

Experiments in Care: Co-facilitation, Responsiveness and Relational Learning in Collaborative Doctoral Fieldwork Projects

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Abstract

Practising collaborative research methodologies involves relational skills and offers relational learning opportunities for researchers. In this critical intervention, I explore my experiences of co-facilitating focus groups about care as part of my doctoral research in schools. I draw upon the lenses of care and therapeutic scholarship to present insights from my own relational learning journey and explore care in collaborative research more broadly. Through creative, autoethnographic approaches, I look back on the joys of shared responsiveness in the co-facilitated focus group space and reflect upon moments when I found it challenging to step back and co-lead. In doing so, I consider what might further support doctoral researchers—and researchers more broadly—to develop care-full practices in co-facilitated focus groups, collaborative research, and beyond. This intervention contributes to calls for more practical support for researchers engaging with the nuances and complexities of these methodologies, as well as to broader, interdisciplinary calls for more relational orientations to research.

Keywords

care, education, collaborative research, doctoral research, focus groups, collaboration

Introduction

In 2007, Cahill described in ACME the ‘promises and potential of PAR [Participatory Action Research] as an ethical praxis of care in which primacy is placed upon relationships and the responsibilities involved in working *with* communities, as opposed to just not doing harm’ (362). Nearly twenty years later, I too was drawn to collaborative methodologies for their *care-full* potential—seeking, like others, a methodology ‘that cares’ to explore care in turn (Aissatou et al. 2022, 551). Planning my doctoral fieldwork in education, 2022–23—austerity Britain, post-Covid lockdowns—following many years working in teaching and pastoral roles in schools, I discovered care scholarship. I found here an echo of practices that had inspired me in schools, and a hopeful, relational response to the alienation and unhappiness experienced by many students and staff in England (The Care Collective 2020; McPherson et al. 2023; Education Support 2023). Seeking to bring the two together, and research care *with* students and staff, I set up collaborative research projects in two schools. I had the privilege of collaborating with a student team and a therapist to research care together, involving co-created and co-facilitated focus groups. These projects formed part of my doctoral research, which explored care in English state schools through collaborative and qualitative methodologies.

In this critical intervention, I focus on my experiences of co-facilitating focus groups in this fieldwork, exploring care in these co-held spaces through particular attention to *responsiveness* and *response-ability*. I do this through critical engagement with care scholarship, attending to care’s potential as well as its complexities. For Kittay (2019, 172), ‘open responsiveness to another’ is core to ethical caring, from where, as Noddings (2012, 772) described, we can be *moved to respond* to another’s ‘*expressed needs*’ or interests. As feminist methodological scholars have argued, care ethics holds potential to underpin collaborative research and relational approaches to research ethics more broadly (Brannelly and Barnes 2023). Theorists and writers such as Tronto (2013; 1993), Owis (2024), and Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) have critically expanded conceptualisations of care to consider also care politics, care *for* multiple others, care about, collective care, or care *with*. This broad scholarship holds many points of synergy with collaborative research and co-facilitation, which involve responding *with* and *to* others and their contexts (Cahill 2007, 362).

Inspired by Lac and Fine’s (2018) article on doing PAR as a graduate student and Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2012, 204) call for a non-idealised, ‘multi-layered, non-innocent, approach to the meanings of caring’, I share here some personal caring challenges as well as joys, reflecting critically on how my positionality as a teacher-researcher affected my co-facilitation. Drawing upon Puig de la Bellacasa (2012, 202) to try to *think with care* about these experiences, I weave reflections from research-collaborators and participants, colleagues, and scholarship into the ‘collective webs’ I think with here. Through these lenses, I explore my perceptions of shared *responsiveness* in the co-held space, tuning in to feelings of a metaphorical, responsive *dance*, including moments of creative, joyful, responsive collaboration, and moments in which I felt I over-led, forcing others to follow in turn. Thinking of Haraway’s (2016, 105) call to ‘help open passages for a praxis of care and response–response-ability—in ongoing multispecies worlding on a wounded terra’, I consider too the ‘possibilities of mutual response’ in our co-held spaces (Bragg 2024, 849). Drawing also upon relational approaches to research ethics and therapeutic literature, I critically examine my

capacity to respond in care—or *response-ability*—in relation to others and my own processes (Meloni et al. 2015).

