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research article

Attending to care leavers' voices: the educational imperative to encourage young people to be 'grown-up'

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This article examines how the voices of care-experienced young people are attended to within an English 'leaving care' service. Distinctively, it applies the work of the educational theorist Gert Biesta to the field of children's social care. Biesta argues that education extends beyond providing knowledge and socialising young people into responsible citizens to include an emphasis on the existential burden of encountering the world in a 'grown-up' way. The article draws on an in-depth study of a leaving care service committed to hearing young people's voices, which employed a qualitative and ethnographic approach. It illustrates how such voices emerge from everyday encounters with their personal advisers as relational, negotiated, situated and contingent, being expressed discursively and materially, including through digital technologies. The analysis surfaces the tensions between the advisers' educational and administrative roles when responding to young people's wishes and feelings and how such tensions limit the possibilities to challenge young people to question and probe in 'grown-up' ways that which they desire. The article argues for broadening the aim of leaving care services beyond supporting young people to transition to independent lives so that they might work out the kind of life they want to live together with others.

Keywords voice • care leavers • social care • education • Gert Biesta

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Introduction

This article explores the ways in which the voices of young people who are leaving public care are attended to. It focuses on the educational role of professionals when seeking and responding to young people's wishes and feelings. Specifically, it examines how personal advisers (PAs) – who are integral practitioners working with young people and leaving care services in England – probe, input and interpret those interactions. Uniquely, the article applies the conceptual work of the educational theorist Gert Biesta to the field of children's social care. Through this distinctive lens, it emphasises the imperative to focus on both educational purpose and pedagogical practice when attending to the voices of young people as they make the transition from care to adulthood so that they might be 'grown-up' and not simply independent.

The article begins by exploring what is meant by 'voice' and its relevance within children's social care. It then draws on qualitative and ethnographic insights to explore PAs' practices of listening to young people, showing how voice is produced through discourses and material environments within everyday encounters between young people and professionals. It focuses on one research site, a 'leaving care' service in England; however, its conceptual framing extends its relevance to the educational role of professionals in social care settings more broadly, including internationally. The article suggests that a dominant emphasis on supporting care-experienced young people's 'independence' ignores an educational concern for them to discover how to live their lives together with others as grown-ups. It argues that beyond listening to what young people wish and feel and advising them, the role of a PA has a clear educational imperative to encourage young people to take up their freedom to encounter the world so that they might question, re-imagine and re-articulate their expressed desires.

Voice as relational

In recent decades, childhood and youth have been recognised as complex, dynamic and relational, with an emphasis on studying young people as part of an assemblage, in which their voices emerge from discursive (signs, utterances and practices) and material (objects and bodies) conditions (Spyrou, 2019). This moves away from the dominant framing of the child within the field of social care that assumes voice to be the articulation of a point of view or subjective experiences assigned to a single individual (van Bijleveld et al, 2015). A relational framing emphasises that what is voiced, alongside attributed meanings, emerges through bodies, minds and sensorial surroundings (Hackett et al, 2021). This shifts attention to how voice is produced through intertwined material conditions and discursive practices that influence each other and are themselves unstable and fluid: 'To speak is always to be part of an event that exceeds, and precedes, our own consciousness and intentionality, in which forces strike the body and spark sensations. Only subsequently do these forces become "captured" as meanings owned by an individual speaker' (Hackett et al, 2021: 916).

Discussions within the field of childhood studies emphasise voice as relying on more-than-speech, which requires an 'expanded listening' involving different ways of being with a young person (more than doing); this includes paying subtler forms of attention aligning to young people's experiences in the moment, including through sounds, laughter, silence (Gallagher et al, 2017) and the seemingly

irrelevant (Spyrou, 2011). This practice of 'proper hearing' and 'serious attention', suggest Nolas and colleagues (2019: 398), attends to the multisensory, embodied and affective moments of encounters. It is an inherently uncertain and potentially anxiety-provoking pursuit, increasingly less favoured in risk-averse bureaucratic contexts. It is easier to hear those 'we can easily name, categorize, and respond to' (Mazzai and Jackson, 2009: 4) than the 'non-normative and undomesticated' (Spyrou, 2011: 157) and 'hard to engage' (NSPCC, 2024: 3). The challenge is 'to learn to hear the voices we don't know how to hear' (Cook-Sather, 2006: 368), including in child welfare and protection services, where those labelled as 'sensible' or 'rational' may have their views taken more seriously than those seen as 'untrustworthy' (van Bijleveld et al, 2015: 136). This challenge takes us to the first research question attended to in this article: what are the material and discursive arrangements that 'make certain perspectives, voices or standpoints possible (rather than others)?' (Spyrou, 2019: 319).

