



PRACTICE OF LEADERSHIP



Community-led Leadership for Urban Youth: *Food-Based Learning and Rites of Passage for Transformation*

Barney Walsh^a & Darren Springer^b

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1. INTRODUCTION

Research shows that urban youth in the UK face educational challenges linked to poverty, structural inequalities, and environments.¹ Programmes providing different experiential learning opportunities can potentially engage these learners more effectively than traditional education settings. These initiatives should direct youth aspirations and a search for belonging toward positive outcomes; and away from paths that may prove harmful to their longer-term wellbeing (so-called 'gang' membership being a striking example). This exploratory piece examines East London community initiatives using experiential and transformative education interventions outside mainstream schooling. Two activity types are discussed. Firstly, nature and food-based learning through Organiclea (promoting just food systems),² The Grow

Academy (championing food justice and outdoor learning),³ and Healthy-Mind-Healthy-Grind (empowering families to embrace healthier lifestyles through plant-based cooking).⁴ Secondly, ritualistic deep-dive discussion groups with rites of passage ceremonies via Manhood Academy Global (exploring identity, emotional strength, purpose, leadership, and positive masculinity).⁵

The work makes use of desktop research, the working interactions with these groups from the co-author,⁶ and three interviews with relevant practitioner experts (ethical approval was granted under King's College London reference MRA-24/25-51597). It argues these experiential learning interventions offer young learners in need the chance for transformed personal and world views; and align more closely with the transformative learning literature that recognises the role of *emotional*

^a Dr Barney Walsh is a Senior Lecturer in Security, Leadership and Development Education at the African Leadership Centre (ALC). He is programme convenor of the MSc Global Leadership and Peacebuilding programme.

^b Darren Springer, also known as Darren Le Baron, is a world-renowned educator in Ethnomycology and Psychedelic studies. Based in the UK and the Caribbean he is also a grassroots community activist and influencer.

¹ Arya, Dena, and Matt Henn. "The impact of economic inequality and educational background in shaping how non-activist "Standby" youth in London experience environmental politics." *Educational Review* 75, no. 1 (2023):

93-114.; Dorling, Danny, David Egan, Kevin Lowden, Stuart Hall, Stephen Mckinney, Erik Cownie, and Ruth Leitch.

Poverty in education across the UK: A comparative analysis of policy and place. Policy Press, 2020.

² See: <http://www.organiclea.org.uk/>

³ See: <https://www.wearegrow.org/the-totteridge-academy>

⁴ See: <https://www.soulandsound.com/hmhg>

⁵ See: <http://www.manhoodacademyglobal.com/>

⁶ Darren Springer has worked closely with Organiclea, The Grow Academy and Manhood Academy Global on different aspects of their programs. Some of the insights in this piece are his personal insights and reflections.

changes beyond just rational reflection. It notes that the importance of the individual facilitators' backgrounds and teaching style (as well as session formats) make replicability and scalability challenging but not insurmountable.

2. YOUTH CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES IN THE UK

Urban youth in the UK are often stereotyped in terms of lacking a moral compass, fuelling anti-social behaviour, involvement in knife crime, and gang membership.⁷ Whilst these views may often be simplistic and unhelpful, they are nonetheless rooted in the lived experiences of many young people in London. The level of engagement with, or being excluded from, mainstream schooling feed strongly into these trends and perceptions. Since the 1990s, only 15% of permanently excluded children (educated in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs)) return to mainstream education; many of whom go on to engage in criminal activity.⁸ London's Violence Reduction Unit states new research shows 'a clear link between children being excluded from school and involvement in violence.'⁹ These broad statistics mask significant disparities: boys, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, being of Black-Caribbean heritage, and having special educational needs, all noticeably increase the likelihood of being excluded.¹⁰ Recent studies also show one in twelve secondary students enter isolation units weekly, with special needs students facing double the risk,

sometimes exceeding eight hours in total (equivalent to a full school day).¹¹

Of course, not all struggling students face exclusion or perpetrate violence; yet many do experience mental health issues, or a generalised sense of lacking belonging, purpose, and direction. The Head of a Pupil Referral Unit in South-East England believes that socio-economic deprivation is central to these issues, which no longer exists only in specific areas or pockets of the UK where you might have expected more difficult students to be found. In interview they explained:

*'Schools will tell you that kids are more challenging these days... those pockets of deprivation are really widespread now, which basically equates to tricky kids. Pretty much all schools have deprived kids in their schools now, from what I can tell, you know, even small leafy village schools.'*¹²

UK media often frames these youth as perpetrators or lost causes and often portray schools as sites of failure rather than spaces of transformation.¹³ Chronic underfunding, teacher workload pressures, socio-cultural challenges and mental health stressors beyond institutional control all contribute to issues.¹⁴ The PRU Head believes most schools do try to cater for learners that are struggling but are hampered by the reality of ingrained institutional and teaching practices. They suggest 'no one really likes change, do they? So the old-fashioned Victorian school of sit down and listen to

⁷ Truth about Britain's feral youth: Small core of youngsters commit staggering 86 crimes by age 16, Daily Mail, June 24, 2012 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2163979/Truth-Britain-s-feral-youth-Small-core-youngsters-commit-staggering-86-crimes-age-16.html> ; Popham, Cassandra. "Behind the Knife Crime Statistics: Understanding Children Who Carry Weapons." Youth Endowment Fund Blog, May 23, 2023

⁸ Institute for Social and Economic Research. Working Paper No. 2013-25. University of Essex, 2013 <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/working-papers/iser/2013-25.pdf>, p.1

⁹ Teenagers excluded from school 'twice as likely' to commit serious violence, the Guardian, 22/05/25, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/mar/22/teenagers-excluded-from-school-twice-as-likely-to-commit-serious-violence>

¹⁰ Black, Alison. "'But What Do the Statistics Say?' An Overview of Permanent School Exclusions in England." Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties 27, no. 3 (2022): 199-219. p.200

¹¹ Weale, Sally. "One in 12 Secondary Pupils Put in Isolation Rooms at Least Once a Week, Study Finds." The Guardian, October 23, 2025.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/oct/23/one-in-12-secondary-pupils-put-in-isolation-rooms-at-least-once-a-week-study-finds>

¹² Head of a Pupil Referral unit in South-East England, interview, 08/11/25

¹³ School system is 'failing' on multiple fronts - report, The Independent, 15 June, 2022

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/nottinghamshire-geoff-barton-ofsted-tony-blair-british-b2101223.html>;

London mayor says knife detectors are available for schools, BBC News, October 13, 2023

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-67099584>

¹⁴ Research shows 'a sense of belonging' is important for pupils' learning and behaviour, UCL Institute of Education, November 23, 2020,

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news/2020/nov/research-shows-sense-of-belonging-important-pupils-learning-and-behaviour>;

Half of pupils expelled from school 'mentally ill', BBC News, July 20, 2017

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-40667089> ; School exclusions rise by fifth in England in past year, study finds, The Guardian, September 24, 2024

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/article/2024/sep/05/school-exclusions-rise-by-fifth-england-past-year-study>

teacher. We haven't really come a long way from that until probably the last ten years or so.¹⁵

Alternative offerings, in theory, flourish. The 'Forest School' revolution, for example, has expanded dramatically across early years, primary, and some secondary school establishments. However, these often represent tokenistic forest school 'lite' or 'ultra-lite' efforts used for marketing purposes rather than to facilitate the genuine changes in worldview that requires risk-taking and student-focused learning.¹⁶ The Red Balloon Educational Trust (tailored education for young people who have self-excluded from mainstream school due to trauma, mental health, bullying or related issues);¹⁷ Think4ward (person-centred alternative provision for students with social, emotional, mental health vulnerabilities);¹⁸ and Gul Outdoors (outdoor-based alternative education including equine therapy, bushcraft, gardening and walking),¹⁹ are just three amongst many other organisations offering alternative programs for students struggling at school. Yet while there is a growing body of research on alternative provision generally,²⁰ the specific impacts and effectiveness of smaller third sector and independent providers - particularly those offering therapeutic, outdoor and nature-based interventions - remains under-researched compared to more traditional alternative provision settings like Pupil Referral Units.

