University of BRISTOL

PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT IN DETACHED YOUTH WORK

Student Number: 2267840

Word Count: 9988

I declare that the research contained herein was granted approval by the SPAIS Ethics

Committee.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I want to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Marcus Morgan, whose invaluable guidance and insights have been instrumental in the development of this project. Our discussions have continually deepened both my passion for sociology and my enthusiasm for this research.

To Miss Pacheco, you played such a significant role in my academic journey. I will always remember the support you offered, which gave me the knowledge and confidence to consider and pursue higher education.

To my parents, thank you from the bottom of my heart for always being my greatest supporters and believing in me. Your constant support throughout university and in everything leading up to this moment has empowered me to embrace every opportunity. I am who I am because of you, and I truly could not have done this without you.

To my friends and boyfriend Jake, thank you for giving me something to smile about amidst the deadlines and the days when balancing it all seemed impossible. A special thank you to Emz - running the marathon together this month was a boost that I've truly treasured in these last few weeks.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this to youth workers across the United Kingdom. I see you, and I thank you for continuing to believe in a system that often overlooks you. I have witnessed the positive impact you have on the lives of young people, and I hope to help others recognise your work as well.

PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT IN DETACHED YOUTH WORK

The youth work workforce is in crisis. Despite growing demand for the support provided by youth workers (YWs), the number of qualified practitioners has declined significantly, driven by over £1.2 billion in funding cuts to the sector over the past four years (NYA, 2025). This reduction has been attributed to the widespread failure to recognise and value the role of YWs, resulting in a lack of public support (Cooper, 2018: 3). Therefore, greater awareness and research into the profession could prove pivotal.

Previous research has focused on YWs' delivery of centre-based support, with little attention paid to more informal forms of practice such as detached youth work (DYW). DYW takes place in non-institutional, public spaces where young people choose to meet (NYA, 2020: 3), including parks, bus shelters, streets, and shopping centres. This approach is often referred to under the umbrella of *street work*, which also involves outreach work. Any growing interest in DYW in recent research has largely framed it within discourses of antisocial behaviour (Jeffs and Banks, 2010; Waiton, 2008), thereby overlooking the decision-making practices used by professionals in these contexts.

An investigation into professional practice within DYW is particularly valuable, as this setting facilitates more 'genuine' dialogue with young people, away from the control and supervision typically associated with the traditional centre-based provision (Whelan and Steinkellner, 2018: 257). In these more regulated settings, YWs have increasingly been forced into the role of 'performative professionals', adopting a professional demeanour that undermines what they perceive as their youth worker identity (Hart, 2015: 871). In order to meet the demands of employers under neoliberal governments that have waged a 'war on youth' (Taylor et al. 2018: 91-92). In contrast, DYW offers practitioners greater autonomy, enabling them to balance

informal, young person-centred approaches with external demands more flexibly (Davidson, 2020: 17), revealing a more honest depiction of YWs in practice.

Detached settings demand fast, in-the-moment decision-making (Trelfa, 2018: 357), allowing for an understanding of the true, unconscious decisions by YWs. Therefore, this study on professional judgement in detached settings offers a more holistic view of youth worker identity and the factors shaping their interactions with young people. Yet, the professional judgement of YWs has received comparatively less scholarly attention than other caring professions or roles working with young people, which have explored how judgement in these roles is shaped by culturally embedded understandings enacted during practice (Polkinghorne, 2004: 152). This study addresses this gap in literature by examining how individual values, knowledge, and experience are embedded in YWs' decision-making when delivering DYW while acknowledging the broader conditions mediating these practices.

To do this, this research draws on the experiences of YWs employed by a youth charity supporting more than twenty youth clubs across a county in the Southeast of England. It is exploratory and interpretative, initially inspired by direct experience working alongside detached YWs. Interviews spoke to a Bourdieusian framework, so this study used an inductive approach, applying Bourdieu's theory of practice, particularly the concepts of habitus and dispositions, to explore the nature of professional judgment within DYW following interviews. These discussions are situated within broader debates concerning young people in public discourse and the impact of austerity measures on youth services in the United Kingdom.

The discussion begins by exploring the beliefs and values held by YWs, both personally and professionally, and how these shape their practice. It then considers their responses to formal training and the extent to which this supports their work, as variations in professional

judgement and boundary-setting become apparent. The analysis then moves to the wider socio-cultural context YWs are embedded, particularly the lack of understanding around DYW and prevailing societal fears of young people (Rodger, 2008; Waiton, 2008). This often leads to YWs being perceived as patrolling figures (Davidson, 2020), an image professionals work against in practice. Finally, I assess these influences by exploring YWs' practice in the face of uncertainty- in unfamiliar environments when engaging with new groups of young people- analysing to what extent the role of their professional judgement is in the 'dynamic risk assessment' they refer to.

Ultimately, this study makes a significant contribution to sociological understandings of professional practice. It explores how YWs navigate interactions with young people to establish credibility as safe and approachable points of support, balancing the promotion of their professional identity with the need to remain accessible and relatable. This research deepens understandings of the nuanced processes through which YWs manage these tensions, highlighting how values, experiences, and socio-cultural pressures shape practice in real-world contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foundations of Detached Youth Work

Unlike more structured approaches to youth support, DYW encourages young people to be active rather than passive participants (Wood and Hine, 2009), relying on their voluntary and informal engagement (Davidson, 2020: 6). According to the National Youth Agency (NYA), the professional, statutory, and regulatory body for youth work in England, this approach fosters more empowering relationships between young people and YWs. As DYW is based on 'regular contact, mutual trust, respect, and understanding' (NYA, 2020: 3). Consequently, this approach is widely recognised as the most effective tool for engaging with young people 'on the fringes' of society (Williamson, Chevalier and Loncle, 2021), who are unlikely to access building-based services or more formal provisions (NYA, 2020: 3).

The role of DYW in reaching young people labelled as societal 'outsiders' - those who do not conform to societal norms (Becker, 1963), such as being out of school or displaying behaviour labelled as antisocial - presents unique challenges to YWs' practice. Efforts to build trust, even when well-intentioned, can reinforce distrust if young people perceive them as forced (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van, 2019; McCrystal and McAloney, 2011: 169). This creates barriers to initial engagement, requiring YWs to adopt specific practices within street settings to foster engagement on young people's terms (Whelan and Steinkellner, 2018: 268). As YWs are often regarded as 'outsiders' by young people, who are typically more familiar and in control of these detached environments (Becker, 1963: 2).

Building trust is a crucial aspect of DYW, but it must be recognised as a time-intensive process. Only once trust is established can practitioners effectively act as mediators between young

people and wider support networks, including their communities. According to Hirschi's (2002) social control theory, this strengthening of social bonds can help prevent crime by fostering attachments between young people and mainstream society. This principle is reflected in many youth services and policies nationally, which claim a commitment to building 'stronger communities' to prevent youth alienation (NYA, 2024). However, research reveals that although 'many local Youth Services rebadged themselves as Youth and Community Services' (Taylor et al. 2018: 86), they did so without committing the necessary time and resources to effectively foster young people's real involvement in their communities, merely obscuring their alienation.

This study explores how YWs' professional judgment allows them to build trust, recognising that, contrary to existing literature, YWs are not solely focused on building relationships with socially excluded youth. This highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the service, one shaped by the voices of YWs themselves. Hence why this insider research is invaluable in a sector that is underfunded, understaffed, and underrepresented in sociological research; at a time when DYW is increasingly driven by the demands of external funders and broader public policy rather than the professionals delivering it.