Educational purposes of attending to 'voice'

There are multiple possible purposes for attending to the voices of young people in social care settings. Listening is frequently framed within constructivist, progressive and instrumental models, which situate voice within an understanding of improving practices to help young people achieve predetermined outcomes. This includes advocating on their behalf, providing practical and emotional support, safeguarding, building life skills and planning steps towards the young person's goals (see, for example, Department for Education, 2022 [2010]; 2023). Listening to young people collectively is seen as representing authoritative shared experiences, vital to enhancing service development, strategic thinking and policy (see, for example, de Souza, 2022; National Children's Bureau, nd). There is also concern with how seriously professionals take the expressed views of young people, with 'influence', for example, a key consideration within Lundy's (2007) 'model of participation' (Kennan et al, 2019). Caldwell and colleagues (2019: 2) identified 'empowerment', 'co-construction', 'participation', 'social action' and 'engagement' as key concepts used to engage with voice, asking whether these might all come down to 'the one thing that children and young people want; dialogue that leads to change'.

What is missing from this array of purposes, however, is an explicit concern with the educational domain of engaging with young people's voices. A broad educational emphasis, rooted in social pedagogy, is key to mainland European social care, albeit only minimally applied in UK contexts (see, for example, McDermid et al, nd). This approach acknowledges the tension between individual autonomy and society's socialisation requirements but places primary emphasis on education as a form of cultivation. This includes, for example, fostering active citizenship: 'the ability to act socially and display social responsibility while rationally fulfilling personal interests as a member of society' (Hämäläinen, 2013: 1028).

Gert Biesta – whose educational philosophy informs critical discussion in this article – similarly draws attention to the persistent tensions between individual autonomy and the adaptations required to meet the demands of society. He highlights the multiple forces that strike young bodies, among them societal forces that 'try to control our thinking and doing', as well as 'internal passions' (Biesta, 2021: 72). His opus extends beyond socialisation to emphasise the relational, ethical and unpredictable aspects of

education in order to explore what might be co-constituted through interactions between humans, allowing also for interactions between humans and non-humans. His work is concerned with the existential 'burden' of 'existing-as-subject' (Biesta, 2017b: 627), and its ethical focus is on the human subject's relational encounter with that which is 'other' in the world: 'It is actually only in the world that we can really exist, since when we withdraw ourselves from the world we end up existing only with and for ourselves – which is a rather poor and self-absorbed way of existing, if it is to exist at all' (Biesta, 2017b: 8).

Biesta's concern is with the role of the educator in arousing a young person's desire to encounter the world in a 'grown-up' way. The German educational concept of *bildung* is conceptualised as the 'work of the self at being a self', and Biesta (2021: 35) identifies *erziehung* (often translated as 'upbringing') as the '"support" of and perhaps encouragement of this work' by an educator. Such work, says Biesta (2015), extends beyond ensuring young people gain knowledge, skills or particular dispositions (what he identifies as 'qualifications'), or the 'socialisation' of young people into existing social orders, traditions and values. The important purpose of being 'grown-up', he says, is bound up in 'subjectification': being a subject through transforming what it is possible to know, to do and to be. This requires the educator 'to open up new vistas, new opportunities, and to help children and young people to interrogate whether what they say they want or desire is actually what they should desire' (Biesta, 2015: 82). Educators must encourage young people – regardless of age or stage – to encounter the world so that they might 'act with consciousness and a conscience' and 'never simply follow the rules or do as one is told, but always remain aware of whether that is what needs to be done' (Biesta, 2024a: 8). According to Biesta (2021), this is 'world-centred' rather than 'student-centred' education; it is an educational endeavour underpinned by a valuing of democracy.