In this research, focus groups within collaborative research frameworks opened opportunities for experimenting with and reflecting upon care and responsiveness in co-facilitation, due to their collaborative and dialogic form. The reflections shared in this intervention may therefore be of particular relevance to those engaging with these methodologies in combination. However, through reflections upon my own relational learning journey in these collaborative projects, I also highlight sources of support for caring co-facilitation that may be of use to researchers engaging with collaborative methodologies or facilitation more broadly. Echoing our Special Issue editors and building upon previous writing with Guerrero (2025), I too note that embodied experiences and collaborative research messiness often receive less attention than research results. Responding to critical geography scholars and those further afield who have openly shared their experiences of care and collaboration (e.g. Wood, Swanson, and Colley 2020; Lac and Fine 2018), I offer to the conversation these co-facilitation and relational learning snapshots—told through creative and autoethnographic approaches, and my own partial lens.

Fieldwork Snapshots

The following snapshots explore moments and reflections from co-facilitated focus groups during my doctoral fieldwork and initial creative analysis. In site A—a special educational needs specialist school—I collaborated with a psychotherapist who works with the school. As part of our project, we co-designed and co-facilitated two focus groups involving both staff and students, featuring a range of creative and embodied methods. At site B—a mainstream state secondary school—I collaborated with a group of eight high school students over the course of eight months to explore care and research together. As part of this, we collaboratively designed and facilitated two focus groups, before analysing our initial findings to present to the Headteacher and Safeguarding Lead. Our first focus group involved students from the same year group; the second involved younger students aged 11-13. We invited our participants to answer questions about care in school and take part in creative and collaborative activities, such as card sorts and drawing (Kara 2020).

In the following narrative, I merge reflections from my research journal, written during and after the focus groups, with present-tense reflections from a period of listening back to audio recordings and beginning to analyse care in the focus groups.¹ As part of my initial creative analysis, I re-interpreted excerpts from focus group transcripts and data as comic-strip-inspired drawings and collages (Ringrose et al. 2021), included below as Figures. Through re-interpreting and 'restorying' these moments (Naicker et al. 2020), I reflected back upon and processed the focus groups, and began to make analytic connections.

Shared Responsiveness in the Focus Group Space

Thinking back to care in my fieldwork, I begin by tuning in to selected embodied memories of feeling responsive to others in the focus group space. In the first moment, I was

¹ These focus groups took place during May, June and July 2024 as part of my doctoral fieldwork. The present-tense, reflexive narrative was written in autumn 2024 alongside the initial creative analysis.

at site A, co-facilitating a focus group with my therapist-collaborator. Part way through our first focus group involving two students and a staff member, I brought out a card sort activity and noticed students losing interest. As can be seen in the scene below, I was still keen to pursue the activity initially. Then, one of our student-participants had an idea.