The Landscape of Detached Youth Work

In England and Wales, more than two-thirds of council-run youth centres have closed since 2010 (Unison, 2024). As a result, 80% of youth work is now delivered by voluntary sector organisations (NYA, 2025), such as the one examined in this study. This reflects the growing privatisation of public intervention amid the hollowing out of the state (Pinch, 1997; Rhodes, 1994). This lack of safe spaces for young people remains a topical issue, with one in four youth centres under threat of closure (NYA, 2021). Consequently, DYW is increasingly employed as

a cost-effective solution to cover large, underfunded areas where other provisions have been withdrawn (Spence, Pugh and Turner, 2003: 62). This reliance is more pronounced in small towns across the UK, much like where my sample is based. However, this localised focus has contributed to a scarcity of academic literature beyond isolated case studies, despite the growing demand for DYW.

Amid this landscape, DYW has shifted towards more targeted, issue-based approaches to align with the 'contemporary political, policy, and social frameworks within which youth work services now operate' (Davidson, 2020: 2). Outcome-based models have emerged to measure the tangible impacts of DYW, often aligning with local and national government priorities to reduce antisocial behaviour (Waiton, 2011: 57). While these models provide measurable outcomes, there is growing concern that strict targets and funding obligations compromise the authentic relationships central to DYW practice.

Research shows that prioritising data collection in a commissioning and payment-by-results environment forces the market into the core of youth work, commodifying young people as 'data for exchange' (Taylor et al. 2018: 88). This shift may have contributed to the sector's recruitment struggles, with over 4,500 YWs leaving the profession in the past decade (NYA, 2025). As increasing demands to meet external targets risks detaching YWs from the young people they support (Smith, 2001), and what they perceive as their identity and purpose as YWs.

This tension between professionals' desire to support young people and imposed outcomes underscores the need for research prioritising YWs' perspectives and how the political landscape shapes their practices. Therefore, this research that examines how YWs balance strict

targets and funding priorities with their own values in practice, provides a valuable opportunity for sociological analysis.

Detached Youth Works Proposed Purpose

This outcome-based model of DYW reflects cultural understandings of social order shaped by moral panics constructed by the government and media (Cohen and Young, 1973). Behaviours once considered non-criminal, such as being 'rowdy' or causing a 'nuisance' (Police UK, no date), are now reframed within a broader political, legal, and regulatory context and labelled as 'antisocial' (Waiton, 2011: 57). Young people's involvement in antisocial behaviour has been constructed as the 'new disease in the UK' (Waiton, 2011: 57; Aldridge and Cross, 2008). Consequently, policies to, 'crackdown on antisocial behaviour' to, 'build communities' - promoted by both Labour and Conservative governments (Labour, 2024; Sunak, 2024) - have taken precedence over the needs of young people (Tiffany, 2011: 129). Adolescents are no longer 'constructed as children in need of protection and care but become positioned as potentially threatening and socially deviant' (Cullen and Bradford, 2018: 115). These priorities are increasingly reflected in the demands placed on the youth sector and the practice of youth work professionals.

Existing research illustrates how moral panics surrounding antisocial behaviour marginalise young people, excluding them from public spaces (Brown, 2013), due to the misrecognition of youth behaviour that comes with this deeply ingrained fear. For instance, efforts by young people to ensure their safety by gathering in groups are frequently misinterpreted as threatening (Malone, 2002). Such misrecognition can be detrimental to a young person's sense of self, as Becker (1963: 34) argues, 'Treating a person as though he were generally rather than specifically deviant produces a self-fulfilling prophecy'. This highlights the critical role of

detached YWs in challenging these narratives and advocating for approaches that prioritise understanding and empowerment over exclusion and control. Such advocacy is essential to ensure that young people associated with an 'antisocial' group identity are not excluded from youth services and support.

Advocacy has become an increasingly essential role for YWs. While existing literature exclusively explores the impact of this public discourse and policy on DYW itself, its impact on those practising it has not been interrogated. An analysis of professional practice and the extent to which YWs' judgements in the field reflect these external demands is crucial for developing a more holistic understanding of how such pressures interact with the pre-existing values held by detached YWs.

Challenges Presented by the Cultural Context

This fear of young people (Waiton, 2008) has increased the workload of youth work professionals by further isolating young people from their communities and support networks. This deepens, rather than mitigates, young people's distrust of authority figures, including police and teachers (Davidson, 2010; Jeffs and Banks, 2010). Young people raised in areas characterised by poverty and inequality, often with minimal adult supervision - where toughness, intimidation, and fighting are culturally valued as forms of respect (Anderson, 1999: 323) - are now frequently labelled as 'antisocial' and show hesitancy toward engaging with those who they perceive as challenging these values. The resulting tension and hostility between social groups is evident in these young people's relationship with the police, whom they often perceive as discriminatory for challenging their social norms (Andersons, 1999). To build and maintain positive relationships, detached YWs recognise the need to maintain 'strategic distance from what were seen to be the more punitive approaches of community

safety professionals' (Davidson, 2010: 17). However, this becomes increasingly difficult under neoliberal policies that promote 'a deep distrust of young people's own peer groups' (Taylor et al. 2018: 88).

In attempts to avoid being perceived as enforcers like the police, detached YWs carefully tread the boundary between social justice and social control. Despite new demands from funders and employers, YWs' acknowledge that if they are to 'embrace the crime control agenda too overtly and directly, then there is a danger that they cease to be youth workers' (Jeffs and Banks, 2010: 115). Davidson's (2010) ethnographic study, though geographically specific to Scotland, is one of the few ethnographic analyses which explores how youth work professionals manage this fine line. She notes that collaborations with police officers are 'carefully negotiated', and although they are not avoided, YWs would deliberately limit the amount of time they spent talking to them, especially in the presence of young people. There were examples of positive collaborations with the local police, such as providing and setting up mobile sports pitches, but these were carefully negotiated (Davidson, 2010: 10). This division created difficulties in the decision-making processes of YWs when having to agree on 'what circumstances did require police involvement and the implications this might have' (Davidson, 2010: 12). This boundary setting practice informed by YWs' professional judgment is something this research aims to address.

The relationship between YWs and young people differs from that of other professionals, as young people perceive YWs as 'non-judgemental', and therefore often feel able to 'open up and share things with the youth workers' (citing chlamydia tests and smoking as examples) that they would not tell any other adult, including parents and teachers' (Hart, 2015: 874). The success of the practice depends on YW's ability to promote authentic relationships, providing young people with a form of support they may not otherwise have access to, due to fear of

embarrassment or getting into trouble. This form of practice, specific to YWs, motivated my interest to explore how youth work professionals navigate this cultural climate while remaining true to their role of advocating for and supporting young people in a more relaxed way.

Putting this into Practice

Ultimately, successful detached YWs prioritise low-threshold practice, which requires flexibility, creativity, and constant boundary negotiation (Tiffany, 2011: 128), to effectively respond to young people's needs. Central to this approach is physical and relational proximity, meaning DYW typically occurs during 'antisocial hours' (evenings and weekends) when young people are most likely to be out. This scheduling can create staffing challenges, particularly when paired with funding cuts, meaning part-time staff and volunteers outnumber full-time workers, who make up only 23% of those delivering DYW (Spence, Pugh and Turner, 2003: 62). However, research shows that part-time workers often struggle to establish formal partnerships or make referrals (Spence, Pugh and Turner, 2003: 63). Consequently, despite being less involved in direct delivery, full-time YWs remain central to the success of DYW. Their established presence within the community means that partnership work often depends on a single youth worker, who is regarded as the local expert and ultimately held responsible for outcomes of DYW in the area, even when not directly involved in its delivery.

