

## Article

# Could the Comfort Zone Model Enhance Job Role Clarity in Youth Work? Insights from an Ethnographic Case Study of the United Kingdom-Based National Citizen Service

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**Abstract:** A convention in outdoor adventure education leadership is to stretch participants beyond their comfort zone to optimize engagement and learning. This article explores how an interpretation of the comfort zone model (CZM) might potentially enhance job role clarity within the youth work (YW) field. The CZM emerged as a strong theme from an ethnographic case study of the United Kingdom government's flagship youth policy, the National Citizen Service (NCS). The findings indicate that the CZM has the potential to reinforce Dewey-derived YW principles and enhance young people's social skills, self-esteem, confidence, and resilience. However, applying the CZM to YW practice presents risks such as misunderstandings, coercion, and overstretching. Further research should consider factors such as staff training, mental health, and welfare concerns, as well as the implications and limitations of integrating the CZM within the YW field.

**Keywords:** youth work; outdoor adventure education; comfort zone model; national citizen service; youth work principles; Dewey



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## 1. Introduction

This article explores how the comfort zone model (CZM), widely used within outdoor adventure education (OAE), might be co-opted by youth workers as a conceptual framework. The CZM is premised on the theory that participating in challenging activities optimizes young people's learning and engagement and was a prominent theme within the findings of an ethnographic YW case study, on which this article is based.

### 1.1. Problems in the YW Field

A perennial problem in the YW field is the failure to de-mystify the YW process. For example, the Commonwealth Secretariat's (CS) [1] survey of consultants and staff from its 35 member states struggles to construct an easily understood summation of YW given the diversity of practice across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific.

“YW is defined by the Commonwealth Secretariat as all forms of rights-based youth engagement approaches that build personal awareness and support the social, political, and economic empowerment of young people, delivered through non-formal learning within a matrix of care” ([1], p. 1)

The CS [1] optimistically depicts YW as a growth profession based on the sector's ability to evolve. However, the CS [1] findings more tellingly demonstrate how the inability to define YW and thereby defend the profession's values and socio-economic benefits is damaging. The CS [1] highlights how the vocation is shrinking due to labor force attrition and because nation-states are redirecting resources to other public goods. Consequently, the CS [1] claims YW must adapt to survive.

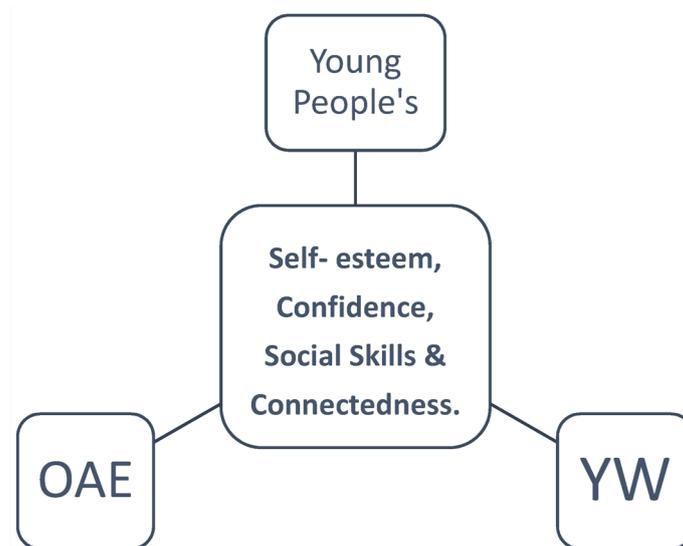
The United Kingdom (UK)'s state-sponsored personal development program for 15- to 17-year-olds, the National Citizen Service (NCS), which mixes outdoor adventure with

YW [2], represents a convenient case study to examine the potential value of integrating the CZM into YW practice to address one of YW's predominant issues, job role clarity [3,4].

### 1.2. The CZM and OAE

OAE is a broad and contested field [5]. Roberts ([6], p. 1), however, claims "OAE is characterised by a wide range of features such as outcome uncertainty, compelling tasks (e.g., involving relationship building), state of mind and completion of a journey".

OAE studies [7–10] identify enhanced social skills, self-concept, and confidence as some of the main benefits of outdoor learning. Demonstrating a synergy with OAE, the CS ([1], p. 1) claims the YW profession aims to build young people's "self-esteem, [and] social connectedness". Figure 1 below illustrates a synthesis of the perceived impact of OAE and YW aims.



**Figure 1.** The Perceived Impact of OAE and YW Aims (Source: Personal Collection).

Mateer et al. [8] question the reliability of OAE impact studies, yet according to OAE meta-analyses, positive outcomes for young people occur regardless of the specific outdoor activity or location [7,10,11]. There are at least three plausible explanations as to why OAE may serve as a dependable pathway to personal and interpersonal development. First, OAE addresses the access to nature deficit [12,13]. Second, young people find learning away from the classroom engaging [14,15]. Lastly, there may be something distinctive in the way the OAE curriculum is facilitated [16,17]. A convention in OAE leadership is to stretch participants beyond their comfort zone without causing distress, described more fully as the comfort, stretch, panic model, or the CZM, in OAE texts [16,18].

Figure 2 below illustrates the CZM Model from an OAE Perspective.

The CZM, rooted in Yerkes and Dodson's optimal stimulation theory [19], finds application in various fields, including management, mental health, and OAE [20–22]. However, the idea that the model can be applied uniformly is naive. For example, Corbett [20] raises concerns about managers using the CZM to justify piling stress and workload on employees. Russo-Netzer and Cohen ([21], p. 394) emphasize the importance of self-determination and dialogue when it comes to "stretch interventions", in the context of well-being. Brown [22] suggests that comfort, stretch, and panic should be regarded as metaphors and used cautiously within OAE. Consequently, the effectiveness and widespread applicability of the CZM are contested, yet they could hold promise for the YW field.

