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'I want to scream it from the rooftops now [...] there are other pathways': What young people learned from a co-designed post-secondary transition programme

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Abstract

This paper uses the framework of transition as *becoming* to explore what young people learned from participating in a post-secondary transition program that was co-designed by young people. The 9-week youth participatory action research (YPAR) involved six staff collaborators (SCs) and seven youth collaborators (YCs). Data comprised recordings of weekly group meetings, group interviews, reflections and artefacts such as planning documents, graphic organisers and writing. We discuss the findings using two themes that we identified together as a team of YCs and SCs. The first represents how YCs became aware of and vocalised understandings of life after secondary school as a diverse and fluid process. The second describes and interrogates how YCs became more confident and empowered, showing the importance of critical consciousness, reflection and action in seeking transformation. We conclude that conceptualising transition as becoming enables us to collectively make sense of the diverse ways we co-construct life experiences and directions.

Keywords Transition as becoming · Youth participatory action research · Transition · Co-design · Critical consciousness · Praxis

Introduction

Young people's trajectories from secondary school have been a focus of educational research for decades, reflecting a concern with educational transitions that began with compulsory formal education (Gale & Parker, 2014). For over 30 years, Australian education policy has been shaped by equity and productivity goals and university has been prioritised as *the* post-secondary destination (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Gale & Parker, 2014; Galliot, 2015; Quinn, 2010). Education policy focuses on widening participation at university by students from under-represented 'equity' groups, such as those from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, Aboriginal and

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Torres Strait Islander students and students from regional and remote locations (Department of Education, 2023; Gale & Parker, 2014; Gore et al., 2015). Australian education policy links productivity and participation by valuing university because it contributes to the achievement of national economic aspiration in a global knowledge economy (Gale, 2015; Galliot & Graham, 2015;). This policy emphasis fails to consider structural inequities that shape opportunities for further education (Gale, 2015), including constraints that young people themselves can recognise (Aaltonen, 2013). Further, by valorising university, Australian education policy fails to consider the varied ways that young people construct 'success' (Jaremus et al., 2023) and may devalue post-secondary aspirations beyond university (Gale, 2015).

Transition from school to university is typically characterised as a linear process that involves induction into institutional norms and practices or the development of an appropriate academic identity (Gale & Parker, 2014). Critiques of such accounts are growing in the literature on post-secondary education. For example, Gale and Parker (2014, p. 735) propose that transition into higher education is a form of 'becoming' that is ongoing, dynamic and diversely experienced, and call on universities to change so they respond better to student diversity. More recently, Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018) also characterised post-secondary educational transition as an ongoing and context-dependent process that can be experienced in multiple ways. Similarly, Gravett (2019, 2021) presents transition into university as a diverse and fluid process, while Gravett and Winstone (2021a, 2021b) identify discomfort and trouble as necessary conditions for processes of growth and becoming. Such critiques connect with long-standing scholarly debate about the linear construction of transition from youth into adulthood, as being marked by further education or employment, that shapes youth policy in Australia (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014, Jun Fu, 2023).

The recognition that educational transitions are potentially complex and troublesome also reflects broader findings about post-secondary options. As Abbott-Chapman (2011, p. 67) pointed out over a decade ago, multiple post-secondary pathways are the norm and people from groups under-represented in higher education are increasingly likely to 'experience fragmentary careers within a mosaic of study and work destinations and a smorgasbord of choices'. Young people need to make sense of available options after secondary school (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Gore et al., 2015; Vernon et al., 2019). Yet they leave secondary school with different capacities to navigate towards their goals (Gale & Parker, 2014). Today young people face the challenging prospect of making sense of their lives after school in a context shaped by the dual pressures of job insecurity in a precarious labour market and career advice that prioritises university as *the* best destination (Jaremus et al., 2023).

To effectively negotiate options after secondary school, young people need to be empowered as change makers. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is an approach to empowering social action (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mirra et al., 2016). It is critical research with origins in critical pedagogy where critical consciousness (*conscientização* in Portuguese) and praxis are central (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Freire, 1987). Freire (1987) describes the interchangeable relationship between praxis and critical consciousness, where students and teachers look at reality, critically reflect upon that reality and take action to change that reality.

Critical consciousness focuses on achieving an in-depth understanding of the world, allowing for the perception and exposure of social and political contradictions. It also includes praxis: taking action against oppressive social injustices (Freire, 1987; hooks, 1994). With young people, YPAR considers praxis and critical consciousness to explore ways to investigate complex power relations, histories of struggle and the consequences of oppression in young people's lives and communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Desai, 2019; Luguetti et al., 2017). Paired with a conceptualisation of transition as becoming, YPAR could enable adults to more effectively acknowledge the value that all young people bring after secondary school (Gravett, 2021).

There is a growing body of research around YPAR in education (Call-Cummings et al., 2022; Cox et al., 2021; Duke & Fripp, 2022; Einboden et al., 2022; Lau & Body, 2021; Schwedhelm et al., 2021). However, there remains a need for YPAR in the post-secondary transition area, where most of the literature has focused on the transition from secondary school into higher education (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Galliot, 2015). Many accounts involve a deficit discourse in which young people are perceived as lacking (academically or otherwise) and needing adult support to adapt to university life (Coertjens et al., 2017; Gravett, 2019, 2021; Gravett & Winstone, 2021a, 2021b). There is limited work that critically investigates and recognises the multiplicity and diversity of young people's experiences after secondary school. Rather than simply hearing young people's voices, we need to invite them to participate as activists in understanding and dealing with the issues that they face (Sellar & Gale, 2011).

