

# Revisoning professional practice with young people: A dialogical social learning model of participation

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**“If I could only help adults and politicians think differently about excluded youth!”**

**“... what opportunity there could be for them to learn about how to respond better to injustice, alienation and exclusion.”**

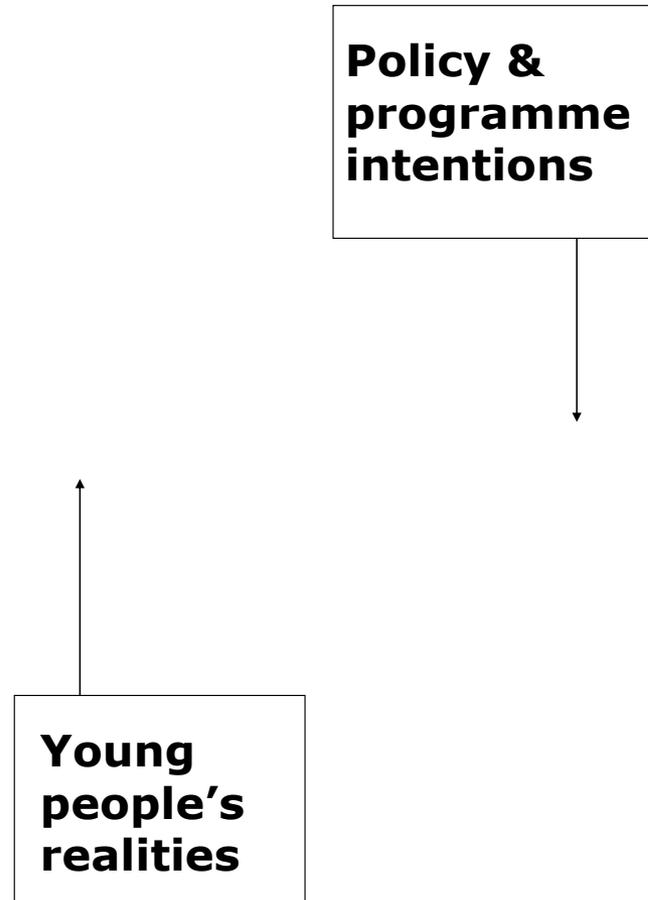
**“... and maybe I could enhance adult participation in young people’s worlds”.**

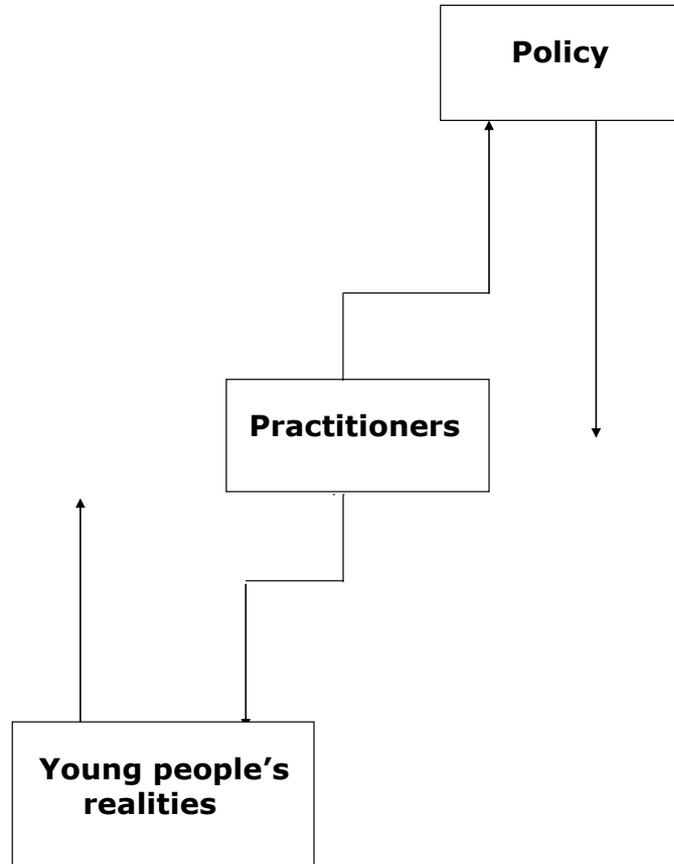
**“... and who knows, one day adults may be able to help youth create a better society than we have today.”**

**“... in the meantime I better ‘sign on’ at the unemployment office, or I will miss my chance of being part of Tony Blair’s stakeholder society!”**