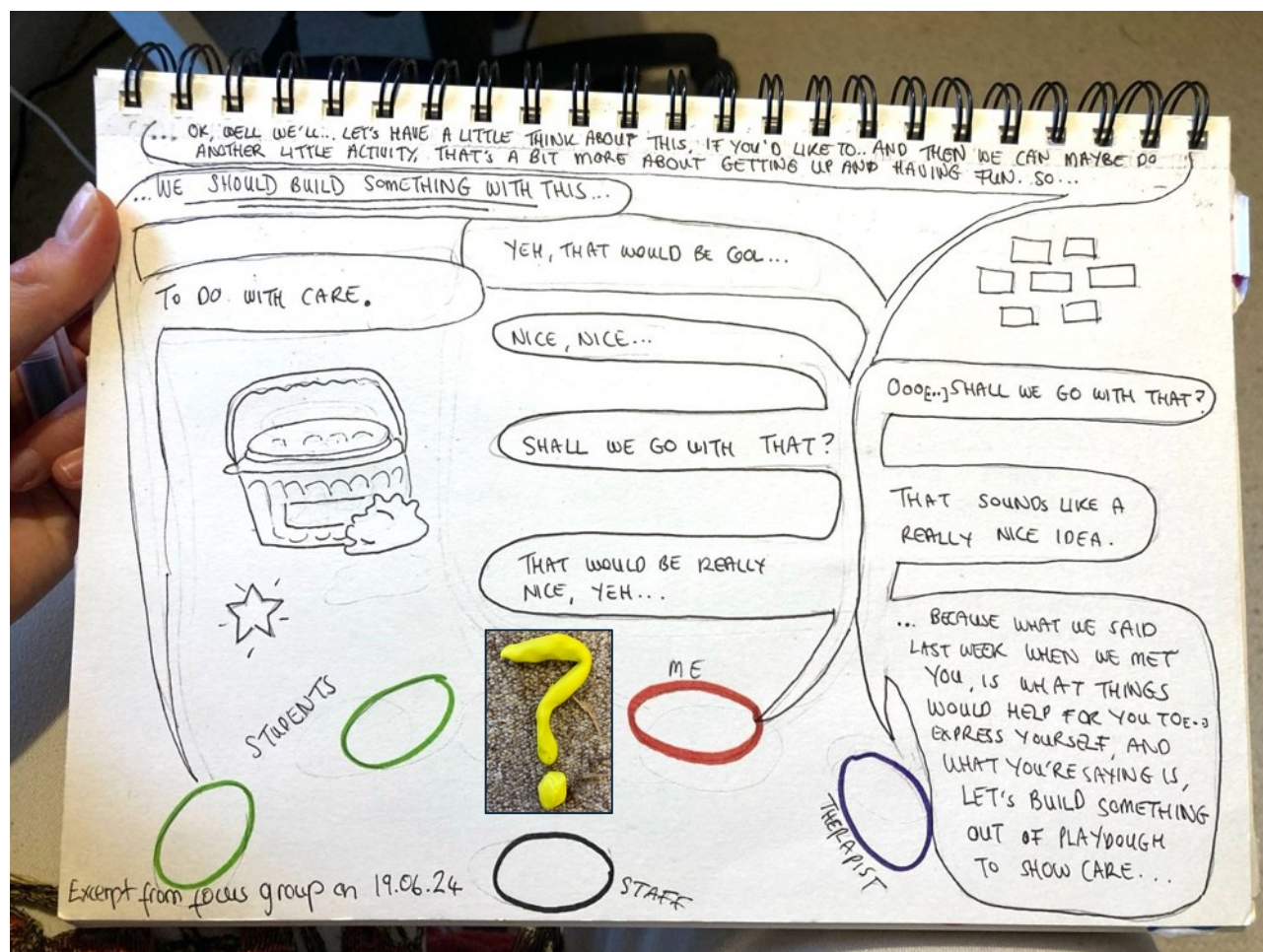


Figure 1. An excerpt from a focus group transcript (19.06.24) and a photo of my response to the student-led activity, re-interpreted as a comic-strip-inspired drawing in my initial analysis.

Listening back, I reflect upon how the co-creative environment and the therapist's support helped me to let go of the original plan and respond more openly to the students. Together, we were able to embrace this student's creative, alternative, proposed activity. Thanks to the student's idea, we then began exploring our experiences of care in the school through plasticine. My plasticine question mark represented feeling care when I first visited the school and was asked curious questions by students.

This sense of shared care seemed to grow in the second focus group. The final image I recall is the photo in the centre of the spiral below, taken by a student, that features objects we had chosen to represent our time together. Listening back to the focus group again, I work backwards from the photo and pick out moments of responsiveness that spiral towards the co-creation of this scene. I hear us dance between each other, thinking of how to end. I am drawn towards the desire to include our objects and each other, as well as the shared response-ability emerging.