This paper explores what young people learned in a post-secondary transition programme that was co-designed *with* young people, and what influenced those outcomes. We begin by discussing how a conceptualisation of *transition as becoming* contributed to co-design of the programme and how it gave us a framework for:

1. Co-constructing findings about the outcomes of a co-designed post-secondary transition programme with the young people who participated
2. Problematising dominant accounts of post-secondary educational transition as a linear process that needs to be smoothed for young people.

Transition as becoming

As noted earlier, there is a growing body of scholarship critiquing the dominant conception of educational transition after secondary school as a largely homogenous and linear process (Gale & Parker, 2014; Gravett, 2021; Gravett & Winstone, 2021a, 2021b). Gale and Parker (2014) made an important early contribution by developing a typology of the ways that transition into higher education is characterised as:

1. *Induction*—a linear process geared towards effective assimilation into university norms and processes
2. *Development*—a focus on acculturation into university and the development of a congruent identity

3. *Becoming*—an ongoing and fluctuating process that involves multiple becomings over the life course.

This typology also connects pedagogy and transition by associating transition as becoming with inclusive pedagogies that provide opportunities for students to connect content with their lives, future roles or identities and encourage them to share their beliefs, knowledge and experiences (Gale & Parker, 2014).

Building on Gale and Parker's (2014) critique, Gravett (2021) and Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018) draw on the work of Deleuze and Guattari to conceptualise transition into university using three intertwined perspectives: (1) transitions as 'rhizomatic' (non-centred, non-linear and non-hierarchical), (2) 'troublesome' (uncertain and possibly destabilised) and (3) as 'becoming' (ongoing, emergent and open). Gravett (2021) uses concepts of the 'rhizome' and 'becoming' to explore the 'irregularity and fluidity of students' experiences, and how we might employ concepts of troublesome knowledge and liminality to acknowledge the value of discomfort as a necessary part of learning' at university (Gravett, 2021, p. 1580).

Considering transition as becoming enables an understanding of transitions as far more mobile, multiple, context-dependent and affective than typically characterised in the literature on post-secondary education. The work of Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018) and Gravett (2021) suggests that educational transition after secondary school can be usefully understood as dynamic, ongoing, emergent, open, evolving and continuous. Conceptualising transition as becoming also counters dominant deficit discourses about students entering university. For example, Gravett (2021) and Gale and Parker (2014) critique metaphors such as gaps and bridges which, in some accounts, are used in relation to student 'deficiencies'. These are based on the deficit view that students have a homogenous and linear transition into university which needs to be eased, failing to consider the complexity, fluidity and multiplicity of young people's experiences (Gravett & Winstone, 2021a, 2021b; Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018). This is accentuated when students have diverse backgrounds and are described as lacking the required attributes and skills (Gravett, 2021; Quinn, 2010). By excluding diversity or presenting diversity as a lack, deficit discourses of post-secondary educational transition can threaten young people's agency.

To engage young people's agency, their unique experiences, diverse and multiple becomings must be recognised and valued (Gravett, 2021; Quinn, 2010). YPAR and pedagogical partnerships with students are ways to rethink transition *with* young people. However, transition is an under-theorised concept in the literature on post-secondary education (Gravett & Winstone, 2021a, 2021b). Considering transition as becoming offers the potential to look beyond normative narratives that surround student transition and celebrate students' becomings in a rich and generative way. As described below in the Methods section, the concept of transition as becoming helped to shape the co-design of the post-secondary transition program. It also provided a framework for constructing the findings presented in this paper and for problematising post-secondary transition as a linear process that needs to be smoothed for young people. Furthermore, transition as becoming connects with the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire that underpins YPAR. Freire advocated education that 'affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished,

uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality' and saw education and becoming as entwined in an ongoing, uniquely human process (Freire, 1987, p. 84).

There is limited educational research into young people's transitions after secondary school that invites young people to co-construct their experiences and brainstorm possibilities for change (exceptions include Coertjens et al., 2017; James, 2016; Vella-Brodrick et al., 2023). Our research contributes insight into the co-construction of both processes.

Methods

This study comprised a nine-week YPAR where young people were positioned as co-researchers whose experiences and knowledge are valuable and largely equivalent to academic expertise (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). The study is the second phase of a larger YPAR (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), the Summer Gap (SG) project, an innovative collaboration between Victoria University; Hellenic Museum; AVID Australia and youth collaborators to (a) co-design a programme to build young people's agency and capabilities to negotiate post-secondary life choices, including pathways to further education and employment; (b) pilot the co-designed programme; and (c) evaluate the pilot programme and make recommendations for implementation beyond 2022. The SG project offered an opportunity for authentic connection, sharing, learning and collaboration, between staff (SCs) and youth collaborators (YCs) (Luguetti et al., 2023a, 2023b).

In the first phase of the SG project (10 weeks), YCs and SCs co-designed a post-secondary transition programme during three weeks of intensive workshops after participating in seven weeks of capacity building (Luguetti et al., 2023a). Employing an engaged pedagogical perspective, the first phase asserted the importance of embracing a holistic approach to YPAR where educators should embrace vulnerability, openly sharing uncertainties and discomfort, while simultaneously encouraging young people to take risks by actively participating with their authentic selves in the process (for more information see Luguetti et al., 2023a). This paper focuses on the findings about what participants learned in the co-designed pilot programme during the second phase of the SG project (nine weeks).

