Comparing students’ and professionals’ understandings of neighbourhood assets

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ABSTRACT

Background: Internationally, young people experiencing poverty and related disadvantages do least well in school. These inequalities tend to be concentrated in places with high levels of poverty and poor outcomes across multiple domains. Although place-based initiatives are sometimes used by policymakers as a vehicle to improve outcomes, such programmes often fail to engage meaningfully with local resources, further marginalising disadvantaged communities.

Purpose: This article considers what asset-based approaches, which seek to understand existing resources (assets) in disadvantaged places, might bring to such situations. Focused on a disadvantaged inner-city neighbourhood in England, it explores professionals’ and young people’s understandings of assets through an assets-mapping approach.

Method: During a two-year study, a university researcher was embedded in a secondary school, and 10 students (aged 13) were trained as co-researchers. Utilising visual mapping methods, they conducted 17 focus groups (45 minutes each) with around 225 of their peers in total. In addition, the researcher conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with a group of local multi-agency professionals and with the co-researchers. Data were analysed thematically.

Findings: The analysis indicated that professionals and young people understood the neighbourhood’s assets in relation to perceived ‘lived territories’. Professionals described different residential groups as ‘owning’ different geographical ‘territories’, identifying professionally-led institutions as assets that could transcend these. Conversely, young people talked about ‘territories’ primarily in terms of power and control: they identified self-defined social spaces, away from professional scrutiny, as among the neighbourhood’s most valuable assets.

Conclusion: Exploring the students’ and professionals’ contrasting positions through Giddens’ notion of regionalisation, which distinguishes front spaces (i.e. professional and public-facing) and back spaces (i.e. private and personally developed), suggests that the tangible nature of assets is perhaps less important than the different power relationships at play within them. The study highlights the necessity of working in partnership with young people throughout the development of place-based initiatives.

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Introduction

Internationally, the poorest children and young people, as a whole, tend to do least well in school and are least likely to have positive post-school trajectories (Jerrim, Greany, and Perera 2018; Hutchinson, Reader, and Akhal 2020). These inequalities tend to be spatially concentrated in geographically located places, which are characterised by poverty and poor outcomes across multiple domains, and weak physical and service infrastructures. These places are often termed ‘disadvantaged’ (Social Mobility Commission 2020). Such spatial patterns tend to be prevalent in many cities and metropolitan areas, across OECD member states and non-member economies (Organisation of Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD] 2018) and are often exacerbated by a number of intersectional issues, including notions of race, ethnicity, class and migration status (European Commission 2020; OECD 2018). Policymakers have long grappled with how to intervene effectively to disrupt these patterns, with many governments making specific efforts to develop targeted area-based initiatives to improve children’s educational outcomes in disadvantaged places (Duveneck et al. 2021; Kerr and Dyson 2017). In the English context, upon which this article focuses, these have most recently been termed place-based initiatives and have been gaining renewed policy attention (Department for Education [DfE] 2021). Before presenting our study in more detail, we situate our work by considering the research context relevant to place-based initiatives and asset-based approaches.

Background

Whatever they are called, and wherever they occur, place-based initiatives share a broad underpinning rationale. They are widely seen as able to develop local policy interventions that can be more responsive to a place’s particular circumstances than is possible for national-level policies (Smith 1987; White and Green 2007). In practice, they have typically sought to address a perceived or actual lack of resources and opportunities in disadvantaged places, which policymakers believe are necessary to support good outcomes (Kerr and Dyson 2017). They have also employed a variety of operational approaches. Some have sought to (re)develop universal service provision to address local needs, such as the Sure Start programme in the UK (Lewis 2011). Others have developed as discrete fixed-term interventions, intended to catalyse sustainable, longer-term change, through the short-term provision of additional resources. Often, this has included importing externally developed, decontextualised interventions into their target areas (Kerr, Dyson, and Raffo 2014; Mathews 2012). Examples of such initiatives include Promise Neighborhoods in the United States (U.S. Department for Education 2013), Opportunity Areas in the UK (DfE 2021), Zones d’Education Prioritaire in France (Rochex 2012) and Educational Territories of Priority Intervention in Portugal (Szelei and Alves 2018; Silva, da Silva, and Araújo 2017).