Thus, the educator's role, says Biesta, is both to listen to what is expressed by young people and to support a 'reality check' through questioning what it is that they desire. This requires particular care so as not to control what the young person does, which would render them no longer a 'subject' of their life but an 'object' of forces that operate on them (Biesta, 2021). The type of listening that is needed extends beyond the instrumental models commonly envisaged for the improvement of policy and practice set within predefined parameters. Instead, this is where possibilities open up for 'not knowing' so that something different can emerge and young people might participate in bringing about change both for themselves and within institutions in ways not previously envisaged (Webb and Kirby, 2019). This requires professionals to attend to young people's efforts to make meaning of their experiences, supporting them to work out how to be the kind of person they want to be, in keeping with the young person's own values, and to lead the kind of life they wish to lead, including how to live together with others (Biesta, 2017a).

PA role

The term 'corporate parent' refers to the legal responsibility of local authorities in England to provide care and safeguarding for the children and young people they look after. The expectation is that local authorities continue to support those leaving care up to the age of 25 'in a way that is consistent with the way in which birth parents support their own children as they grow up, helping them transition to

independent life' (Department for Education, 2018: 15). PAs are core practitioners in providing this support. They are not qualified social workers but work jointly with other professionals to ensure young care leavers are provided with 'the practical and emotional support they need to make a successful transition to adulthood', either directly or through helping them to build positive social networks (Department for Education, 2018: 7). Their broad role includes the following: providing advice, information and support, including on practical skills and education, training and employment; developing confidence and decision-making capacity; maintaining health and well-being; contributing to the planning of pathways to independent living; liaising with family and coordinating service provision; and record keeping (Department for Education, 2022 [2010]).

A key requirement for PAs is 'to establish a rapport with care leavers and take their views into account when taking forward plans for their support' (Department for Education, 2022 [2010]: 25). Where there is a difference in perspectives between the 'young people's wishes and feelings' and 'the PA's informed professional view of their best interests', the PA has 'a responsibility to negotiate with the young person about a reasonable way forward' (Department for Education, 2022 [2010]: 25). While there is minimal guidance on processes for such negotiation, it is recognised to require considerable professional 'skill', 'judgement' and 'engagement and attention to the young person's developing and changing needs' (Department for Education, 2022 [2010]: 33), which must 'strike a balance between being "hands off" and intervening in support of the young person' (Department for Education, 2022 [2010]: 33). PAs are expected to allow young people opportunities 'to take risks and learn and grow, even if this means that they may not initially be successful in what they set out to achieve' (Department for Education, 2022 [2010]: 33). A key emphasis for their role is balancing 'the risk of harm to the individual, and the rights and freedom of care leavers to choose their own lives and lifestyles' (Department for Education, 2018: 14). Drawing on Biesta's work to probe the broad educational purpose of the PA role, this concern with the young people's freedom invites us to consider how being 'grown-up' might be different from managing to live independently. This leads to our second research question: what are the possibilities for young care leavers to take up their freedom through encountering the world so that they might question, re-imagine and re-articulate their expressed desires?

Methodology: tracing young people's voices in a leaving care service

The authors are engaged in a five-year (2021–26) interdisciplinary project, 'The Children's Information Project: improving lives through better listening and better data', working in partnership with local authorities to explore the needs and experiences of children, young people and their families and how information about these is used in ways that might enhance service provision. The article focuses on one strand of our work with a 'leaving care' service that places a strong emphasis on relational practice to enable young people to voice what is important to them.

At the time of writing, the researchers have worked with this service for over three years. This began with a review of policy, guidance and internal documents and initial individual and group interviews with senior managers (six), plus PAs (two) and care-experienced apprentices employed by the local authority (two) who volunteered to participate. Further fieldwork included two focus groups with a total

of six care-experienced young people and another with five leaders of leaving care area teams within the service. A researcher also spent three days embedded within two of these teams, shadowing seven PAs, including their in-person interactions with three young people. This involved ethnographic participatory observation for the whole working day, including the PAs travelling to visits in offices and homes and communicating through phone and other media. Throughout the day, informal reflective conversational interviews were conducted with the PAs to explore the assumptions and processes behind their interactions. Finally, a workshop was held with 23 PAs and service managers to explore together a draft analysis, introducing Biesta's theorisation of 'grown-upness'; their discussion was recorded, and written responses to open-ended questions were collected.