This research will investigate how full-time YWs' professional judgment allows them to promote and maintain positive relationships with local businesses and community members. It will investigate how they perceive the lack of training provided for part-time staff and volunteers. Existing research has reported that training for YWs is often localised, inconsistent, and rarely focused on detached and outreach work (Spence, Pugh and Turner, 2003: 64). This represents an interesting area of inquiry when considering how disparities in training may

influence the decision making and behaviour of full-time staff working with less experienced or untrained colleagues. This will contribute to broader literature exploring the growing reliance on trainees and volunteers in the public sector, for example, in healthcare, where frontline staff have reported challenges related to unclear role boundaries and a lack of knowledge for students and volunteers (The Kings Fund, 2018).

Regardless of the individual's title when practising DYW, professional judgment remains critical. Particularly as detached YWs navigate their affiliations with multiple social groups, often including the communities they serve. Unlike other professions such as teaching or social work, where roles are more clearly defined, the ambiguity of DYW requires practitioners to employ flexible strategies in managing their identities and interactions. Balancing authenticity with professionalism becomes even more challenging when YWs are embedded within the community. While detached YWs shared social identities with the young people they work with can strengthen relationships, they also raise ethical dilemmas. At first glance, having something in common with young people, such as being from the same area, often enhances interactions by fostering trust and rapport. As Spence, Pugh and Turner (2003: 67) note, 'Detached and outreach workers are most successful when they are in touch with extended networks of young people and are known within the communities in which they are operating'. However, these benefits require increasing importance of detached YWs' professional judgment, as they must manage these interactions appropriately.

The complexities associated with the establishment of professional boundaries in building relationships, are demonstrated in Hatton's (2023) insider research on lesbian, gay and bisexual women YWs in the Northeast. It explores how professionals must be confident in identifying when adjusting boundaries between their professional and personal identity could help build rapport with young people (Hatton, 2023: 1009). This ongoing negotiation highlights the

central role of professional judgment in DYW. It emphasises why it is vital to study the decision-making processes of detached YWs and recognise that they belong to other social groups, beyond their professional role.

The Importance of Professional Judgement

Consequently, professional judgement is developed across all professions but holds particular significance for detached YWs, who often operate independently of the direct support and supervision of managers, colleagues, and sponsors. This autonomy enables them to adapt their practice to the complex and varied needs of different groups of young people. However, this is not accurately represented in existing research, as YWs are unlikely to admit to an outsider - or to external bodies upon whom they rely for funding - that their practice differs from the outcome-based models they are assumed to deliver. In reality, DYW relies heavily on context-specific strategies and the ability to respond to the diverse needs of communities (Spence, Pugh and Turner, 2003), emphasising how youth work cannot always be quantified or narrowly defined (Jeffs and Banks, 2010: 116):

> Youth workers operate according to different criteria. […] They must be able to give reasons for targeting based on professional judgement that takes full account of who will benefit most from their intervention and where the greatest need resides.

This research demonstrates how YWs differ from more extensively studied youth professionals whose decision-making is guided by more structured frameworks. Detached YWs, by contrast, rely on their professional judgment to navigate informal and unregulated contexts. This investigation into professional judgment has been applied to other social actors who must grapple with 'various, and sometimes inconsistent or contradictory, frames to give meanings to

their actions' (Lamont, 2009: 109), relying instead on their values, morals and judgements. However, this has been focused on other professionals, such as University Professors, rather than those working with young people of secondary school age (11-16), like the detached YWs in this study.

The Making of a Good Detached Youth Worker

The views and accounts shared by YWs reflected Bourdieusian understandings of practice, which explains why some social actors adapt to social roles and settings as effortlessly as a 'fish in water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127), while others cannot. In common discourse, these intangible factors are difficult to articulate beyond references to individual personality. Hence the usefulness of a Bourdieusian framework in discussions surrounding how some individuals 'naturally' have more of a 'feel' for their professional role (Adams, 2006: 515).

According to this theory, such differences are a result of the deeply embedded, taken-for-granted knowledge and habits shaped by individuals' cultural contexts within broader social structures. Bourdieu (1998; 1986; 1977) conceptualised this as habitus: a set of dispositions - preferences and attitudes towards practice - informed by cultural factors such as class, age, geographical location, language, education, and family background, among others. Throughout this study, I refer to the embodied dispositions of YWs, shaped by lived experiences over their life course (Leeder et al. 2021: 358), which form their habitus and unconscious competence within the field (Bourdieu, 1977: 79).

While this framework has not yet been applied specifically to DYW, it has been used in broader discussions examining antisocial behaviour, an area closely linked to the current landscape of DYW. Rodger (2008) critiques the limitations of both current policy approaches surrounding

antisocial behaviour and the popular sociological perspectives informing these, which adopt an overly reflexive lens of human behaviour. These demonise young people displaying antisocial behaviour by failing to acknowledge the socially determined and structurally constrained nature of human behaviour and action (Rodger, 2008: 67). Instead, it frames this behaviour as a 'rational choice' which assumes a consensus in society that this behaviour can - and should - be stopped. Instead, Bourdieu's concept of habitus offers a more useful analytical tool for understanding how:

> Community, neighbourhood, family and street relationships create and demand particular modes of response from those who inhabit them. The ways of behaving, thinking and talking that are acquired are shaped by the field and lead to habituated ways of behaving that are compatible with life in a social area. (Rodger, 2008: 67)

This framework allows for a more holistic understanding of those displaying antisocial behaviour, as well as of YWs' practice and the factors that guide their interactions in the field. It is particularly useful for developing more effective support and training for DYW practitioners, while also broadening understandings of DYW more generally. A more comprehensive grasp of YWs' professional judgement is essential to current research on youth services and to informing public policy, which should draw on these professionals' insights and expertise. This focus on DYW addresses a gap in the existing literature, which has largely focussed on more traditional, building-based youth work, overlooking the distinct challenges, judgements, and experiences of YWs in detached settings. This study not only applies a fresh framework to the study of youth work practice but also contributes to wider conversations about the social and cultural influences that shape professional judgment.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample consists of YWs working across a county in the Southeast of England. This English context is a useful addition to existing research on DYW, which is overwhelmingly based in Scotland, a place less affected by the neoliberal processes which have caused a 'significant loss to open access or universal youth services' in England (Davidson, 2020: 18). Purpose sampling was used to recruit participants currently practising DYW, which was crucial to this research. As an insider, working for the same youth charity as participants and delivering street-based work, access issues usually associated with this social group were mitigated. Snowball sampling was then used to reach YWs from partner centres that I had not worked with, increasing the generalisability of the data and acting as a mode of operational distancing to address the limitations of insider research (Kirpitchenko and Voloder, 2014: 5).