A prevalent theory, that OAE experiences can have lasting benefits for confidence and resilience by expanding the comfort zone, is also debatable due to a lack of longitudinal studies [7–9]. There has nevertheless been one exceptional Ramírez, and Allison [23] study of mature adults who had experienced a wilderness expedition decades previously. Many of

the 26 expedition alumni felt that the experience in their youth had helped them realize their potential [23]. Prominent themes within the study [23] were gaining confidence, connecting with others, and resilience. However, the notion of resilience remains controversial given the interplay of multiple factors underpinning the ability to overcome adversity [24–26]. Furthermore, while Van Breda [25,26] and Garrett [27] both recognize the increasing interest in resilience building among academics and policymakers, they disagree on whether this interest is a threat or an opportunity. Garrett [27] contends that making individuals responsible for their capacity to cope detracts from the state’s responsibility for structural inequalities, such as health and wealth. Van Breda and Dickens [28] counter that differing resilience levels align more with the diversity of social connectedness than policy, which amplifies inequity.

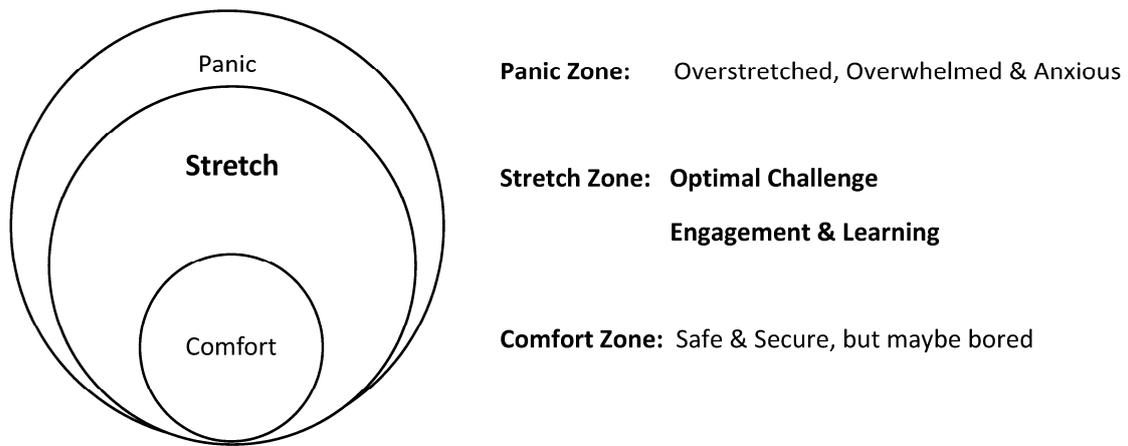


Figure 2. The CZM Model from an OAE Perspective (Source: Personal Collection).

Regardless of whether an OAE experience builds resilience in the long term, OAE literature highlights four fundamental elements of effective facilitation. The first element is the recognition of the diversity of comfort zones among participants, with anxiety and risk perception being highly subjective and fluid [22,29,30]. Secondly, OAE leaders should facilitate idiosyncratic stretching [22,29,30]. The third element emphasizes the importance of fostering collective effort, goal-sharing, mutual encouragement, and teamwork among group members [16,18,28]. Finally, OAE literature widely agrees that to fully realize the transformative potential of an experience, it is essential to reinforce learning through reflection after the event [9,16–18]. Adding further refinement to OAE leadership, Rhonke’s [31,32] “Challenge by Choice” concept allows participants the autonomy to opt out. Additionally, O’Connell et al. [33] recommend prioritizing relationship building over task completion. Put simply, effective OAE leadership is sophisticated and nuanced but not definitive.

Figure 3 below illustrates the theoretical principles of effective CZM facilitation.

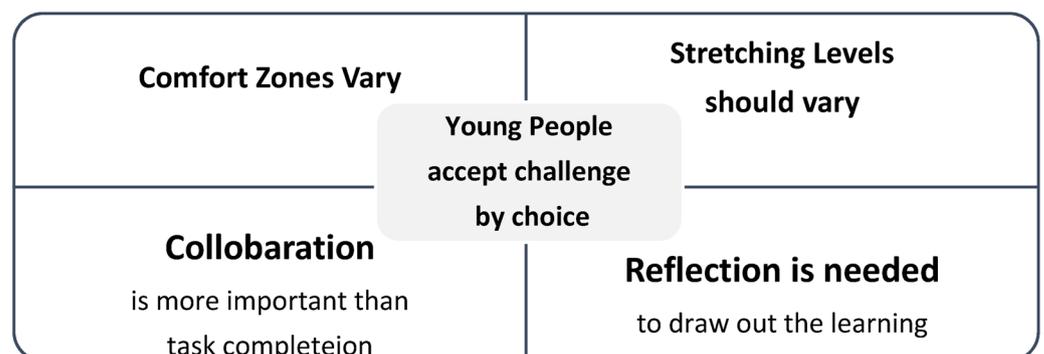


Figure 3. The Theoretical Principles of Effective CZM Facilitation (Source: Personal Collection).

Substantive research in OAE [7,9,34] implies that stretching participants beyond their comfort zones has significant benefits, including increased self-confidence, personal growth, and improved social skills. However, OAE outcomes are highly individualized, and there is little evidence to suggest that more intense activities lead to better outcomes [7,9,34]. Nonetheless, an outlier study conducted by Bailey, Johann, and Kang [35], using electrode-fitted headsets, found a positive correlation between the level of measured stress responses and the OAE participants' reported benefits. Reed and Smith [36], however, challenge the presumption that the fear factor within OAE induces benefit for all by providing evidence to the contrary. Practitioners are therefore encouraged to consider the individual characteristics, social context, and mental health of participants to minimize the risks associated with overstretching them [7,21,36].

