

Appendix 1

Broxtowe Borough Youth Conference 12 February 2026

11 May 2026

Researcher:

Ellen Froustis, M.Ed., MA, DPhil (C)
University of Oxford, Rees Centre
Doctoral Research Fellow

Research Interns:

Carl Rifino and Mae Torrance

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
<i>Background</i>	2
Methodology.....	3
<i>Design</i>	3
<i>Discussion Group Questions</i>	3
<i>Participants</i>	5
<i>Data Collection</i>	6
<i>Data Analysis</i>	6
Findings.....	7
Discussion.....	16
Limitations.....	20
References.....	22

1. Introduction

Raising youth voice and their participation in schools and communities to improve youth outcomes has been a growing response to challenges young people face in education, mental health, social justice and others. It's been more than three decades since Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), that stressed the right of children and young people of member states, including the UK, to meaningfully contribute their views and voice on matters affecting them. Section 507B of the Education Act 1996 is one example of local authority provision to engage young people in shaping educational and leisure time activities in their communities. Engaging young people in activities to capture a more accurate perspective of their thoughts, needs, desires and ideas can support local authorities and policy makers to deliver more targeted policies and practices to promote the wellbeing of children and young people (Gov.UK, 2026).

Including young people in the co-production of knowledge and implementation of policy, practices and initiatives that benefit them creates a greater level of inclusion, connectedness and belonging to their communities (De Lima, Potter, Preece et al, 2026). Through community participation, young people develop social-emotional, collaborative and relationship skills (Ravishanker et al, 2022). They acquire problem-solving and decision-making skills and abilities that foster preparedness for adulthood. Young people can learn to positively influence, shape and navigate community issues as civic leaders through community engagement (Checkoway, 2011; Mathews, 2001).

In the UK, numerous councils have included young people in decision-making in a diverse range of initiatives such as national youth parliaments, local youth councils, youth advisory boards, and one-off consultative events (Mathews, 2001). The Broxtowe Borough Council generated a series of youth voice forums in November 2025. Young people attending youth centres across the borough were invited to participate. The aim was threefold: to capture their experience of social media and the role of influencers on the lives, whether they felt a sense of connectedness and belonging to their school and community, and to gauge their interest and ideas on organizing a youth-led conference to engage a broader range of young people from local schools in discussion on these themes.

1.1 Background

Following the recommendations of young people from the November 2025 Youth Forum, the Broxtowe Borough Council facilitated a youth-led conference at the Beeston Community Centre, 12 February 2026, bringing together more than 66 secondary students from schools across the region. Participating students enjoyed a day-long

conference exchanging perspectives on social media and ways to navigate the complexity of issues that arise ranging from cyberbullying and questionable influencers to extremism and predators. They discussed conflicting identity issues arising from social comparison, fear of missing out, belonging, peer conflict and rejection. A second discussion group explored the meaning of community, whether young people feel a sense of connectedness and belonging to their school and local community. They considered how young people can be more involved in co-creating the communities they belong to. They also explored the extent to which they have real mentors and role models in their lives and how strengthening bonds with trusting adults can support their needs and aspirations. Perhaps strengthening relationships between home, school and community might buffer the effects of negative social media, decreasing reliance on non-expert influencers for guidance with caring adults already in their lives.

The conference was led by two youth leaders who were the MC's of the event and members of the Youth Parliament. Young people had the opportunity to engage with community organizations and learn from keynote speakers leading positive change in their community. They expressed their sense of community through a collaborative art project with a local artist, enjoyed musical breaks with a live musician and were nourished by an abundance of food and beverage from local vendors in full support of the aims of the conference.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This was a qualitative study facilitated during two round table discussions with young people ages 11-16 years old who attended the Broxtowe Borough Youth Conference. The first discussion explored young people's experience with social media and the impact on their mental health. The second discussion centred on the theme of community and belonging. After each discussion, young people developed an action plan to address issues raised that affect young people's mental health and well-being.

A quantitative survey also was facilitated at the end of the youth conference using the Mentimeter online survey tool to collect young people's experience of the conference and future events they would like to see happen.

2.2 Discussion Group Questions

A. Key Questions raised in the first discussion on social media and mental health were:

- How much time do you spend on social media each day?
- What are the positive and negative aspects of engaging with social media?
- What issues related to social media affect young people's mental health?
- To what extent is cyberbullying prevalent?

- What type of influencers do young people follow?
- Do influencers have a positive or negative affect on young people?

Further questions guided the development of an Action Plan to address issues raised on social media and mental health:

- What do young people do to protect themselves from negative social media use and influence?
- What are your thoughts on how young people can be protected?
- What are your thoughts on how adults can support young people to improve their social media use and mental health?
- What regulations are needed to protect young people?
- Other?