Ethics approval for this study was provided by the Victoria University Ethics Committee. All participants signed written consent forms at the beginning of their participation in the study, and their interactive consent was negotiated orally at regular intervals during the study, especially when explicitly generating data for reflections and focus groups.

The YPAR included six staff collaborators and seven youth collaborators of diverse backgrounds and experiences with a common interest in piloting and evaluating a post-secondary 'transition' programme (see Table 1). All the YCs participated in an expression of interest process in which they were asked to write about their areas of interest, reasons for wanting to take part in the project, the meaning of transition and how we could make them feel welcome in the project. Chloe H, Aisha and Patty were part of the initial 10-week co-design process that generated the programme, *Becoming You*. SCs and YCs co-designed the possible learning outcomes,

Table 1 Participants in the study summarised from positionality statements

Name	Background	Reason for joining YPAR	Roles
Isabelle	18-year-old female first year university student who completed year 12	To reflect on her past decisions, strengths and aspirations. Isabelle wanted to explore personal growth and development, incorporating self-care as an essential element in her journey of self-discovery	Youth Collaborator (YC) in pilot programme, <i>Becoming You</i>
Christian	18-year-old male who completed year 12	To explore various career paths and reimagine what success means, Christian mentioned a STEM family background juxtaposed with a desire to be an actor, showcasing a dynamic and evolving mindset in his pursuit of self-discovery	Youth Collaborator (YC) in pilot programme, <i>Becoming You</i>
Chloe F	18-year-old female who completed year 12	Chloe expressed a specific interest in art, especially painting. Chloe expressed a broader interest in activism for social change, indicating a commitment to making a positive impact beyond individual interests	Youth Collaborator (YC) in pilot programme, <i>Becoming You</i>
Costa	18-year-old male university student from Hellenic background who completed year 12	To connect with the Hellenic Museum and explore his Greek heritage. Costa's strong connections to specific paintings in the museum reflected a personal link to his family's history and cultural background	Youth Collaborator (YC) in pilot programme, <i>Becoming You</i>
Chloe H	18-year-old female first year university student in a law degree. She enjoys being creative (writing, acting and drawing/painting)	To meet new people and to learn valuable skills for the workplace, despite not being entirely sure of her career (co-design process) and guiding YCs' participation in the pilot programme	Youth Collaborator (YC) in co-design process and guide in pilot programme
Aisha	18-year-old with an African Australian background and her interests include many categories such as the arts and by that, it would be sketching, literature (poetry) and content creation	To participate in something new and learn more about herself and other people (co-design process) and to guide YCs' participation in the pilot programme	Youth Collaborator (YC) in co-design process and guide in pilot programme

Table 1 (continued)

Name	Background	Reason for joining YPAR	Roles
Patty	18-year-old vocational education student who completed unscored year 12. Patty is interested in gaming, hockey, catching up with friends, drawing and airsoft	To help young people make a better transition out of school (co-design process) and to guide YCs' participation in the pilot programme	Youth Collaborator (YC) in co-design process and guide in pilot programme
Carla	Middle-class Brazilian queer woman living in Australia. Experienced with YPAR and co-design, but new to field of post-secondary educational transition	Interest in co-creating knowledge with young people in the field of post-secondary education transition	Researcher
Juliana	Middle-class Australian-born woman who came to academia mid-career. Experience researching diversity and inclusion and educational transitions, but new to YPAR	Interest in empowerment of young people through education that transforms life opportunities by expanding what it is possible to imagine, do and become	Researcher
Bill	Grew up on a small farm east of Ballarat in Victoria. Over a decade spent teaching in schools in metropolitan Melbourne and in Oregon, USA. Extensive experience in teacher education, school partnerships and researching higher education	Interest in improving the status and quality of teaching and learning in schools and higher education	Researcher
Amy	Middle-class Australian woman who had eight years of experience in the education sector. First time working on a research project	As a project manager, Amy facilitated all sessions between YCs and SCs. Interest in youth-focused education	Project manager
Claire	Executive Director of AVID Center (Australia). Extensive experience in education policy, teacher professional learning and school improvement	Interest in improving the quality of education policy and the status and quality of teaching and learning	Project leader
Sarah	CEO and Head of Curation at the Hellenic Museum. Passion for Hellenism stemmed from deep interest in the philosophical and intellectual curiosity of the Ancient Greeks	Interest in promoting the role of the Museum as a learning organisation	Project leader

structure, pedagogies and teaching strategies, using insights based on critical consciousness about lived experiences of post-secondary life that developed during the co-design phase. One of the YCs suggested the programme's name, 'Becoming You', to represent the fluidity and complexity of such transitions (Luguetti et al., 2023a). Chloe H, Aisha and Patty acted as guides for the other young people and supported implementation of the pilot as well as its evaluation. Isabelle, Christian, Chloe F and Costa were recruited to pilot the co-designed programme.