In summary, the CZM helps OAE leaders frame their practice and be alive to diversity, the risks of under or overstretching, and the benefits of teamwork and reflection. The overall point is that within this conceptual framework, the setting or activity is not as pivotal in building social skills, self-esteem, and confidence as the quality of facilitation and its congruence with the participants.

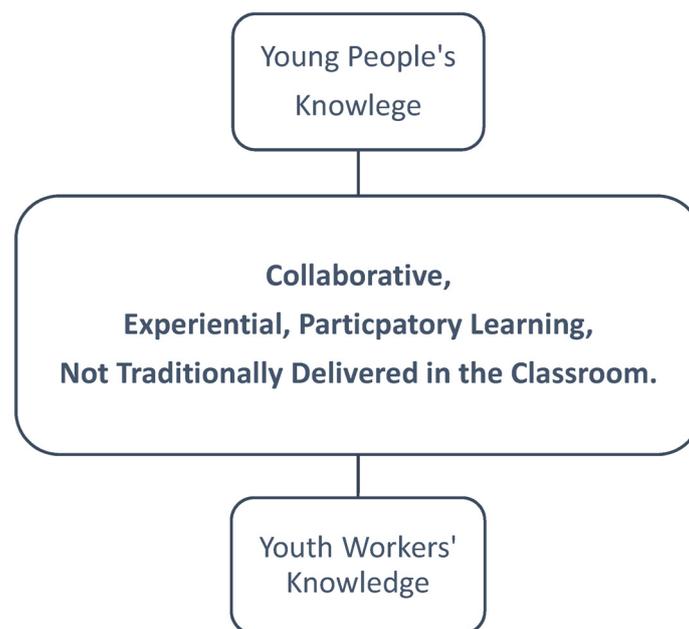
### *1.3. Dewey's Influence on OAE Conventions*

Facilitating activities attuned to participants' strengths aligns with Dewey's [37–39] seminal, progressive education philosophies. Dewey [38–40] advocates for an interactive curriculum tailored to individual learners' agency, transferable skills, and knowledge. Rooted in democratic decision-making and trust in the young's ability to solve real-world problems, Dewey's [37–39] pedagogical ideals, therefore, stand in opposition to didactic, teacher-centered classroom conventions. Put another way, Dewey [38,39] promotes experiential and participatory learning, where learners are encouraged to reflect and draw upon their collective experiences and be guided, rather than instructed, by adults. Consequently, drawing from the work of Dewey [38–40], OAE is considered synonymous with experiential education [5].

### *1.4. Dewey's Influence on the YW Approach*

YW practice shares the same Dewey-inspired traits evident within the OAE field. For example, the CS ([1], p. 9) describes how the YW profession avoids taking a deficit view of young people and is predicated on an empowering, experiential, "asset-based" approach appreciative of young people's strengths. YW academics [41,42] alongside OAE scholars [16–18] echo Dewey's [40] assertion that a learning-by-doing approach is more engaging, empowering, and transformative than rote learning, especially after reflection. Consistent with Dewey's [37–39] ideas, the CS [1] observes that, despite global variations and the vast array of settings, YW practice coalesces around a participatory, dialogic approach. In other words, effective practice is informed through conversations that combine young people's and youth workers' knowledge yet privilege young people's agency. Consequently, still drawing from the work of Dewey [40], YW is said to be either synonymous with social education or, more latterly, informal education [41,43–46]. Central to these social and informal pedagogies is the idea that youth workers establish connections with young people outside of formal educational settings, serving as knowledgeable others who engage in spontaneous conversations, foster relationships, and facilitate youth-driven, collaborative learning experiences [41,43–46]. Put another way, within the YW tradition, young people are seen as the key drivers of an ongoing creative process and not consumers of a definitive product [41]. The point is that effective YW facilitation aligns with OAE leadership by being similarly sophisticated and nuanced but not definitive. The YW sector, however, encompasses more diverse settings and some different 'industry jargon' than the OAE field.

Figure 4 below illustrates the social and informal education principles of YW.



**Figure 4.** The Social and Informal Education Principles of YW (Source: Personal Collection).

The largely improvisational YW approach has both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, a study by Harris [47] reveals that experienced youth workers develop versatile expertise, akin to jazz musicians, enabling them to adapt to young people's diverse needs in different spaces. On the other hand, separate empirical studies [3,4] have identified the uncertain nature of the YW role as one of the main causes of occupational stress. Certainly, the unpredictable aspect of YW clashes with the prevailing trend towards target-driven funding premised on achieving preconceived outcomes [1,48,49]. Role ambiguity also ensures the YW field is vulnerable to being misunderstood and manipulated. For instance, according to the CS [1], the YW sector's transition towards a more directive approach can be attributed to state manipulation and the lack of state sponsorship. Notwithstanding, the CS [1] views the evolution of YW as desirable overall. The CS [1] even suggests the sector may need to discard its outdated informal and social education terminology. Ord [42], however, contends that the YW profession should revisit its Dewey-inspired roots and be skeptical of innovation [50]. The apparent challenge facing the field, therefore, is how to navigate the evolution of youth provision while remaining true to the transformative educational principles derived from Dewey.