B. Key questions asked in the second, round table discussion on connectedness and belonging were:

- What makes young people feel a sense of belonging to their school and community?
- What makes young people feel disconnected or lack of belonging from their school and community?
- Do young people have trusted adults or mentors at school or the community that they can talk to, support their needs, aspirations and mental health? Who might they be?

Questions prompted to facilitate an Action Plan to address issues raised during the round table discussion on community and belonging:

- How can school create a greater sense of belonging for young people?
- How can the community create a greater sense of belonging for young people?
- How can young people use their voice and ideas to strengthen their sense of belonging at school and the community?
- How can the community engage young people in co-creating opportunities, places and spaces for youth engagement and connectedness?

C. Post-Conference Mentimeter Survey Questions:

Ranked Statements-Part A:

Each statement was ranked on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest and 1 being the lowest mark.

1. During the youth conference, I felt that my voice was heard and ideas considered on issues that affect me and my peers.

2. I felt a sense of connectedness and belonging to my community during the youth conference.
3. I felt a sense of purpose during the youth conference that I was doing something important and contributing to my community in a positive way.

Ranked Statements-Part B:

What part of the youth conference did you most enjoy?

Each statement was ranked from 1-6, with 1 being the highest and 6 being the lowest mark.

4. ____ Listening to the Mentor's stories.
5. ____ Connecting with other young people.
6. ____ Expressing my thoughts on issues important to me.
7. ____ Contributing ideas that improve my community.
8. ____ Learning about the work of organizations in my community
9. ____ Participating in fun activities.

Open-Ended Survey Questions

10. After the conference, I'd like for The Broxtowe Borough Council to consider these follow-up activities for young people:
11. What other issues would you like to see addressed in a future event?
12. Describe the conference in one word.

2.3 Participants

- There were 66 participants, ages 11-16 years old, from five schools in Broxtowe Borough who attended the Youth Conference. Each table consisted of students from varied schools.

2.4 Data Collection

Data from two discussion group sessions and one post-conference online survey was collected during the Youth Conference hosted at the Beeston Community Centre. Each discussion group was facilitated by a youth leader, secondary school students who volunteered from each table. In two cases, youth leaders were university research interns who facilitated the discussions. In two other cases, teachers with SEND groups facilitated the discussions with students from their school, as students opted out from this role. Student participants at each table took turns writing down main points on flip chart paper during the group discussions. At the end of the conference, the flip chart papers were collected, photographed and analysed thematically.

Students received a QR code to complete the post-conference Mentimeter survey, observed overhead on a large screen. Results were downloaded and analysed. Participants responded to ten of the twelve questions, as time ran out and students had to depart by school bus. The two questions that were not responded to were:

11. What other issues would you like to see addressed in a future event?

12. Describe the conference in one word.

2.5 Data Analysis

Braun and Clark's (2006) Thematic Analysis was used to analyse data that was collected from flip chart paper that was documented by students from ten tables of approximately 66 secondary school students. Data from the post-conference survey was analysed with the purpose of understanding young people's views of their conference participation with thoughts and ideas on a future youth event. Triangulation between the researcher, council members during an online meeting for this purpose, and the two university research interns clarified and aligned interpretation of findings.

3.Findings

Discussion Group A: Social Media and Mental Health

The main themes that evolved from the data analysis on social media and mental health were **benefits, risks, behaviours, identity**.

Young people expressed the positive and negative effects of using social media. The **benefits** of using social media were connecting with friends and family, finding useful information online, playing games and watching videos for entertainment or educational purposes and having a digital space to create a personal profile of photographs and memories.

Social media also posed **risks and challenges** that made it “unsafe”, said students. Young people stated that they had to be vigilant and aware of strangers they engaged with while playing games, interacting through chats or when exchanging comments on posts. Among the most hazardous experiences for young people is encountering cyberbullying, hate speech, pornography, grooming, scamming, false information, identity theft and attracting potential stalkers. Particularly painful is “doxxing”, “when people you know leak information about you”, or when cyberbullies remain somewhat or fully anonymous, harming others with no accountability. Youth reported that they are more vulnerable to false information which can affect the decisions that they make.

While young people expressed being well- aware and informed about the dangers of social media, the effect on their mental health had more to do with how it changed their **behaviour**. The amount of time spent on social media (5-10 hours) replaces time that could be spent on more meaningful, engaging, creative, productive or socially interactive activities. They observed that the more time they spent on social media, the more their mental health was affected. For example, they stated that excessive social media use (5+ hours) tended to occur when caught in “a cycle of being stressed or bored”, resulting in “doom-scrolling” (scrolling aimlessly through posts), “spending more time indoors”, feeling “guilty”, “lazy” and “weak” for “staying up late” and not managing their time better. In more extreme cases, “isolating” themselves instead of engaging with friends or being outdoors also was a factor contributing to the adverse mental health of young people. Therefore, this behaviour change influenced how they felt about themselves, which affected their mental health.