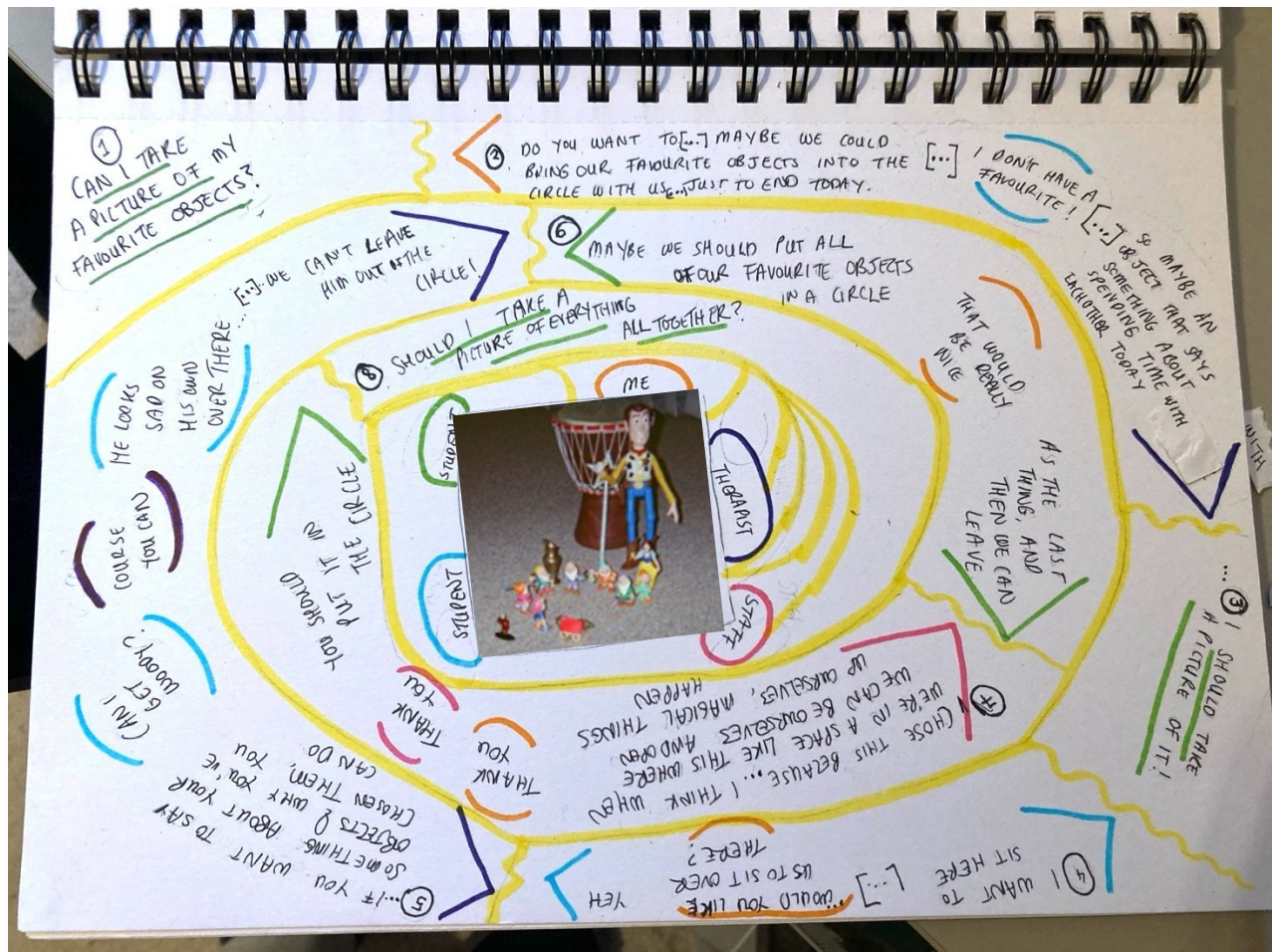


Figure 2. Eight excerpts from the end of a focus group transcript (02.07.24) and a student's photo of our closing circle of objects, reinterpreted as a 'responsiveness spiral' in my initial analysis.