The becoming you programme

The pilot of the *Becoming You* programme ran for six face-to-face sessions of three hours each (see Table 2). Co-designed by YCs and SCs to be interactive (Luguetti et al., 2023a), it had the intended learning outcomes of empowering young people to: (a) increase their understanding of the complexity inherent in any choice; (b) feel more empowered to explore life motivations; (c) increase confidence in talking about personal decisions; (d) increase ability to seek out and discover information about work, study and life options; and (e) increase ability to imagine and plan for a desired future.

As detailed in Table 2, the pilot programme was co-designed as a personal inquiry process where young people entering their post-secondary life could explore the question 'what comes next'? This reflected how YCs developed critical consciousness during the co-design process, coming to recognise post-secondary transitions as fluid and complex. In the pilot programme, YCs explored what they would like to achieve in the next few years before planning the next steps towards this imagined future. The first four weeks involved a series of interactive, guided activities. In the fourth session, YCs set themselves a challenge to complete over three weeks before returning to share their experiences and evaluate the programme in the final session. None of the YCs attended the fifth session at the time it was originally scheduled. Rather than seeing this as a lack of engagement, the SCs drew on our experiences and collective reflections about the different ways that young people participated in the co-design process, including fluctuations in engagement due to multiple competing priorities and commitments (see Luguetti et al., 2023b). This enabled us to respond flexibly. Amy (SC facilitator) followed up with the YCs and rescheduled the final session to a time that suited the YCs. All YCs and SCs subsequently attended the rescheduled final session. Table 2 provides an overview of the pilot programme.

Data collection included the following:

- a) *Observations collected as field notes.* Carla, Juliana and Bill wrote field notes after each collaborative session. Sessions 3 and 6 were also recorded and transcribed.
- b) *Project artefacts* including planning documents, graphic organisers and photographs.
- c) *Focus group with YCs and SCs* facilitated by Carla and Juliana. These explored barriers that facilitators encountered when piloting the co-designed transition experience, emotions experienced and learning throughout this process.

Table 2 Description of the *Becoming You* sessions

Session	Date	Outline	Focus
1	27th May	Self (Purpose) and others	This session focused on building relational capacity between SCs and YCs. YCs were introduced to the purpose of programme and what it offers and begin to consider their individual reason for participating
2	3rd June	Exploration	YCs considered the drivers, systems and motivations that impact their life and decisions. Beginning by examining the heroic myths of ancient Greece (<i>The Heroes Journey</i>), YCs considered how often we minimise life to a series of milestones
3	10th June	Discovery	YCs took part in a Socratic Seminar on a presented article, Hernandez, L., (2021, 7 November). <i>Unrecognised strengths. The power of being you</i> . They then completed a personal Investigation activity
4	24th June	What's the Next Step?	YCs participated in an elevator pitch activity focusing on introducing themselves to new opportunities. The conversation focused on the meaning and presentation of success and developing a person's understanding of what success is. YCs set themselves a challenge to complete over a 3-week break
3 weeks break			
5	15th July	Evolution	No YCs attended the set session. The session was rescheduled at a time to suit YCs
6	22nd July	Evolution (Take Two) and Evaluation	YCs were given a space to present their individual challenges and evaluate the <i>Becoming You</i> programme. All YCs from the previous session attended, presented and participated in the evaluation with all the SCs

Data analysis involved ongoing dialogue between YCs and SCs and was informed by a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). We held two meetings of YCs and SCs to discuss and co-construct themes. Our initial analysis was inductive. At our first meeting, we discussed the themes that we had identified from the final focus groups. YCs and SCs read transcripts individually, discussed their themes in pairs and then shared with the whole group. Afterwards, Juliana and Carla developed a written summary of what they interpreted as key points. They shared this in the second data analysis meeting, asking YCs for their interpretations and whether there were any important points missing. In conversation, the YCs confirmed that the broad themes made sense to them as a starting point. Between meetings, Carla and Juliana wrote an interpretive narrative based on YC and SC discussions. They began to note some connections with the conceptualisation of transition as becoming (Gale & Parker, 2014; Gravett, 2021; Gravett & Winstone, 2021a, 2021b). Reflexive thematic analysis can be used with compatible guiding theory (Braun & Clarke, 2021). From this point, we used the conceptualisation of transition as becoming to frame the analysis and co-construct the findings presented below.

Findings

We co-constructed two key themes from our data: (1) *recognising and vocalising transition as becoming* and (2) *empowering young people as change makers through critical consciousness and praxis*.

‘I want to scream it from the rooftops now [...] there are other pathways’: Recognising and vocalising transition as becoming

In the first theme, we discuss how YCs vocalised and applied understandings of transition as a diverse and fluid process of becoming to make sense of their prior experiences and imagined future lives:

It’s taking those opportunities you never thought you would do before and realising just because you’re 18 and they expect you to make a decision now doesn’t mean you have to [...] you’re going to go through life and you’re going to go through life experiences like a roller coaster; like it’s never a straight line. And I think in life we should appreciate that it’s not a straight line. We should appreciate that life is going to give you happy memories, sad memories, you know, challenges, triumphs, where you’re putting in the work for yourself to figure out what you want to do [...] You have avenues to change. You don’t have a single linear straight line is amazing (Isabelle, interview).

And I want to scream it from the rooftops now [...] there are other pathways, there are other ways to do this and there are other ways that you can move forward [...] And especially like in the creative scene, like there are so many things coming out now [...] I’m glad that I kind of realised that there’s more than one path (Chloe F, interview).