Too much time online often interfered with their **identity** development and ideas about the world. For example, one group referred to having “warped ideas of how relationships are”. Another group stated that social media was “making them want to act older”. The “lack of representation” was raised by several groups of young people from diverse racial

and ethnic backgrounds leaving them with a feeling of “being left out”. Of particular significance to their self-esteem and worth was when comparing themselves to “celebrities or fake images of perfect people” (altered by AI, photoshopping, or filters), that set unrealistic standards for young people. They observed that when influencers/ celebrities post, they tend to only show the best version of themselves which further amplified the “pressure to be perfect”, “feeling like a failure” or “not being enough”, causing “anxiety”, “jealousy”, “depression”, “suicidal thoughts”. Dealing with these difficult emotions often made them “push people away who are trying to help you”. Therefore, although young people were aware that the idealistic images of others’ lives on social media were not always real, it affected their perceived inability to reach these standards. Self-acceptance perhaps played a role in poor mental health.

Growing AI trends was a topic that most young people did not appear to have a lot of experience with, based on their responses, although they believe that AI is embedded in most social media platforms. AI, they felt, “cannot be trusted”.

Social Media Action Plan

During their Action Plan development, young people suggested that interventions to address social media risks and challenges should be addressed on an industry, parental and individual level.

The *communications industry*, they suggested, should “restrict social media downloads for Under-16s” and have a “mandatory 3-4 hr time limit”, where access is cut off. Social Media should have “heavier filters on inappropriate content”. There must be clearer “age group restrictions on social media use and specific content”. There should be options for “private versus public accounts” and “scanning apps to detect scams and fake figures”. They felt that “AI should be removed from social media apps as a feature” and “AI songs and images must be clearly labelled”. They suggested establishing “a governing body to report hate speech” and “heavily fine platforms for dangerous content”. In essence, although young people enjoy the freedom of using social media, they want the industry to make it safer because they have the technological responsibility and capability to do so.

On a *parental level*, young people felt that “parents need to be better educated” about how to protect their children from negative social media use and content. They should also be “more aware of the type of content their children are exposed to”. Parents should “have to approve app downloads until a child is an adult”. They should “set time limits on time spent on social media” and “ask their teens to power down their phones by midnight”. Parents also should be “encouraging young people to spend more time doing activities outdoors with friends”. Even though time spent on social media is often a point of conflict between parents and children, young people in essence are asking for support

to help them regulate the time spent scrolling as well helping them to navigate the dangers by knowing more about the sites they have access to.

On a *school level*, young people suggested that “phones should not be allowed in instructional settings”. Young people need “more social media literacy courses” and cyberbullying awareness and management skills. Young people, therefore, believe that school can play a greater role in helping them navigate the challenges they face while using social media.

On an *individual level*, young people recommended that they support each other to “develop their own norms for social media use” to encourage self-management as opposed to relying solely on externally imposed restrictions. They suggested that students should “report any bad content”, “limit amount of time” and if in distress, “talk to someone you trust about your feelings if you need help”. Recommendations made by young people clearly point to the role of adults in supporting their efforts to manage their social media use. Perhaps the strongest statement is their desire to develop their own responsible approaches to social media use, where self-protection becomes the trend as opposed to the risk of the unknown.

Discussion Group B- School & Community Belonging

School Belonging

Conference participants were all members of a school and the community, however, “belonging” was a concept most had not considered so extensively before and therefore, took more brainstorming to process than the social media questions they had more experience with.

Discussion prompts first helped them to identify what qualities make young people feel they belong. Common responses were: “feeling heard”, “being accepted”, “being respected”, “recognized”, “trust”, “happiness”, “stability”, “comfortability”, “spending time with people with similar interests”, “sharing personal experiences”.

Characteristics commonly reported by students to describe feeling lack of belonging was feeling: “disconnected”, “not being listened to”, “invalidated”, “being scared”, “bullied”, “ignored”. According to the young people, hearing students but not addressing their needs made them feel disregarded reflecting a perceived lack of belonging:

"The general attitude toward teenagers where they aren't very accepted results in people being ignored a lot, and they invalidate our opinions a lot and what we think."

"Kids voices are heard but not often taken into account or little action done."

Therefore, being seen and heard in a safe, responsive and stable environment where young people can “connect with others with similar interests”, “share personal stories” feel “validated”, “respected”, “accepted” in an environment of “trust”, generates a feeling of “happiness”, “connection” and “belonging”.