# One objective, two agendas





# Professional / practice dilemmas

- Practitioners mediating between structural and biographical complexities
- Young people faced with individual choices and social obligation
- Young adults stopping still and moving on
- Pedagogic care / integrity of professional practice and the constraints of targets
- Competence and deficiency perspectives of youth in policy and practice
- Paradoxes between assumptions about youth and the realities they are confronted with

“I want to get into the working world - and there’s this (training) option and I don’t want to do it - but I’ve got no choice ... it’s not what I want to do ... it’s nothing to do with what I want to do. They say to me ‘It’ll give you experience and it’ll give you skills ... but it doesn’t matter because that experience ain’t going to be nothing to do with what my life’s about”

(Sean, age 21, New Deal Office, 30/6/99).

# Dissecting the intervention encounter

- Neither advisor nor young person is empowered here.
- Advisor precariously situated between meeting policy targets and responding to the complexity of the young person's lived realities
- Dilemmas, tensions, ambiguities and disjunctions between young person and system
- *No discursive space* to acknowledge complexity
- Simple solution is to leapfrog the messiness
- The young person is not empowered .. so unlikely to sustain a commitment
- Who gains here?

How can we start to re-vision professional practice with young people?



# Learning from an 'alternative (supported housing) youth project'

- Holistic, Flexible and genuinely client centred
- Youth work practice through ongoing social and organisational learning – open and reflexive – seeking to continually learn from practice how it can best support and empower young people.
- Whole scale organisational culture and ethos of:  
    “success through empowerment”
- Workers have flexibility to act in response to young people's needs

“What makes it work is staff ... compromising, working with you, helping you out .. But it's got to be vice verse as well. It's a two-way thing really. It's just the staff working with the individual and the individual working with the staff”      (16 year old young homeless boy)

# Considerations for rethinking professional youth work practice

- Taking account of complex and holistic needs – not just as units of labour
- Working with wider issues of social exclusion and life stories of young people.
- No normative transitions - Diversity of realities, perspectives and trajectories
- Flexible and person-centred according to diverse identities and realities
- Aspiration to empower young person
- Success in terms of benefits for young person rather than government targets

# Theoretical influences

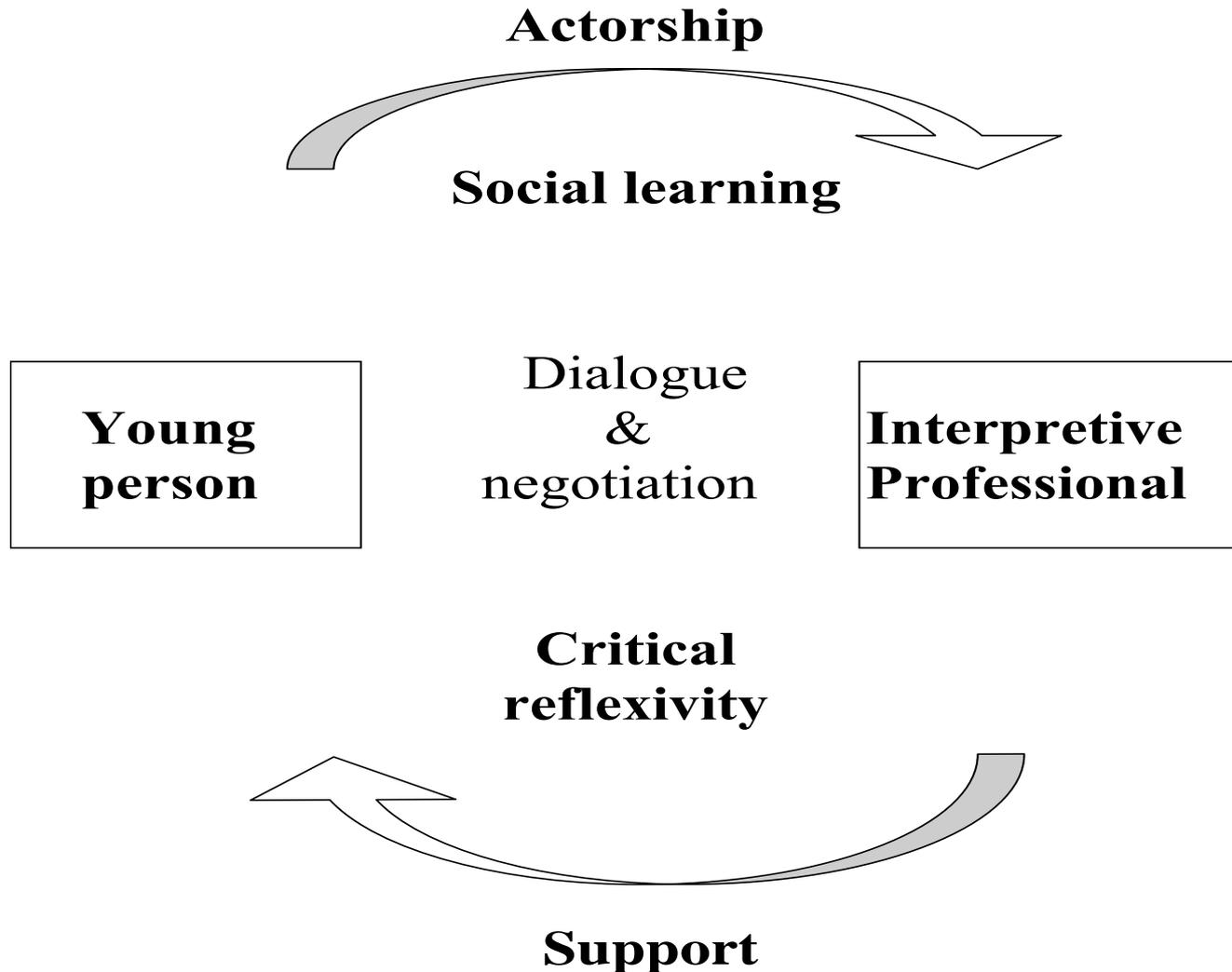
- Wildemeersch: 4 axes of social learning:  
Action, Reflection, Communication and Cooperation
- Steven Kemmis: 'Communicative action space'  
.... As a way of mediating power inequalities between system and lifeworld
- Schon: *Reflective Practitioner*: Knowing and reflecting in action
- Honneth: The struggle for *recognition*
- Lave and Wenger: *Situated social learning*  
(complementarity of participation and reification)
- Heron: *Cooperative inquiry*
- Weil: *Critically reflexive action inquiry*