I've learned that there's more to life or more to your end of high school than just your gap, your VCE [year 12 certificate]. There's also people out there to help those people. They're for you and they will help with this. [...] my ATAR [numeric Australian Tertiary Admission Rank] isn't going to define me. [...] I discovered the data wouldn't benefit me or wouldn't define me and my life because I wasn't good at doing textbook stuff. I wasn't good at the theoretical stuff. Practical things are what I thoroughly enjoyed [...] Also, stress throughout my VCE life was a big problem. The family didn't really help with that but being able to realise that an unscored VCE is a lot easier to do (Patty, interview).

Isabelle used the metaphor of a rollercoaster to vocalise a new understanding of transition after secondary school. Understanding that trajectories after school are not linear allowed her to be more confident in making decisions and changing them when necessary. For Chloe F, seeing the possibility of multiple pathways gave her confidence to explore her passion for art. She also wanted to share this insight with others. Patty also showed new confidence in constructing their identity through critiques of dominant markers such as university entrance scores.

The YCs acknowledged multiple experiences, critiquing the typical social focus on short-term, practical strategies to promote 'success' (e.g. ATAR, making decisions quickly and treating all areas as the same). YCs came to construct transition as a more fluid and enduring component of learning. This reconceptualisation of transition also allowed YCs to critique how social processes and schooling can constrain understandings and experiences of transition. Building understandings based on YCs' lived experiences was central to recognising and vocalising transition as becoming. For example, SCs and YCs worked on 'journey mapping' to story different lived experiences after secondary school. This qualitative approach portrays lived experiences as a social text, capturing both temporal and spatial dimensions (see Fig. 1).

As described by Patty (YC), Bill (SC) and Carla (SC), Fred's story offers one representation of the complexities of transition. For Fred, transition was not smooth. Guided by Patty's creativity, Fred became a symbol of the collective wisdom and experiences of the YCs and a representation of the complexities and fluidity of the transition experience faced by young people. Patty's unique approach to creating Fred, without a pre-defined goal, added a layer of authenticity to the character. Similarly, the YCs talked about how they learned to critique dominant understandings of 'success' and how schooling had constructed their decisions and choices:

Christian: one of the main things is something I took from the third session, which was I define success as achievement-based because that's the way my school has programmed me to think of success. What you mentioned at the very end of the last session was that if it's a valuable experience and you've learned something from it, then you have succeeded. If you have changed and developed in some way and you now have a new perspective on the world around you and how you fit into it or something like that, then you have succeeded. That is an achievement, and you can be proud of yourself after that.

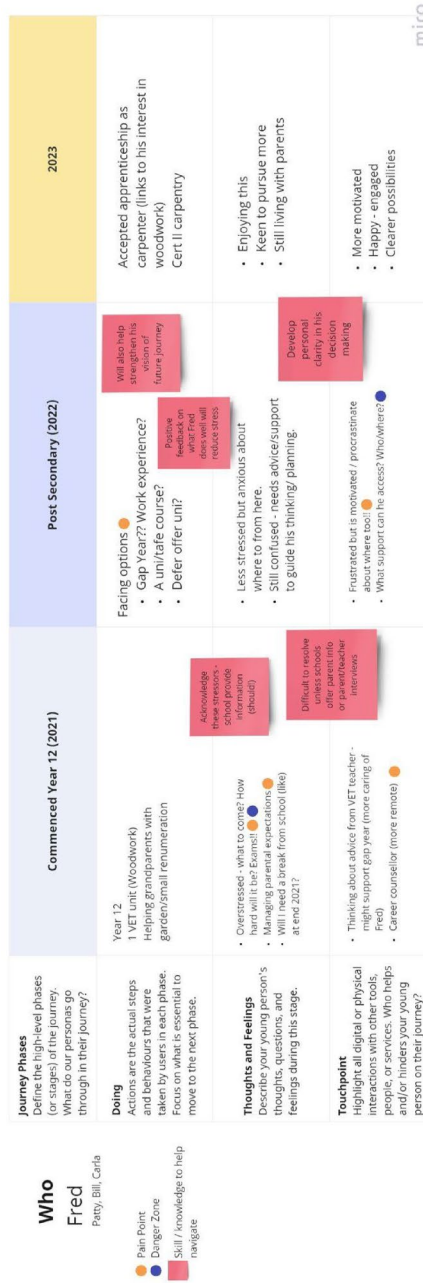


Fig. 1 Example of a persona created by youth collaborators and staff collaborators using journey mapping

Isabelle: I think this whole course did that. Once you break down the walls that society had created for us young people. It's like a dam; without that the water is actually allowed to flow through, and you're allowed to have individual thoughts that might break against the current. You're able to actually decide for yourself and not just do what everyone either wants you to do or what's expected of you. You're able to actually form and take the steps to create your own life [...] So having people tell me, and people I can look up to, especially, like Amy and the other collaborators, you earn their trust and respect, and you see them as human beings and they see you as a human being [...] *Becoming You* helps you figure out what you want, but also you guys taught me not to be so hard on myself. Even presenting a project I was so nervous because all I saw was that it wasn't done and you guys were, 'Wow, it was pretty, it was so well-informed'. I should treat myself like that. I should have a piece of all of you in me and feel like that and tell myself these things and not just vomit up what society is telling me, which is to hate yourself or judge yourself, or not value your own accomplishments. (Focus groups).