Looking back, I wonder what helped us, as co-facilitators, to respond in care in these moments. From the outset, I had been struck by the therapist's capacity to hold space for emotional reflections, to be emotionally present, and to leave space for others. As I shared with her, her relational skills in co-space-holding helped me to 'slow down and sit with the process'. My own experience with collaborative research had also been growing, enabling me to feel more grounded in creatively responding and co-holding space for students to lead. I felt that 'our partnership in the space... helped with openness'. In turn, she reflected on the power of a 'methodology that shows care in order to talk about care'. We both reflected upon the students' growing 'trust' in being able to co-create the space together with us, and our shared sense of being able to openly bring ourselves in more. The joy of this is captured by the staff quote about a magic wand: 'when we're in a space like this where we feel we can be ourselves and open up ourselves, magical things happen' (7). I am moved by the student's response—'you should put it in the circle'—inviting her to place the wand with our chosen objects.

Turning to site B, I tune in to an example of shared responsiveness between student-collaborators—referred to also as co-facilitators, here—and our student-participants. Towards the end of our second co-facilitated focus group, depicted below, student-participants had been asked to draw and/or discuss the most caring school they could imagine. They began to talk about the importance of extra-curricular clubs. Here, student co-facilitators were

moved to respond to student-participants' expressed needs and wishes for more clubs, starting to think together about how they could set up clubs for younger students in the school.

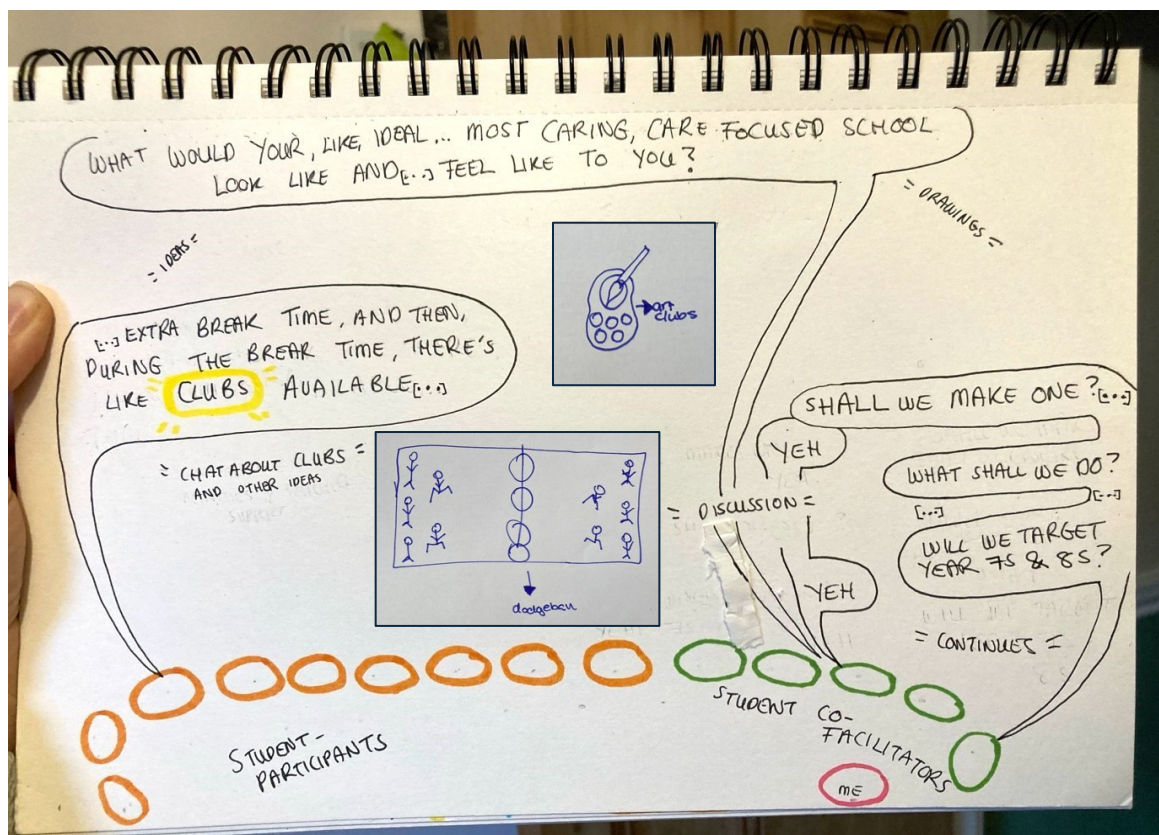


Figure 3. Excerpts from a focus group transcript (22.05.24) featuring parts of a student's drawing of an ideal caring school, re-interpreted as a comic-strip-inspired drawing in my initial analysis.