However well intentioned, such initiatives have, though, typically reported modest, poorly sustained outcomes (Kerr and Dyson 2017; Duveneck et al. 2021; Rees, Power, and Taylor 2007). A factor widely identified as contributing to this is that place-based initiatives have tended to perpetuate deficit narratives about their target areas and those living in them (Durose and Richardson 2016). Gulson (2005), for instance, describes how policymakers can easily develop a deficit narrative of blaming local people for not taking the opportunities policy has (supposedly) made available to them to improve their
outcomes – whether or not these are realistically accessible. This social ‘pathologizing’ (Gulson 2005, 152) has often led place-based initiatives to focus narrowly on professionals’ perceptions of residents’ decontextualised, individual traits – for example, low aspirations among children and adults, or low parental involvement in children’s learning (Lupton 2006). This has frequently occasioned them to overlook the socio-spatial dynamics of disadvantaged places, and how these help to shape educational and other outcomes (Massey 2005). Local people have, moreover, also tended to be excluded from the design of place-based initiatives, with their experiences and knowledge about their local areas going largely unrecognised (Kerr and Dyson 2017; Lupton 2010; Warren and Mapp 2011). Indeed, an evaluation of the implementation of the Opportunity Areas programme (Easton et al. 2018) specifically highlighted the need for the leaders of place-based initiatives to engage closely with their targeted residential communities. This was seen as important both to enhance professionals’ understandings of the contexts in which they are intervening and to help residents secure a tangible stake in initiatives.

In response, this article explores the possibilities that working from an asset-based stance in disadvantaged places may open for the design of place-based initiatives that aim to improve children and young people’s educational outcomes. Understood broadly, the Glasgow Centre for Population Health (2011, 2) defines assets as ‘the collective resources which individuals and communities have at their disposal’. An asset-based stance, then, assumes that disadvantaged places hold resources that can be utilised to support improvements in residents’ outcomes, and specifically children’s and young people’s educational outcomes. Arguably, it also invites a broad understanding of educational outcomes. For example, alongside academic attainment, Roth and Van Eijck (2010, 1027) suggest the need to prepare students to be able to navigate life events, cope creatively with uncertainty, and develop ‘the dispositions and abilities to learn as they go’. Such broad understandings appear important to reflect the holistic and dynamic nature of young people’s lives as embedded in their local neighbourhood contexts, and their need to be able to navigate these successfully to achieve good outcomes over time (Massey 2005). It is also important to be clear at the outset that adopting an asset-based stance is not to suggest that targeted investments and additional professional support in disadvantaged places are unnecessary. Rather, it is to suggest that place-based initiatives might be made more effective at supporting a broad range of educational outcomes if they could add value to existing assets, rather than overlooking or cutting across these.

**Purpose**

The central purpose of this paper is to report learning from an empirical study exploring the neighbourhood assets (i.e. those which lie beyond internal school and family processes) in the disadvantaged inner-city neighbourhood of Hollyburgh (pseudonym), England, which could support young people to pursue positive educational outcomes, broadly understood. This sought to surface and compare local professionals’ and young people’s understandings of these assets, and to consider the implications for the design of place-based initiatives.

The overall study had a five-phase design. Phase 1 developed an endogenous assets-mapping approach. Phase 2 explored professionals’ views of the neighbourhood assets available to young people. Phase 3 engaged young people in mapping the
neighbourhood assets currently available to them, while in Phase 4, they mapped their ideal assets. Phase 5 then explored professionals' responses to the young people's assets-maps. This paper specifically reports outcomes from Phases 2 and 3 (other phases are reported separately elsewhere). These addressed the following research questions:

1. *What neighbourhood assets do young people residing in Hollyburgh identify, value and use, in their pursuit of positive educational outcomes?*
2. *What neighbourhood assets do professionals identify as being valued and used by these young people in their pursuit of positive educational outcomes?*
3. *What are the implications of these dual perspectives for the design of place-based initiatives?*

In the following sections, we outline the study's conceptual and methodological basis, addressing how assets were understood and how data were generated and analysed (see Forbes 2019 for a full account). We then present findings that suggest that, in Hollyburgh, young people and professionals alike placed greatest value on the neighbourhood assets over which they had greatest control. This leads us to argue that if professionals are to support young people in disadvantaged places to use a full range of neighbourhood assets to pursue a broad range of educational outcomes, they will need first to engage with young people's lived realities as local residents. This is something that the design and implementation of place-based initiatives have, to date, rarely enabled.

**Re-conceptualising asset-based approaches**

To develop a detailed and nuanced understanding of assets, we drew initially on international literature that focused on assets in highly disadvantaged, urban Western contexts that were identified as similar to Hollyburgh. These widely cite Kretzmann and McKnight’s (1993) ‘asset-based community development’ (ABCD) approach (see, for example, Fuller, Guy, and Pletsch 2002; Mathie and Cunningham 2003; MacLeod and Emejulu 2014). Broadly, the ABCD approach aims to enable professionals and local residents to work together to create an inventory of neighbourhood assets by identifying and sorting these into three categories: (1) individual capacities, skills and knowledge, including practical skills and creative talents; (2) more or less formally constituted local associations or clubs; and (3) local institutions, such as churches, libraries, schools and youth centres.

