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Youth-championing research-practice collaboration as vehicle for collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship: Insights from an exploratory study with four schools in the Western Cape, South Africa

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Abstract

In educational research, interest in collaborative research strategies including research-practice partnerships (RPPs), research-practice collaborations (RPCs) and related approaches has grown significantly over the past decade, expanding beyond RPPs initial roots in the US to an increasingly global footprint. Yet many questions remain about how to engage in collaborative educational research as well as the benefits, 'impact', and relevance of doing so for all parties involved. The South African context is one of many - outside the US, UK, and other emerging hot spots - where the potential of these approaches has only been explored sporadically. The core focus of this proof of principle study is how enabling, hospitable spaces for collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship (CKD&S) can be fostered through RPCs with schools in the Western Cape, SA. RPC is defined as a concept that is closely related to RPPs yet distinct in potentially valuable ways in terms of key challenges that have been identified around the significant investments such partnerships demand. The thesis narrates and interprets four emergent, youth-championing RPCs with schools that ran in parallel over the first two terms of 2023. These RPCs centred on the collaborative prototyping of a developmental intervention for learners in key transitional grades in the SA education system. Drawing on the perspectives of school leaders, staff as well as over 200 learners, the potential of RPCs as vehicles for fostering enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S that are tailored to context, allow for differentiated collaborator engagement as well as flexible, distributed, servant leadership, is considered. The discussion augments broader deliberations in the literature on the formative potential of RPCs for researchers and practitioners, as well how the value and transferability of these collaborative research strategies may be assessed. A proposal for first prototype heuristic to support clearer conversations around CKD&S activities is outlined.

Service and stewardship statement

This thesis contributes to the discourse on the potential of collaborative research strategies including research-practice collaboration (RPC) and the related research-practice partnership (RPP) as vehicles for collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship (CKD&S). Specifically, it explores how enabling, hospitable spaces may be fostered for CKD&S in schools and similar contexts through RPCs that intentionally engage and champions young people as key collaborators.

What I/we did

- I worked with four schools in the Western Cape, SA over six months in 2023 on a series of interconnected, emergent youth-championing RPCs.
- Together with school leaders, staff and over 200 learners, a developmental intervention for learners in key transitional grades of the SA education system was collaboratively prototyped. The intervention focused on questions of identity, purpose, and their interplay with learning as well as the school as key learning space.
- Formative and summative feedback was collected from school leaders, staff, and learners about the collaborative process, which was triangulated with researcher fieldwork notes and process documentation captured over the six-month period. These qualitative data were interpreted using narrative, reflexive thematic analysis.
- The overall process is narrated and interpreted in this thesis, drawing on triangulated qualitative data as well as theoretical triangulation.
- Based on the collaborative prototyping process an optimised toolkit of exercises was collated and aligned with the Life Orientation curriculum for the General Education and Training phase in the SA education system.

What is, or will be, different because of it

For the collaborators in the four schools

- The prototyping of the developmental intervention was designed to be a beneficial end in itself for the young people who engaged with the process as participant-collaborators. Based on their summative feedback, I am confident in asserting that contributing to the process was beneficial for the overwhelming majority of learners.

- The school leaders and staff who collaborated on the process described being motivated by offering their learners the opportunity to engage in reflection on questions of identity, purpose, and their interplay with learning particularly in the school context. The formative and summative feedback from these collaborators confirmed that they all believed the process had been beneficial for the learners in their school.

- The optimised toolkit was not actively socialised in the collaborating schools as part of the RPCs, but these four organisations have first access to it and conversations are ongoing about opportunities for further collaboration on potentially anchoring it in classroom practice.

For educational and social researchers

- The study builds on, and addresses, specific unpursued opportunities in the empirical and theoretical literature on RPCs, RPPs and related collaborative strategies through the narration and interpretation of four RPCs. It highlights key conceptual connections and differences between RPPs and RPCs and considers how these strategies may mutually enrich one another based on empirically (and theoretically) anchored, context-specific insights.

- The engagement of young people as key collaborators in the four RPCs presents a pioneering approach to be built on in future research.

- The focus on the formative potential of RPCs for researchers, particularly in the context of a PhD as an apprenticeship, engages with emphases in the literature about actively equipping researchers to harness these approaches.

- The study frames RPPs, RPCs and related approaches in terms of a broader imperative of CKD&S, a lens that further allows for exploration of commonalities across these different approaches.

- The study presents a novel augmentation of literature on spatialising education with Mason's understanding of "the atmosphere of environment", the concept of hospitality and the theory of enabling spaces to explore how enabling, hospitable spaces may be fostered for CKD&S.

- The thesis also engages with the general silence in social scientific methodological and philosophical literature on how a research philosophy anchored in a Christian metaphysic may be congruently operationalised as part of a narrative, collaborative research methodology.

Across epistemic communities

- A first prototype of a multidimensional, dialogic heuristic is developed based on the work with the four schools, as a tool to support clearer conversations about potential or ongoing collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship activities. The heuristic, which is a central contribution of the proof of principle study presented in this thesis, is framed for use by researchers, practitioners as well as other epistemic communities that operate at the intersections of these broad, heterogenous groupings.