Below, this commentary discusses community leadership within small, innovative outreach programmes for urban learners. Kolb's experiential learning theory outlined a four-stage cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation that transforms direct experience into knowledge.²¹ This has been criticized, however, for its *individualistic* focus - Lave and Wenger's situated learning emphasizes *socially* constructed learning within communities of practice.²²

Mezirow's transformative learning theory, though originally focused on adults, meanwhile emphasizes critical reflection on assumptions and beliefs, potentially providing insight into how experiential programs can facilitate fundamental shifts in worldview.²³ To what extent are these and related ideas relevant to these community-led interventions? And how replicable and/or scalable are these interventions in terms of reaching learners within and across mainstream education?

3. INTERVENTIONS

The below discussion asks how community-led experiential learning initiatives - including nature and food-based projects, and rites of passage ceremonies - conform to or challenge established theories of transformative education, and what makes them effective for young people disengaged from mainstream schooling and society.

Nature and food-based learning

Organiclea promotes socially and environmentally just food systems, advocating for small-scale producers' rights to land access, control, and seed sovereignty. Founded in 2001 on derelict allotment land near Epping Forest, East London, it has grown to supply UK and European markets through weekly stalls.²⁴ They deliberately target excluded and vulnerable groups within their open and inclusive programmes. Participants gain food-growing skills while appreciating the land's heritage and historical significance (Saxon settlers cultivated the area from the 6th century onwards), combining practical agricultural education with cultural and environmental awareness.

The Grow Academy, a Barnet-based collaborative agroecological farm, prioritizes individuals facing

¹⁵ Head of a PRU, interview

¹⁶ Lightfoot, Liz. "Forest Schools: More Marketing than Outdoor Education?" The Guardian, June 25, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jun/25/for-est-schools-more-marketing-than-outdoor-education>;

Sackville-Ford, Mark, and Helen Davenport, eds. *Critical Issues in Forest Schools*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019.

¹⁷ See: <https://www.redballoonlearner.org/>

¹⁸ See: <https://think4ward.co.uk/>

¹⁹ See: <https://www.guloutdoortherapy.org.uk/>

²⁰ Power, Sally et. al. *The Varied Landscape of Alternative Education Provision in the UK: A Home International Comparison*. Oxford: University of Oxford, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.5287/ora-0z1zoy0km>; IFF Research Ltd, Martin Mills, and Patricia Thomson. *Investigative Research*

into Alternative Provision. London: Department for Education, October 2018.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5bc611a4ed915d0b0349a64d/Investigative_research_into_alternative_provision.pdf

²¹ Kolb, David A. *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. FT press, 2014.

²² Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991

²³ Mezirow, Jack. "Perspective Transformation." *Adult Education* 28, no. 2 (1978): 100-110; Kitchenham, Andrea. "The Evolution of John Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory." *Journal of Transformative Education* 6, no. 2 (2008): 104-123

²⁴ See: <http://www.organiclea.org.uk/>

educational, well-being, and employment barriers. Championing food justice and sustainable living, they cultivate knowledge, connection, and resilience through hands-on outdoor learning. Activities include after-school/holiday clubs, family projects, traineeships and the UK's first AQA-certified Mushroom Cultivation & Mycology programme.²⁵ GROW's experiential learning after-school 'Mycology Club' involves understanding fungi's fundamental role in Earth's ecosystems and even human evolution, forming vast underground mycelium networks sometimes called the 'wood wide web' that predated plant and animal life on earth.²⁶

Wenham and Ralph state neoliberal education foregrounds individualism and competition, pushing aside social justice concerns. So-called marginalized students, often stigmatized, 'need to be away from the pressures of the mainstream classroom,' with Forest Schools and outdoor experiences offering alternative environments.²⁷ Organiclea and GROW seek to complement (rather than confront) mainstream education, offering safe, collaborative, social justice-minded spaces for students struggling within traditional institutional settings. They also provide real-world skills and qualifications: Organiclea offers curriculum-relevant engagement, synchronising school visits with national curriculum standards; and GROW maintains institutional links with Totteridge Academy, a 'traditional school' with a clear collaborative and social agenda which many do not.²⁸