While creating an Action Plan for how to strengthen belonging in school and their community, young people identified that it involved actively engaging, connecting and co-creating with peers and trusted adults who can be supportive of their needs.

School level belonging, they suggested, could be enhanced by increasing access and opportunity for young people to engage with peers outside of the classroom, such as in school activities, which many felt were not extensively provided in their school. Some of their ideas included: allowing students to propose the types and range of school clubs and activities that they’d like made available to them, having more assemblies and meet-and-greets.

"At my school there aren't many clubs other than sports clubs, I would like more arts or coding clubs, and they shouldn't happen during lunch when we need to eat."

Schools that did provide activities, did not always include students’ input, preferences or interests in their offerings, which did not support belonging: *"The students don't usually get the opportunity to pick the clubs, the teachers usually pick them."*

Others suggested that communication tools can enhance belonging with opportunities to elevate their voice and express their needs and concerns to school faculty and counsellors. Students would like opportunities to provide “more frequent feedback to teachers; especially students who aren't in the school councils.” They suggested “message boxes” or hosting “a student radio station”.

Participants who were student council members, felt their role was tokenistic: *“we really don't do anything”*. Student interest is often low: *"We have a student council, but no one really wants to do it, so the only reason we are student council is because no one else volunteered"*. Students felt that schools also could be a stronger liaison to the community: *“schools do not have much choice on community activities which we would like to get more involved in.”* Therefore, students expressed that they clearly seek engagement and school involvement beyond the classroom and opportunities to use their voice to improve their school experience.

Last, young people felt that schools could better support the mental health of students. In their Action Plan, they suggested that schools “make counsellors more available, put resources toward making counselling spaces feel more welcoming and inviting”. They felt that “it's hard to actually access their services” due to “limited hours” resulting in “feeling rushed and not heard” when they did access services. A very strong message was

normalizing “asking for help” so that students could talk to a counsellor or trusted adult about issues of concern whether great or small:

“In school or outside organizations, they need to make asking for help more casual not always advertised as urgent, so that kids feel comfortable talking about all issues, even minor ones.”

“Have more tutors to chat with you about things.”

Community Belonging

What it means for an adolescent to belong as a member of the greater community took thoughtful reflection to reach clarity: *“When someone’s a part of a community, they don’t always realize it because it’s natural or they always have been.”* Upon deeper inquiry, students organized their thoughts around civic engagement within authentic adult-youth relationships and opportunities for involvement, decision-making, and use of public spaces for social connection.

A pre-cursor to engaging with the greater community is having equitable relationships with adults, mentors and role models who have a positive view of young people and can facilitate opportunities for them to participate, contribute and lead. These relationships, students suggested, require “acceptance”, *“being able to talk to others about how you feel”, “people wanting to hear what you have to say” and having “chances to show how good we are -don’t assume we are lazy and bad!”*

Young people suggested that having access to community mentors and role models to co-produce knowledge with other young people can contribute to positive community change and provide opportunities for young people to serve as role models to other peers in school or the community:

- *“Use the information we presented to them (Council) and put forward our ideas to hopefully make a difference in society.”*
- *“I had someone tell me once that I was a really good role model and it made me feel good.”*
- *“Wait, we are role models!”*
- *“Even if we are (role models), we don’t have the publicity in our schools to be able to say that.”*
- *“I think you can be a role model not the way you are or where you are but what you’ve done.”*

Young people shared that some of the role models in their lives were both adults and peers: “my parents,” “my grandparents”, “family friends”, “club captains”, “my art teacher, because my other role model is an artist on instagram so my main role models are mostly artists”. This suggests that most young people view role models as accessible people directly influencing their lives. Research

suggests that naturally occurring mentorships have the strongest influence on young lives (Miranda-Chan et al, 2016).

Belonging, said young people, means “being seen and heard” by adults that are open to co-producing solutions with young people on issues affecting their lives and community: *“Basically the decisions made that involve us, we could be brought in.”* Another stated, *“incorporate youth voice into decision-making (Q&A’s, events like our conference!).”* Other ideas suggested capturing the views of young people through *“polls, public surveys, all-around vote for big issues”*. Irrespective of the method, young people expressed that they want to be active participants in their community.

Authentic community belonging, according to students, occurs when young people “have opportunities to be involved”, gain “volunteer experience” and can liaise with community organizations “so that services are more accessible”, particularly by mental health organizations.