I wonder what had helped to support shared responsiveness here. Debriefing together after both co-led focus groups, student-collaborators and I reflected upon the merits of a student-facilitator-led ice-breaker activity. In my research journal, I had noted: 'they were asking the students to share a fun fact about themselves and clapping every answer'. Observing and noting student-participants 'feeling increasingly comfortable sharing', I was creatively challenged to understand how fun and laughter can go hand-in-hand with co-holding caring spaces. I also observed 'shared care' between older and younger students, through, for example, 'recognition' of and responses to younger students' perspectives in care-full dialogue here and elsewhere, helping to mitigate inevitable age-based power dynamics in schools. I noted that the co-created, warm and lively atmosphere 'helped inter-year group collaboration!', later echoed by a student-collaborator, who shared that younger participants and the co-facilitators continued to say 'hi' to each other in the corridors. In our debrief reflections, student-collaborators discussed the value of involving students in facilitation and planning to support relatability and engagement, and highlighted the importance of creative activities.

Challenges of Responsiveness

Reflecting upon co-facilitation during fieldwork, I found the dance metaphor in one of my partner's Gestalt therapy books. Chidiac (2018, 134) describes the 'delicate dance' of

facilitating dialogue as a 'dialectic of stepping forward and shaping as well as letting go and allowing space'. In the examples above, I can tune in to the feelings of stepping back to allow space, and/or dancing to co-create and co-hold space together. However, I did not always find it easy to navigate the dance steps of responsive co-facilitation. In my journal I see a reminder to myself, written between the two student-co-facilitated focus groups—'setting my intentions: stepping back'—and a question as to whether I was 'over-caring and overleading'.

As I browsed the therapy books during my fieldwork to help process encounters, I had been particularly struck by Taylor's (2021, 107) call for us to reflect carefully upon our responses to others, in light of our own 'experience of vulnerability'. This links to the concept of relational awareness, which involves becoming 'consciously aware of responsive processes, perceptions and experiences in the intersubjective encounter', as 'embodied resonance, historical selfhood and personal history' can all shape our 'relational responsivity' (Nielsen and Petersen 2021, 140). I wondered: how might my own relational patterns and *embodied resonances* be enhancing or limiting my *relational responsivity* in the co-facilitated focus group space?

Reflecting back further through collaging, I pick out two quotes from the other co-led focus group with older students at site B and explore some of the experiences, perceptions and feelings that seem to be interacting with my response-ability in these moments of co-facilitation.



Figure 4. Two quotes from a focus group transcript (16.05.24), collaged with printed images as part of my analytic reflections.

Resonating with an image of my teacher self (thank you, to my former year 11s for my warmly mocking comparison to a nursery school teacher from the children's TV show, *Balamory*), I feel in these quotes how I am used to holding the room and caring for a class—seeking to keep everyone safe and ensure they have a nice time. I hear myself trying to make sure everyone feels appreciated—calling for the 'whole group to hear it'—yet also notice how I hold the focus group direction in doing so. I hear my struggles to best adapt the plan given the lack of time—'we've got one activity'—and my question to student co-facilitators—'we could do that quickly?'—that does not necessarily allow enough space for them to step into the flow and potentially shift direction. In the end, this left us with less space for a final student-led question—which they were rightfully disappointed about, as in their words, 'that question's important'. Returning to Puig de la Bellacasa (2012, 211), I reflect upon the delicate distinction between prepared with care—exactness—and open responsive caring: 'the tempting proximity between these terms reveals a risky ground: the ambition to control and judge what/who/how we care for'.