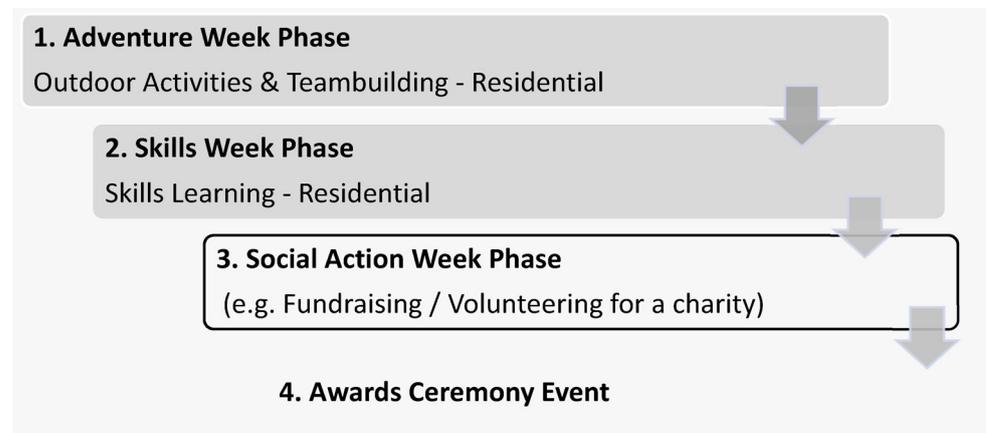
#### 1.5. The NCS Case Study

Since its launch in 2010, the NCS, the UK government's flagship youth policy, has been the most state-funded and well-attended form of youth provision in England and Northern Ireland [2]. Despite criticisms of the personal development program's value for money from the National Audit Office [51] and academics [52,53], the NCS remains a top-down priority in the state's vision for YW [54].

Before the 2020 COVID pandemic lockdowns, the scheme would customarily run for three or four weeks during the UK's school summer holidays [2]. First, previously unacquainted cohorts of 12 to 15 teenagers would be taken on a teambuilding phase in the form of an adventure residential [2]. Each team would then relocate to more local accommodations to experience a second residential, where the young people characteristically attend an assortment of workshops during a skills phase [2]. Subsequently, the respective groups plan and then undertake a typically non-political social action project, such as fundraising for local charities [2]. On completion of this volunteering phase, the young people are certified as NCS graduates and can celebrate at a regional award ceremony [2]. To sum up,

on the one hand, the NCS is a complex, innovative, and multifaceted process, yet on the other hand, the program is simply a mixture of outdoor adventure and YW.

Figure 5 below illustrates the four phases of the NCS.



**Figure 5.** The Four Phases of the NCS (Source: Personal Collection).

The NCS targets 15- to 17-year-olds and has been presented to the UK Parliament as a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that helps young people build skills for work and life” ([55], p. 4). In its 2023 iteration, the NCS is marketed to potential participants as a pathway to ‘boost your confidence, grow your resilience, get involved in social action, be a force for good, and learn new skills to prepare yourself for the world of work’ [56]. Put another way, the NCS represents a state-sponsored pathway to enhanced economic viability premised on a youth deficit model. Academics have therefore criticized the NCS program for conflicting with YW principles [52,53]. Scholars [52,53,57,58] claim the NCS is inflexible, amateurish, judgmental, and disempowering. The NCS is inflexible because it focuses on a limited age group, time, and location [52]. The NCS is amateurish because the state prescribes the process instead of involving the YW sector [2]. The program is judgmental because it stereotypes young people as lacking skills, confidence, and resilience [58–60]. Lastly, the NCS is disempowering because young people have limited input into the curriculum, making it prescriptive and manipulative [2,59]. De St. Croix [53] highlights how the governance of the NCS often excludes experienced YW organizations as delivery contractors and relies on casual labor, exemplifying a de-professionalization of the sector. Notwithstanding, de St. Croix [52] simultaneously employs the NCS as a compelling example to illustrate the point that experienced and committed youth workers continue to facilitate empowering youth work practice, undeterred by state manipulation.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The NCS represents a convenient case study to examine how youth workers might adhere to YW principles in challenging circumstances.

More specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

How might the CZM, associated with OAE, potentially address job role clarity?

The research was conducted in accordance with and approved by the University of East London’s University Research Ethics Sub-Committee.

### 2.1. Sampling and Data Collection

This case study utilized a qualitative approach [61]. The data collection process involved conducting opportunistic, semi-structured interviews, taking field notes during participant observation, and reflecting on preconceptions, power dynamics, and research decisions in a reflexive journal [61–63].

The ethnographic field study took place over the summer months of 2018 mainly across four different settings located in the UK, as illustrated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** The Four Main Field Study Locations.

Location	Phases	No. of Days	No. of Nights
A Rural OAE facility	Adventure	5	4
A University Halls of Residence	Skills	5	4 (Not observed)
A Youth Club Base	Social Action/ Volunteering	5	0
An Award Ceremony Venue	Accreditation	1	0

## 2.2. Obtained Sample

The researcher partnered with a well-established YW charity that has been delivering the NCS since 2011 to conveniently access voluntary research participants.

The sample comprised five charity-employed practitioners and one NCS cohort of 14 young people.

The study's youth cohort sample was limited to those who volunteered and provided their parents' consent to participate in the study. All the young people interviewed and observed were 16-year-olds, and the sample was skewed towards middle-class females. Information about disabilities was collected by the host organization but not shared with the researcher.

All the young people were recruited by the host organization from the same UK city, but prior to their NCS experience, they had not met each other.

Table 2 below illustrates the demographics of the NCS Young Cohort Sample.

**Table 2.** The Demographics of the NCS Young Cohort Sample, n = 14.

Participant Number	Age	Assumed Gender	Observed Ethnicity	Self-Reported Class
1	16	Female	Global Majority	Middle
2	16	Female	Global Majority	Middle
3	16	Female	Global Majority	Middle
4	16	Female	Global Majority	Working–Middle
5	16	Female	Global Majority	Working–Middle
6	16	Female	White	Working–Middle
7	16	Female	White	Working–Middle
8	16	Female	White	Middle
9	16	Female	White	Middle
10	16	Male	White	Refused to be Classified
11	16	Male	Global Majority	Refused to be Classified
12	16	Male	Global Majority	Working
13	16	Male	Global Majority	Middle
14	16	Male	Global Majority	Middle

The study's practitioner sample was also limited to those who volunteered and provided their consent to participate in the study. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the research participants' identities. The practitioner sample was mainly white and mostly male.