Participants had varying levels of involvement in DYW, with over half involved in both the planning and delivery of DYW. Although a larger sample size would have improved reliability, staffing constraints limited YWs availability, so despite initial interest from a larger pool of YWs, several could not commit to interviews. In total, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted. Their informal nature meant interview times varied from half an hour to over one hour, as participants were empowered to guide the conversation. This meant time became a significant practical limitation. Therefore, to overcome this the interviews were conducted online to remove travel time. Additionally, conducting interviews online helped ensure that colleagues did not feel obliged to participate. Their involvement happened at times and locations which best suited them, meaning other staff members did not know if they participated unlike if an interview was to be held in the centre (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010:

31). This also helped detach participants from the organisation during the interviews, encouraging them to speak more freely.

The sample predominantly identified as women, although 29% of participants identified as men - a notable figure given the feminisation of paid childcare work (Fraser, 2022; Hochschild and Machung, 2012). Race and ethnicity are not discussed, as, unlike gender, these topics did not arise during interviews, likely reflecting the county's predominantly white population (ONS, 2021). This influenced the decision to avoid pseudonyms, due to the class and racial associations with names (Crabtree et al. 2022). Instead, participants are referred to by their job title and a number ordered by length of service: Youth Worker 1 being the longest serving, and Youth Worker 7 being the newest (see Appendix I).

Data collection

This study was originally designed to triangulate methods, combining interviews with observations to enhance the credibility of findings (Given, 2016: 71). Since interviews rely on self-reporting and secondary accounts, observing YWs practising DYW would have helped mitigate interview bias, allowing for more reliable data (Denscombe, 2010: 141). While my prior involvement and informal observations acted as a pilot study, the ethics committee did not permit the inclusion of formal observations due to concerns over informed consent in a community setting- a core, though debated, ethical principle (Greener, 2011: 154). Since DYW avoids collecting young people's data, asking for signed consent would conflict with its ethos. Additionally, as the young people engaging in DYW are under eighteen, determining who is appropriate to give consent, whether a parent, guardian, or youth worker, would present significant practical challenges, particularly if appropriate consent-givers were absent. Most

importantly, the process could have damaged the relationship between YWs and the young people they support, many of whom already distrust authority figures (Brendtro et al. 2019).

In future research, while observations would offer the most valid data, they may only be feasible under covert conditions, carried out by someone who holds the dual role of youth worker and researcher, with young people unaware they are being studied. This would require strict ethical safeguarding procedures, including anonymisation and avoiding digital recordings to protect identifiable information and ensure privacy and confidentiality. This approach would need careful ethical justification, balancing the risks of covert research with the potential for more nuanced insights into DYW, given that social researchers and YWs label these young people, who would be participants, as vulnerable and in need of protection from harm.

It was impossible, and undesirable, to completely disregard my previous experiences and understandings of DYW (Kühner, Ploder and Langer: 2016; Harding, 1993). These insights, inaccessible to outsider researchers, prompted this interrogation of what shapes YWs varying practices. However, echoing the work of Merton's (1972) critique of the 'insider' vs 'outsider' distinction, extended time away from the centre studying meant I also experienced 'outsider-ness', particularly with newer staff and recent micro-politics in the organisation and community. For participants I had not met prior, my insider status often only facilitated initial access. Nonetheless, my familiarity with DYW allowed me to share personal experiences when participants were hesitant, as this use of self helped to build rapport (Mey, 2007: 478) and establish a non-hierarchal relationship (Mills, Bonner and Francis: 2006). This fostered openness and richer, more valid data, in contrast to a passive research approach.

Ethics

Participants' positions within their communities informed the decision to withhold the name of the county and youth charity. Disclosing this information risked identifying participants, as YWs operate in small teams where stakeholders are easily recognised (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010: 32). This could have compromised both anonymity and the trust YWs have built within their communities (Davidson, 2020: 2; Spence, Pugh and Turner, 2003: 65), if the interactions discussed could be traced back to community members.

Trust among colleagues was emphasised as central to participants' work, reinforcing the need for strict ethical conduct. Participants were fully informed of their right to withdraw and how their data would be handled with care. This included secure storage, anonymised transcripts and confidentiality from colleagues to prevent harm (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010: 32). Anonymity was crucial given that critiques of organisational practices could strain relationships. As despite my connection with the organisation, ethical standards required me to 'acknowledge negative findings honestly' (Social Research Association, 2021: 28).

I recognised the study's limitations, particularly the small sample size and limited generalisability, but ensured a rigorous and transparent process. I reflected on my insider positionality, which could both enrich and constrain my interpretations. I avoided assuming shared understanding and sought clarification in interviews where needed. Follow-up questions encouraged participants to reflect on their own experiences rather than making assumptions about young people's perceptions of them. Ultimately, decisions were taken to maintain research integrity, uphold ethical standards, and produce trustworthy, valid findings. This approach helped secure rich, in-depth accounts from DYW staff while respecting participant welfare, community trust, and social research ethics.

Analysis

Following data collection, I used thematic analysis to identify patterns and common themes across participants' accounts, as while individual secondary accounts or testimonies can be shaped by personal bias or interpretation, recurring themes across different participants helped validate the nature of the interactions described. It allowed for a distinction between individual beliefs and broader shared practices. Additionally, I included content analysis of the organisation's *Detached Youth Work Handbook* (see Appendix III) to further my understanding of what influenced professionals' practice in this organisation.

When writing up the findings, I was careful not to interject my own theories or assumptions into participants' narratives, which is common in social science research. Instead, I aimed to present their testimonies with sensitivity and authenticity, allowing their voices - often marginalised or unheard - to speak for themselves. This approach reflected a commitment to ethical, reflexive research that empowered participants and stayed true to their lived realities.

ANALYSIS

Internal: Morals, Values and Beliefs

Training

The charity's DYW handbook acknowledges that 'much of [the demands of detached work] cannot be taught'. Similarly, participants expressed a belief that completing standardised qualifications did not equate to becoming a good detached youth worker. This was particularly evident for longer-serving YWs, who had worked with a larger pool of YWs over the course of their career:

> I've been out with people and had to turn around and go, we probably need to redirect your work because detached isn't for you. (Youth Worker 1)

> I think, for me, it's either in you or it's not. You've either got it or you don't. It's a hard thing to teach- there are qualifications out there, but there are people who have done qualifications that probably aren't the best youth workers. And there's people out there that haven't done the qualifications, and you think, oh my god- you're the best! […] it's personality, its mindset, it's everything. (Youth Worker 3)

This 'mindset' that influences an individual's sense of fit as a detached youth worker points towards professional dispositions. It explains why some individuals instinctively adapt to the demands of DYW, while others struggle despite formal training. These variations in practice reflect research exploring how 'a person's dispositions can enable or facilitate some forms of

learning, whilst inhibiting or preventing others' (Hodkinson, Biesta and James, 2008: 39). YWs' competence becomes particularly clear in detached settings:

> Youth work, for me, is based on you as a person. I really feel like that, I really do. But don't get me wrong, you can train to be a good youth worker, […] if you haven't got certain qualities, you can gain them, you can gain knowledge. Anyone can gain knowledge in their practice and whatnot, and gain skills - anyone can do that. But sometimes you have to have that little bit extra inside you - that little something that you can't be taught or can't be coached or anything - you've just got to have it there. If you haven't got that, I think that's what will make detached hard for you. (Youth Worker 5)

The limitation of formal training and other commonly assumed indicators of professional ability, such as years of experience, is echoed in research on nurses which found their competence in practice does not necessarily correspond with the length of time in the role, but rather with individuals' unique dispositions (Rischel, Larsen and Jackson, 2008). In this study, participants showed some awareness of the influence of their dispositions on their practice, particularly concerning gender:

> I think what I struggled with at the beginning - and it's still a bit of a funny one for me - is when it's just me and another male member of staff. Groups of girls, like young girls and whatever - not so much daytime, but late at night. [As from the] perspective of any other members of the public seeing a couple of men talking to a group of young girls - you don't know what that conversation is - they don't know what the interaction is. And for me, it's a bit like that, innit? And even with us going over to the young girls, they don't know us - so for me, when I deal with those types of interactions, when I see a

group of young girls, I'm more like: you get the eye contact, and you give them the 'you alright?' and give them a thumbs up or whatever from a distance. And if they acknowledge you and you get something back, then you will progress further with it, 'What you guys up to?'. And as you're saying, 'What you guys up to?', you're walking - slowly - over towards them. And then they'll talk back, and they might walk your way or whatever, and then you can have that conversation. But you've already sort of sussed them out and given them the opportunity to suss you out, so they know what the interaction's about. I think that's the only one I have any sort of trouble, or I think twice about, before I step into it. (Youth Worker 5)

This recognition of external perceptions associated with these two social identities emphasises the role of bodies in enabling and, at times, enforcing expressions of distinction (Bourdieu, in Bloustein, 2002: 101). Youth Worker 5 attempts to challenge the social structure through his practice (Hodkinson, Biesta and James, 2008: 37-38), working against the dominance associated with his gendered habitus and consequent position of power within the social space (Behnke and Meuser, 2002: 159). He shows an awareness of this difference, which shapes his professional judgement and approach. Not only does this highlight the role of dispositions in shaping interactions, but it also suggests standardised training fails YWs by not accounting for how their unique identities influence interactions due to differences in how they are perceived.

Shared Beliefs

Participants expressed a shared belief in young people that set them apart from other community members, whom participants argued were disconnected from their own youth. YWs' acknowledgement of their own youth allowed for shared understanding which aided relationship building with young people on detached:

I might discuss similar situations that can then be relatable to the young person, because sometimes that can literally be the stepping stone from, 'I'm not interacting with you', to, 'You're actually kind of cool and actually you've been through similar things to me'. (Youth Worker 6)

This supports earlier research that emphasises the importance of the self in youth work (Hatton, 2023; Fusco, 2012), and the importance of shared experiences, dispositions, in building relationships. YWs' ability to relate to young people on a personal level, despite generational differences, was key to fostering trust, something discussed extensively by Youth Worker 5, the eldest participant in the study:

They'll see the greys in my beard and whatnot, but […] we'll start talking, […] I tell them how old I am, but then I'm still able to relate to what they're saying, they'll talk to me and say, 'he's alright- he might be old but he's alright' (*both laugh*). (Youth Worker 5)

While this account is shaped by the participant's assumptions about how they are perceived by young people - limiting its reliability - it illustrates the use of self in practice. It also points to a fundamental belief in young people and connection to their own youth which is reflected in the habitus of effective detached YWs, who reject dominant discourses that position them in opposition to young people. A habitus shaped by YWs' frustrations over the lack of empathy from other community members.

Boundary Setting

Another disposition that facilitated relationship-building with young people was shared local knowledge and geographical positioning (Jóvér, 2023). All participants had unique perspectives on the complexities of living in the area where they practised DYW, expressing an 'internal debate [over] whether it's good doing detached in the area you live or not' (Youth Worker 3). Professionals who were not from the area valued this boundary, 'because then I have my own life, and I have my work life' (Youth Worker 6). Meanwhile, YWs 1, 2, 3, and 4, who grew up and still lived in the areas where they practised, described this as an asset:

> My daughter plays football, and I see some of [the young people] football training, and they ran across a 3G pitch to come and have a chat with me. She was like, 'Who are they?', because some older teenage lads came over, but we speak to them week in and week out, so for them to recognise you elsewhere means you've done something right- because these are the ones that hated adults two months ago. (Youth Worker 1)

These encounters with young people outside of work, which can often be misread by young people, emphasise the importance of professional judgment. In such instances, where the boundaries between personal and professional identities are blurred, like other practitioners of care detached YWs must make decisions in the moment without clear-cut rules (Polkinghorne, 2004: 172). A more intrusive merging of Youth Worker 1's professional and personal life was referred to as an opportunity to reaffirm boundaries:

> One young person who was not in a very good place, asking me for money in the middle of town- so at which point I said to my daughter and her mum, you just go into that shop and I just pulled them aside and had that conversation. I said it's not really appropriate for you to come and be doing this now- and we dealt with that and that was fine. I think there are more benefits than there are negatives, and if it does bother you

too much, then obviously you've got line managers and things that can support that- but having that local knowledge is always really good, and the benefits, definitely out way the hindrances that come along with it. (Youth Worker 1)

Here, Youth Worker 1 immediately goes into the 'autopilot' discussed in conversations of habitual practice (Southerland, 2013: 340) by removing his family from this interaction. They noted that this was an isolated incident - one not reported by others in the study - suggesting the young person felt a particular sense of trust with this professional, built through previous detached sessions or youth activities. Such boundary-setting is less applicable when engaging with unfamiliar young people during detached sessions (Hart, 2015: 878). Regardless, it highlights the importance of support structures for staff, given the risks inherent in youth worker - young person relationships. Boundaries in DYW must be carefully managed yet flexible, adapting to best support young people's development (Hatton, 2023: 1016). This flexibility meant boundary-setting looked different for each practitioner, emphasising that while YWs' work towards the same outcomes, their judgments leading to it vary as a result of their dispositions.

External: The Wider Socio-Cultural Context

The organisation's handbook states:

> To optimise our work, it is important that we understand the needs, concerns, and general perceptions of the community.

It recognises the significance of the socio-cultural context to practice, something echoed by participants.

2.1- Lack of Understanding about Detached Youth Work

All participants highlighted a lack of understanding about DYW in the community, having to repeatedly emphasise, 'We're not COVID ambassadors, we're not an extension of the police, we're not anything like that - we are going to speak to them' (Youth Worker 2). This created challenges when working with volunteers and external companies, who often exhibited these common assumptions in practice. Volunteers tended to adopt the 'identity-of', rather than the 'identity-as', a youth worker. According to former youth worker and now academic Trelfa (2018: 360), those performing the 'identity-of' a youth worker are 'shaped and constrained by ideologies, discourse, practices and procedures that are subject to control from above', intentionally reflecting mainstream, dominant values in their practice rather than allowing the presence of their unconscious self. This was reflected in participants accounts of working with volunteers:

The volunteers we've had, they've got that mentality of […] it's antisocial behaviour we're out here for, we're PCSOs [Police Community Support Officers]. (Youth Worker 5)

It's harder with volunteers and other organisations because not all the time they understand the reasoning behind it. (Youth Worker 6)

Meanwhile, participants demonstrated their 'identity-as' a youth worker, recalling everyday forms of resistance against the controlled boundaries and demands imposed by the state, which were not always in the best interest of young people (Trelfa, 2018: 360):

I'm not going to give you names, dates of birth, registers, week in, week out because we don't collect that. I will tell you how many 13–17-year-olds I've worked with and how many are male, and female - you know, nonspecific. We can do that. But I'm not going to give you their names or whatever because then they won't speak to us- so- and I'm not going to report everything I get told, because that's not youth work either. (Youth Worker 1)

There was one participant, based in the smallest centre out of everyone in the sample, who discussed the power of understanding the 'true' nature of youth work, and how, with the right knowledge gained from being embedded in the community they practice in - becoming familiar with the young people - even volunteers can possess the 'identity-as' a youth worker when not formally being employed to do so (Coulter, 2001):

We try and keep it youth worker and volunteer. But I've got a couple of volunteers now […] They're quite seasoned, they're quite sort of known in the community as well, and

yeah, just stick them in some uniform and off you go, like, have a great time (*laughs*).

