traverse and get the most from these programmes, as well as the pitfalls they face.

The article recounted three shared transition experiences across different groups of marginalized young people in Denmark and England as carried out through their engagement across four youth arts programmes. *Negotiating adulthood* for the young people in our study involved, on the one hand, showing they could adapt and take responsibility, be trusted, work hard and manage their time, but on the other, the arts programmes served as an opportunity to speak up for themselves and challenge negative stereotypes about young people. There were both responsabilizing but also liberatory experiences whereby the art and culture offered non-deficit-based trajectories. However, the existing critiques of the responsabilisation of young people, deriving from the risk society (Kelly 2001) and the pitfalls of project-based 'regimes' created within programmes for young people at the margins (Bruselius-Jensen and Nielsen 2021) remain valid critical perspectives. These critiques make visible how youth arts programmes, through the over-controlling and tokenistic involvement of young people, are also contributing to individual and generational responsabilisation.

*Negotiating future work life* encompassed many positive benefits for moving on with artistic passions, the transition from bedroom artist to professional practice, joy, engagement and collaborative working. Young people felt positive about future employability within the creative industries, despite their preparation for self-employment and precarious futures. However, the language of twenty-first century skills was also at risk of reducing learning, such as youth arts programmes, to instrumentalized experiences of self-improvement and individualized educational competition (Hickey-Moody et al. 2022). Arts programmes that develop young people's critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication are highly valued by funders for producing work-ready young people and supporting employability. Re-engagement with education and upskilling for the world of work were key themes within the data from both Danish and English programmes, yet the kinds of skills that are developed and future careers that working-class young people, are set up for, are questionable. Whilst many youth arts programmes are funded, under these auspices, the young people took a much less instrumental view of the skills they were developing for their imagined futures.

*An orientation to care for the self and for others* was important for building a community of peers through art and culture, which young people reported were relational catalysts for engagement, agency and power. These aspects of care as acts of interconnectedness and solidarity by young people are often overlooked in terms of outcomes by programme funders, managers and surrounding society. Our research has shown that, above the 'expected' transition work of negotiating adulthood and developing work skills, young people valued this transitional experience above the others. We suggest that this finding aligns with recent work by Lamont among a much broader population of American young people (2023) and contributes to contemporary youth transition research, as it offers a counter-narrative to what Taylor (2011) has termed the well-being discourse. As mentioned by McLeod and Wright (2016) this discourse encompasses a dangerous preoccupation with individual well-being, which has the potential to distract from 'the continued importance of collective welfare and the social provision of the material conditions in which much individual well-being is lived and felt' (Ibid. pp. 779). Our data supports this concern by demonstrating and emphasizing the importance of the social and societal aspects of well-being as carried out among young marginalized people being part of arts programmes. The research shows how a caring self in an interconnected and

interdependent community with others closely links to and unfolds a strong collective awareness of and actions towards the distinctive social, but also generational conditions, these young people share and face. For the young people, these communities operated on both a local artistic level with peer groups and friends, but also on a broader level, such as the places where they live and how they are perceived by their families and the wider societal community.

## Conclusion

This article recounts how arts programmes can support multiple and differentiated transition experiences among marginalized young people. Our research, undertaken across four arts programmes in Denmark and England, explored the diverse types of negotiations and orientations of young adult life and future adulthood experienced by marginalized young people. Through our three shared transition experiences: the negotiation of adulthood, the negotiation of future work life and an orientation for care, we identify broader patterns for marginalized young people's contemporary transitions. Conceptually, we followed a branch of Youth Studies concerned with young people's transitions as 'processes of becoming' (Gale and Parker 2014; Grosz 1999; Worth 2009). We argued that this perspective is well aligned with theories within arts and culture and permits us to look for similarities, differences and patterns across different groups of marginalized young people across two countries. The programme contexts also have implications for our findings, which were thematized around deficit narratives, future work-life and orientations for care.

We identify a new and increasingly persistent shared theme in marginalized young people's transition work in post-pandemic times: an awareness of caring for oneself and others as an interconnected and relational action, which is particularly pertinent to the young people in this study. We argue that acts of self-care and building close communities of peers based on mutual solidarity enable marginalized young people to gain a new and often overlooked awareness of both the social and generational conditions they share, as well as of the power collective actions of social change hold. Thus, the young people in the study frequently positioned the self within a community, as a self that also can take care of others, shifting it from a deficit position of maintaining individual self-wellbeing, towards a self that is permitted to flourish in a community with others (Butler 2022; Lamont 2023). This breaks with those individualizing tendencies dominating much of the current well-being discourse (McLeod and Wright 2016) as well as with the more hidden tendencies of the care discourse to define not only what we should consider as care, but also who can give care and for what reason (Ndikung 2021).

The study suggests that by paying closer attention to marginalized young people's multiple, uncertain and precarious transition experiences and which issues of collective importance are emphasized by them in their processes of becoming, it is possible to gain a broader and more qualified knowledge of the value of youth arts programmes in these young people's lives. The study offers insights into three key themes that can support a shift from a narrow focus on more expected transition outcomes, such as taking up education and gaining employment, which are defining, but often misleading indicators for the success of these programmes (Simmons 2017). However, we also argue that the key themes are of significance for future research into marginalized young

people's processes of becoming in understanding both the social and generational conditions they share.

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