Table 3 below illustrates the demographics of practitioner cohort sample.

**Table 3.** The Demographics of Practitioner Cohort Sample n = 5.

Pseudonym	Age	Assumed Gender	Observed Ethnicity	Self-Reported Class
Colin	Undisclosed	Male	White	Undisclosed
Ben	Undisclosed	Male	White	Refused to be Classified
Lucy	Undisclosed	Female	White	Working

**Table 3.** *Cont.*

Pseudonym	Age	Assumed Gender	Observed Ethnicity	Self-Reported Class
Bella	Undisclosed	Female	White	Middle
Sergio	Undisclosed	Male	Global Majority	Middle

Table 4 below illustrates the practitioners' NCS roles and self-reported: YW/OAE/Sports Experience

**Table 4.** The Practitioners' NCS Roles and Self-Reported: YW/OAE/Sports Experience.

Pseudonym	NCS Role	Self-Reported YW/OAE/Sports Experience
Colin	Director of the Youth Charity	Over 40 years of YW and OAE experience.
Ben	NCS Contract Manager	11 years of YW and OAE experience.
Lucy	NCS Program Manager	3 years of YW experience and a martial arts background.
Bella	Casually employed NCS cohort leader	Social work student with the experience of just one youth residential but otherwise no YW experience.
Sergio	NCS cohort sub-leader	3 years of YW experience plus over 5 years of experience in sports coaching, personal training, and OAE.

### 2.3. Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full. Thereafter, thematic analysis was used to identify individual and collective themes that emerged from the data [62]. Initially, the data was analyzed based on Gramsci's [64] examination of class, but the analysis was later revised in 2023, shifting to the CZM due to the incongruence between a class-oriented approach and the data collected.

### 2.4. Positionality and Originality

The researcher employed a David and Sutton [65]-informed, ethnographic approach that emphasized professional identity, immersion, and the participant as an observer, therefore building trusting relationships with participants and eliciting candid disclosures about their experiences. To diminish researcher and social desirability bias throughout the study, the researcher considered their positionality and other factors that could influence research decision-making within a reflexive journal [63].

The researcher is a white, middle-class male YW lecturer. The researcher has 23 years of experience working with teenagers in London, England, which began in 1986 and included teaching outdoor pursuits. In 2010, the researcher transitioned from local government and youth service management to lecturing in YW. This YW background stimulated a professional curiosity as to the perceived transformative potential of the NCS program. Although there has been one previous ethnographic study [2] examining the NCS program, this study is unique in that the observations were made through an insider's gaze.

## 3. Results

This study investigates the usefulness of the CZM in YW practice, making it an original contribution to the field. The research findings may be relevant to policymakers, YW practitioners, and academics who want to understand the potential role of the CZM in YW.

Table 5 below illustrates how the results have been divided into themes:

Table 5. Themes.

<b>Theme One:</b>	<b>The Experiential YW Approach</b>	
<b>Subtheme 1.1</b>	<b>The Value of Experience</b>	exemplifies how youth workers draw on lived experience.
<b>Subtheme 1.2</b>	<b>Leadership Style</b>	illustrates youth workers' non-authoritarian tendencies.
<b>Theme Two:</b>	<b>Theme Two: What is the Relevance of Stretch Learning to YW?</b>	
<b>Subtheme 2.1</b>	<b>Capturing Complexity</b>	exemplifies how the CZM is a valuable tool.
<b>Subtheme 2.2</b>	<b>The Benefits of Stretching</b>	illustrates the range of benefits, young people might gain from being stretched.
<b>Subtheme 2.3</b>	<b>The Risks of Stretching</b>	demonstrates how dangerous coercion might be.

### 3.1. Theme One: The Experiential YW Approach

#### 3.1.1. Subtheme 1.1: The Value of Experience

Charity director Colin emphasized the need for improvisation in the NCS due to the diverse social mix and ability range, describing how youth workers “build relationships on the fly”. The interviews revealed that NCS practitioners relied on their life experience to inform an improvisational approach to YW. For instance, Ben, the NCS contract manager, drew from his social skills and practiced within his friendship circles, while NCS program manager Lucy found her martial arts background useful. Bella, the cohort leader, drew on her social work training, while Sergio, the cohort sub-leader, has an international background in sports coaching, personal training, and OAE. Ben stressed the importance of saying the right thing at the right time, and Bella emphasized the importance of staying calm and being non-judgmental. Sergio empathized, and Lucy expressed her propensity to “get on with young people better than adults”. All the participants cited various forms of training as beneficial, be it YW, social work, sports coaching, or OAE.

Ben, the NCS contract manager, claimed, however, that “there was no substitute for experience” and highlighted the challenges of working with inexperienced staff. Ben shared concerns about the limited time for the training of NCS casual staff and stressed the importance of experienced workers providing guidance and support during difficult moments. Bella highlighted the value of team decision-making, drawing upon the expertise of experienced youth workers. Sergio emphasized the need for a “wise old head”, aligning with his perception that experienced youth workers are more comfortable taking risks to empower young people. This viewpoint resonated with Colin’s belief that novice youth workers tend to “guide young people too much”.

#### 3.1.2. Subtheme 1.2: Leadership Style

An experienced outdoor pursuits instructor noted that youth worker group leadership was typically more empathetic than the approach of teachers, which he felt was more autocratic. Sergio emphasized encouragement and creating a “positive space” summing up his philosophy by saying “I am pro-human”, and “nobody is better than another”. The researcher noted how the practitioners under observation had a greater propensity to guide and share suggestions and knowledge rather than instruct, teach, and tell young people what to do. However, there were some rare examples of autocratic leadership observed within the study, which resulted in young people protesting and resisting the tasks set. When staff prioritized task completion over building relationships, there was often frustration on both sides. In one instance, Sergio displayed an uncharacteristically authoritarian attitude in response to a lack of focus during the volunteering week, which exacerbated resistance to the assigned tasks. The young people expressed their dissatisfaction with statements such as “we are not slaves”, and “I am not doing it”. Sergio’s reflection with the staff team led to a shift towards more autonomy, productivity, and higher morale among the young people the following day.