Why it is important

When it comes to collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship across epistemic communities, everyone agrees in principle that this is a fruitful way of working but questions about how to do this, as well as how to navigate the practical, epistemological and ethical implications of doing so, are reflected in a range of unpursued opportunities in the existing literature in education research. This study contributes to engaging with some of these opportunities in ways that seek to be of service to researchers and practitioners by highlighting learning about "the how" - drawn from active collaboration in schools - and translating key insights into a first proposal for a practical conversational tool that allows these, and other epistemic communities, to count the cost of collaboration before diving in.

Lead researcher

Margaretha Magdalena (Magriet) Cruywagen

The author has opted to reframe the traditional impact statement in terms of stewardship and service in keeping with the thesis' foundational emphasis on an ethic of service and stewarding knowledge across different epistemic communities.

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All figures or visualisations included in this dissertation were developed and designed by the author. Any references that are cited below figures or visualisations are included as they informed aspects of the content.

Acknowledgements

Jesu, Juva | Soli Deo Gloria

I am grateful to have called the University of Glasgow, with its motto *Via, Veritas, Vita*, my intellectual home while I worked on this project.

A big thank you to the four school communities who opened their doors to me and gave this project several collaborative homes. To the school leaders, staff and learners who worked with me – thank you for your hospitality, time, energy, creativity, and trust. None of this would have been possible without you.

Author's declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature:

Printed name: Margaretha Magdalena (Magriet) Cruywagen

Abbreviations and acronyms

As a rule, the concepts, names, organisations and/or titles below will be written out once at the top of each chapter - with a reference to the corresponding abbreviation or acronym - after which the abbreviation or acronym will be used in the interest of brevity.

ANA	Annual National Assessments
CKD&S	Collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship
DBE	Department of Basic Education
GET	General Education and Training
Gr.	Grade
HoD	House of Delegate schools
HoR	House of Representative schools
MC	Ministerial Committee
MTT	Ministerial Task Team
NEEDU	National Education Evaluation and Development Unit
NSC	National Senior Certificate
OBE	Outcomes Based Education
PEER	Practice embedded educational research
PED	Provincial Education Department
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
RPC	Research-practice collaboration
RPP	Research-practice partnership
SA	South Africa
SACMEQ	Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality
SADTU	South African Democractic Teachers Union
SGB	School governing bodies
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
US	United States of America
WCED	Western Cape Education Department

CHAPTER 1 | NARRATING and INTERPRETING an EMERGENT, COLLABORATIVE JOURNEY

Preamble

Who am I? Why am I here? What do I need for my life journey?

In the first six months of 2023, I explored these questions with over 200 young people in the Western Cape (South Africa). During this collaborative process another question emerged, drawing them all together: *What's my story?* A question that bids us to look back and reflect on our journey to date, consider how we are unfolding in the present, and, what this may look like in the future. The young people I worked with were key collaborators in a project that sought to champion their experiences and perspectives by fostering an enabling, hospitable space in which they could grapple with questions of being and becoming.

The process of formation and knowledge discovery I have gone through as a social researcher, which has cemented a commitment to work *with* people not *on* or *about* them, would not have been possible without the generous, hospitable engagement of the learners, teachers and school leaders who chose to work with me, who invited me into their schools and chose to trust me with their time, perspectives and experiences. The enabling, hospitable spaces that were fostered for collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship (CKD&S) are their handiwork as much as mine.

I have made every effort to honour their generosity and dignity as complex, creative human persons who cannot be comprehensively represented by any narrative I hope to articulate. The study interpreted and narrated in this thesis is best understood as a learning journey during which I have scratched the surface of CKD&S, explored through research-practice collaboration (RPC), and articulated several insights and questions about how collaborative research strategies might enrich the practice of social researchers.

1.1 Introduction

This thesis narrates and interprets four interconnected, emergent, youth-championing RPCs with two primary and two secondary ordinary, fee-paying, public schools in the Metro East District of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) in the first half of the 2023 school year. The mode of delivery of the developmental intervention at the core of these collaborations varied across the schools as the approach was adapted to fit varying contextual constraints, priorities, and opportunities. The intervention was prototyped as an

embedded activity, with all schools opting to have it run during the school day, and as such school leaders and staff were also essential collaborators.

The learners who participated in the intervention were guided through a series of activities prompting individual, and collaborative reflection on questions of identity, purpose, and their interplay with the school as a key learning space. Beyond merely participating in the intervention, they were invited to share verbal and written feedback about their experiences that centrally informed the intervention's ongoing optimisation for their context. In narrating and interpreting the collaborative process, their feedback – as well as that of school leaders and staff – augments the observations and reflections I captured in my fieldwork notes.