(Youth Worker 3)

This supports Bourdieusian understandings of professional judgment, which recognise that a shared position in the field - through common local knowledge and experiences with young people - facilitates successful DYW practice and professionals' suitability for the role.

2.2- Perceptions of Young People in the Community

Antisocial behaviour was another common topic in discussions about DYW. Participants acknowledged the 'climate of unsafety' (Innes and Fielding, 2002) in which they operate, where young people's behaviour is often perceived as threatening, risky or indicative of social disorder (Rodger, 2008: 176):

I think a lot of adults are very scared to interact with young people and to help them. So, I think actually, we almost have a bit of a moral duty to help them whether we're working or not. (Youth Worker 3)

This culture of fear has led communities, reflecting New Labour initiatives, to take a zero-tolerance approach, overregulating the behaviour of young people (Waiton, 2008: 15), but relying on resources from the state to do it. This leads to increasing demands on YWs who are regarded as 'experts in youth' by the public (Cullen, and Bradford, 2018: 115). However, YWs expressed frustration at some demands they receive, which are often vague (Youth Worker 3; 5), or not appropriate for their role (Youth Worker 1; 2; 4; 6). As well as the community's failure to address these issues themselves:

When I was younger, if I was out and about and I was getting up to something that […] I shouldn't be doing, I knew if my parents or my parents friends, or someone from my street, a neighbour, saw me, they would have me up on it. Whereas now that's not a thing, because […] that person is probably scared that the group that you're with will abuse them, so they won't say anything. (Youth Worker 5)

This lack of community connection reflects Brown's (2013) work on young people's exclusion from their communities today. It has led YW's role to become increasingly focussed on restoring that bridge- by engaging with local businesses and leisure centres during detached sessions (Youth Worker 3; 5; 6; 7), and sending representatives, typically the Director of Youth Work, to multi-agency antisocial behaviour meetings in the local area. This helped YWs advocate for young people and ensure support is tailored to the community, which is particularly valuable for those working away from where they live. However, participants noted that they already knew most of the young people discussed (Youth Worker 1; 2; 6), due to their work in schools - recognised as vital for building recognition with young people and better understanding their needs. This may explain why it is harder for those practising DYW part-time, not receiving this knowledge, to make appropriate judgments in the field.

2.3- Avoiding the Authority Figure

Echoing existing literature, participants reported maintaining a separation from the police (Davidson, 2020), in physical proximity but also their practice, to maintain what they perceived to be their identity as a youth worker:

There was a big operation and [the police] were like, 'Can you buddy up with a police officer and walk around?', and I was like, no […] I said I'm happy for our youth work

team to arrive as a team, and just be part of that and we can have a conversation together, but I'm not walking around getting out of police cars with you because that identity of me as a youth worker is going to completely go out the window. (Youth Worker 1)

This demonstrates participants' awareness of young people's reluctance to engage with the police, yet how they were constrained by the need to act as mediators between organisations, including the police and youth offending teams while practising DYW (Jeffs and Smith, 2005). Consequently, instances, where the youth team agreed to collaborate, were carefully managed. For example, through football matches or by inviting the police to participate in specific youth sessions, often on the condition that they did not wear uniform (Youth Worker 1; 3; 5; 6). Participants also noted that their own branded uniforms which have *Youth Worker* in large writing on the back helped to visibly distinguish them from the police, which was important because:

> You'd be surprised by the amount of people that say, 'Oh, the police sent you', or we'll go over, and they'll say, 'We're not doing anything wrong'. It's like, no, I know- I'm just here to see if you're all right. (Youth Worker 2)

During interactions, this differentiation was reinforced by YWs' verbal and physical cues. For example, sitting on a bench with a coffee helped prevent them from being perceived as patrolling (Youth Worker 2). The most successful detached YWs were those whose unconscious practices, such as their language, set them apart from authority figures:

> I think they respond a bit more to us because they know we're a bit more relaxed. (Youth Worker 7)

Navigating Uncertainty in Practice

3.1- Weather and Time of Day

Environmental factors, beyond YWs' control, impacted their judgment during detached sessions. YWs recognised that these factors influenced their dynamic risk assessments, but judgments remained individualised, shaped by their dispositions. Some YWs described the deliberation about whether to approach young people in winter or late at night when it's dark, due to the unknown and concerns regarding their safety:

> Especially in the wintertime, it's really difficult to tell young people's ages when they're all sort of sat in a park like this (*puts hood up*). It's really hard to see who it is […] So you've almost got to be constantly, dynamically risk-assessing: Is this a safe situation? And probably it is, but it could also be a group of adults that are drinking or smoking and could become aggressive. (Youth Worker 3)

> We have some groups that may present more volatile behaviour than others, so I think it's that dynamic risk assessment of: Is it worth the approach? Maybe not today, or not because it's dark—maybe if we saw them somewhere that's more lit up. (Youth Worker 6)

This suggests that, although not to the same extent as other members of the community, YWs cannot completely detach from the fear of young people, as they are likely exposed to this messaging in other social settings. This supports other research on DYW, where YWs were 'found, in some instances, to rehearse stereotypical conceptualisations of young people in their

own practice' (Davidson, 2020: 15), highlighting how individual dispositions can limit fully reflexive professional practice.

Participants explained how seasonal factors can sometimes lead to a complete re-shift of the practice, as all participants discussed how 'in the winter months, the dark months, we don't see many young people' (Youth Worker 6). This was overcome differently between centres, for some, it meant moving towards outreach work:

> We've got some funding now from the youth offending team to pay for some [football] pitches […] just to keep them occupied in and around those sort of twilight times. (Youth Worker 5)

Meanwhile, staff from other centres explained how they banked hours when it was cold and dark, so they could use them when more people were out during half-term or when the weather improved (Youth Worker 1 & 2). The frustration of not encountering anyone in the winter was a greater factor in professionals' reluctance to go out at these times than fear itself for older, more experienced YWs.

3.2- Staff Pairings

Existing research on youth work looks exclusively at trust between young people and YWs, failing to recognise the importance of trust in youth work teams themselves. All participants expressed a sense of gratitude towards their small staff teams, particularly when recalling practising DYW with less competent individuals or when facing more 'risky' situations:

I've been doing it for a long time, and I really enjoy it, and I'll go and speak to any group going, but if I'm with someone who won't do that, then that makes it really difficult because I have to worry about them as much as I worry about the young people- and you do that anyway, but if you know they're particularly uncomfortable, that makes it really difficult. (Youth Worker 1)

Practitioners were more likely to deliberate over approaching unfamiliar groups when paired with someone whose dispositions limited their confidence in practice. The uncertainty this disruption of routinised elements of practice, in this case the usual rapport between colleagues, created space for reflexivity in professional judgement (Adams, 2006: 518):

If that person isn't comfortable and something does kick off, I need to be able to turn around and think, yeah, that persons got my back. (Youth Worker 5)