Open-ended statements provided in the online Mentimeter survey reflected enthusiasm for using their voice to lead:

- *“Let some people tell their stories and why [what] they want to be [sort-of-event].”*
- *“Take our ideas and take them to the Youth Parliament.”*
- *“I hope Broxtowe Borough Council can listen more to young people’s voices, for example what they really want.”*

The places and spaces that young people feel a sense of belonging in the community are: sports clubs, parks, comic cons (fan conventions), church/religious gatherings, and youth clubs. These are the places young people said they were “most comfortable”, “have similar interests” with those around them, and have the most “fun”. However, they felt there were unexplored opportunities that could be considered to increase social connection and prospects for young people to meet like-minded peers.

In the Action Plan, young people expressed the desire to meet new people and have safe community spaces to congregate. The students discussed wanting to use the parks more. Some group members, however, expressed concerns over safety, particularly at night. There was reference to “knife crime”, “the need for more police presence” and “neighbourhood watches”, and “a place where needles can be disposed of”, all of which were intimidating to young people.

Young people were aware that there were youth service programs in the community, but there were some barriers to participating. Some students “didn’t know how to get involved”. For others, “access to transportation made it difficult to attend”. Social anxiety

was an issue for some. Creating a bridge of connection to youth centres with students “who were shy or had smaller friend’s groups” could be helpful, they said, as these students “feel like they can’t go” if they “don’t know anyone”.

Finally, young people on numerous occasions mentioned that engaging with the greater community also could open opportunities to access mentors and role models, something they would like more of.

Mentimeter Survey

Data that was collected from a mentimeter survey was shared live on a big screen at the end of conference and accessed through a QR code. Findings show that on a scale of 1-10, participants rated their experience of their voice being heard, as well as, feeling a sense of connectedness and belonging at 7.3. Slightly higher ratings were reported (7.7) for experiencing a sense of purpose for contributing to the greater good during the conference.



Young people ranked the following Mentimeter statements from 1-6:

The most popular response from the range of experiences young people had during the youth conference was participating in fun activities. Secondly, young people enjoyed connecting with other young people and third, they liked listening to mentor stories, contributing ideas to improve their community and expressing their thoughts on issues important to them:

A. Listening to the Mentor's stories.

Connecting with other young people.

Expressing my thoughts on issues important to me

Contributing ideas that improve my community.

Learning about the work of organisations in my community

Participating in fun activities

4.1

4.7

4.0

4.1

3.8

5.1

Young people's responses indicate that connection with others around activities was most important to them, making their experience meaningful and enjoyable.

"I really enjoyed this conference because I connected with people that shared the same interests."
(Post-Conference Mentimeter Survey response)

"Yes these activities were very fun and engaging especially to talk to a lot of people who spoke on stage especially Emily Patterson." [youth mentor presenter]
(Post-Conference Mentimeter Survey response)

The other four statements reflected individual interests such as using their voice, contributing ideas and learning about the success stories from real role models and mentors in their community. One young person suggested a future event where they too can tell their stories.

"Make more opportunities to meet similar minded people and create a sense of belonging by listening and taking into account our views and opinions"
(Post-Conference Survey response)

"Let some people tell their stories and why [what] they want to be [sort-of- event]. "
(Post-Conference Survey response)

Engagement with community organizations required young people to physically seek them out for information. While young people did engage during break periods with the organizations' materials at the stalls, playing games and seeking information, a recommendation for a future conference could be to create a specific time for young people to speak to at least one organization's representative and report back to their

group. There were so many worthy youth organizations that young people could benefit from participating in their initiatives beyond the conference.

When asked in an open-ended question what young people would like for Broxtowe Borough Council to do as a follow-up activity, some youth suggested a future conference:

“Have more youth conferences to allow children to say their thoughts on what they want in the community to help young kids.”

“I believe another conference like this would be beneficial for youth members.”

“I would like them to have more events like this.”

Others wanted to see ideas go beyond expressing them to materializing them:

“Use the information we presented to them and put forward our ideas to hopefully make a difference in society.”

“Take our ideas and take them to the Youth Parliament.”

“I hope Broxtowe Borough Council can listen more to young people’s voices, for example what they really want.”

A common response in the post conference survey was the need for more youth centres and opportunities to meet other young people:

“They should add more youth centres, so more kids are able to go to them without being limited.”
(Post-Conference Survey response)

“Host some young people meet up.”
(Post-Conference Survey response)

Perhaps the most enthusiastic comment was:

- *“I had a nice time here and I wish I could come again and I’m so thankful for being here.”*

4. Discussion

Broxtowe Borough Council's first Youth Conference brought together students, schools, community groups, youth leaders and local authority officials to engage young people in dialogue to understand and address the challenges that social media poses to their mental health, but also to explore how young people experience connectedness and belonging to their school and greater community. Directly capturing their voice, thoughts and ideas, both before and during the conference, provides an opportunity to integrate and implement their valuable feedback into policies, practices and initiatives that promote inclusion, participation and strengthen the wellbeing of children and young people in the community.