In the design of the developmental intervention, as well as the interpretation of the emergent, youth-championing RPCs, I drew on the theory of enabling spaces (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b, 2014a, 2016, 2017) , which was augmented by key insights about the spatialisation of education as well as the concept of hospitality (Bretherton, 2004, 2016; Smith, 2024) and educationalist, Charlotte Mason's twenty principles (Mason, 2019; Mason, 1925). In the narrative, reflexive thematic analysis, these were triangulated with a set of overarching factors of collaborative working (Patel et al., 2012), as well as a selection of concepts for collaborative engagement.

The other collaborators and I proceeded in an iterative manner in optimising the developmental intervention so that it was fit for purpose in different school settings (Ashton et al., 2020; Buchanan, 1992; Hawkins et al., 2017; Lewrick et al., 2018). Each iteration was also harnessed as an opportunity to learn about how the intervention, and its individual elements, could be adapted to more effectively engage young people, maximise benefit for them (Bettencourt, 2020; Morrow, 2008; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Skelton, 2008), and, wherever possible, add value to school communities through curricular and/or strategic alignment (Pendlebury and Enslin, 2001; Riley, 2013; Ebersöhn, 2015).

This thesis explores the potential of RPC as a vehicle for CKD&S in school contexts. It also unpacks how a project that initially sought to centre collaborative inquiry with young people, expanded to integrate valuable learning that emerged through ongoing collaboration with school leaders, staff and learners. Given the emergent nature of the RPCs, the findings presented in this thesis are best understood as a first proof of principle for the potential of RPCs in fostering enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S (Kendig, 2016). In this chapter I outline the study's key catalysts and purpose as well as the research

questions, objectives, foundations, and assumptions that have anchored and framed the process. In conclusion, a roadmap for the rest of the thesis is delineated.

1.2 Responding to UNESCO's International Commission on the Futures of Education's new report Education in a post-COVID world: Nine ideas for public action

UNESCO's International Commission on the Futures of Education drafted a report on education in a post-COVID world outlining nine ideas to navigate the pandemic and its effects. The Commission issued an invitation to young people and stakeholders at all levels to debate, engage with and act on the ideas. The project chronicled in this thesis is - among other things - a response to that invitation, focusing on three of the ideas outlined in the report (UNESCO 2020):

1. Prioritising the **direct involvement of young people** in the reimagining and transformation of the education system.

Nine out of ten young people in the world live in low- and middle-resource countries (World Economic Forum 2020). This thesis focuses on a series of RPCs that sought to champion the perspectives, experiences, and potential of young people in the SA context (Wallace 2015, World Bank 2021).

2. Valuing the profession of teaching as well as teacher collaboration and fostering "conditions that **give frontline educators autonomy and flexibility to act collaboratively**."

Although the RPCs are framed as youth-championing, school leaders and staff were essential collaborators in the process, and the interpretation of the learning that emerged through the process highlights both the importance of engaging school staff as collaborators *and* facilitating conditions that support them to collaborate on projects or initiatives that add value in their immediate context.

3. Acknowledging **the importance of schools as social spaces** that have an integral role to play in the transformation of education.

Four schools provided the context for the emergent, youth-championing RPCs I narrate and interpret in this thesis. The collaborative process would not have been possible without the existence of these dynamic, multi-dimensional, relational space-times.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The overarching purpose of the study is to investigate the potential of youth-championing RPC as a vehicle for CKD&S in schools. It extends our understanding of RPC as a collaborative research strategy with many important points of connection and cross-pollination with approaches including RPP and others. Specifically, it explores the potential of taking a youth-championing approach to RPC, crystallising insights that are pertinent in the SA context but also raise important questions for researchers and practitioners who may wish to employ similar approaches in other contexts. The study examines how RPCs can be harnessed to work closely with schools on projects that encompass research and developmental dimensions in ways that are adapted to the needs, priorities, capacity, and constraints of schools as well as the different collaborators that are engaged in and through them.

1.4 Research questions

This study explores the following overarching research question as well as three related sub-questions:

Research question 1 (RQ1): How can enabling, hospitable spaces for collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship. (CKD&S) be fostered through emergent, youth-championing research practice collaborations (RPCs) with four public, fee-paying schools in the Metro East District (Western Cape, SA)?

- **Research question 1A (RQ1A):** How can these RPCs, and the developmental intervention at their core, be adapted and optimised for each school context based on their needs, priorities, capacity, and constraints?
- **Research question 1B (RQ1B):** How can the developmental intervention be harnessed to work with young people in key transitional grades (Grade 7 and 9) to explore their lived definitions of identity and purpose as well as their interplay with learning and the school as a key learning space?
- **Research question 1C (RQ1C):** How can the value and transferability of this emergent model of youth-championing RPC be interpreted drawing on qualitative data collected across the four collaboration sites?

1.5 Objectives

In interpreting and narrating the emergent RPCs, the study's research questions informed six objectives:

- Develop and prototype a youth-championing developmental intervention in four public, fee-paying schools in the Metro East District (Western Cape, SA). Harness the intervention to explore questions of identity and purpose, as well as their interplay with the school as a key learning space, with young people in key transitional grades (Grade 7 and 9).