In addition to producing an inventory of assets, it is anticipated that: (i) professionals will use the assets identified to support local reforms, (ii) social bonds between local residents will be developed and strengthened by taking part in mapping activities, and (iii) this will empower residents to use neighbourhood assets to improve their communities, individually and collectively (Jasek-Rysdahl 2001). ABCD's wide appeal, therefore, appears to lie in its potential to engage professionals and local residents, in systematically identifying a wide variety of tangible and intangible neighbourhood assets, which they can then use to improve local outcomes.

Set against this, however, ABCD also has some notable limitations. These fall into three broad areas. First, the very act of ‘mapping’, which often involves residents and professionals walking around a neighbourhood together, brings with it a risk that tangible
physical assets may be emphasised over intangible individual or associational assets. This may be especially so for assets operating in a virtual space within a neighbourhood – for example, local social media groups. Second, while ABCD assumes that the assets identified through mapping processes will be valuable to residents and professionals alike, this may not be so. For example, they may have differing ideas about what ‘good outcomes’ look like and the assets needed to pursue these. In addition, there is remarkably little discussion in the literature of how inventories of assets may stimulate local reform strategies and include residents in these. As seen in critiques of Opportunity Areas, for example, there is a danger that local professionals might simply see neighbourhood assets as resources to support professionally determined strategies to ‘fix’ residents’ perceived deficits. Conversely, there is also a risk that professionals may simply place the onus on local residents to use neighbourhood assets to improve their outcomes, and then blame them if they do not succeed (MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014). Third, questions have been raised about ABCD’s inclusiveness in practice. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993, 28) state that, in principle, ABCD processes should be inclusive of all community residents, arguing: ‘the most powerful communities are those that can identify the gifts of those people at the margins and pull them into community life’. However, many groups, particularly the most vulnerable, have often been under-represented, with children and young people especially likely to be excluded (Jasek-Rysdahl, 2001). Lacking diverse perspectives, it seems there is a risk that ABCD processes may effectively treat residential communities as homogeneous, seeing an asset for one as an asset for all.

Applying this discussion of ABCD to the design of place-based initiatives, it is apparent that, on the one hand, ABCD arguably has a valuable contribution to make. In principle, it can support initiatives to identify wide-ranging assets in their target areas, in ways that are inclusive and empowering of children and young people. On the other hand, in its current formulation, ABCD appears insufficient to enable the leaders of place-based initiatives to consider important questions about how assets may be valued and used, by whom and to what ends, and how inclusive this may really be. To maintain ABCD’s strengths, yet also to help to overcome its limitations, we suggest that elements of Sen’s ‘capability approach’ (Sen, 2001, 58; see also 2010, 2013) might be valuably brought to bear on an assets-mapping approach. This, we propose, could support the leaders of place-based initiatives to move their focus beyond simply identifying assets to being able to make sense of how young people value and use these. This will need to include some consideration of the factors that might enable or constrain young people’s engagement with different assets, individually and at neighbourhood level.

With its focus upon what people can ‘do’ or ‘be’, rather than the commodities they possess, the capability approach offers a powerful way of thinking about the process of using assets (what Sen (2001, 75) terms ‘capability’) and the outcomes this can generate (what Sen (2001, 75) terms ‘functioning’). From this perspective, something is an asset if individuals can use it to access opportunities that help them pursue outcomes they value. Conceptualising assets in this way means that just because a neighbourhood asset can be mapped, it does not follow that residents, individually or collectively, will see it as valuable, be able to use it, or choose to pursue the kinds of outcomes professionals may anticipate. For example, Sanchez-Jankowski (2010) shows how tensions can arise in disadvantaged neighbourhoods between the kinds of assets, capabilities and functionings that professionals value for residents, and those that residents may consider
meaningful within the constraints of the ‘particular structural conditions of poverty’ (348) which shape their daily lives. Hence, any exploration of how assets are valued and used by young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods must also consider the socio-spatial dynamics of these places, and how they simultaneously shape, and are shaped by, young people’s engagement in them (Massey 2005). For our purposes, synthesising elements of ABCD and the capability approach is, therefore, valuable in allowing neighbourhood assets to be mapped while also raising questions about how and why young people value and use (or how professionals believe they should value and use) these assets to pursue positive educational outcomes. In the following section, we explain how this elaborated assets-mapping approach informed our empirical study of neighbourhood assets in Hollyburgh.