# Social Learning

*The learning through participatory systems such as groups, networks, organizations and communities, in conditions which are new, unexpected, uncertain, conflictual and hard to predict ... when solutions have to be found for unforeseen contextual problems. ... emphasis is on the optimal use of the problem-solving potential of which a group, institution or community disposes. Social learning is action- and experience-oriented, it is critically reflective, meaning that actors question the validity of particular opinions, judgments, strategies, actions, emotions, feelings, etc. It is cooperative and communicative, which means that the dialogue between actors is crucial, continually involved in implicit or explicit processes of negotiation*

(adapted from Wildemeersch et al. 1998).

# Re-animating the (communicative) action space between professional and young person

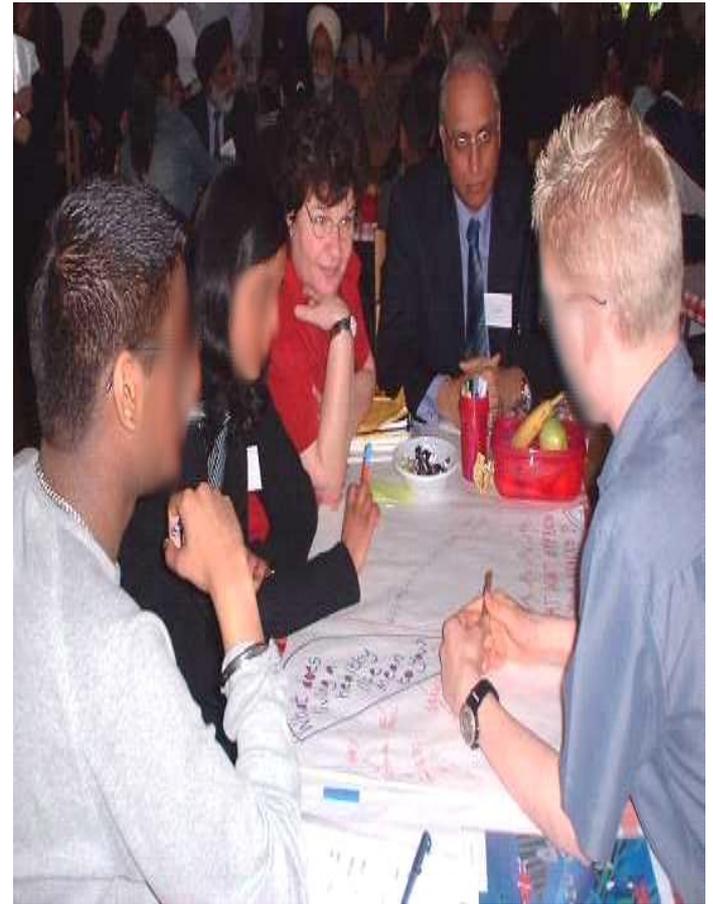


# The 'interpretative' professional (1)

- Reflexive articulation of professional practice