The team’s YW delivery placed a strong emphasis on reflective practice, with regular staff meetings and ‘circle time’ reflection sessions with the young people. One young person

emphasized the importance of “listening” as a crucial skill for effective YW. Observations indicated that the staff maintained a relationship-oriented culture, regularly engaging in spontaneous dialogue with young people and responding in a personalized manner.

Bella’s approach to YW was summed up as “We’re trying to treat them not like kids, and we’re trying to not be their teachers”, a sentiment that resonated with NCS program manager Lucy’s belief that YW offers an education that cannot be obtained in a formal academic setting and is especially suited to those who do not thrive in such environments. Drawing on participatory theory, Lucy noted that the third week of volunteering is the most empowering and impactful, when young people are “allowed to identify natural leaders and introverts and develop without the [adult] leaders”.

### 3.2. Theme Two: What Is the Relevance of Stretch Learning to YW?

#### 3.2.1. Subtheme 2.1: Capturing Complexity

The staff interviewed, who shared an OAE heritage, felt the first week was the most impactful because it presented the greatest amount of stretch learning. Colin, for example, felt the NCS represented effective practice because “there’s always a challenge in there for everyone, no matter who”.

Through the interviews, it became apparent that the CZM was a valuable tool for participants to understand and reflect on their multifaceted NCS experience. According to Colin, the charity’s director, the NCS program aims to remove young people from their comfort zones, with the level of comfort differing greatly between individuals. Colin added that young people only appreciate the longer-term learning of the NCS after reflection and observed how this is not captured in short-term satisfaction surveys.

Bella stressed the importance of pushing participants “outside their comfort zone”, particularly for those who are sheltered. Sergio suggested that being stretched helped young people create positive memories, which could be beneficial when facing future adversity. Ben mentioned that the CZM featured in the charity’s just-in-time training for NCS casual staff.

Some of the young people also associated the CZM with their perceived aims of the NCS, citing pushing themselves out of their comfort zones and feeling a sense of achievement after doing something new. For other participants, however, the NCS was an opportunity to enhance their resume, identify their strengths and weaknesses, meet new people, become more connected, or make friends.

#### 3.2.2. Subtheme 2.2: The Benefits of Stretching

During the study, multiple benefits of stretching were identified. Colin and Sergio emphasized the individualized nature of challenge, with Colin stating, “There is no one thing that challenges everyone”, and Sergio agreeing that different activities stretch different participants. An OAE Leader highlighted the importance of the stretching model and teamwork, stating that “The environment is just an aesthetic”.

Colin highlighted the challenge of collaboration within the NCS and how the intensity of the program accelerates team bonding. Colin noted the importance of dealing with a diverse, unfamiliar range of individuals, including those who were the “jack-the-lads or bullies in school” and academic achievers. The researcher’s observations confirmed how participants learned to work with different personality types and develop skills to navigate group dynamics.

Ben claimed that the NCS experience provides “social learning” opportunities atypical of the “digital generation”. Interviews with young people demonstrated a general appreciation for taking a break from technology and reported changes in their communication skills and confidence in meeting new people. Lucy, the NCS program manager, described the program as “just about identifying you can be friends with anybody”.

According to Lucy and Sergio, the stretching within the NCS program is designed to build confidence, skills, and resilience in young people. Lucy noted that the program can be life-changing, and young people can emerge from it as “completely different person”

with a newfound family. Colin shared similar sentiments, believing that some participants experience “life-changing moments”. Young people’s interview responses affirmed the program’s focus on building confidence and pushing oneself to new heights. One young person, for example, expressed a newfound desire to pursue a career in YW. Overall, the NCS experience was perceived to broaden horizons and provide new perspectives, with one participant describing it as “experiencing a whole new world”.

### 3.2.3. Subtheme 2.3: Risks of Stretching

The charity director, Colin, acknowledged that there are serious risks involved if young people are forced to attend the program against their will. Colin shared an incident where a participant, who had just been released from secure accommodation, became violent and “broke two of my ribs”. Colin added, “I could give you an incident every week, where we got kids who it’s not really an appropriate programme for, but the parents see it as an opportunity to get the kids away out of their hair. . . . But I’m talking small numbers. In amongst a large number . . . thousands”. In Colin’s view, coercion should always be avoided, and although some young people might benefit from being significantly stretched, overall, moderate stretching represents a wiser, safer practice.

## 4. Discussion

This discussion examines how the CZM associated with OAE might provide a useful pathway for reflecting on and de-mystifying YW practice to potentially address one of YW’s perennial challenges, job role clarity.

### 4.1. Theme One: The Experiential YW Approach

The interviews revealed that NCS practitioners drew on their lived experience and training to inform their improvisational approach to YW, adapting to social dynamics, meeting individual needs, and building relationships. These results support the alignment between YW [41–46] and Dewey’s [37–39] principles of experiential and reflective learning, as well as Harris’s [47] conclusion that experienced youth workers possess versatile expertise, like skilled jazz musicians. These findings also resonate with de St. Croix’s [52] assertion that experienced youth workers find ways to promote youth agency, regardless of state manipulation.

The results highlight the alignment between YW and OAE professions shared emphasis on collaborative decision-making and fostering young people’s agency, which echoes Dewey’s [38] critique of traditional autocratic teaching methods and advocacy for a more democratic and participatory approach to education [38,39] which YW [41,42] and OAE scholars [16–18] agree to be more engaging. This approach was summed up elegantly by one respondent as avoiding being like teachers and not treating young people as “kids”.