In such scenarios, the dynamic risk assessment became a more conscious process, supporting the idea that only in 'times of crisis' can habitual practices be disrupted (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 131), requiring more deliberate decision-making which hybridises habitus and reflexivity (Adams, 2006). Although the whole sample acknowledged the influence of rapport between colleagues, darkness, and uncertainty on dynamic risk assessment in unfamiliar environments, decisions still differed between professionals, emphasising the presence of individual dispositions. For Youth Worker 4, even when consciously applying professional training, they would not approach unfamiliar groups. This was put down to being 'naturally' less confident than colleagues with more extroverted personalities:

With [centre manager] she can just approach anyone whereas with me I would only approach people that I know. She is just so confident, and I suppose she's got a very bubbly personality. (Youth Worker 4)

3.3- Tools to Aid Engagement

Tools such as objects or existing relationships also shaped participants' practice, as knowing a group member through school or other forms of youth support made it much easier to approach a group of young people:

[It's] all to do with the sort of delivery that you're involved in. So, for example, one of our youth workers does a lot of work in our secondary schools, and that's kind of the main group of people that are out in the evenings. So, she knows a lot of them- so they respond really well to her during those conversations. Whereas I'm more primary based, so if I was to go over, they'd sort of be like, 'Who are you?'. If I say I work with [that youth worker] then they're like 'Oh okay', and more than happy to have a chat. (Youth Worker 2)

Objects such as sports equipment, food and drink supported interactions with young people who YWs did not already know, 'nine times out of 10, we'll take a ball out if it's not dark, then we'll just sort of kick about the park and see if anyone comes over' (Youth Worker 2). It was also a way to maintain and develop existing relationships:

[A]t the end of GCSEs, we went […] and bought loads of packs of ice cream and just gave the boxes out and were like, it's boiling hot, you've all finished your exams- they're like, 'what you've actually bought them for us?' […] we'd worked with them for weeks

and weeks and weeks about exams and we've come out just to play football and whatever, but that ice cream then becomes a tool for twenty minutes to sit and have a chat about what they're doing at the holidays, and you've got their engagement because everyone's sat around chatting. (Youth Worker 1)

The use of props and freebies to help 'smooth the initial approach' and foster conversation is discussed in the organisation's DYW handbook, which emphasises the importance of using them carefully. It stresses that they should not be expected every time or used to manipulate power dynamics in a way that contradicts the ethos of the work. However, they were useful in supporting the practice of YWs whose dispositions made them feel 'awkward' on detached.

CONCLUSION

In the context of moral panics surrounding antisocial behaviour among young people, alongside simultaneous cuts to the very services intended to support and engage them, this study set out to explore the professional judgment of YWs involved in DYW - a service increasingly employed in response to this climate. This study represents the first comprehensive exploration of how professional judgment shapes the delivery of DYW, analysing how practices differ between youth work professionals in detached settings. It explored how YWs respond to external attempts to universalise their practice, which fail to consider the feasibility of such changes to their individualised professional judgements. To do so, it has prioritised YWs' voices, offering insights that would likely remain inaccessible to outsider researchers.

The most obvious finding to emerge from this study was a shared belief among YWs that successful DYW practice is not something that can be taught, especially by existing models of training, that fail to recognise the varying dispositions of social actors. As this research has shown, even when YWs perceive their decision-making as a deliberate and conscious process, their practice is always contextually situated. Any 'reflexivity is as much the habitual outcome of field requirements as any other disposition' (Adams, 2006: 515). This was particularly clear when examining professionals in the detached setting, where factors such as community attitudes, weather, young people's perceptions of authority figures, and staff composition had varying effects on their practice, particularly in areas like boundary setting, use of tools, and 'dynamic risk assessments'. These variations were shaped by the individual values and experiences influencing their professional judgment, yet the outcomes of these judgments in practice still aligned with the youth worker identity, rooted in a habitus that held a fundamental belief in young people.

Therefore, this analysis supports Bourdieusian understandings of practice. The findings presented here offer new insights into professional judgment by examining practitioners operating outside of settings traditionally associated with their social role - professionals who have not typically been the focus of such theoretical analysis. They highlight the continued relevance of Bourdieusian concepts in contemporary social life, contributing to existing knowledge by providing a new empirical example of practice theory within a professional context where it has not previously been applied. There is clear evidence of the influence of the 'intrinsic qualities' associated with habitus in the varying judgments and decision-making processes of YWs in detached settings. This lays the groundwork for future research into YWs by highlighting the need for a more comprehensive understanding of their identity to better understand and support their practice.

This study is limited by its relatively small sample size, which affects the generalisability of the findings. Therefore, like many existing studies on DYW, it provides a localised understanding, so further research into detached YW's professional judgement would benefit from a longer time frame so a larger sample across wider geographical location could be obtained. This would be valuable not only for social research but also for the youth sector and public policy more broadly. A repeat of this study would also benefit from the incorporation of observations, to assess to what extent YWs can make more deliberate judgments in the field. Despite its limitations, this research confirms the need for greater sociological engagement with DYW and YWs, as several rich and unexpected themes emerged during interviews, insights that outsider scholars would be unlikely to identify and therefore investigate without engagement with practitioners. A natural progression of this work would be to further explore youth worker identity as several themes raised by this study present valuable opportunities for future research that could not be fully explored within the limits of this study. For instance,

examining the role of uniform in YWs professional identity, what YWs perceive as the purpose of DYW, and how they measure success in their practice.

The implications of these research findings are far-reaching, offering valuable insights for both recruitment and training within the youth sector. Rather than focusing solely on experience or work-related competencies, the findings emphasise the importance of employers understanding applicants more holistically, by taking into account their values and what motivates them to join the sector. These insights highlight key limitations in traditional training models, which often fail to equip staff and volunteers with the tools needed to navigate the individualised and context-specific nature of professional practice. While this study focuses specifically on YWs, its findings may also be relevant to other community support professionals operating in similarly complex environments. Considerably more work is needed, however, to give governments, funders, and communities a fuller understanding of the realities and complexities of detached youth work practice.

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APPENDIX I

Table 1. Participants' demographic details.

Youth Worker …	Attended youth centre in youth?	Years of employment in youth work (excluding volunteering)	Highest level youth work qualification (completed or in progress)	Role in DYW			Gender	Age category
				Delivery	*Planning*	*Both*		
1	✓	20	Level 6			✓	M	35-40
2	✓	12	Level 6			✓	W	30-35
3	✓	10	Level 6			✓	W	25-30
4	✘	4	Level 2	✓			W	25-30
5	✓	3	Level 3			✓	M	50-55
6	✓	2	Level 3	✓			W	20-25
7	✘	1	Level 2	✓			W	20-25

Participants held additional professional titles not explored in this study. The sample included two Centre Managers as well as the Director of Youth Work for the whole organisation.

APPENDIX II

<u>Extract from interview with Youth Worker 2</u>

<u>17/01/2025</u>

Researcher:

So, with the training - when you first get into detached, especially when you have new starters - how are they supported, guided and trained to go out from the centre?

Youth Worker 2:

There is an online awareness training course that they are advised to do- so they do that and then it's just a case of shadowing. So, we've got quite a strong detached team- there's not many of us, but they are strong detached youth workers. So, an example is Halloween last year there was a group of, I think there was nine of us that went out in the end across the communities in the area, a lot of those were new so they came and were sort of thrown in at the deep end because it was so busy. We were out quite a long time, so they got to see the real in-depth detached and see what it's really like. But it's a lot of shadowing and then when they feel comfortable, you know, we sort of encourage a lot of self-reflection in youth work and when they're comfortable to be able to go out, we just sort of observe them as to how they communicate with young people, how they approach them, their confidence as to whether they'd be able to handle if anything was to, you know, sort of escalate into something else. But I think with youth work, we've got to be quite open and honest and say, sometimes detached could be not so nice and it could turn nasty if you approach the wrong group or

whatever- but as long as they show the confidence and the abilities to be able to do it, then we're happy to give them that opportunity.