- Understanding and action are jointly co-developed as a process of critically reflexive dialogical situated social learning at the interface between system and lifeworld (Co-inquiry based practice)
- Professional acts as a resource to support the young person, rather than as a state enforcer
- Assumptions about young person, and how professional should respond, are challenged within the encounter
- The quality of the relationship is key.

# The interpretive professional (2)

- “In a co-inquiry based relationship learning shifts from a directive, bureaucratic, teacher-centred approach to the collaborative (re)production and (re)interpretation of knowledge that makes sense in the context of the lives of both adult and young person”  
(Weil, 2005: 163)
- “In processes of social learning, power involves reciprocity manifested in autonomy and dependency in both directions. This means that ... power is not given or taken away: it is always being negotiated”  
(Wildemeersch et al 1998: 262)

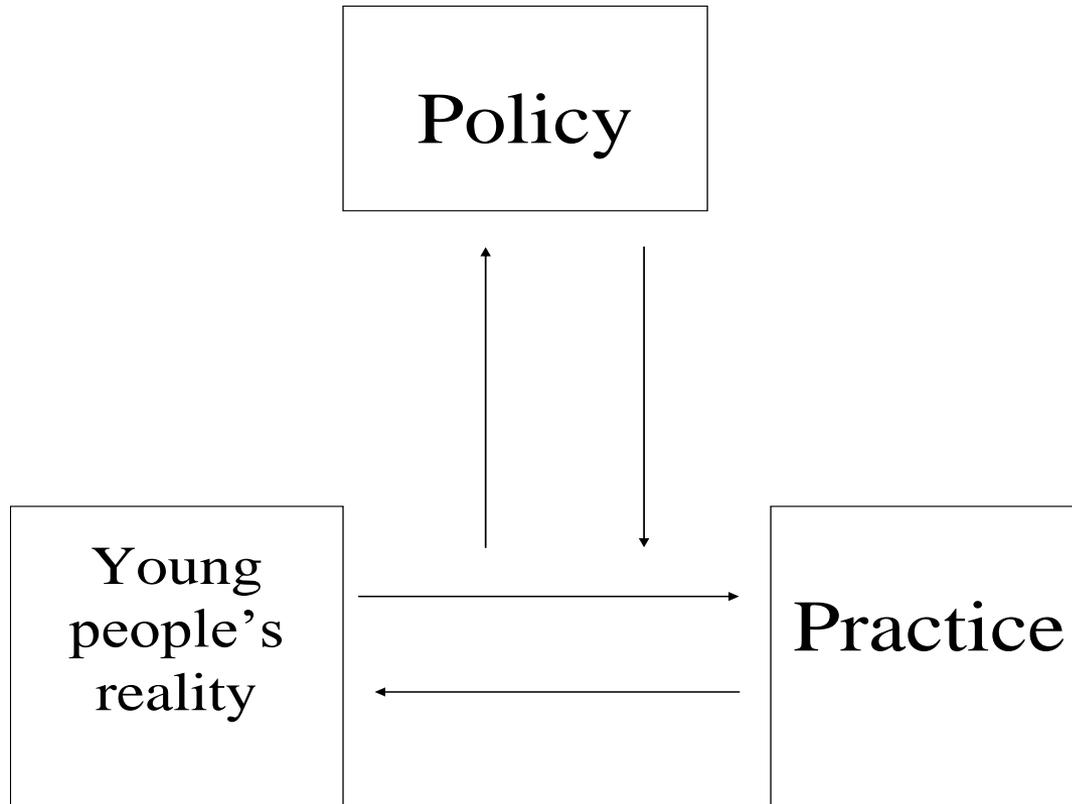


This is all very well but practitioners are constrained by their organisational and policy contexts.