For Christian, the *Becoming You* program helped him to learn how 'school has programmed him' and how he needs to resignify what success means. He emphasised how the dominant social understanding of success and constructions of post-school pathways as linear were barriers that he faced and came to understand how to negotiate during the *Becoming You* program. For Isabelle, the program created a space where she could recognise social processes shaping dominant constructions of trajectories after school, allowing her to think for herself instead of only responding to others' expectations.

Emotions appeared strongly in YCs' reflections on what they had learned during the pilot program:

Becoming You gives school leavers a chance to review and use introspection to really discover what they want to do, what their passion is, and then how to properly align that with, you know, something practical in the future or in the industry itself. Because that's what finding a career is all about [...] and *Becoming You* really gives you the [...] resources and the necessary requirements that you need to make that evaluation of your future and plan for it in a really constructive way. (Christian, interview)

When I was leaving school, I felt incredibly nervous but also very, very excited. And I knew that that thing wasn't going to be Uni, so there was a bit of anxiety around that. [...] I'm so glad that I took the time [...] I'm allowing myself to figure out who I am [...] I think that a lot of people just never take that time. And, like, if I don't take it now, then I know that I'm going to be so busy with being alive that I might never [...] reach that point of connection with myself. [...] So I'm proud of myself for doing that. (Chloe F)

I think I've realised once again; I wasn't alone in not knowing what I wanted to do. Like the first session I sat down, all the other youth collaborators were kind of like, Yeah, we don't really know what we're doing either. And some of the staff collaborators were also like, Yeah, I'm not really sure what I want to do. Still, like, you know, I've gone through all these differ-

ent careers [...] I think I've learned that I'm not alone and that was really important for me to learn. (Chloe H, interview)

Within a safe space, SCs and YCs could be emotionally open, voicing their diverse perspectives and experiences of transition. In the process, they realised that they were not alone in trying to understand the complexity of transition. By sharing difficult emotions, YCs came to see that discomfort can be an essential component of learning. This insight enabled YCs to see transition as a transformative experience, rather than as a problem needing resolution (Gravett, 2021). By engaging with transition as complex and potentially troublesome, YCs expressed new confidence to construct success on their own terms and see transition as an ongoing process of becoming, rather than a linear path towards a set destination. They reconstructed this process in terms of constant adaptation, alteration and self-investigation.

SCs also modelled emotional openness in engaging with each other, as one YC reflected:

[T]he reason we felt so safe enough to be open with everyone else is that you guys were open with us. I remember one of the first sessions when we were going through, we were doing our mind maps, not only did we have the time to organise our own life, but Amy you shared, and I remember it was very pivotal. I was, wow, I'm not scared to share. I'm not nervous if I haven't accomplished enough from my age because you were reinforcing the fact that it's okay to not want to go to Uni. It's okay to hate what you're doing and then change. And especially since, you guys all shared your mindset with us participants, I felt safe enough to actually share my story [...] I know a lot of people my age, a lot of adults, I don't really trust a lot of people. So, being able to learn to give me up like this in front of all of you guys helps me learn all of the lessons of *Becoming You* [...] But that was because of the relationships and the foundation you provided us participants. (Isabelle, Focus groups)

By being willing to take risks and be vulnerable, SCs and YCs created a space where openness was welcomed.

'I actually can go out and change the world and build something good for myself': Empowering young people as change makers through praxis

In this theme, we present how critical consciousness and praxis empowered young people as change makers in the *Becoming You* programme. Through action and reflection, the YCs learned to better articulate their feelings and gain confidence:

I feel like I can be resourceful if I can. I learned that [...]I've somehow unlocked the independent side of me coming here every Friday. So, it's yeah, you really, it really helps you become more productive and your time more organised and I know we're confident. Yeah, more confident as well. Like, yeah, it's, it really enhances your social skills [...]. (Aisha, interview)

Reflecting on the experience of the co-designed *Becoming You* programme, Aisha expressed growing confidence and social skills through engagement with others. Chloe F and Christian shared how they gained confidence in their own decisions:

Chloe F: I came in with a lot of big emotions about what I wanted my future to feel like, but in terms of narrowing it down and envisioning it, *Becoming You* has helped a lot and also, made it seem tangible. Like, something that I would be able to reach as opposed to the future never really comes, it just kind of appears as the present, and understanding that and getting to a point where I felt confident enough in my ideas [...] I feel like, yeah, I actually can go out and change the world and build something good for myself and reach and connect with people, which is what I want to do.

Christian: I think, my next step is investigating all of my options confidently. So, having the courage to actually go out, talk to people who know more about my industry than I do and answer the questions that I want to answer in the future by simply reviewing all my sources of information and taking full advantage of all the resources that I can find myself and that's a very active process as well. You can't sit back and comfortably find these answers. It's all about taking action and taking initiative.

Amy: And you feel confident in taking that step?