A participant in GROW's Grow-Cook-Share programme, a free food growing programme for families eligible for

free-school meals at school who do not have a garden, stated 'being part of GCS has meant so much to me and my son. Coming to the farm every other Saturday allowed me to bring all parts of myself to a safe space, and have a community where I felt completely accepted. I now feel strong.'²⁹ Another regular visitor emphasized the general environment, saying:

*'As soon as you walk past the gates it's like a sense of freedom here. You can express how you feel, act how you normally are without people judging you. Walking in you can hear birds, you can hear wind, it just sort of makes you feel at peace.'*³⁰

Organiclea likewise offers an outdoor environment that seems to provide an ethereal connection for participants, with a regular attendant saying: 'I just like being here. It's like walking in paradise.'³¹ Another volunteer and graduate of Organiclea's eight-week horticulture course emphasises the familial and communal aspect in transformative learning, as well as the interpersonal connections needed to reach young learners. Growing up in 1990s Hackney, East London, Marcel Andrew was very much affected by what 'people call gangs in the media. Although I wouldn't say that, I would just say it was local boys from certain estates who grew up together... but you end up hanging around a particular group and then it becomes tension and that kind of stuff.'³² In response to a report on how poor quality meals in UK prisons affect prisoner mental health and disruptive behaviours,³³ and knowing low-income households often lack skills, time, and knowledge for affordable healthy eating,³⁴ Marcel subsequently

²⁵ See: <https://www.wearegrow.org/what-we-do-1>

²⁶ Taylor, Thomas N., Michael Krings, and Edith L. Taylor. *Fossil Fungi*. London: Academic Press, 2015; Sheldrake, Merlin. *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds and Shape Our Futures*. London: Random House, 2020

²⁷ Wenham, Lucy J., and Tom Ralph. "Space to Step Back and Think Anew:: A Pupil Referral Unit and A Forest School." In *Pedagogies of Discomfort: Spaces for Working with Challenging Conversations and Topics*. 2022.

²⁸ The Totteridge Academy. "Welcome." Accessed 2025 <https://www.thetotteridgeacademy.org.uk/welcome>

²⁹ GROW Annual Impact Report 2023/24, p. 12, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6706b196e886fa1540bbc50b/t/67f68bdbdfdf10750594f088/1744210923628/GROW+Impact+Report+2024.pdf>

³⁰ GROW Farm x TTA Kitchen Film, March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omZNeWWScJg> (0 min 20 secs)

³¹ Power Art and Film, *This Worker's Food Coop Made Me Cry* (Organiclea), July 2022

<https://youtu.be/ej6AXzZDqX4?si=PCiWWmAx2qPHBww5> (8min)

³² Marcel Andrew, graduate of Organiclea, Founder of 'Soul & Sound' and 'Healthy Mind Health Grind,' interview, 05/11/25

³³ HM Inspectorate of Prisons. *Life in Prison: Food*. London: HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2016 https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_orts/life-in-prison-food/; Vincent, Lucy. "Our Prisons Are in Crisis, Could Healthier Food Behind Bars Be Part of the Solution?" *TEDxSurreyUniversity*, March 2018. TED.

https://www.ted.com/talks/lucy_vincent_our_prisons_are_in_crisis_could_healthier_food_behind_bars_be_part_of_the_solution

³⁴ Rutland, Marion, and Ruth Seabrook. "Tackling food poverty: The role and importance of food education in United Kingdom schools." In *The 40th International Pupils' Attitudes Towards Technology Conference Proceedings 2023*, vol. 1, no. October. 2023; Poor are wasting cash on ready meals, says Jamie Oliver: Chef criticises families who don't eat cheaply by cooking from scratch, *Daily Mail*, 28/09/13

established 'Healthy Mind Healthy Grind', delivering hands-on plant-based cooking workshops to individuals and families, teaching them how to make nutritious affordable meals (he also runs the Jus Jamming music collective through his Soul and Sound organisation, as well as working with disaffected youth across a range of projects).³⁵ Marcel notes family engagement as crucial to a genuinely transformed outcome, especially with parents usually being responsible for what food is in the house but also in terms of getting full buy-in. He states:

*'I've always just been that guy that creates a platform or safe space for young people, for parents, for them to learn, for them to get together, to talk together, engage together and to learn something new.'*³⁶

For urban youth, these nature and food-based learning experiences may prove particularly powerful. Their novelty helps trigger deeper engagement; remove negative associations with formal education in confined institutional spaces; offer different challenges and successes; and create physical and emotional distance from urban stressors.