Great care was paid to the data-protection and ethical considerations of the study. Data-sharing and protection protocols were formally agreed, and ethical approvals were gained through both the lead university and the local authority research governance mechanisms. Informed consent was obtained on a continuous basis from all participants. In the field, the PAs asked young people in advance whether they agreed for the researcher to be present; where this was not possible, such as when a PA unexpectedly dropped in for a quick chat with a young person, the researcher did not observe interactions. Another key ethical consideration was paying ongoing attention to moments when participants may want to withdraw their consent, given the sensitivity of issues being discussed, but might not feel able to say so or else were not present to do so. For example, a researcher chose not to accompany a young person and their PA to a health appointment; she also left a professional meeting when the discussion turned to a young person's sensitive health issues. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, fieldnotes written up, and all research data anonymised and securely stored.

Analytically, the study is situated within a post-qualitative paradigm, focusing on the material and the discursive and on what both do relationally. Attention is on how what is produced emerges from a particular entanglement of bodies, things, words, social institutions, communities and so on and how these affect each other (Fox and Alldred, 2018). Our initial reading of field notes and transcripts focused on becoming familiar with the data by paying attention to interactions (young people, PAs, technologies and things), discourses ('voice', 'freedom', 'independence' and 'education') and wider influencing forces (norms, peers, family members, other professionals and policy), being careful to avoid simplistic aggregation. There followed a more in-depth analysis, in which the research team reread and discussed the data (later discussing emerging ideas with PAs themselves); this included zooming in to examine excerpts in detail before zooming out to look at these in relation to the wider data set. This process allowed us to trace emergent possibilities between young people and PAs for the voicing of thoughts, feelings and desires and a questioning of such desires, as well as how such possibilities become foreclosed. It included attention to the following: (1) how different bodies, things and forces are interconnected and influence each other; (2) emerging tensions and complexities, such as competing expectations of the PA role and different educational purposes; and (3) how researchers' own theories, experiences and reflections might bring insights into, rather than generate 'true and complete' knowledge about, the lives of the research participants (Biesta, 2010: 494). World-centred education offered an analytic framework for attending to the educational values and purposes underpinning the PA role, including how

young people's voices and possibilities for grown-upness might emerge at particular moments through relational educational encounters. Biesta (2010: 500) makes the case for such a value-based, rather than evidence-based, professional practice on the principle that questions of the effectiveness of what works are 'always secondary to questions of purpose'.

Educational encounters in a leaving care service

Promoting independence, parental care and corporate accountability

The website for the leaving care service that was the focus of this study stresses that they 'listen' to the views of the young people and 'take them seriously'. PAs likewise emphasise that it is 'important for workers to understand what is important' to young people. In line with their *locus parentis* role, a guiding question when thinking about how to work with young people is whether something is 'good enough for my own child' (manager). This includes deciding on the processes of collecting and documenting the young people's views. As one PA put it, 'Would you give a questionnaire to your [own] child?'.

Within this concern for attending to voice, PAs are engaging with and seeking to balance or meld two distinct discourses and their respective purposes. The first is bureaucratic, whereby a key purpose of recording what young people say is to ensure accountability for the work done. This is exemplified by the service's website, which frames a commitment to listening to young people within wider administrative purposes that include 'consulting' on the services provided and recording 'wishes and feelings within your pathway plan'. The 'pathway plan' in question is a statutory requirement of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and is expected to cover such areas as education, training, career planning and support needs, such as accommodation. The second core discourse and priority is relational, social and emotional: it is clear that PAs' models of practice extend beyond the 'informational' (Parton, 2008: 254) or 'bureaucratic necessity' to instead encompass 'a caring and loving activity' (Shepherd et al, 2020: 312). For example, where possible, PAs aim to integrate the review questions and standardised scales required for bureaucratic reporting purposes into everyday informal conversational exchanges, such as when driving somewhere together with a young person. Fostering such 'safe and appropriately intimate' spaces, which help professionals 'to resist the urge to force a conversation or raise an issue too quickly or directly', has been identified as an essential creative and demanding integration of the 'heart' (as well as 'head' and 'hand') into children's social care (Ruch et al, 2017: 1021).