Christian: I do. I think I do. I feel confident enough to take responsibility for my own investigation and honestly optimistic about it as well now, which is really positive. (Focus groups)

Chloe F and Christian described how they learned to reflect on and explore possibilities for action. Using the verb 'investigate', Christian emphasised action that requires courage as well as focus. Being confident and understanding themselves as 'a work in progress' was important for the YCs as they learned to investigate their options and identify actions that they could take to create change. Confidence, in this context, led to empowerment:

It felt like it was the first kind of space where I felt like I was in control and that my opinion was really valued in a way that they really like. Yeah, we want to help you. We want to help you grow and we don't care if you disagree with us. Please let us know what you think, which is something that can be sorely missing in [...] higher education. It can feel cold and, like, a little bit detached, but [the programme] was very much, it was a personal sort of thing, and everyone was really nice, which is great. Always good to enter into a space and for everyone to be friendly. It really makes all the difference. (Chloe F)

I really like the co-design method. I think it's important [...] especially when looking at making something for a specific person. So, if you're making something for young people, young people need to be involved in the process. They're the ones using it, so why not involve them in the process? I think that's why it's really important [...]. (Chloe H)

Chloe H and Chloe F mentioned how they took ownership of the program within a space where disagreement was welcomed and collective action could

What is Becoming you?
 What are you becoming? What will become of you? What do you want to become?

The simple questions everyone asks of us, that we fail to ask ourselves. The ones that carry the weight of life's purpose, but don't receive the consideration they deserve.

Becoming you is an association in collegiate with Victoria University, AVID Australia, and the Hellenic Museum dedicated to the assistance of students beginning the transition into the next stages of their lives. It aims to reduce limiting misconceptions, including us to help us to explore the pathway post secondary school.

Don't allow others to dictate your path. Instead it's time to focus on becoming you!

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Resources

BECOMING YOU: Survival Guide to life after school
 VICTORIA UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA
 AVID AUSTRALIA
 Hellenic Museum
 The Youth Collaborative of Becoming You
 Log created by Amy Howard

FAQ'S

- How do I motivate myself to find my passions?
 Motivation naturally when passion is involved. Switch off technology and other instant sources of gratification to discover what you are interested in. Join us to begin the investigation.
- What does the Becoming You mean?
 Becoming you aims to challenge stereotypes/ your own internal preconceptions that place societal norms on you. It is a cutter and a path to discover what you truly want to do. Once liberated from these, the course aims to offer the skills and support necessary to investigate every option unimpeded.

TIPS AND TRICKS

- As long as you have the passion and will to find out, you'll end up where you are supposed to.
- Patience will find the answer to your questions quicker than the fear of failure or uncertainty.
- Passion isn't the absence of hard work, but rather the ability to keep pushing when nothing is worth working for.
- Invest time into you, the only person that you can't replace. What you enjoy is to put effort and consideration into it. If you feel like you only find things that you don't like, you are one step closer to realising what truly matters to you.
- Knowing what you wanna do is hard... knowing what you don't want to do is progress.
- Don't sacrifice passion for practicality, or vice versa. The world isn't an ultimatum.

THINGS TO ASK YOURSELF

- What do you most value about yourself?
- What are my skills?
- What mentally drains me?
- What stresses me out?
- What are my core values in life right now?
- Is this my opinion or someone else's?
- What type of pace and energy do you thrive in?
- What spaces or communities do you feel happiest and most fulfilled in?
- What are my most important needs and desires? Does my present life fulfill them?
- What's one thing I would like to do more of and why?

Fig. 2 Pamphlet co-designed by YCs

take place. For example, the YCs decided to present something about the *Becoming You* program at the Victoria University Open Day and co-designed a 'survival guide' to hand out on the day (see Fig. 2).

The YCs felt empowered to help other young people to navigate the complexities of the transition. This emphasised how the *Becoming You* programme created a space where YCs felt empowered as change makers. Ongoing praxis (action and reflection) was essential in this process.

Discussion

Our findings show how YCs learned to critique dominant identity markers and constructions of success beyond secondary school. For example, Isabelle and Chloe F used youth-defined metaphors (Jun Fu, 2023) of 'rollercoaster' and 'other pathways' to construct alternative trajectories. Patty, Christian and Isabelle reconstructed 'success' on their own terms, challenging university entrance as the dominant measure (Jaremus et al., 2023). In the process, they reflected on their lived experiences to identify what mattered to them, referring to a range of priorities and relationships that go beyond the conventional focus on education and employment after secondary school (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014). The YCs demonstrated awareness of social processes and structural constraints (including expectations of family and schooling) alongside a growing sense of agency (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014). This involved emotional work by the YCs to make sense of their lives in relation to a turning point (Aaltonen, 2013). *Becoming You* offered the YCs a space in which they could reconceptualise transition on their own terms, as *becoming* (Gale & Parker, 2014; Gravett, 2021), to negotiate post-secondary school options and 'own' their decisions.

Empowered by their reconceptualisation of transitions after secondary school, the YCs wanted to share their insights with other young people. The 'survival guide' (Fig. 2), co-designed to support other young people navigate the complexities of transition after school, represented the praxis of understanding social injustices and working towards action. Freire's work emphasises that critical consciousness is the important initial stage of transformation when we begin to think critically about ourselves and our identities in relation to our political circumstances, e.g. by recognising subtle forms of oppression in our classrooms such as racism, sexism, homophobia, classism and ableism. In that sense, critical consciousness leads students and teachers to take action (praxis) and transform or negotiate their oppressed condition (Freire, 1987). Praxis was also an essential element in this process. Liberation is a praxis embedded in education: 'the action and reflection of students and teacher upon their world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1987, p. 48). For Freire, education and becoming are also entangled and ongoing human processes. Critical consciousness and praxis are fundamentally opposed to authoritarian pedagogic practice whereby teachers simply deposit information into their students, serving as an instrument of social reproduction (Darder, 2017; Freire, 1987). This banking concept of education reflects a deficit view of students as passive objects with little, if any, autonomy or ability to construct and conceptualise knowledge (Freire, 1987; hooks, 1994).