Manhood identity and rites of passage

The Manhood Academy Global (MAG) explores identity, emotional strength, purpose, leadership, and positive masculinity. It primarily engages boys (in cohorts of 8-12-year-olds; and 13-year-old+) but also offer programs for girls, mixed groups, and parents/carers through weekly drop-in sessions and tailored 5-, 6-, or 12-month programs. They deliver trauma-informed, culturally relevant interventions through group mentoring, parent circles, consent and respect workshops, academic coaching, and emotional literacy training.

MAGs agenda is to 'create spaces where transformation is not just possible, it's expected.'³⁷ In an era of toxic

masculinity,³⁸ research links crime, gang involvement, and educational disillusionment partly to absent male role models and confusion about "real men's" role in contemporary neo-liberal society.³⁹ Hallsworth and Young note urban masculinity celebrates being 'hard' while repudiating 'what society codes as the feminine: a capacity for care and compassion.'⁴⁰ MAG seeks to interrogate and counter these identities as features of the contemporary urban experience, teaching that manhood means self-mastery, not dominance, as part of a more collaborative social practice.

Dirkx argues from a Jungian perspective on transformative learning that 'Psychological wholeness involves conscious and unconscious aspects of one's psyche.'⁴¹ MAG uses social media detox, chess for strategic thinking, and 'Manology' exploring primordial symbolic systems - earth, water, air, and fire⁴² - along with complex Jungian themes like archetypal patterns including the 'hero's journey'. But these are presented and engaged with using age and culturally appropriate examples, such as discussions of different Marvel Comic characters. Davis Williams, a co-founder, explains 'we don't mention things like Carl Jung because they don't care, but they do care about what they watch on TV, what they see on Netflix. So we utilize that to normalize some of these deeper concepts that might exist within.'⁴³ Affirmations and ceremonial procedures are cornerstones of the work. According to Davis:

*'Rituals are key... lots of running, lots of ceremonial dances. It's very therapeutic. It's very mindful. It's very transformational in that sense... we present to the young boys that manhood is not a one hat fits all. So we help them think about what kind of archetype are they? What characteristic does that archetype have, and put in place rituals that activate that kind of archetype within them.'*⁴⁴

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* argued from a Marxist perspective that oppressed groups often conform to unjust norms even when seeking self-improvement, as 'their vision of the new man or woman

³⁵ See: <https://www.soulandsound.com/hmhg/>; <https://www.facebook.com/healthymindhealthygrind/>

³⁶ Marcel Andrew, interview

³⁷ See: <https://www.manhoodacademyglobal.com/>

³⁸ Waling, Andrea. "Inoculate Boys Against Toxic Masculinity": Exploring Discourses of Men and Masculinity in #MeToo Commentaries. *Journal of Men's Studies* 31, no. 1 (2023): 130-156

³⁹ McNulty, Anne, and Megan E. Birney. "What makes a 'good man'? A mixed-methods exploration of UK adolescent attitudes towards masculinity." *Journal of Gender Studies* 33, no. 2 (2024): 186-199; Knife offenders lack male role models,

says senior police officer, BBC News, 29 Feb 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-51682870>

⁴⁰ Hallsworth, Simon, and Tara Young. "Getting real about gangs." *Criminal justice matters* 55, no. 1 (2004): 12-13, p.13

⁴¹ Dirkx, John M. "Nurturing soul work: A Jungian approach to transformative learning." *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice* (2012): 116-130, p.126

⁴² Eliade, M. (1958). *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. Sheed & Ward.

⁴³ Davis Williams, Co-Founder of manhood Academy Global, interview, 11/11/25

⁴⁴ Ibid.

community-individual interdependence, and a spiritual aspect to learning that is not well understood or practised within traditional curricula. These may be of particular benefit to urban youth at risk of developing toxified worldviews, due to a dangerous mix of their challenging socio-cultural and familial lived realities combined with education frameworks ill-suited to those contexts.