The findings of the study emphasize the importance of the guidance and support provided by experienced youth workers during difficult moments and during staff reflections. The results therefore suggest a strong community of practice is essential in mitigating the occupational stress identified by previous empirical studies [3,4]. The results add nuance to the risks associated with employing casual staff and the potential de-professionalization and loss of skills within the sector identified within the literature [1,52], effectively capturing the issue in terms of there being “no substitute for experience”. To sum up, the study underscores the significance of fostering a strong community of practice with experience and understanding of YW principles to mitigate autocratic or disempowering ‘teacher-like’ behaviors among youth workers.

### 4.2. Theme Two: What Is the Relevance of the CZM to YW?

The NCS could be seen in two ways: either as a complex process or simply as a blend of OA and YW. A surprising finding within the case study was that participants were able to use the CZM to make overall sense of a multifaceted program. However, the CZM is seemingly absent in youth work texts. For most of the practitioners, the perceived overall

aim of the program was to stretch young people beyond their comfort zones and thereby help them optimize their learning and develop their self-esteem, confidence, and social skills. These perceived objectives and outcomes align with the existing OAE literature's perspective on both the CZM and the reported impact of OAE [7,10,11,34]. Although Mateer et al. [8] question the reliability of OAE impact studies, a possibility that emerges from the study is to view elements of YW as stretching learning processes and thereafter to negotiate with young people how they might appreciate being stretched beyond their self-identified comfort zones. To do so would align with Russo-Netzer and Cohen's ([21], p. 394) emphasis on the importance of self-determination and dialogue when it comes to "stretch interventions", as well as be aligned with YW's dialogic approach [1]. It was notable within the study how autocratic leadership created resistance to tasks set, yet when young people were given the autonomy to solve their own real-world problems and develop with less adult direction, both morale and productivity improved. Both YW scholars [44,45] and OAE scholars [16,17] place more emphasis on how activities are facilitated than the setting, assuming nonetheless that the learning takes place away from the formality of the classroom. That said, simply being away from the classroom [14,15] or in contact with nature [12,13] might explain the self-reported, positive outcomes that the youth cohort under scrutiny attributed to the NCS experience. To what extent the setting matters, therefore, remains up for debate.

The results, however, support the literature's [9,34,43,44] claim that young people gain social skills when challenged to work collaboratively. The study presented intriguing, nuanced perspectives from practitioners, indicating that young people's social learning is accelerated through intensity, taking a break from technology, or having to work alongside unfamiliar peers. One interpretation is that young people are stretched simply by working together in a diverse group.

All the practitioners and most of the young people in the study assumed that the benefits accrued from the NCS would have long-term value. The literature [7–9] acknowledges, however, that any lasting benefit of challenge-based learning needs more longitudinal research. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that there are risks associated with stretching young people, such as mental health episodes and welfare issues. Some of these risks were foreshadowed in the literature [21,32,36], but a surprising finding was how coercion presents risks to youth workers as well.

The results of this study support the implication from OAE studies [7,9,34] that moderate stretching of young people has numerous benefits, including enhancing confidence, self-esteem, and the ability to deal with adversity, which was perceived within this study's small sample of practitioners to be life-changing for some NCS participants. The OAE's interpretation of the CZM [16,22,29,30] is highly relevant since it emphasizes sophisticated and nuanced facilitation, aligning with the educational values of YW [43–45] and Dewey [37–39]. There are, however, longer-term questions to consider. The results support the OAE literature's [7,9,34] view that outcomes are individualistic and that each participant will have their own unique experience and learning, which is drawn out through reflection after the event. Further research is needed to explore both the value and risks of stretching learning and to understand the factors that contribute to its benefits or harms. Additional research on the benefits and drawbacks of youth workers facilitating young people's social learning via negotiated breaks from technology or by having to work alongside unfamiliar peers would also be apposite.

In summary, this study indicates the potential value of the CZM while underscoring the complexity of youth provision. While the CZM presents promising avenues for exploration, the implications of integrating the CZM framework into practice require careful consideration.

## 5. Study Limitations

The study's limitations should be acknowledged, as they impact the generalizability of the findings. Firstly, the small sample size and convenient, voluntary sampling method

resulted in a disproportionate representation of middle-class females in the youth cohort and made the results unrepresentative of the wider population. Secondly, the researcher's prior experience and knowledge of YW will have unavoidably influenced the interpretation of the data and emerging themes [63].

Moreover, the findings may not apply to other YW contexts or practices, and participants might have provided socially desirable responses rather than expressing their authentic experiences. The study was conducted over a relatively short period during sunny weather, which should be considered. Additionally, the study's interpretivist paradigm highlights the subjective nature of understanding human experiences and the construction of reality, making it inherently problematic to generalize the findings to a larger population [62]. Future research with larger and more diverse samples could explore the applicability of the CZM in different YW contexts.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the study focused on interviews with mainly experienced youth workers, who often had supplementary OAE experience, which is unrepresentative of professional norms. De St. Croix [52] observes that experienced youth workers and youth work organizations are not a consistent feature of the NCS, and consequently, this study certainly cannot be regarded as a generalizable illustration of NCS practice. Lastly, the long-term benefits of the stretching experience remain debatable, and the focus on resilience raises concerns about whether it poses a threat to young people's interests or serves as a pretext for governments to avoid addressing structural inequalities more effectively [31].

While this case study provides a foundation for discussion and debate in the field of YW, it is crucial to view the findings as tentative and constrained by the study's limitations.

## 6. Conclusions

This case study examines the potential value of integrating the CZM into YW practice to address job ambiguity within the YW field. The CZM, as commonly applied in OAE, encourages young people to step outside their comfort zones and experience a moderate level of challenge for optimal engagement and learning. Both OAE and YW facilitation draw inspiration from Dewey's non-traditional learning and teaching principles and share the common objective of enhancing self-esteem, confidence, social skills, and connectedness among young people. The synergy between OAE and YW, therefore, creates an opportunity for the integration of practices that could benefit young people and perhaps be thought of as building resilience.