The significance of the findings suggest that trusted adults are central to young people's journey of managing the world around them, whether it is navigating the complexities of social media or addressing issues they face in their school or community.

Social Media & Mental Health

Student Action Plans provided relevant recommendations for how adults can better support and protect them from the harms of social media. They asked for adults leading the industry to take responsibility for regulating a tool that allows strangers to enter the front door of their house, bedroom, classroom, and follow them throughout the day to their social events in the comfort of their bookbag, purse or pocket. Addressing their concerns by forwarding their recommendations to relevant regulatory bodies may be a positive step toward joining the millions of voices globally that seek solutions.

Students asked for parents to become better informed about how to both protect them and help them to regulate their time and choice of games and platforms they engage with. Despite the tension it creates for many parents to manage their children's phone and internet use, these young people did not ask for more freedom, they asked for more support with limits. This provides an opportunity to consider offering workshops with parents to "better educate" them, as students suggested. It can also provide opportunities to engage parents and their children in discussion on how to support each other to manage their internet use without the conflict and tension that is often arises.

This leads to the most essential recommendation by young people, their desire to "develop their own norms for social media use". Self-management is the best management and trusted adults on various levels can play a key role in helping young

people to establish them. School is an environment where school counsellors and teachers can be a part of this effort. Young people explicitly asked for more opportunities to engage in dialogue at school, with trusted adults to express their thoughts and concerns. A recommendation is for schools to allocate time to facilitate a discussion group setting where young people can collaborate on creating their own norms and codes of conduct for their social media and internet use and how to manage the challenges of cyberbullying, predators and questionable influencers. Media literacy curricula can supplement efforts to support students' social media management, also a recommendation made by students.

Young people explicitly asked for more opportunities to participate in community oriented youth forums. As a follow-up to school initiatives, the Broxtowe Borough Council can organize a youth forum where student representatives from all schools can come together and share their action plans to develop a collective set of norms for social media and internet use. Strengthening bonds between school and community and aligning aims and objectives for student support and participation further supports student efforts to sustain norms that protect them. Research suggests that when children and young people develop peer norms, they are more likely to take ownership and responsibility to follow them, in line with their social agreement, commitment (Hardecker et al, 2017) and social influence in internalizing positive peer social norms (Telzer et al, 2017).

It is important to note that all young people must be involved in activities that enable youth voice, and initiatives to increase youth participation. Young people participating in the youth forum and conference stated that schools typically select a small group of high achieving students to participate in leadership activities, often those representing the student council. These students, however, are already excelling and experiencing opportunities for leadership development. Less involved, marginalized or vulnerable young people, however, tend to benefit the most from participation, research suggests, because they are placed in new roles where they can develop, contribute, lead and discover new capabilities within themselves. Including students of diverse backgrounds can have positive benefits to their self-esteem, self-image, identity (Heath, 2018; Kremer et al, 2015) and what Markus and Nurius (1986) call, a vision for a "possible future self".

Examining the role of social media on young people's mental health, students expressed that their mental health was affected when spending excessive time online, when comparing themselves to others and when they cannot meet unrealistic standards which affects their identity and creates uncertainty about how they should be in the world. While mental health can be affected by many other factors affecting children and young people's lives, adults can support young people to address the issues they raised and identified in student action plans:

- PARENTS: Open dialogue with children on how they are being affected by social media, the challenges they face and bring perspective to their beliefs and

perceptions. Support children to set and keep their own limits, not as externally imposed but as self-management. Seek information, webinars to become better informed about the types of platforms that young people should avoid and how to use technological options on devices. It is vital that children feel safe talking to parents when they are distressed about social media use and not avoidant due to fear of punishment.

- **SCHOOL:** Invest in media literacy curricula to give young people tools to develop critical thinking to manage their internet use and keep them safer. Involve the school counsellor or external psychologists to open dialogue with young people about how they feel about themselves, how to manage relationships and how to build their confidence and esteem. Offer school activities based on student's input. Activities build upon student's self-concept. Encourage open communication with teachers to build better relationships, which young people are clearly asking for. Identify ways to implement peer-to-peer mentoring, classroom group work, and including young people's voice in decision-making where possible. Consider an initiative for young people to develop their own norms about social media use within and outside of school.
- **COMMUNITY:** Support and encourage school efforts to address social media not didactically but experientially. An initiative to develop youth norms for social media use in a youth forum can support youth participation as experts of their experience. Accessing schools that tend to not participate in community organized events can be beneficial to providing access to more students. Activating organizations to provide expert support for young people in community initiatives through youth centres and schools is a community asset. Understand and problem solve challenges schools and mental health centres have in providing adequate support for students may provide a leadership opportunity for councils. Promoting participation in youth centres to families with broaden access more children to attend. Encouraging youth centres to use their spaces to provide workshops and education to parents on social media and general effective parenting practices is worthwhile. Developing opportunities for young people to be engaged in community level initiatives to capture youth voice and involve young people in decision-making, problem solving issues that affect them is an important step to inclusion and positive youth participation. Considering how community spaces can be used to provide after-school activities for youth can fill a needed gap as some schools appear challenged to do so. Engaging young people in the co-production of youth media to reach a broader audience of young people with positive social influence may strengthen community norms and benefit students' personal development.
- **ROLE MODELS:** Identifying mentors and role models at home, school and the community that young people can have access to has many benefits, minimizing reliance on unknown influencers who are not invested in their lives nor experts in