There is lots more that could be unpacked: the weight of the PhD and my reading about care, contributing to my excitement—'really insightful'—and interacting with my capacity to co-hold space. Years of embodied tension about the approaching end-of-lesson bell – and patterns of stepping forward at that moment to avoid running out of time. I hear myself trying to care for and about multiple possible needs at the same time and wonder, in reflection, about learned caring habits from teaching, including at-times frantic responsiveness. In my responses, I hear my colleague Rebekka Hölzle's reflections about the impulse to 'do' in order to care, when perhaps, in a hierarchical context, and position of privilege, this can also keep us in control. We wondered too about the potentially gendered elements to my relational patterns of caring—wanting everyone to be well-fed and at ease.

Looking back to my research journal now, I see myself asking the question after the first co-facilitated focus group: 'did I feel I had to overcare'? I wondered why I found it hard to step back in those moments. What was I afraid might happen? On one level, I know I had been particularly fearful of potential ethical harm in the research space. I trusted my student-collaborators and was deeply impressed by their reflections on research ethics throughout the process. But I also felt strongly the important reminder from Brown (2022, 207) that 'it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that in participatory research the participants' best interests are foregrounded, that participants' health and wellbeing are tended to and that participants do not come to any harm'. When working in schools previously I had held safeguarding and behavioural responsibilities, meaning that at times it felt harder to judge my remit of care as a researcher. I see this listening back to two moments when students brought up specific teachers in our co-led focus group discussions. I had noted the embodied sensation in my journal—I felt some tension... around whether students could talk about teachers—feeling on shaky ethical ground, fearful of causing harm to staff through the research (Chidiac 2018, 63–64). I hear myself jump in to respond in the first instance: 'in terms of talking about individuals, it's not really the space'. In the second moment, however, I had noticed this embodied feeling, yet I tried to think about how my therapist-collaborator might have held these difficult discussions. Instead of jumping in to shut down the conversation, I guided it towards a possible theme 'is that maybe something around, like, time in schools?'—leading the student to share the need for 'more [time] to express ourselves'. Thinking back

now to Taylor's (2021) book, I reflect again upon how fears and past histories can interact with response-ability in co-facilitation.

The Ongoing Relational Learning Journey

I am grateful for the opportunities I have had to learn relationally from/with co-researchers and participants over the course of my fieldwork. To end this piece, I share my unfinished reflections upon what else has personally supported me on this journey, and what I think might further support me, or others, to facilitate and co-create caring, *response-able* collaborative research spaces.

Expanding Reflexivity – Relational Awareness

Reflecting in my journal over the course of my fieldwork, I found it helpful to follow Khawaja's (2022, 195) guide for facilitators of youth-led PAR, and reflect upon participation dynamics alongside my actions and feelings. Along with works by Kara (2018) and others, this helped me to *think with care* in completing the initial institutional ethics application, laying the ethical groundwork for the projects and their relational spaces. Through my fieldwork, I also came to find therapeutic literature—and conversations with therapists—supportive for reflecting upon ethics-in-relation and processing my *response-ability* in research. As my supervisor reminds me, there is a risk of trying to *perfect* inevitably messy relational encounters in hindsight/foresight, and, in so doing, ignoring the context, and agency or reflexivity of my collaborators. Taking inspiration from Gestalt therapy, I've found it helpful to think of—if challenging to practice—'heightening awareness in the present moment' through *deep listening* and *presence*: a 'state of being fully embodied, resonant with others and the current context' (Chidiac 2018, 22, 53; Taylor 2021, 182). In research, that means expanding reflexivity to what Shah (2023, 816) calls 'awareness of bodily sensation', as well as thoughts, and challenging what hooks (1994, 139) described as the 'erasure of the body' at universities. This also connects to what Syedullah (in Woodly et al. 2021, 910–913) terms 'confronting ourselves' and 'tendencies within ourselves, our cultures, and our political systems to practice care as a paternalist extension of colonial patriarchal power'. Heightening embodied and relational awareness could further support ethical praxis and co-space-holding, helping researchers to recognise when 'mobilising our power is holding space for others to take up space and have their stories heard' (Pascoe et al. 2020). Engaging with *relational awareness* helped me to develop awareness of my positionality-in-relation: to step back at times; to seek support; and to consider, in analysis and practice, how relational patterns—from teaching, for example—may shape my responses and the 'data' differently at varied moments. Yet this reflexive relational learning journey is an ongoing challenge—always evolving, and excitingly unfinishable—"you're just always in process" (Kaba in Syedullah in Woodly et al. 2021, 913).