- Adapt and optimise the intervention for each of the four school contexts – two Primary Schools and two Secondary Schools – through research-practice collaboration (RPC).

- Develop and employ a narrative, reflexive thematic analytic framework to interpret the value and transferability of the emergent RPCs drawing on qualitative data collected across the four schools, as well as theoretical triangulation.

- Formulate and critically discuss findings from the four schools about the potential and limitations of RPC to foster enabling spaces for CKD&S in schools and similar organisations.

- Prototype evidence-informed, transferable tools and resources based on the RPCs for use in the four schools and others.

- Articulate the study's contributions and implications for different epistemic communities (researchers, practitioners, policymakers), specifically related to the implementation and interpretation of (youth-championing) RPCs with schools and other similar organisations.

1.6 Foundations, assumptions, and framing principles

The study's philosophical and conceptual foundations are outlined in the next chapter. The following assumptions and principles have also framed the investigation:

- A research design and strategy that centres collaboration across epistemic communities (school leaders, staff, learners) will be more effective and ethical than extractive research strategies (Bettencourt, 2020; Collier, 2019; Henry and Tait, 2016) in engaging schools and discovering knowledge relevant and beneficial to the different collaborators in these contexts. Youth-championing RPC, as framed in this study, is a description of the mode of engagement that emerged through collaboration with four schools over a six-month period. It is also one aspect of the contribution this thesis seeks to make to the ever-expanding knowledge base about collaborative strategies in education and social research. In a youth-championing RPC not every epistemic community that contributes necessarily derives equivalent

benefits. In this study, I centrally championed the experiences and perspectives of young people as shared through their verbal and written feedback while simultaneously honouring the vital contributions of school leaders and staff to the RPCs.

- A related assumption is drawn from Burke and Hadley's (2018) work on youth participatory action research (YPAR), namely that "youth are active producers of knowledge and culture who see, know, and engage with their communities in ways that may be different from the adults around them" (p. 219). Literature on other similar projects (Anderson, 2020; Anyon et al., 2018; Cammarota and Fine, 2008; Cummings, 2024; Mathikithela and Wood, 2019; Shamrova and Cummings, 2017; Spindel Bassett and Geron, 2020; Tuck and Habtom, 2019; Zeller-Berkman et al., 2020) strongly suggests that knowledge generated by young people has the potential to fruitfully augment the work being done by other epistemic communities. Although, the intervention which was designed to facilitate collaboration with young people is at the core of the RPCs described in this thesis, I posit that solely focusing on this dimension of the collaboration without considering the learning that emerged from working with school leaders and staff, as well as from the reflections captured in my fieldwork notes and process documentation, would limit the thesis' contribution.

- Young people, school leaders and staff have points of access to knowledge in their context that are beyond my reach as a researcher. By collaborating with them the research process is enriched and can in turn be optimised on an ongoing basis as understanding grows of how it may maximise benefits for different collaborator groups (Dixon, 2023; Skipper and Pepler, 2021).

- The individuals I collaborated with, whether school leaders, teachers or learners, were engaged as "moral, believing, narrating," purposed, agentic, relating human persons[1] (Smith, 2003) who constantly interpret their experiences and surroundings as part of the process of crafting the stories they live by (Bevir and Blakely, 2018; Blakely, 2020; Smith, 2003, 2011, 2015) and actively discovering, generating and stewarding knowledge within, and about, their place and positionality in the world (Cadora and Meek, 2023; Jessop et al., 2008; Meek, 2017; Sheppard, 2002).

- COVID-19 restrictions, notably repeated transitions into and out of lockdowns, profoundly affected how young people, school leaders and staff experience and

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[1] I unpack the philosophical anthropology that underpins the study in Chapter 2 (See 2.1.4).

engage with learning and teaching, as well as their own sense of identity as learners and educators (Chapman and Bell, 2020; Soudien, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2020, 2021; Carver and Shanks, 2021; Greenhow, Lewin and Staudt Willet, 2021; Whalley et al., 2021). I contend that their shifting physical, emotional, and mental relationships to learning and becoming, particularly as these are experienced and navigated in relation to the school as a key relational space-time, are worth exploring collaboratively (Jansen and O'Ryan, 2020; Jansen and Farmer-Phillips, 2021; Pascal and Bertram, 2021).

- The knowledge generated in, and about, each school will be particularly relevant in that environment and its transferability is limited. However, I posit that this study's findings about effective strategies for designing, implementing, and refining youth-championing RPCs as vehicles for CKD&S in schools may be transferable both within the study's immediate context – the Western Cape, SA – and further afield.