PAs also see emotional support as core to the key role of supporting young people 'to build an independent and successful life for the future' (PA). Within this, however, there are variations in the balance pursued between emotional, practical and informational priorities. While some PAs see themselves as providing emotional support, with one describing their caseload as like 'having ten more children', others, for example, emphasise the practical aspects of their role. These can involve connecting young people to wider supportive networks, including with birth families. This varies by how much young people are seen to have existing positive networks, acknowledging a diversity of cultural and individual priorities, with a focus on 'facilitating' young people 'to build an independent and successful life for the future' (PA). Recognising that unaccompanied asylum seekers, for example, want advice to navigate the asylum,

welfare and social care systems (driven by the ambition to exit these quickly), PAs may prioritise this purpose, with one describing the relationship as 'transactional'.

The tension between fulfilling bureaucratic imperatives and the emotional and relational qualities of the assumed 'parental' role does not escape the young people's attention, even when they clearly feel their PA cares about them and regardless of the informality of their exchanges: 'Imagine if you went to your families or your friends or whatever, then it was just, "I'm just going to make some notes about this meeting". It's like, it's weird, isn't it? You'd want to know what it was for' (young person). What is striking, however, about both the parental and bureaucratic discourses in evidence is that both ignore the educational dimension of the PA role, as well as how this might itself integrate a loving concern. Educational love, argues Vlieghe and Zamowski (2019: 522), for example, is about introducing the next generation of young people to the world and pointing out 'why it is important to relate to this world'.

Co-constituted voice in everyday encounters

The young people's voices emerge out of their everyday encounters with the PAs. The latter see building a 'good relationship' as key to ensuring that young people voice what is important to them. This also helps with interpreting what is being communicated, especially where this is subtle and ambiguous, as in this example: 'As we were chatting, a WhatsApp message comes through. [The PA] tells me "She is saying I can't get to my appointment because of a train strike. Reading between the lines, I think it's because she wants a lift"' (fieldnotes). Such encounters are mediated through different technologies. The information available to PAs to interpret young people's wishes and feelings is markedly different when faced with a few characters on a digital screen compared to when listening by phone or in a face-to-face encounter; knowing the young person well over time and across contexts can be important in interpreting voice. PAs identify in-person meetings as optimal for enabling young people to open up: 'video-calling and audio calling are not a replacement for that, as they can so often just say, "Yeah, I'm fine"' (PA). In person, the young person's voice may be expressed materially: a pregnant young woman, for example, gestures with her arms the narrowness of her stairway to demonstrate how it cannot accommodate a pram. Her concern is 'powerfully' evoked (researcher's fieldnotes) through the protrusion of belly and arms constrained within the closeness of the walls, and the PA agrees to pursue an application for alternative housing. Digital text, however, affords something different. In the WhatsApp example earlier, the ambiguous 'ask' for a lift might be more difficult to achieve by phone or in person: digital communication might help the young person to minimise exposing their vulnerability, either at having to attend an appointment or by having a request for a lift denied.

Working out how to respond to perceived wishes and feelings requires the PA to consider the shifts between the different purposes of their role. For example, the decision to offer a lift, as one PA explains, depends on whether she is focused on promoting the young person's independence, which relates to educational purposes, or whether she has a safeguarding concern about the young person's immediate well-being. Biesta (see Bertelsen et al, 2023: 10) highlights how 'education and mental health work are both (albeit different) forms of picking up on what the world asks of us'; the educator's role is to require young people to stay with, rather

than to avoid, the difficulty of encountered challenges. One PA identifies how it is 'difficult sometimes to respond to voices and need'; it requires dexterity and a certain artistry in fostering trusting relationships and in decoding communication, as well as agility in shifting between the different purposes of their role. Knowing what to do is itself contingent on how and what a young person communicates at any given moment. It is in this sense that voices are co-constituted through the encounters themselves.