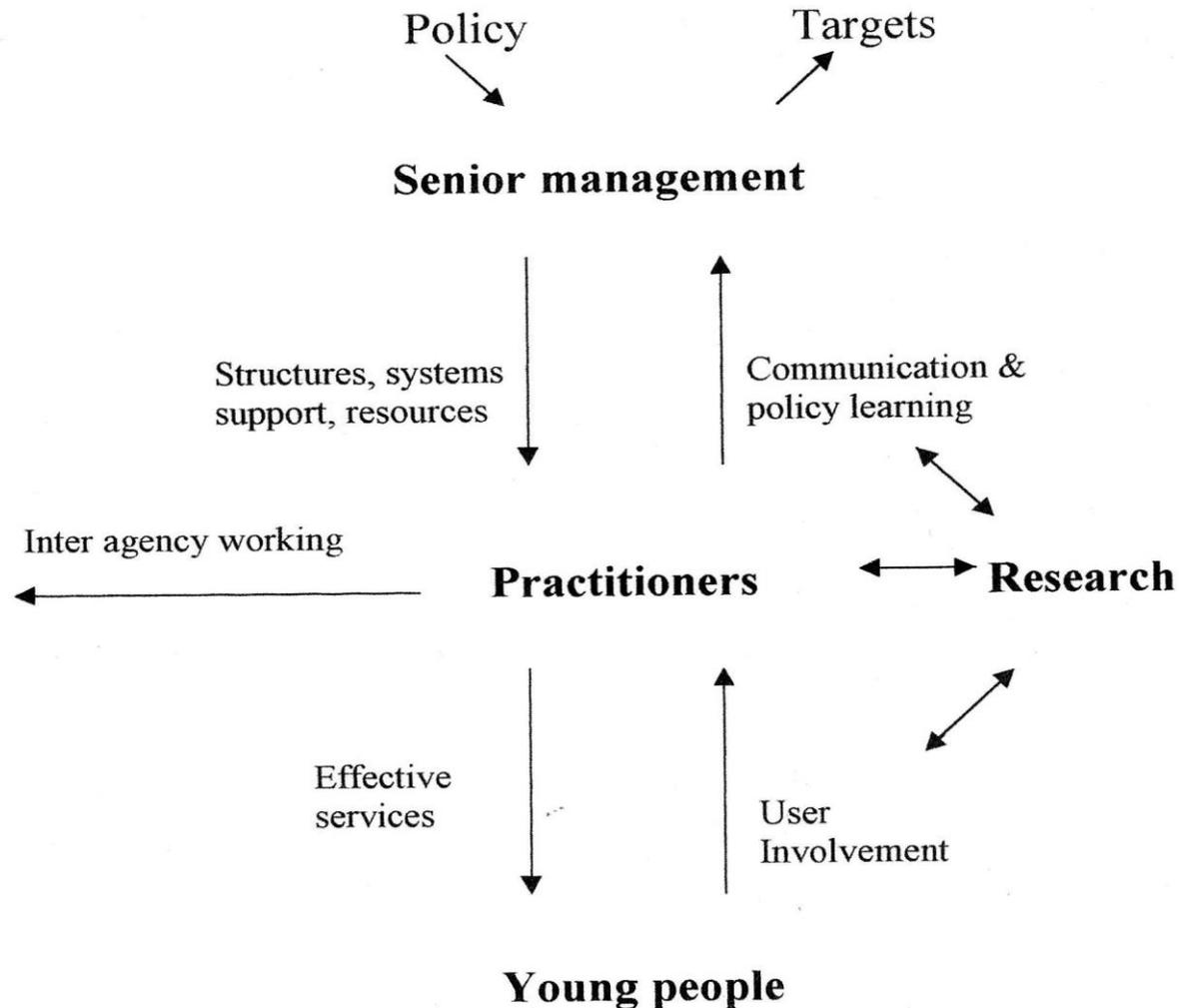
Workers are listening to young people but who is listening to the workers?



# Building in learning from practice



# Developing a learning organisation



# Concluding thought

“By listening to children and young people we can gain the information we need for a fuller understanding of the issues that affect their lives. By dealing with voices, we are affecting power relations. To listen to people is to empower them. .... If we were to really listen to children and hear what they have to say, it would result in the need to radically change many of the services that are currently provided. ... the starting point [...] is to continue to make visible the paradoxical discourses, which come from the exercise of adult power.”

(Dalrymple, “The Practice of Advocacy: Participation, Voice and Resistance”, in progress)