Method

Our research site was the inner-city neighbourhood of Hollyburgh (pseudonym), England. This neighbourhood was selected for the following reasons: (i) national monitoring data showed high levels of poor outcomes across multiple domains; (ii) it had been the target of multiple place-based interventions that had made little difference to outcomes; and (iii) the research team was approached to work in Hollyburgh by a group of locally based multi-agency professionals who felt that the neighbourhood held untapped assets that, if identified, could be used to support improvements in young people’s outcomes. This group included representatives from local primary schools, the local housing association, the neighbourhood resident association, adult education services, and various professionally led youth and community projects.

As noted earlier, this paper focuses specifically on Phases 2 and 3 of a larger study. Phase 2 involved university researchers conducting individual one-hour semi-structured interviews with 14 members of Hollyburgh’s professional multi-agency group. These focused on individuals’ professional and personal relationships with Hollyburgh, and the neighbourhood assets – individual, institutional and associational – that they believed young people might, or should, draw upon, to pursue positive educational outcomes. Phase 3 then sought to access young people’s views. This involved the first author working as an ‘embedded researcher’ (McGinity and Salokangas 2014, 3) at Hollyburgh High School. The school serves children aged 11–16 and draws around 90% of its student population from the local neighbourhood. To ensure young people’s voices informed all aspects of this work, students were recruited as co-researchers (Fielding and Bragg 2003). In practice, a job advertisement for co-researcher posts was distributed to Year 9 students (aged 13–14), as the school’s timetable allowed them the possibility of working on the study for three hours a week over six months. Ten students applied to be co-researchers, forming a school-based research team with the embedded researcher. Although the team was predominantly female, it otherwise reflected the school’s diversity in terms of ethnicity, free-school meal status, and attainment.

The co-researchers took part in an initial six-week induction programme designed and led by the embedded researcher. This introduced them to the study’s understanding of assets, different data collection and analysis methods, and ethical practices. They were then tasked with designing research activities to explore their peers’ use of neighbourhood assets.
**Data collection**

Thinking carefully about how to communicate the study’s core ideas in accessible ways, the co-researchers chose to design and lead focus group discussions to collect data. With a strong framing around broad educational outcomes, these employed visual mapping methods (Amsden and Van Wynsbergh 2005) as a stimulus for discussions, with participating students asked to draw and annotate individual maps of the neighbourhood assets they used. Thematic topic guides for discussions were also used to provide further focus. These incorporated open-ended, spatial questions – e.g. *where do (you/young people) go in (your/their) spare time and why?*, scenario-based questions – e.g. *where do (you/young people) go when (you/they) want support and why?*, and questions relating to future thoughts and desires – e.g. *what would (you/young people) like to do/develop within your community?*. Approximately 20% of the school’s students (N = 225) participated, with this sample reflecting the school’s diversity insofar as possible. Year 11 students (aged 15–16) were, however, excluded at the school’s request, as they were preparing for school-leaving examinations. In addition, the embedded researcher conducted individual interviews with the student co-researchers to enable a deeper understanding of their individual assets-use.

**Data analysis**

The embedded researcher transcribed all the interviews and focus group discussions. Transcripts were supplemented by young people’s assets-maps and by research diaries kept by the embedded researcher and co-researchers to record field notes and reflections. Data were then analysed in two main ways. First, the embedded researcher applied understandings of assets from the literature to the data. Second, the school-based research team developed a thematic analysis of the full data set, discussing the data as a group over a six-week period. They employed open, descriptive coding processes (Saldana 2013) to identify and agree on emerging themes. Data from young people and professionals were analysed independently and then compared.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval for the study was secured from the School of Education, Environment and Development (University of Manchester) University Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was secured for all participants using age-appropriate consent forms, tailored to participants’ involvement. Participants were assured of confidentiality (the exception being if safeguarding concerns arose), the use of pseudonyms to maintain anonymity and the right to withdraw from the study. Permissions to record and publish data excerpts were also secured. Consent was verbally reconfirmed at the start of all research activities, and ground rules for focus group activities were openly discussed – for instance, that participants would disagree respectfully and keep the discussion confidential within the group. Research activities took place at Hollyburgh School or professionals’ work places at times that would not disrupt learning or other commitments. Data were also made available for participants to check, thus ensuring transparency.
Findings

In this section, findings from the study are presented thematically. Quotations from transcribed, anonymised data are included to illustrate the discussion. Overall, when talking about Hollyburgh’s assets, professionals focused almost exclusively on professionally developed and professionally led activities, taking place in professionally led institutions and associations, outside school hours. Young people, by contrast, focused on statutory schooling, and on self-identified and self-curated spaces. These differing perspectives are considered in turn.

Local professionals’ understandings of assets

All the professionals identified Hollyburgh School, and its after-school provision in particular, as a valuable asset for providing a range of structured, education-related, out-of-hours activities. For example, a Hollyburgh School teacher reflected:

My daughter goes to secondary school and they have a brand new building which, in the evenings and weekends, is dark and unused, and it’s where the children go to learn. Here, there’s clubs on during the holidays, after school, there’s groups using it from the community, adult learning. It is a huge hub in terms of the community.