1.7 Structure of the thesis

The next chapter presents the **philosophical and conceptual foundations** of the thesis. I start by outlining the philosophical and methodological commitments that buttress my work as a social researcher. I also position the study's focus on how enabling, hospitable spaces can be fostered for CKD&S through approaches like RPC in relation to key conceptual foundations. The concept of *space* that underpins the discussion is unpacked and linked to notions of spatialising education. Building on this foundational understanding of space, the theory of *enabling* spaces is augmented by the value of *hospitality* as well as Charlotte Mason's understanding of *the atmosphere of environment.* The fledgling body of literature on the RPC "approach" is reviewed in relation to the ever-expanding discussion and exploration of RPPs in education research, with a specific focus on the assessment or evaluation of these collaborative approaches as well as selected unpursued opportunities, assumptions, and blind spots in the reviewed literature. Selected factors of collaborative working are outlined and a preliminary set of concepts for collaborative engagement are proposed. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the importance of counting the costs of collaboration.

The third chapter anchors the presented narrative in salient literature about the **SA education system and context** with a central focus on the potential of schools as collaborative contexts and the positionality of the study's key collaborators – learners,

teachers and school leaders – within these spaces as well as the system more broadly. The COVID-19 pandemic, as perceived watershed moment in the SA education context and elsewhere, is interrogated with a focus on the some of the ways its impacts on teaching, learning and related priorities have exacerbated and illuminated pervasive systemic challenges that pre-date it. The events of recent years are briefly contextualised in relation to how the country's education system has continued to evolve since its transition to a constitutional democracy thirty years ago.

The next chapter outlines the collaborative, narrative, interpretive **research strategy and design** that were employed to answer the study's research questions. I describe the process of designing and prototyping the developmental intervention that was at the core of the emergent, youth-championing RPCs and outline how feedback and reflective data was collected and analysed to inform the narration and interpretation of the RPCs presented in this thesis. The ethical considerations that informed the research design are outlined, along with questions of rigour and transferability. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations.

In the fifth chapter the **findings** that emerged from the narrative analysis of qualitative data collected across the four schools are outlined in relation to the study's research questions. The interplay of expectations and experiences in an emergent collaboration are unpacked based on a triangulation of collaborator perspectives, and the process is also narrated and interpreted at the level of each of the four schools. Learning that emerged through the collaborative prototyping of the developmental intervention that specifically relates to fostering an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S for, and by, young people is presented. Dynamics around mobilising collaborative learning in terms of cross-cutting themes and collaborative cross-pollination are outlined. The chapter concludes with reflections on the data that was not collected due to the emergent nature of the RPCs and two collaborative opportunities that are specific to the SA context are highlighted.

A selection of the study's findings are critically examined through a dialectical interaction between the facets of an enabling space (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b, 2014a, 2016, 2017), the factors of collaborative working (Patel et al., 2012) as well as other foundational concepts. Throughout the **discussion** chapter, I endeavour to demonstrate the value of polymorphic, dynamic engagement with the productive tensions and synergies between different dimensions of space-time in considering how enabling, hospitable spaces may be fostered for CKD&S. The chapter concludes with the presentation of a first prototype for

multi-dimensional heuristic to support clearer conversations about CKD&S that was developed based on the study's collaborative engagement as well as the narrative, reflextive thematic analysis presented in this thesis.

In the final chapter I reflect on the study as a process of formation through collaboration, highlighting how my perspective and practice as a social researcher has evolved. I also draw together key elements of the thesis' narrative by briefly summarising the study's key strengths, limitations, findings, contributions, and implications, and conclude by highlighting a few opportunities for further research.

CHAPTER 2 | FOSTERING a HOSPITABLE, ENABLING SPACE for COLLABORATIVE KNOWLEDGE DISCOVERY and STEWARDSHIP: PHILOSOPHICAL and CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

This thesis interprets and narrates a six-month process of collaborative engagement with four schools in the Western Cape, SA through the lens of emergent, youth-championing research-practice collaboration (RPCs). In the presented analytic narrative the RPCs are framed as vehicles for engaging in collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship (CKD&S) in schools as well as catalysts for learning about how enabling, hospitable spaces may be fostered for CKD&S.

The process of collaborating with these four schools has been a cornerstone of my apprenticeship and formation as a social researcher (Haigh et al., 2011; Hokkanen, 2017; McAlpine et al., 2020; Platow, 2012). However, the CKD&S I refer to is not something that only happened while I was, for example, directly working with school leaders and staff on optimising the developmental intervention for their context, or, while I engaged learners as participant-collaborators during sessions. It has cascaded through every aspect of the process, from the ongoing review of literature to the narrative, reflexive thematic analysis of the perspectives and experiences of different collaborators (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Polkinghorne, 1995), to the imperative to harness the interpretation and narration of the entire journey as an act of stewardship (Caldwell et al., 2008; Fujimura, 2017; Winters, 2023; Brox, 2024).

This study, which employs narrative, reflexive thematic analysis as part of a "Big Q" qualitative paradigm or framework, values "a subjective, situated, aware and questioning researcher, a *reflexive* researcher" (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p. 5). As such researcher subjectivity is considered a resource to be harnessed and rigorously channelled in the research process rather than a problem to be eliminated. Drawing on methodological resources as well as empirical worked examples by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021), David (2025), Hesse-Biber (2017), Liamputtong (2020, 2022), Malterud (2016) and Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2020), the central importance of a researcher's critical, reflexive self-awareness - which encompasses philosophical and theoretical awareness - is intentionally foregrounded in this chapter.