Researcher:

You were talking about the interactions and knowing who to approach- where does that come from? Is that something you talk about with your partner or-

Youth Worker 2:

Yes, you always go out as a group of a minimum of two. As long as you both feel comfortable- I mean nine times out of 10 we do a lot of work in the schools around the area, so we know quite a lot- god that sounded really big-headed. We get groups that might call us over, or they'll recognise our coats and be like, oh, it's the [youth centre team] and we'll go over, and they'll usually be quite welcoming. I think having that kind of relationship built already is a bonus- but if that's not there, then it's okay. I think it's sort of self-judgement, if you're happy to go over and they're not sort of giving you that complete cold shoulder as to, 'who the hell are you coming over?', then go for it I think.

Researcher:

What are the measures you guys to make sure everyone does feel confident and safe?

Youth Worker 2:

I think a lot of it is that communication between the workers that are out we've got a WhatsApp group so you post in there as to when you're going out, what areas you're visiting and then should anything happen, somebody's on call to be able to phone and ask for advice or say, '…this has happened, what do we do? Do we leave?'. But, I think a youth worker has that communication to be able to just say to the young person what they're doing, who they are- they're not any involvement with the police or anything because I think that's what quite a lot of young people quickly judge and turn to- they think, 'you're here because I'm hanging out when I probably shouldn't be'. So yeah, just having those safety measures in place is the most important thing- but a youth worker should be able to leave if they feel uncomfortable, you know- thank you for your time, we're going to go now- and then move on to somewhere else.

Researcher:

Is there any way that you guys differentiate from the police, not just saying, 'We're youth workers'?

Youth Worker 2:

We've always got uniform branded up with our land yards and our ID and stuff- so that's good- but nine times out of 10, we'll take a ball out, if it's not dark, then we'll just sort of kick about the park and see if anyone comes over. Or we might be sort of base up at one of the local shops and we'll just sort of sit with a coffee on the bench and see who's about, and say hello- it's not sort of like patrolling all the time, if that makes sense? And we might have a display board if we're based up somewhere, or our youth bus might be visible. But yeah, you'd be surprised by the amount of people that say, 'Oh, the police sent you', or we'll go

over and they'll say, 'We're not doing anything wrong'. It's like, no, I know- I'm just here to see if you're all right, what you up to? How's things? You know.

Researcher:

I'm not very familiar with [the area you're talking about] because I'm not from there- but do you get that sense then, with the young people, that they feel like, 'oh, am I going to be in trouble like in the community in general just for sort of being there'?

Youth Worker 2:

Sometimes, yeah- if it's getting dark and they're hanging around like a kids park or playground, then they're like, 'well, we're not doing anything', or vaping is a big issue in the local area and smoking- so we'll walk over, and they'll quickly try and get their vape in their pocket, and it's like, I'm not here to tell you not to do that- I'm just making sure you're all right. And then sometimes you might sort of say, well are you doing something wrong? And then they're like, 'No- I don't think so'. Of course not- you're just sitting in the park with your mates, there's nothing wrong with that- just keep the noise down a little bit. So yeah, you'd be surprised by the amount of people that are like, 'We're not doing anything'.

Researcher:

I mean, we've spoken about not wanting to be like the police, but how do you distance yourself from other professionals who work with young people?

Youth Worker 2:

I think it's the qualities of a person- youth work is way more relaxed than any kind of teacher role. But I think the key thing is that youth work is voluntary- they have to be happy to participate, we can't force them to get involved or do anything with us. Their engagement is on their terms- so I think that's the main difference. I think that kind of boundary of- oh, it's just another professional working with me- is kind of minimised because you've got that if you want to work, if you want some help, I'm here to do it- you don't have to come to me, but it's there should you want it.

APPENDIX III

Extract from organisations' *Detached Youth Work Handbook*

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Overview

This handbook introduces, explains, or expands on existing knowledge with regard to detached and outreach youth work. It offers ideas and information to work with young people who do not use traditional youth work settings but meet on the street, in parks, or find other social space of their own.

Good youth work practice expects practitioners to adapt any model or methods to best meet the needs of young people so the ideas and opinions expressed in the handbook are not a prescriptive way of delivering detached and outreach Youth Work but suggested approaches. While the content comes from experienced practitioners in voluntary and maintained youth services it is the responsibility of any detached and outreach youth project to ensure that all legal obligations are fulfilled and organisational policies and procedures are followed.

Detached v Outreach

Detached youth work operates without the use of a building or activity and takes place where young people "are at" both geographically and developmentally. It delivers informal and social education and addresses whatever needs are presented to or perceived by the youth worker. As Detached Youth Workers have no physical building or specific activity over which

they have power or control, the relationship between young person and youth worker is entirely voluntary and constantly up for negotiation.

Outreach youth work also takes place on young people's own territory and supports and compliments new and existing centre/project based youth work. Primarily used to inform young people of services that exist in their locality and to encourage them to use such services, outreach can also seek to identify, through consultation with young people, any gaps that exist in services aimed at meeting their needs.

Their Similarity and Difference

The fundamental similarity of each is that they start with young people where they meet, whether that is on the street, in a park, on the beach or anywhere else. However, while the purpose of detached work is to find out the needs of young people as they experience them and attempt to deal with whatever they present, outreach is seen as an extension of building or activity based work. Youth workers who are either personally involved in those buildings/activities or supporting others who are, go onto the streets with the purpose of usually encouraging young people to make use of existing provision by attending their organisation or activity.

There are various other terms used to describe youth work which engages with young people who are away from provided buildings or activities.

'*Street-based youth work'* is commonly used as an umbrella term to describe both 'Detached' and 'Outreach' Youth Work. This is sometimes unhelpful as it does not give the youth worker

the clarity of purpose that using these two words in the correct way offers. This can lead to confusion either for themselves or the young people with whom they work.

Mobile Youth Work refers to a youth work provision which is delivered from a Mobile youth centre such as a bus or caravan. However in nearly all respects it follows the methodology of centre-based youth work since it relies, after some going out to talk to young people, on those same young people coming in to the provision.

Values & Ethos of detached

Young people place a huge part in the here and now as well as the future of their community. A main focus and role of youth work is to education and encourage both young people and the community to recognise this and promote this understanding being demonstrated across those communities through behaviours, perceptions and experiences.

Connect and engage with young people away from centres, within their own community, a place where they are familiar and more comfortable.

Detached youth work is like and approached work, where the engagement is voluntary. Engagement, respect and relationships will develop over time and it is important establish positive relationships and often work at the interest and pace of the group or individuals.

Being a bridge between young people and community or partner-based opportunities for them to engage in.

Identify the individual and collective needs of young people within that area and promote and empower a positive youth voice.

Challenge behaviour of young people and through discussion and reflection promote social education and understanding for the young people. It is the role of the worker to encourage positive engagement and potentially mediate between Young People and local agencies and police to prevent negative labelling and behaviours occurring or developing. Youth worker to encourage youth voice.

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