The idea of the school as a community hub, engaging young people and wider residents in broad educational activities, was common across the professional interviews. They also widely identified the physical location of the school building as important in supporting this. On the one hand, they often referred to Hollyburgh as having negative territorial dynamics, with typical comments including:

All the estates are a bit territorial, you know. You stick in your own.
(Community volunteer and local resident)

I think there are boundaries. For the students, there are sort of boundaries that you don’t cross in terms of different communities.
(Teacher)

On the other hand, they tended to perceive the school’s location at the intersection of three prominent, yet distinct, residential areas within Hollyburgh, allowing it to transcend perceived lived boundaries to some extent. As the assistant principal at Hollyburgh School explained: ‘I think we [the school] are neutral kind of place in terms of being on the boundaries’. This, they believed, made the school a safe physical and social space for all Hollyburgh’s young people.

The professionals also broadly emphasised the strong inter-neighbourhood relationships the school, and particularly its after-school learning team, had been able to develop, seeing these as reinforcing values of territorial neutrality and safety. Notably, for instance, much of the after-school provision was run in partnership with residents from across Hollyburgh’s various housing estates. For instance, a community liaison officer for the after-school programme gave an anecdotal example of a situation in which this partnership-working had helped to ensure the school site’s neutrality and safety for young people:
At the holiday camps, we had skateboarding. So, the guy left his skateboards, went for his lunch, came back; all twenty of his skateboards had gone missing. [Name] who works in the school as well as within the community, he went to knock on one [resident’s] door and he said: ‘Look, you’ve got an hour to get me all these skateboards back to this gentleman.’ This gentleman came back to all twenty skateboards.

Indeed, the professionals often referred to the fact that Hollyburgh School had been established in the late 2000s with an explicit commitment to mitigating ‘unsafe’ forces in children’s lives and in the wider neighbourhood context. Reflecting on this, the community liaison officer went on to hint at perceived disorder within Hollyburgh. He tacitly expressed a sense that its young people led potentially chaotic lives, commenting: ‘if [the school] wasn’t here I just wonder what would be happening’. He continued this theme when identifying the school’s football pitches as an asset for young people:

When there’s not a booking, there’s like 40 young people on there … once they get kicked off it … you wonder what do they do? Do they go back on the estate and cause a bit of trouble?

More generally, the local professionals appeared to position themselves and the available after-school provision as, to some extent, a positive disciplining and organising force for young people. For example, this was suggested by an English as an Additional Language (EAL) practitioner:

I think one of the most important influences is this school. Some of them [the pupils] might not have that support at home but I think having it here makes a difference.

In addition to Hollyburgh School, and specifically its after-school provision, all the professionals interviewed identified the local youth centre, Hollyburgh Youth Village, as a significant asset for young people. This had recently been established in a new, purpose-built building and was supported through charitable funding. For instance, the EAL practitioner expressed the following view:

The Youth Village is amazing. I know they [young people] all love going to the Youth Village because it is a state of the art building with everything going on in it. They have movie nights, a gym, a recording studio. I think a lot of the young people go.

However, while the local professionals presented unanimously positive views of the Youth Village’s facilities, they did not always regard them as ‘safe’ in the same way as Hollyburgh School. Many related this to the Youth Village’s location in the middle of one of Hollyburgh’s distinct residential areas, which they considered might be risky for non-resident young people to enter. As Hollyburgh School’s assistant principal commented:

While the Youth Village is busy, I know that there’s lots of young people who don’t access it because it is in an unsafe area for them.

This sense of geographical territoriality was reinforced by a professional from the Adult Education Service:
Anecdotally, what I get back from partner meetings is that for young people it is territorial. If we’re looking at putting activities on, people from that area won’t come if it’s [at the Youth Village] … You would need to put it on [at the School] in order to engage that group of young people as they don’t see that as their area.

In sum, from professionals’ perspectives, the assets that were seen as most valuable in supporting young people’s outcomes appeared to be professionally led, institutionally based and aimed at creating a broad range of additional educational opportunities beyond statutory school provision. It is noteworthy that location, rather than the nature of the provision, was widely understood to be central in determining how far young people were able to value and use these assets, with the Youth Village being more limited than Hollyburgh School in this respect.

**Young people’s understandings of assets**

While young people often identified the Youth Village and Hollyburgh School’s after-school provision as neighbourhood assets, they rarely reported valuing or using these. They did, however, widely report valuing statutory schooling as an asset that enabled specific capabilities to attain qualifications and pursue positive future trajectories. This is reflected in the following quotations from individual assets-maps created in a Years 7–8 focus group session:

School is good because it gets me a good education and the GCSEs I need.