Building on the work of these scholars, I agree that as there is no such thing as value neutral or atheoretical research it is essential that every researcher is able to clearly articulate both the "Big Theory" – the philosophical or meta-theories that are foundational to every aspect of their work - as well as the explanatory theories and concepts that they harness in the design, implementation and/or analytic phases of their work (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2021). I further contend that this is particularly important in the context of this thesis where I am the sole narrator of a collaborative research process I designed, facilitated and then interpreted drawing on data that reflected the perspectives of other collaborators.

P. J. Lewis (2001) writes about the difficulty of situating the "I" in narrative research. I do not stand somewhere outside of the process, narrating from a privileged bird's eye view. I am part of the story I present with all the limitations and opportunities that entails (Elliott, 2005; McAdams, 1993; Pushor and Clandinin, 2014). Thus, before unpacking the key concepts and explanatory theories that underpin the interpretation and narration, I start in the first section by presenting the philosophical and methodological commitments that buttress my work as a social researcher to ensure that readers can situate, and critically engage with, this narrator's positionality in the presentation of reviewed literature (Chapters 2 and 3) as well as the research design (Chapter 4), findings (See Chapter 5) and discussion (See Chapter 6).

In interpreting and narrating my collaborative engagement with four schools, this thesis also considers the formative potential of this type of research for social scientists-in-training (See 7.1). Braun and Clarke (2021) highlight the challenge – particularly for many apprentice social researchers – of getting to grips with the "Big Theory" that underpins our work and then clearly, as well as congruently, connecting those foundations to the other methodological and theoretical frameworks we draw on. As I endeavoured to articulate my own philosophical, theoretical and methodological position as a researcher in a manner that was consistent with my broader understanding of reality, being, knowing and valuing, I struggled to find methodological texts in education or the other social sciences that address how to approach social research if your starting point is a theistic one (Strauss, 2006; Poythress, 2011; Holmes and Lindsay, 2018). While it is a widely held belief in the modern Academy that religious belief is a private matter to be kept out of public and professional life, this conviction – itself as much a position of faith as any matter of religious doctrine – is anchored in the pervasive secularisation thesis (Lyon, 1985; Taylor,

2004, 2018; Midgley, 2011; Scruton, 2012), which only serves to obfuscate the varied beliefs, convictions and commitments that all scientists – whether atheistic, agnostic, theistic or otherwise – approach their work through (Smith, 2003). Thus in outlining the coordinates of a Christian ontology, epistemology and axiology I am ensuring I meet the criteria for rigour in "Big Q" qualitative research by making the foundations I work from explicit (Malterud, 2016; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Liamputtong, 2020; Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2020), but I am also addressing this general silence in recent methodological and philosophy of science literature and providing readers with a worked example of what it might look like to approach collaborative, narrative, interpretive research from these philosophical foundations.

Although a collaborative ethos underpinned this study and the process has been interpreted and narrated with a focus on RPC and CKD&S, I acknowledge that by some assessments or criteria my six-month engagement in the schools may not meet the threshold to be described as collaboration in the fullest sense (Keast and Mandell, 2014). The literature on collaboration is extensive spanning many different disciplines and this "elastic concept", to borrow Keast and Mandell's (2014) turn of phrase, can be challenging to pin down and differentiate from various modes of engagement broadly predicated on working together (Enyedy and Stevens, 2014; Stout and Keast, 2021; Thomson et al., 2009). In the context of this study, *collaboration* is defined "as a process of shared creation…through which a group of entities enhance the capabilities of each other" (Camarihna-Matos and Afsarmanesh, 2008, p. 311).

Given the multi-dimensionality and complexity of collaboration both as a pursuit and a field of study, this proof of principle study explores the question of how enabling, hospitable spaces can be fostered for CKD&S through approaches like RPC (Kendig, 2016). The concept of *space* that underpins the discussion is outlined and linked to notions of spatialising education. Building on this foundational understanding of space, Markus Peschl and Thomas Fundneider's theory of *enabling* spaces augments the concept and value of *hospitality* as well as Charlotte Mason's understanding of *the atmosphere of environment.* The fledgling body of literature on the RPC "approach" is unpacked in relation to the ever-expanding discussion and exploration of research-practice partnerships (RPPs) in education research, with a specific focus on approaches to assessing the 'impact', efficacy, and transferability of RPP/Cs as well as selected unpursued opportunities, assumptions and blind spots in the reviewed literature. Given the distinctive

nature of collaboration and the significant investments it demands in terms of relationship-building, cohesion as well as adaptiveness around ways of working and approaching leadership (Keast and Mandell, 2014), the chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the importance of carefully considering the costs of collaboration (Vivona et al., 2023).