Challenges to Replicability

If they are deemed effective, an important question becomes to what extent are these kinds of programs replicable or translatable into more mainstream education? One issue is the personalised nature of the programmes: projects and processes are in place, but they need to adapt to the personal interests and wellbeing of the participant. This requires time and tailored content. In terms outdoor learning, the Head of the PRU believes many students may not automatically benefit from such excursions. Sending troubled learners to spend time on a country farm has become more commonplace.⁵³ However: 'the majority of kids who get sent are the kids who are struggling... then the kids come back and they'll say, well, I got sent off to a farm but I hate the outdoors and now they don't want me back in school anyway.' He believes that for some schools 'It's kind of like where can we hide away the tricky kids rather than what is really useful for these kids to do?'⁵⁴ Marcel, through his work at Organiclea, his own programmes, and the various other projects he engages with, believes that genuine transformation of young urban learners occurs when they engage people they can relate to and spend proper time with. He states:

*'I'm way older than them, but I still have the same the experiences, the things they go through... when you go to school, a lot of these teachers, they're just following the curriculum. They ain't got no time for the kids really to that extent, because you have to teach ten classes a day or whatever. I engage whether it's through music, whether it's through food. We are able to engage, talk to them, ask questions and really build a relationship.'*⁵⁵

Secondly and relatedly, the style and interpersonal interactions with the facilitator may be as important as

the context – be that within mainstream schools, more nature or food-based experiences, or within ceremonial or spiritually minded interventions. When Marcel goes to schools, and 'talks to them like, "yo, this is what we're doing," we're talking on their level. They're like, okay, we like this guy, he's all right. Rather than some guy being very formal. So I think it's your style of delivery... definitely schools can do it, but it's just about getting the right people to deliver it.'⁵⁶ Similarly, Davis adapts the more thorough MAG content into 'watered down' school friendly versions to give talks to larger groups of young learners. There, and within his closed-door sessions, he believes the authenticity of the facilitator engaging the young learners is crucial:

*'When I am with my groups, I am very authentic, very raw. I become just like them. When other professionals come who want to see what we do, social workers and things, they only introduce their professional side. And the young people are like who are you?... But when I'm with the young people, I am 100%. Literally, we call it as it is. We're honest. We're not meant to be your friend and tell you what you want to hear. We're meant to guide you. I feel you've just got to be totally honest.'*⁵⁷

He also notes that doing 'deep dive' work with younger learners requires exposing your own vulnerabilities and the difficult spiritual journey you have also been on, which many professionals are reluctant or unable to do:

*'How can they take my place if they have not done the healing work themselves? People have come into this space and they've tried to exert their leadership; but you want to guide them. They don't want you to hide that shit. And where's your fun? I'm a very fun guy, I think left field and right field. And a lot of people are very fixed in a certain paradigm.'*⁵⁸

So, along with being outside of and away from the traditional school curriculum model and physical institutional space, for genuine connection and resultant transformation to occur for young learners, it seemingly may also require: more time; more tailored personalised content; and a specific style of facilitator, that cannot always simply be 'copy and pasted' across other projects or, especially, into mainstream schooling.

⁵³ See, for example, <https://jamiesfarm.org.uk/> Point of important note: the interviewee was not directly discussing or criticising the work of Jamies Farm. This is just one example of the kind of organisations that engage in this work that the interviewee was speaking about.

⁵⁴ Head of a PRU, interview

⁵⁵ Marcel Andrew, interview

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Davis Williams, interview. The BBC documentary can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMit6cIoM0g>. Another MAG documentary on eth Gambia is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbelZFa3sdE>

⁵⁸ Davis Williams, interview. The BBC documentary can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMit6cIoM0g>. Another MAG documentary on eth Gambia is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbelZFa3sdE>