It can get you a job.

Teaches you things for the future.

Additionally, it is evident in this comment from a student co-researcher interview:

I have a lot more freedom of options here, like I get to choose what I do for GCSE. I got to choose to do Graphics and Music and Leisure & Tourism – they’re really good opportunities. We have performed at the music college and the town hall.

On their individual assets-maps, only one young person specifically distinguished the school and its after-school activities, with annotated comments reading:

School. I get educated there and learn loads. I also train to do [sporting activity] for the [...] championships. This community has helped me to become a much more confident person.

Although most young people seemed to share the professionals’ view of Hollyburgh as negatively territorial, they often appeared most concerned about whether professionals, or others outside their immediate peer groups, had greater influence over the assets identified than they personally had. Indicative of her peers’ perspectives, one of the student co-researchers expressed the following view in her research diary:

All the Youth Village does is sport and if you don’t like sport, there’s nothing. The adults are always on at you to get involved in courses and stuff that you just don’t want to do.
As this co-researcher suggests, the young people typically seemed to see professionals as interfering in their use of professionally led assets, with this limiting their opportunities to determine the capabilities and functionings that they wished to pursue. There was also a strong sense across the young people’s data that they considered particular professionals to hold negative views of Hollyburgh and to position young people in relation to these. For instance, they often reported feeling ‘judged’ and were disinclined to engage with professionally led provision as a result. For instance, another co-researcher commented:

You would never go to the teachers for advice, especially not about something like careers. They are not approachable and I would just feel embarrassed and ashamed. Like they might judge me.

By contrast, family members were seen as a source of educational support and advice by many, rather than as a negative influence. This is reflected, for instance, in the following comment from a different student co-researcher:

My mum is always motivating me to reach out and do something in the future. She’s definitely a role model. Her mum and dad didn’t go to university and she didn’t have the best education but she forced herself to go and get the best education possible.

Friends were also widely reported as an essential source of support, often replacing the family for older young people, as these observations from a Year 7–8 focus group session suggest:

Sometimes I find it hard to say things to my mum and dad but they do care about me. I find it hard to say things to them but with friends, I can just tell them easily.

[Friends] understand you, listen to you, sometimes family don’t keep information in confidence.

Echoing this, the majority of young people reported most valuing and using assets that allowed them the freedom to develop relationships with their peers, away from adult scrutiny – whether professionals or family members. These assets were frequently physical or virtual spaces that could be freely self-accessed, self-defined and used to pursue self-determined outcomes – whether, as stated on an individual assets-map, related to ‘feeling good about myself’, building associational assets by making and sustaining friendships, or accessing more specific capabilities and potential future functionings: for instance, exploring possible careers.

In terms of physical institutions, local shopping centres, parks and fast-food restaurants were typically highly valued and used in this manner. For example, in her research diary, one of the co-researchers explained why she thought that so many young people identified Hollyburgh’s supermarket as a highly valued and used asset:

You don’t have to explain why you go there. It is just somewhere to go, walk around, chat, but you don’t know why. It gets you out of the house and is an easy place to hang out. I see all my friends in there and my neighbours.
Like many young people, this co-researcher seemed to perceive the supermarket much as the professionals saw Hollyburgh School – i.e. as a neutral, social hub for the community. Notably, however, the supermarket was physically located directly opposite the Youth Village. This calls into question some of the professionals’ views that geographical territoriality may prevent young people accessing the Youth Village.

Importantly, it was evident from the analysis that the young people also widely attributed a distinct value to online spaces as assets because they were not physically located in Hollyburgh (even if being physically accessed from there). For instance, young people often reported using online spaces to explore ways of ‘being’ and ‘doing’ lying outside Hollyburgh’s socio-spatial dynamics, and even to travel outside their local area for the first time:

My digital friends give me a different perspective. I see how others’ life is and it broadens your horizons. (Student co-researcher interview)

[name] lives in [place] in the middle of nowhere. She talks about her life and although we are similar, her life is so different (Student co-researcher research diary entries).

I met up with my online friend [name]. We went to [place] together to see a band that we like. I would never have gone if not for her. (Student co-researcher research diary entries)

In addition, the young people widely perceived the Internet as a neutral space in which to seek advice and explore personal issues. For example, entries in the student co-researchers’ diaries include:

Google knows everything; it is where you ask for unbiased advice and it would reply with an honest answer. This is something that people don’t do.

Google doesn’t judge you.

Social media is a bubble. You can be yourself. In real life, everyone judges you, children and adults. I’m told to act like an adult but I’m treated like a child. I’m caught between both.