Educational responses to voiced desires

Where PAs are concerned about a young person's expressed wishes or feelings in relation, for example, to their safeguarding or their apparent lack of financial management, they are more directive. To illustrate, a PA describes influencing a young person's purchase when shopping with them for a winter coat: 'They had expensive taste, but I was able to convince them to get something a bit cheaper'. Here, the PA both listens to the young person and points out the reality of their financial constraints. The young person's voice is heard in this account, both in their desire for an expensive coat and their agreement to exercise restraint. This said, it is unclear whether their shift in position was 'forced' or 'produced' (Biesta, 2009: 361), or whether their attention was drawn sufficiently to the tensions inherent in the purchase for them to take up their freedom to decide for themselves what to do.

Another PA is observed waiting for a care leaver to join an online meeting to discuss a recent unplanned move to a neighbouring city. The PA explained to the researcher that the young person had 'abandoned' their current supported living provision and 'absconded' to live with a friend's family. Also present at the meeting are colleagues from the supported housing provider. The PA reports on a recent visit to the young person's new home, musing how they had expressed delight with the move – 'Look at me, I'm so happy, I love it here; look at the smile on my face' – despite their welfare benefits being stopped and growing rental arrears. The young man is deploying the discourse of 'wishes and feelings' performatively, expressing strong positive emotions as a justification for his desire to relocate. That week, he had declined calls and put down the phone on the PA, and he does not join the online meeting; he is described as 'burying his head in the sand'. Therefore, the meeting continues in his absence. The PA wryly interprets the no-show as a strongly (albeit silently) voiced preference to be elsewhere: '[He] is saying what he wants by not being here, he's making clear what he wants, he wants to stay and be in [name of city]'. While concerned about the consequences of this decision, the staff are understanding, emphasising how the housing provider had triggered the need for a move by issuing an eviction notice without sufficient warning and prompting the rapid relocation to the new city rather than taking time to consider other options. The young man's absence from the meeting, however, prevents the possibility of the educational work of deliberating his situation and options, which might allow for an interruption of his desires. In Biesta's terms, he remains living in his 'idea of the world' (see Bertelsen et al, 2023: 8) rather than in the world itself. He does not encounter and 'come into relationship' with his desires and passions but is 'determined and overtaken by them' (Biesta, 2021: 72). Denied the freedom to navigate the multiple forces that exist within the world, including that of an eviction notice, the young man remains himself – self-absorbed with pursuing

what it is that he feels he desires – rather than being a self who exists in the world and questions whether what is desired is indeed desirable.

At a different observed meeting, this time in person, a PA encourages a young asylum seeker to confront a similar wish to move to another city. Despite the young person's expressed preference to speak in English, the PA involves an interpreter, explaining that this is 'to make sure that you understand' the complex immigration and tenancy issues to be discussed. This denial of the young person's voiced request to speak only in English demonstrates a paradoxical challenge of working to support someone to encounter the difficulty of reality in order to ensure that they are free to decide what to do. As Biesta (2024b: 190, emphasis in original) explains, 'it seeks a response from the student … and in this sense *doesn't leave the student free*. Yet it wishes this response to be the *student's* response, and in that sense, it *has to leave the student free*'. Having discussed the immigration issues, the PA moves on to acknowledge that the young person is keen to live elsewhere but explains the complexities of moving too quickly to a different local authority. This, she expands, requires a history of renting and a higher income – the PA had earlier told the researcher that she had explained to the young person 'many, many times that affordability is the main issue'. The young person listens and signals his agreement to the PA's advice, with a nod and a brief 'yes', but quickly reasserts a wish to move: 'I see the same faces day after day; I want to go somewhere where there is more people and more things'. Once more, the PA patiently acknowledges these wishes before repeating the reasons to plan carefully. To the researcher, the PA later identifies the need to tread a delicate line between informing the young person and not imposing an agenda:

> It's a balance of us saying, this is what could happen, and you need to understand this, but not making it sound like we are trying to tell them what to do and take choices away from them. Because he can, it's entirely his choice. People make unwise choices all the time. One way or another you're free to do that. So, I just feel like my job is to make sure that [they] understand the consequences of that. (Fieldnotes)

The PAs are clear that their role is not to decide what a young person should do, recognising that theirs is a 'consent-based' service and that, anyway, 'there is not much we can do'. In the examples presented earlier, the PAs hear the voices of the young people in their expressed desire to move and their agreement or rejection of the PA's suggestion to do so slowly. The PAs are keen for them to take into account the possible negative consequences of moving to another city: they explain the risks and communicate appropriate action. However, what is not evident is any process through which the young people might themselves surface the different factors that drive their desires – something the PAs cannot know – and to interrogate these in light of the information shared by the PAs. Instead, the PAs' emphasis is on stressing the risks, with the intention to cultivate (or 'convince') young people into responsible citizens; their educational role is reduced to that which is 'to work "on" an object' rather than 'as an encounter between subjects' (Biesta, 2024b: 190).

In contrast, the educational value of supporting a young person's freedom to interrogate their own desires and circumstances is recognised by another care leaver, who makes a clear distinction between voicing wants and thinking more deeply about how to live one's life, with the encouragement of a PA:

> Literally, every form I've done says, 'What do you want to do in the future? What do you want to be like? What's your plan?' And you write it down, and you obviously give it to them [PA], but they never like actually ask, 'How are you going to do it?' and what support there is. (Young person)

Discussion and conclusion

A key question for local authorities who provide children's services is how listening to young voices might enhance children's social care. Our research invites us to explore another pressing, but often ignored, question: how might children's social care enhance the voices of young people?

Our work highlights how the purposes and practices of listening and responding to young people themselves change the relationships embedded within the service. Through encounters with their PAs, the young people's voices emerge as relational, negotiated, situated and contingent. They are mediated through the materiality of bodies, technologies and the pedagogical interaction with professionals. In attending to young people's wishes and feelings, PAs are required to take on board what it is that young people wish and feel and to provide emotional and practical support while also informing them of available services and possible risks – all without imposing their own agenda. These are difficult tensions to navigate within everyday encounters with young people who have multiple and complex needs, especially against a backdrop of severely limited capacity within social care services and wider structural constraints.

Discussing the possibilities of supporting young people to be 'grown-up', PAs identify the complexities of engaging with this concept in their work. There are multiple internal forces, including fear, shame and childhood trauma, operating on the care leavers they support. These combine with the external forces of competing cultural influences, tensions between the biological family and local authority expectations, and the constraints of the welfare and immigration systems. Against this background, PAs are keen to protect possibilities for the young people to be 'childlike' and 'to embrace their youth', against expectations that they become independent adults at a younger age than many peers. They identify how being 'grown-up' is normatively interpreted as being 'adult' and how this might be experienced by young care leavers as a further pressure to 'accelerate developmentally', with the risk of 'viewing themselves and their abilities as lesser than their peers' (PA).

In contrast, Biesta, informed by a Rancièrian logic of the equality of all intelligences (Rancière, 1991), asserts that through the very act of speaking (verbally or otherwise) in response to the multiple forces in their lives, young people have the possibility to take up their freedom to verify their equality to others. Encouraging care leavers to take up this freedom requires asking them uncertain 'critical questions' (Biesta, 2016: 621). In the final research workshop conducted for this strand of our study, PAs identified examples of such questions that they use: 'What if…?'; 'How would you advise a friend/family member experiencing the same situation?'; 'Who will the decision affect?'; 'What have others done in your position, and what decisions do you think they had to make?'; and 'How do you think [others] might respond/feel about that?'. Thinking with Biesta's (2015) domains of educational purpose, we

see here the possibility for young people's subjectification through the probing of 'deeper thinking' (PA).