Blending OAE, YW, and Dewey's principles within an OAE interpretation of the CZM could potentially provide a pathway for greater clarity in the YW role, which is otherwise ambiguous and mystifying, not just for youth workers but for young people and funders alike. Simply put, however, this study concludes that youth provision facilitators should avoid behaving like teachers.

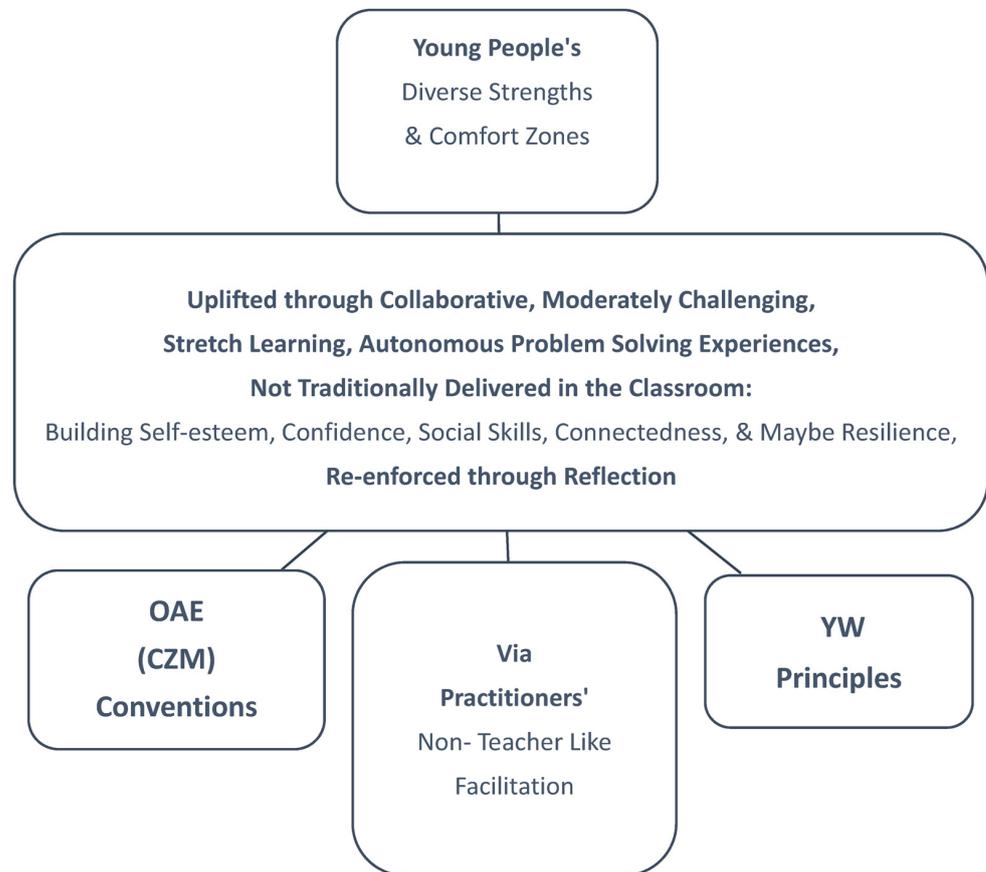
Figure 6 below illustrates this in more detail:

### *Navigating the Opportunities, Challenges, and Risks*

The first opportunity emerging from this study is to consider using the above analysis, or something similar, as a youth worker training tool. Another possibility emanating from the discussion is for youth workers to engage in dialogue with young people to determine their preferences and willingness to be stretched. The results suggest going beyond their comfort zones might be appealing to some young people, and conversations are at the heart of YW.

The findings substantiate the proposition that investing in the moderate stretching of young people can lead to positive outcomes, even perceived life-changing experiences. The study also suggests that young people's social learning is intensified by technology breaks and collaboration with unfamiliar or diverse peer groups. One interpretation is that young people are challenged simply by working together, and this would suggest that facilitating stretch learning does not have to be elaborate or expensive. The study's findings, however,

support the idea that stretch interventions should be self-determined, thereby aligning with the challenge-by-choice conventions within OAE and good practice identified in the field of mental health.



**Figure 6.** How YW's Principles OAE Conventions and the CZM might be Synthesized (Source: Personal Collection).

Integrating the CZM into youth work practice, however, requires careful navigation of potential risks and challenges. The rationale for any application of the CZM would be to re-enforce the Dewey-derived principles of YW and not substitute them. In other words, the CZM has the potential to add an additional aspect or nuance to the understanding of the youth work role but does not represent a panacea anticipated to solve funding issues or state manipulation, for example. Notably, the study's strongest finding was that there is no substitute for experience.

Risks of applying the CZM include misrepresentation, misunderstanding, or dilution of principles; a temptation to rely on just-in-time training; misalignment with target-driven funding models; and potential negative consequences of coercing or overstretching young people, such as mental health issues and welfare concerns.

To sum up, while exploiting the synergies between OAE, YW, Dewey, and the CZM may offer an opportunity to clarify the YW role, it is crucial to approach this integration with caution. Overall, while the study's findings suggest that the CZM may have the potential to re-enforce YW principles and practice, it is important to note that this is still an untested, tentative proposition emanating from a small, unrepresentative case study and is not without risk. Further research and evaluation are needed to validate, expand upon, or disavow these findings.

Further research is recommended in the following areas:

- The benefits and risks of stretch learning for young people in YW.

- The benefits and drawbacks of youth workers facilitating young people's social learning via negotiated breaks from technology or by having to work alongside unfamiliar peers.
- The benefits and drawbacks of integrating OAE and YW training.
- The value and risks of integrating the CZM into YW.
- The applicability of the CZM in different YW contexts.
- Youth workers' training needs.

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