**Comparing professionals’ and young people’s understandings of assets**

Overall, it appears that in thinking about the value and use of assets, both young people and professionals were concerned to counter the negative impacts of Hollyburgh’s socio-spatial dynamics on young people’s experiences and outcomes. In practice, however, this led to markedly different approaches. Professionals widely saw professionally structured associations and institutions as best able to mitigate the impacts of (perceived) geographically located territories, and more generally to limit anti-social behaviour. This stance was exemplified by a leader of the Youth Village, who expressed the view that Hollyburgh’s supermarket would be an ‘easy place to indulge in risky behaviours … You know, harassing security guards and shoplifting’, whereas she saw the Youth Village as offering a safe, supervised environment.

By contrast, the young people often seemed keen to distance themselves from professionals – and particularly from such negative professional assumptions. Sometimes this was by turning to family, and more often by using supermarkets or similar spaces to build and strengthen associational networks. Insofar as possible, they also appeared keen to distance themselves from Hollyburgh, particularly valuing online spaces where they did not feel judged – whether as Hollyburgh residents, or
as children unable to determine valuable capabilities and functionings for themselves. These contrasting views strongly expose the sense that professionals’ earlier concerns about the physical and geographical location of professionally led institutional assets may be much less important in practice than the power relations enacted by professionals and young people in their engagements with neighbourhood assets in general.

Discussion

The findings suggest clear differences between professionals’ emphases on professionally led institutions and young people’s emphases on self-identified places and spaces where they can build strong individual and associational assets – the exception being the role of statutory schooling in enabling individual capabilities and functionings around academic qualifications.

These contrasting perspectives may be valuably explored through Giddens’ notion of ‘regionalisation’ (Giddens 1984, 119–122). This distinguishes between ‘front’ spaces, i.e. spaces governed by professionally determined relations, locked into a professionally led space, and ‘back’ spaces, i.e. flexible spaces in which agents, in this case young people, can define their own activity, in their personalised pursuit of valued outcomes. As the analysis identified, in Hollyburgh, while professionals focused on ‘front spaces’, young people more often valued ‘back spaces’, with Hollyburgh School’s statutory offer being the exception.

Front spaces, because they are professionally determined and professionally led, are likely to be underpinned by what Jones et al. (2016, 1153) characterise as ‘… institutionalized practices of perceiving children through a developmental lens and in need of surveillance and adult-formed structures’. In the professional data, there was, if largely tacitly, often a sense that this surveillance may be particularly necessary to counter territoriality and any perceived tendency towards anti-social behaviours on the part of Hollyburgh’s young people. Moreover, the young people appeared to operate with a critical awareness of professionally led institutions as spaces in which professionals might attempt to ‘programme their social conduct’ (Giddens 1984, 30). Arguably, this at least partly underlies one co-researcher’s critique of the Youth Village as a place where adults ‘make you do courses and stuff you don’t want to do’.

That said, the data do little to suggest that young people have dismissed, or sometimes more actively rejected, assets occupying front spaces out-of-hand. Rather, it seems the choices they made about whether to engage with these were likely to be influenced by the extent to which they saw their emerging social identities, and sense of agency, as fitting with the capabilities and functionings that they thought these assets might enable. For example, as already noted, young people widely valued statutory schooling as an institutional asset that could support their academic attainment. However, they appeared considerably more suspicious of professionally led activities outside school and, with a few exceptions, were largely uncertain about the value these assets might have in their lives.
By contrast, the vast majority of young people appeared to embrace assets located in Gidden’s back spaces, perceiving these as providing them with valuable opportunities to experiment with different self-determined, rather than professionally determined, ways of being and doing. This mirrors Jones et al.’s (2016, 1152) observation that young people:

... enact agency in creative ways as they figure out who they can and cannot be in different contexts, as well as how they can shape different contexts as they engage with both adult and youth in those contexts.

Indeed, as mentioned above, many of the young people were starting to become aware of the ways in which they felt that others, and particularly professionals, viewed them and appeared to be rejecting at least some aspects of what Jones et al. (2016, 1130) describe as ‘their own production of self by adults’. This seemed particularly to be the case when young people believed professionals to be positioning them within negative discourses about Hollyburgh.

These findings indicate that policymakers and professionals cannot act on the straightforward assumptions that bringing additional resources and opportunities to a place will somehow be inherently ‘good’ for the place and its young people, or that location alone is key to enabling young people to value and use assets. Indeed, it is notable from the analysis of data that Hollyburgh School’s statutory offer was the only professionally led asset widely valued by the young people involved in the research, yet it was the only one not specifically created in an effort to bring Hollyburgh’s assets-base more closely into line with more advantaged areas.