their field to guide youth's development. Youth mentors at the conference were quite inspiring for young people; they asked for opportunities to meet more local heroes, particularly in relation to how to work toward their personal goals and aspirations and overcome challenges. Schools and the community can access parents, alumni, student peers, community members to share their challenges and success in overcoming adversity and reaching career and personal goals. Access to real mentors and roles models can have a positive effect on their identity development, higher educational attainment, lower criminal activity and higher psychological well-being and resilience (Miranda-Chan et al, 2016; Kuperminc et al, 2020). Incorporating media content with credible role models in education can also support positive social influencing (Kearney and Levine, 2020).

Connectedness and Belonging

Belonging, as defined by young people in the Broxtowe community, is experienced when adults recognize and respect young people's autonomy and agency, and view them as capable and competent partners in decision-making processes, that can find solutions to issues affecting them with adult support. According to research, young people that experience feeling worthy and valued in their environment feel the greatest sense of belonging (Pardede and Kovac, 2023). Engaging in co-production with adults, strengthens their identity and personal development and makes better use of the resources allocated to support them as they know best what works and doesn't work for them in the context of learning and engaging in the school environment (Lodge, 2005, Cook-Sather, 2002; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Therefore, providing opportunities for young people to engage in co-constructing their school and community with adults is a way to support their actions plans, in which they expressed a strong desire to be active participants. Engaging young people experientially with caring adults invested in them can have far reaching outcomes than their digital experience of navigating the world.

Active participation on a school and or community level with adult mentors and role models helps to develop young people's identity, leadership and democratic skills but also strengthens their sense of belonging and mattering (feeling significant, appreciated, invested in and depended upon) (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). This can be achieved by investing in building positive relationships which requires that adults understand how to build their relational skills, how to resolve conflict or differences with young people while maintaining the relationship, how to guide and discipline without punishing and how to model authentic, using consistent behaviours of positive regard. Investing in trauma- informed and relational approaches can support educators and community workers to build these skills.

Opportunity to engage with peers in safe places and spaces in the community also was essential to the experience of *belonging*, as was accessing their views through polls and other means and implementing their ideas, according to student conference action plans. Ensuring safety in public parks and venues was essential, youth stated. Creating, events, festivals, initiatives for young people to meet new peers outside of their school was also recommended. Meeting new peers at the conference was a highlight for students and, therefore, more local authority initiatives to bring young people together to work on building community through active participation, volunteer work and co-production with community organizations may be a way to achieve this.

Last, belonging is least experienced by vulnerable, at-risk or marginalized youth. Their lack of presence at the conference, although they had participated in the earlier youth forum through community centres, was notable. They were not selected by participating schools to attend, particularly those that brought student council members, although all students in the community were invited to attend. Inclusion communicates mattering and providing opportunities for vulnerable youth to experience new roles and activities can expand their view of self and serve as experts of their lived experience to provide perspective, improve services and support networks. Vulnerable youth can be very resilient and knowledgeable in ways that youth from more protected backgrounds might not be. For example, some of the more nuanced approaches to protecting against social media harms were recommended by young people at the pre-conference youth forum, knowledge gained from experience. Therefore, intentional efforts by schools and the community to include children in need, children in kinship care and social care, children with special needs, unaccompanied asylum youth and others is vital.

5. Limitations

The collective voice of young people expressing their views on social media and mental health and connectedness and belonging was restricted to those young people attending the conference and may not be representative of students who did not attend the conference, particularly vulnerable youth who were not in attendance. Working toward building rapport with schools more resistant to attending community organized events that benefit students may be helpful.

Group discussions were not recorded and therefore rich data may have been lost in discussion, however, it provided an opportunity for student participants to take on the role of documenting youth voice which may have served as a positive experience of leadership and engagement.