A challenge to asking such questions more frequently – and thereby encouraging the young person to become the subject of their own life – is the simple framing of voice as 'wishes and feelings', alongside a predominant focus for the PA role on what Biesta (2015) calls 'qualifications' and 'socialisation'. The observed PAs respectfully ask questions centred on identifying what it is that young people desire and, with care, follow up with knowledge, advice and support, helping to cultivate young responsible citizens. Mostly, their questions do not explore the multiple forces driving such desires: internal forces like fear, boredom, passions, needs; and external forces like professional, familial or peer pressure or an 'impulse society' (Biesta, 2021: 14). They do not probe young people to examine the possible consequences of their wishes, including for themselves (such as debt) and others (family, friends and partners), as well as those unforeseen by PAs. There is no discussion, for example, of whether a young person's refusal to fit within a system that expects a planned move for those lacking financial independence is an act of resistance and/or of self-harm.

Although the language of 'education' is notably absent from children's social care in the UK, educational purposes and practices are evident in the PAs' encounters with care leavers. One interviewed PA describes their role as 'facilitation', which fits their 'advisory' work but ignores the wider educational possibilities of the work that they do with young people. The word echoes a liberal progressive conception of participatory education, with the young person at its centre and the educator on the periphery, 'ready to pounce in response to an enquiry or thought' in order to steer them towards a particular goal with an appropriate intervention (Webb and Kirby, 2019: 92). It is a term that indicates a 'fear of teaching', suggests Biesta (2016: 832), underpinned by the assumption that it 'can only appear as an act of power that limits rather than that it enhances freedom'.

Fostering the possibility for care leavers to live grown-up lives requires a reorientation of the normative values of what is considered educationally desirable for them and of the educational role of their social care professionals. 'Educative teaching' emphasises how young people's grown-upness always 'arrives' from an 'outside' as an 'interruption of what is going on' (Biesta, 2016: 842). It involves drawing young people's attention to the specificity and contingency of their situation while requiring that they take up their freedom to come to a position about how to act in ways that are uniquely their own. This is an intellectually and emotionally demanding endeavour. It requires the resource of slow time, where it is possible to pause and ponder, fostering voice over time, returned to at repeated visits and responsive to the shifting particularities of the context and young person. It is where it becomes possible to say to a young person, as one PA does, 'Let's ask this question again in 24 hours'. Being grown-up is necessarily and inescapably dependent on relational encounters, rooted in interdependence, not an outcome of living independently, as evoked by one PA: 'Young people can be independent but not grown up!'.

Biesta (2014) draws attention to the beauty of an inherent risk in education, one in which young people might take up their freedom in ways that challenge the educator's intentions. Without the risk of such unpredictability, he says, 'education itself disappears and social reproduction, insertion into existing orders of being, doing, and thinking, takes over' (Biesta, 2014: 7). Embracing the beautiful risk

requires a 'weak' practice, not the strong practice of cultivation, so that outcomes remain uncertain (Biesta, 2014: 2). This helps to ensure that young people are not the voice-piece of the multiple forces that operate upon them, including local authority and government agendas. Opening up possibilities for deeper contemplation encourages care leavers to work out how to be a self, one that is grown-up in the context of the reality of their own worlds. This serves to remind them of their freedom, in which the 'whole point of having this freedom is that it is up to [the young person] to decide what to do with this freedom' (Biesta, 2021: 47). Any government authority acting in *loco parentis* might consider this educational endeavour good enough for their child.

While this empirical study is firmly located in England, the complexities and challenges it exposes are clearly evident elsewhere. Boddy et al (2020: 291), for example, drawing attention to the precarities of care-experienced young people's transitions to adulthood across Norway, Denmark and the UK, highlight 'the complexities, uncertainties and inherent interdependencies' of everyday young lives and emerging adulthoods. Research across Europe emphasises the importance of social support and relationship building to enable care leavers' transitions to adulthood (see, for example, Cudjoe et al, 2022; Crous et al, 2021; Höjer and Sjöblom, 2014). This article has pointed towards the value – as yet significantly underexplored – in opening up possibilities for professionals to deliberate what it means to enable care leavers to be adult and grown-up. This includes the potential educational purposes of their role in listening to the voices of young people and the artistry beyond the science of navigating tensions in their everyday practice.

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This study has University of Oxford Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (SSH IDREC) approval (R69891/RE001).

Conflicts of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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