This has important implications for the design of place-based initiatives. If, as is often the case, their leaders plan to enhance a place’s assets-base by developing professionally led ‘front-space’ assets, it will be important to be clear about the capabilities and functionings they may enable, and for young people to be an active part in determining these. This idea appears central to supporting young people to be able to make informed choices about the potential value of engaging with these kinds of assets. In Hollyburgh, for example, if the Youth Village is to be more widely valued and used, young people and professionals will need to work in partnership to determine what it can enable young people to do and be – other than to be under professional surveillance.

Relating to this, it also appears important that professionals engaged in place-based initiatives develop an expanded awareness of the assets young people themselves consider valuable and the outcomes they use these to pursue. In Hollyburgh, there seemed to be very little professional awareness of assets occupying back spaces, even though young people clearly placed considerable value on the opportunities there that allowed them to learn in quite different ways, and for different purposes, from those they believed possible in professionally led front spaces. In addition, the leaders of place-based initiatives may need to consider how professionals can support the use of assets occupying back spaces, without undermining the value these have for young people. Professionals in Hollyburgh might, for example, valuably seek further ways to help young people develop the digital literacy skills needed to evaluate online information critically.

Overall, a clear message from the data is that young people’s valuing and use of assets (whether in front or back spaces) is likely to be strongly related to their ability to exercise some agency, both to shape desirable identities and to determine outcomes they have
reason to value. In turn, it is important that the leaders of place-based initiatives do not tacitly assume that professionals have unilateral power over the specification and leadership of any new provision intended to enhance a place’s assets-base for young people. In such a scenario, the only real power open to young people is not to use newly-created assets occupying front spaces. At best, this may lead to considerable investment in widely unused assets, and at worst, invite a pathologizing discourse about young people who choose not to engage.

**Limitations**

The findings presented here are from a small-scale case study, and are hence not generalisable to all disadvantaged contexts. For instance, Hollyburgh, although diverse, does not have a history of interethnic tensions or patterns of residential segregation based on ethnicity. The perceptions of ‘territoriality’ reported here might, therefore, be different from those in places where there are established patterns of ethnic-residential segregation and where the location of neighbourhood assets may have different significance. In addition, although young people have been influential in shaping the study as co-researchers, ultimately, this has been underpinned by a professionally determined, rather than a young-person-determined agenda. Added to this, the data generation with young people was conducted within an institutional asset occupying a professionally led front space – namely Hollyburgh School. To some extent, these factors may have limited how far young people’s authentic views about neighbourhood assets could emerge. Furthermore, the necessary omission in this study of the views of students who were in their final year of schooling – when the use of assets to support progression to further education, employment or training may be particularly important – is also a limitation.

**Conclusion**

This paper has reported learning from an empirical study that sought to investigate neighbourhood assets in a disadvantaged inner-city neighbourhood. It explored whether an asset-based approach might be used to overcome some of the limitations seen in many place-based initiatives that aim to improve young people’s educational outcomes. Notwithstanding its limitations, it offers a number of contributions to this debate. First, it has problematised simple understandings of assets, thus allowing their value and use, as well as constraints upon these, to be considered from multiple perspectives. Second, it has indicated that young people can support place-based initiatives as co-researchers, with this arguably being an essential first step in bringing their voices to bear on developments. Third, it has revealed the importance of the power dynamics enacted by young people and professionals through their positioning of, and engagement with, neighbourhood assets. In doing so, it has shown that these dynamics may often be more important than assets’ tangible properties – possibly including their location – in supporting or hindering young people’s engagement with these. Notably, in Hollyburgh, these dynamics appeared to have created a situation where, in terms of professionally led assets, young people most valued formal schooling and attainment outcomes, while professionals emphasised after-school provision that could support a broad range of educational opportunities and outcomes.
The findings and their implications present challenges for those involved in leading place-based initiatives, whatever the features of their target areas. The findings highlight a need to explore how young people can be helped to determine – and then supported to achieve – the capabilities and functionings they wish to pursue when engaging with the range of assets occupying ‘front spaces’. Leaders also need to consider how they can add value to assets occupying ‘back spaces’ without undermining the importance these have for young people. Furthermore, they will have to ensure that none of these is done in a way that tacitly reinforces deficit narratives about young people and the places where they live. If, as appears to be the case in Hollyburgh, professionals are committed to using neighbourhood assets to develop the kind of broad educational outcomes Roth and Van Eijck (2010) regard as essential to supporting young people to lead successful lives, they must work in partnership with young people to do so. As learning from Hollyburgh suggests, if they do not do so, when it comes to opportunities outside academic learning, there is the possibility that young people may simply stay in their ‘back spaces’ to pursue broader outcomes, without access to the potential benefits professional support and resources might bring.

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