4. CONCLUSION

This exploratory commentary piece has not had the time to fully evaluate and critique the interventions being discussed here. However, it has, we believe, showcased the valuable work being done by disparate groups of community leaders within the challenging urban environment of contemporary London that is worthy of policy interest and further scholarly attention. It has explored the potentially transformative benefits of: alternative physical spaces; the communal and familial aspect of transformational learning; and the need for emotional and/or spiritual change, rather than purely rationalist self-critique. This aligns more closely with Dirkx's emphasis on soul, emotion, and spirituality in transformative learning than with Mezirow's original rationalist framework (Mezirow did, in fact, acknowledge emotional and relational dimensions in later work, although remained fundamentally more cognitive and emphasised rational discourse and critical reflection).⁵⁹ These community interventions also suggest the value of a 'community of practice' approach that moves beyond individualistic models of learning.⁶⁰ The interventions have highlighted the role of family as an important site of practice and identity formation that has been largely overlooked by other community approaches despite their shared emphasise on collective learning through participation.⁶¹ This dimension may be particularly crucial when working with young people in urban educational contexts.

Kolb's experiential learning four-stage cycle is also relevant in relation to the nature-based aspects of learning experiences. Concrete Experience such as climbing activities or gardening outdoors; Reflective Observation including evening debrief discussions or mindful solo time in nature; Abstract Conceptualization can draw lessons about resilience, teamwork or self-reliance; and Active Experimentation sees the applying of lessons to subsequent challenges or daily life. But

healthy eating interventions also expose the limitations of Kolb's overemphasis on rational cognition: behavioural change often precedes conceptual understanding, with habit formation and environmental factors proving more influential than reflective insight. The emotional, cultural, and socioeconomic dimensions of food consumption resist reduction to a neat cognitive cycle. Rites of passage ceremonies also challenge Kolb and other more Western, individualistic epistemologies, as they are inherently communal, privilege symbolic knowledge over abstract conceptualisation, and operate through mystery, physical ordeal, and spiritual transcendence rather than only rational reflection.

Mainstream educational models operate within specific cultural and contextual boundaries, performing effectively in professional training or formal education contexts but not accounting for collective, transformative, or culturally embedded learning more relevant to urban youth experiences. Engaging young people through resonant means and modalities - from the individualised focus of the educator to Hollywood movies tapping into archetypal hero journeying - help facilitate deep connections to nature, earth, and ceremonial processes. Traditional institutions may be unable to fully replicate intense, immersive, individually focused experiences within standard 9am-3:30pm school days in typical buildings. However, they should consider innovative ways to reproduce these experiences and ceremonial processes curricular-wide to some extent, by removing students from their usual physical and emotional surroundings, utilising guest specialists, and providing tailored options for individuals and groups.

Regardless of whether youth can be 'transformed' to the extent Mezirow anticipated in his adult-focused work,⁶² this work reinforces the view that more experiential, social, and identity-forming work can shift world views and connect to learners' true identities. These can harness energies and channel frustrations into ways

⁵⁹ Dirkx, John M. "Nurturing Soul in Adult Learning." In *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, edited by Jack Mezirow and Associates, 79-88. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000; Mezirow, Jack. "Learning to Think Like an Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory." In *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, edited by Jack Mezirow and Associates, 3-33. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000; Mezirow, Jack. "Transformative Learning as Discourse." *Journal of Transformative Education* 1, no. 1 (2003): 58-63

⁶⁰ Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991; Wenger, Etienne. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998

⁶¹ Barton, David, and Karin Tusting, eds. *Beyond Communities of Practice: Language, Power and Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005

⁶² Kegan, Robert. *Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994

meaningful to the daily lived realities of urban youth. We hope that more detailed studies can be undertaken to more fully understand the longer-term impacts of the interventions noted here.

Disclaimer

Darren Springer has worked closely with Organiclea, The Grow Academy and Manhood Academy Global on different aspects of their programs, and helped co-found Health Mind Health Grind. He is friends and collaborators with Marcel Andrews and Davis Williams on different projects. He is therefore an insider observer and analyst of these discussions rather than claiming to be an objective outsider.

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Organiclea: <http://www.organiclea.org.uk/>

Grow Academy: <https://www.wearegrow.org/the-totteridge-academy>

Soul n Sound (including Healthy Mind Health Grind): <https://www.soulandsound.com/hmhg>

Manhood Academy: <https://www.manhoodacademyglobal.com/>

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