The concept of praxis, as illuminated by various youth studies literature on post-secondary transitions, became a crucial and transformative framework for understanding the complexities of young people's lives (Harris, 2015; Jaremus et al., 2023; Roberts, 2011). Harris (2015) introduced the lens of 'youth citizenship,' highlighting the significance of everyday practices, social participation and recognition in shaping transitions. By embracing citizenship perspectives, Harris (2015) acknowledged the unpredictability of contemporary life courses and the need for new frameworks that consider praxis (action and reflection) that go beyond traditional markers of adulthood. Jaremus et al. (2023) provided a valuable connection by emphasising the role of informal, youth-led networks in promoting participation, belonging and recognition, aligning with the notion of praxis as an empowering force for change. Roberts (2011) challenged the narrow focus of UK youth policies and introduced the concept of the 'missing middle' in youth transitions, reinforcing the idea that praxis is essential for understanding a broad range of youth experiences beyond conventional pathways. The diverse perspectives presented in our study and in these studies collectively underscore the relevance and necessity of praxis in understanding post-secondary transition, urging a shift from rigid, linear frameworks to more dynamic and participatory approaches that acknowledge the multifaceted nature of young people's lives.

In this study, SCs shared their emotions with the YCs and it helped to create an open and safe space where wholeness was welcomed. Radical wholeness (hooks, 1994) was an essential element in facilitating young people's learning. hooks (1994) advocates a pedagogy of 'wholeness, a union of mind, body and spirit', stating that this insight was instrumental in overcoming the conventional Western academic belief that 'a classroom was diminished if students and professors regarded one another as 'whole' human beings' (pp. 14–15). hooks (2009) calls on educators to commit to a process of spiritual healing that incorporates the realisation of the self in relation to others. This means that adults must be willing to bring their whole selves, to grow, take risks and be vulnerable, becoming empowered and empowering others in the process. Similarly, Aaltonen's (2013) exploration of the role of agency and emotions in transitions underlined the importance of praxis in empowering young people to navigate institutional constraints and construct their identities.

Our study offers an alternative to a discourse, in education policy and some literature on educational transitions, of transition from secondary school as a homogenous and linear process in which young people lack agency (Gale & Parker, 2014; Gravett, 2021; Gravett & Winstone, 2021a, 2021b). The dominance of this discourse is evident in the fact that very little educational research in the transition area is being conducted *with* young people. On the contrary, most research has been done *on* young people (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Broadbent & Cacciattolo, 2013; Vernon et al., 2019). Consequently, young people tend to lack agency in this space; many are silenced and their life experiences are invisible (Shay et al., 2022).

In reflecting on a YPAR approach (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Desai, 2019; Luguetti et al., 2017), we present a more empowering perspective on practising and researching transition after secondary school. This acknowledges complexities and invites young people to participate as co-researchers and agents of change. However, it is important to note that YCs were not involved in all the research cycles in

the present study. Unlike the YCs in the first phase of the YPAR, the participants in *Becoming You* had not been involved in co-design of the pilot programme. Even so, YCs and SCs created a democratic space where YCs' knowledge was acknowledged, and this contributed to framing post-secondary transition as diverse and fluid.

We also seek to broaden the application of transition as becoming to spaces beyond higher education. Transition is an everyday event in diverse places and spaces (Quinn, 2010). In considering transition as becoming with post-secondary school students, we emphasised the ongoing changes, transformations and back-and-forward movements experienced by young people (Gale & Parker, 2014). This offers an alternative to the deficit view that young people are problematic if they do not desire the university pathway promoted via the 'neoliberal imaginary' (Gale, 2014). A co-design process allowed us to better explore the diverse possibilities in post-secondary transition with young people.

Understanding transition as becoming enables us to collectively make sense of the diverse ways we engaged in a fluid and dynamic process of co-construction. Our findings emphasise the benefits of greater openness and flexibility, by educators and in educational institutions, to mirror being and becoming as fluctuating experiences, rather than trying to subjugate flux with rigidity (Quinn, 2010). Our findings also show the value of YPAR for fostering critical consciousness and praxis that enable enactment of the ongoing and intertwined relationship between education and becoming that Freire envisaged (1987).

We intend to explore a more diverse cohort of youth collaborators in the future studies. We acknowledge that diverse cohorts could bring richer insights into the social injustices prevalent in the area and allow us to reimagine a new future through hope and imagination. Additionally, a more diverse cohort would foster a sense of representation and empowerment among young people who may have been historically marginalised or under-represented. This approach aligns with the principles of critical consciousness and praxis, as it acknowledges the importance of amplifying the voices of all young people and co-creating knowledge that reflects the tapestry of their experiences. Through this commitment to diversity, we aspire to cultivate a collaborative space that encourages dialogue, understanding and collective action in navigating the multifaceted nature of post-secondary transitions.

Authors' contributions All authors contributed to the conception and design of this youth participatory action research (YPAR) and the manuscript. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by JR, CL and BE. Data interpretation was performed by JR, CL, BE, AH, AO and CH. The draft of the manuscript was prepared by JR and CL and all authors provided input into at least one draft. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Declarations

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