2.1 Philosophical foundations

In his book *Sociology and the human image* (1983), David Lyon highlights that any social researcher who attempts to compartmentalise their roles in pursuit of detachment will in the end only succeed in detaching their research from the reality of the real world (Lyon, 1983). In this section the philosophical commitments that are foundational to the presented study - as well as my work as a social researcher - are outlined so that readers can better understand both how I make sense of questions of reality and being (ontology), knowing (epistemology) and valuing (axiology), as well as how this has shaped a congruent design, implementation, and analysis of this study (methodology). In Chapter 4, I outline how this methodology has been operationalised through the study's research design. The question of personhood cuts across all these philosophical dimensions (Smith, 2003, 2011; Scruton, 2017; Van Pelt and Spencer, 2023) and further highlights the importance of congruence across the different dimensions of research philosophy and practice (Otoo, 2020; Braun and Clarke, 2021; Morsches and Matthews, 2022; David, 2025). Thus, I also clarify the understanding of *the social* in social research that buttresses this study. The section concludes with a rationale for a collaborative, narrative, interpretive methodology, centred on knowledge discovery and stewardship, that is firmly anchored in the outlined philosophical foundations (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Liamputtong, 2020, 2022; Miles, 2020; Clark et al., 2021).

2.1.1 A Christian metaphysic and ontology

> "What I do *not* believe is very clear and precise. What I do believe is complex, diffuse […] It involves myself, whereas what I do not believe can be at a distance. I can regard it as exterior and therefore relatively well defined. It can be the object of a taxonomy. What I believe finds me totally implicated personally. I can speak about it only as I do about myself."
>
> – Jacques Ellul, *What I believe* (1989, Emphasis added)

Although I can relate to the challenge Ellul (1989) highlights in this quote, I will endeavour to outline some of the key coordinates of the ontology and metaphysic that are

foundational to my work as a social researcher. Building on the work of other scholars, I will highlight how a Christian ontology or metaphysic provides a robust foundation for ethical social inquiry of any variety, including the work I present here (Cadora and Meek, 2023; Ellul, 1978; Evans, 1979; Holmes and Lindsay, 2018; Lyon, 1983; Meek, 2011; Poythress, 2011; Smith, 2003, 2011; Van Pelt and Spencer, 2023; Watkin, 2022).

Holmes and Lindsay (2018) helpfully summarise the central beliefs that underpin a Christian ontology:

- All things owe their **existence and persistence** to God alone.
- That existence also serves God's **purpose**.
- This purpose "is realized through the **joint efforts** of God and man."
- Everything that exists is **beloved** of God.
- Human existence[2] is "**unique and distinct** from that of the animal kingdom in terms of purpose, and in relation to God."
- Christians **believe in, and relate to**, Christ "not only as transcendent Saviour but also as a personal guide, mentor and friend" (See also, Watkin 2022).
- There is a **distinctively Christian way** of "being-in-the-world," which is guided by God's purpose or will as revealed in the Creation, Incarnation and Scripture (p. 3-4, Emphasis added).

Several ethical and epistemological obligations flow out of these beliefs. I unpack these further in the following sections of this chapter. In considering some of the ramifications of this ontology for social research I draw on Ellul's (1978) concept of Christian realism as well as transcendent foundationalism as defined by Kreitzer (2005) and neorealism as summarised by Holmes and Lindsay (2018).

Ellul asserts that realism, which he is careful to distinguish from metaphysical or philosophical Realism, is a necessary basis for Christian thinking on society. He highlights two aspects of realism as he employs the concept:

- Firstly, seeing the facts as they are and grasping them thoroughly, and,

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[2] See 2.1.4 for a discussion of the implications of this metaphysic and ontology for the philosophical anthropology that underpins my work.

- Secondly knowing clearly what you are doing, why you are doing it and what the likely results of your actions will be.

In this pursuit, he underlines the importance of seeing things as they are yet not necessarily deriving principles of action from them, emphasising the importance of working from a clear metaphysical foundation as opposed to reverse engineering it empirically.

The concept of transcendent foundationalism[3], as defined by Kreitzer (2005), adds an important dimension to Ellul's assertions. Transcendent foundationalism asserts that "every person has a foundation" and that the triune God (and His wisdom) - as opposed to any aspect of the observable creation, neutral human observation and/or neutral human reason - is the transcendent foundation of all truth (Holmes, 1977, 1997; Kreitzer, 2005). Despite our finiteness, humans can perceive this truth, whether as a system or as diverse data points, and although we see the world from particular, interpreted points of view that are contingent on our participation in the contexts we observe, our interpretations are not the sources of facts or reality but rather part of our mode of perception and engagement with the world (Ellul, 1978, 1989; Kreitzer, 2005; Lyon, 1983).

Neorealism as framed by Holmes and Lindsay (2018) further augments Ellul's concept of Christian realism, highlighting that "although there is only one reality it allows for multiple interpretations" with each apprehension necessarily imperfect. Neorealism also emphasises "the reflexive nature of research and […] the value-laden nature of attempts to understand and describe reality" (p. 4). Building on Ellul's second point we need to know what social scientific research is *and* what it is not. Based on this we need to grapple with why we might engage in it, and carefully consider what the results of our actions might be.