Practising and Attuning to Relational Skills in the Process

Digging deeper into the relational practice of co-facilitating, I reflect upon how I have learnt experientially through opportunities to practice co-facilitation and participate in others' co-held spaces (e.g. Elliott and Hansen 2022). Attuning to the relational skills involved in responsive co-facilitation, such as *deep listening*, I think of the relational skills involved in research more broadly. Brannelly and Barnes (2023, 29) describe how the 'relational skills and abilities of the researcher are second to academic skills' in research methodology texts, meaning that researchers may struggle to know how to manage research relationships and

emotions, and put methods into practice. Care scholarship and therapeutic literature can provide helpful complements, yet I wonder how researchers could be further practically supported to develop relational skills for co-facilitation, and beyond. This does not mean that there is one 'right' form of caring or collaborating that needs teaching—we all have diverse relational skills we can bring to learn from/with each other, as I have been lucky enough to experience, learning from/with students, staff and practitioners. Yet attuning to relational skills and reconceptualising what constitutes expertise opens relational learning possibilities for researchers. Possibilities for supporting researchers to develop their own *response-ability* in practice could include mentoring from people with varied relational skillsets and experiences from within and beyond the university (Wood, Swanson, and Colley 2020, 439–440). They could also include further opportunities to practice and reflect together upon our praxis in research training programmes.

Aligning Theory/Method/Practice

I have also found it personally helpful to explore responsiveness in collaborative research through the lens of care, and, in turn, to allow responsiveness-in-practice to shape my conceptual understandings of care, in sometimes messy ways. For example, from a purely theoretical perspective, I found it easier to miss the 'contradictions and the cracks' of caring (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 35). Yet, seeking to co-facilitate with/through/about care, and engaging in this reflexive writing, I have re-engaged with some of the structural, relational and personal 'inescapable troubles' of caring in schools, research and beyond (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012, 199). In reverse, engaging with the politics of care encouraged me to further question whose *responsibility* it is, or should be, to respond in care in schools—such as in the student-led clubs example—and to relate these questions to structural, intersectional inequalities in society (Woodly et al. 2021). Similarly, through engaging with scholarship highlighting the complexities of collaborative research, I have wondered how power dynamics and hierarchies in research and schools can also stimulate pressures to respond in care (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008). At the same time, through these experiences, my sense of the *promises and potential* of collaborative research as a site of care—and of care in schools, more broadly—has expanded. I have felt: the ethical grounding of relational care; the power of caring *with*, supporting me to *respond in care* in turn; growing, joyful, sensitive sensations of collective response-ability; and the dance of responsiveness, spiralling into care as a magical 'co-creative moment—an intimate improvisation—always open to the other(s) surprising you' (Eales and Peers 2021, 176). Re-tuning-in to these embodied experiences, I feel energised to continue to strive for care-full, responsive spaces in research and beyond.

Sharing (is Caring?)

Thinking back to the challenges and joys of care in collaborative research, I end by reflecting on the conversations that have supported me, both in person and in the literature. I return to Tronto (1993, 168), who calls for a 'public discussion of needs, and an honest appraisal of the intersection of needs and interests' in politics, and reflect upon the potential for more open discussions about care within research spaces. I also reflect upon the *promises and potential* of co-held spaces at university, to allow space for vulnerably reflecting upon practising collaborative methodologies. Such spaces hold potential to support researchers to navigate complex questions of *responsiveness* in collaboration, including balancing diverse needs of others, and ourselves, and thinking about who might be excluded from our

approaches to co-facilitation (Guerrero and Dobson 2025; Pascoe et al. 2020). In response to those who have opened and shared dialogues about care and collaboration with me, I look forward to continuing the learning—and the conversation.

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