The last two questions on the mentimeter survey were not answered as time ran out. Perhaps in a future event, reading out each question to the audience and answering each question collectively can organize the time better for students. Spacing the discussion questions within a closer time frame earlier in the conference may ensure student energy is preserved.

Last, engaging participating teachers in their own discussion group could have provided an added perspective to the discussion prompts. Teachers who are naturally open to attending and supporting youth voice events can be valuable ambassadors to their schools to encourage more teacher participation and liaisons to other schools not in attendance.

6. Conclusion

The aims of this research project initiated by the Broxtowe Borough Council were successful in implementing youth voice collected from the November 2025 Youth Forum to organize the 2026 February Youth Conference. Recommendations from students, community organizations and council members used to design the delivery of the conference was considered a success by participating young people who openly asked for similar future events. Youth leaders facilitated the conference, making for a youth-centred event, while community and council members supported this first of its kind event in Broxtowe Borough with students in mind. Rich feedback from young people shed light on what they need to feel supported and included and provided insight on how to strengthen the bonds between home, school and community and align efforts to address the impact of social media in their lives. Feedback from young people can be used to develop a framework to address a host of issues typical in the lives of adolescents and those with more vulnerable needs in the Broxtowe Borough.

References

- Checkoway, B. (2011). What is youth participation? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(2), 340–345. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.09.017>
- Cook-Sather, A. (2002). Authorizing students' Perspectives: Toward trust, dialogue, and change in education. *Educational Researcher*, 31, 3–14.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2006). Sound, presence, and power: "Student Voice" in educational research and reform. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36, 359–390
- De Lima, E., Potter, K., Preece, C., Rehill, N., Davis, G., Bulmer, S., Allen, K., March, A., Hobbs, T., & Fonagy, P. (2026). An adaptive, youth-centred co-design methodology: place-based co-design centring youth and community participation. *Research involvement and engagement*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40900-025-00833-w>.
- Fielding, M. (2001). Students as radical agents of change. *Journal of Educational Change*, 2, 123–141.
- Hardecker, S., Schmidt, M. F. H., & Tomasello, M. (2017). Children's Developing Understanding of the Conventionality of Rules. *Journal of Cognition and Development*, 18(2), 163–188.
- Gov.UK. Youth Voice in Policymaking. Access: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-voice-in-policymaking>
- Kearney, M., & Levine, P. (2020). Role Models, Mentors, and Media Influences. *The Future of Children*, 30, 106 - 83. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2020.0006>.
- Kremer, K.P., Maynard, B.R., Polanin, J.R., Vaughn, M.G., Sarteschi, C.M. (2015). Effects of after-school programs with at-risk youth on attendance and externalizing behaviors: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 44(3):616-36.
- Lodge, C. (2005). From hearing voices to engaging in dialogue: Problematising student participation in school improvement. *Journal of Educational Change*, 6, 125–146.
- Matthews, Hugh (2001). Citizenship, Youth Councils and Young People's Participation, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 4:3, 299-318.
- Miranda-Chan, T., Fruht, V., Dubon, V., & Wray-Lake, L. (2016). The Functions and Longitudinal Outcomes of Adolescents' Naturally Occurring Mentorships. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 57 1-2, 47-59 . <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12031>.
- Mitra, D. L. (2004). The significance of students: Can increasing "student voice" in schools lead to gains in youth development? *Teachers College Record*, 106,

651–688.

Mitra, D. L. (2009). Strengthening student voice initiatives in high schools: An examination of the supports needed for school-based youth–adult partnerships. *Youth and Society*, 40, 311–335.

Pardede, S.; Kovač, V.B. (2023). Distinguishing the Need to Belong and Sense of Belongingness: The Relation between Need to Belong and Personal Appraisals under Two Different Belongingness–Conditions. *European Journal Investigating Health Psychology. Education*, 13, 331–344.

Ravishankar, A., Biggin-Lamming, J., Holliday, T., & Fraser, L. (2022). Collaborating With Children and Young People: A New Model for Co-Production. *BJPsych Open*, 8, S111 - S111. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2022.335> .

Rosenberg, M., & McCullough, B. C. (1981). Mattering: Inferred significance and mental health among adolescents. *Research in Community & Mental Health*, 2, 163–182.

Rudduck, J., & Fielding, M. (2006). Student voice and the perils of popularity. *Educational Review*, 58, 219–231.

Rudduck, J., & McIntyre, D. (2007). Improving learning through consulting pupils. London and New York: Routledge.

Telzer EH, van Hoorn J, Rogers CR, Do KT. (2018). Social Influence on Positive Youth Development: A Developmental Neuroscience Perspective. *Adv Child Dev Behav*. 54:215-258.

United Nations (7 March 1990). Convention on the Rights of the Child., E/CN.4/RES/1990/74. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f03d30.html> .