Humility is absolutely central to Christian neorealism because of the ever-present acknowledgement that while we make every effort, through a rigorous employment of congruent methodological frameworks, to see things as they are as accurately as possible,

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[3] Foundationalism, or immanent foundationalism, has a lot of intellectual baggage and while its counterpoint, nonfoundationalism, generally creates a "relativism so complete that any attempt at a cross-disciplinary conversation faces the threat of complete incommensurability" (Van Huyssteen 1997, p. 3, quoted by Kreitzer, 2005) it is also important to recognise postmodernity's contributions to unmasking a host of "illusions created by epistemological foundationalism. We now know that any issue is always seen from a particular interpreted point of view, and that our epistemic practices therefore constitute contexts in which our very participation is a precondition for our observations" (Gregersen and Van Huyssteen 1998, p. 5, quoted by Kreitzer 2005).

the inherent limitations of our capacity for observation and reasoning mean that we will never be able to do so comprehensively (Kreitzer, 2005; Poythress, 2011, 2023). To acknowledge this is, however, not a denial of reality but rather a necessary reminder of our limitations as human persons and, I would argue, one dimension of a compelling rationale for the value of collaborative social and educational inquiry.

Within this ontology, science of any variety is demythologised and approached as a servant rather than a master or saviour (Holmes, 1983). Along with it the researcher must also, to echo Ellul's sentiment, assume a posture of humility and service rather than pride and/or mastery. Lyon (1983) builds on this: "Christian faith is centred in God, not science. But social science does have a place in relation to faith and is an entirely proper expression of the highest Christian aspiration: to love and serve God and neighbour" (p.16). The ethic of love, humility and service, that bolsters and augments this ontological position, is further outlined in the next section.

2.1.2 Axiology: An ethic of love, humility and service

Hesse-Biber (2017) asserts that "the moral integrity of the researcher is a critically important aspect of ensuring that the research process and a researcher's findings are trustworthy and valid" (p. 67). Research is a value-laden endeavour and as such it is imperative that researchers clearly articulate the moral position they occupy (Holmes, 1984, 1997; Holmes and Lindsay, 2018). A Christian metaphysic or ontology establishes various specific and general ethical obligations or commitments that apply directly to research (Holmes and Lindsay, 2018). In this section, I discuss a few central ones in terms of an ethic of love, humility, and service.

I draw the concept of an ethic of love from Chris Watkin, who juxtaposes it with an ethic of violence (Ellul, 1978; Milbank, 2006; Watkin, 2017, 2022). Drawing on the work of Milbank (2006) and others, Watkin (2022) highlights how modern political thought (and social theory) is built on an "ontology of violence" whereas "for a Christian Trinitarian view, love is 'the original law of human social being' and…violence is its negation" (p. 50). He is careful not to conflate power and violence rather differentiating between "power expressed in and as violence and power expressed in and as love" adding that these "positions are not symmetrical" (p. 50) as they are often conceived of in many branches of critical theory and its mutations (Freire, 2017; Aubrey and Riley, 2019; Watkin, 2022).

Within a Christian metaphysic, love is primary and fundamental. An ethic of love[4] "introduces an attractive alternative to the reduction of relationships to…will to power. Instead of a will-to-power, Christian Trinitarian theism has a will to charity (*agápē*), and this inscribes self-giving rather than *libido dominandi* (will-to-power) at the heart of reality" (p. 51).

The decision to foreground humility and service in addition to love, flow out of Watkin's framing of this ethic. A will to *agápē* underscores that love is itself a transcendent reference point and thus as humans we proceed with humility knowing that while we may endeavour to "love and serve God and neighbour" we always fall short of the fullness of love as expressed in the very nature of God. Furthermore, as Watkin writes, this ethic "inscribes self-giving" or service, rather than a will-to-power, at the heart of all we do. All of creation is beloved by God and as His transcendent truth and wisdom is our foundation, we proceed in love with humility endeavouring to be of service.

I posit that humility has individual as well as disciplinary ramifications. As highlighted in the previous section, the inherent limitations of our capacity for observation and reasoning mean that, while we make every disciplined and rigorous effort to see and interpret aspects of reality as accurately as possible, we will never be able to do so comprehensively (Kreitzer, 2005; Poythress, 2011, 2023). These limitations, which necessitate humility, apply to individuals and entire disciplines (Sertillanges, 1998).

An explicit emphasis on service provides another important ethical guardrail in social research. Rather than a mere means or end, service flows out of love and is a key practical consideration throughout the entire inquiry process in considering the objects, aims, purpose, conduct, fruits, and application of research (Holmes and Lindsay, 2018):

Table 1: The objects, aims, purpose, conduct, fruits and application of research

Objects	Carefully considering what you do or do not study in relation to the potential consequences for those you conduct the research with (or on) as well as society more widely. Within reasonable limits, Christian researchers bear a moral responsibility for the potential consequences and applications of their findings, and thus need to consider what they choose to investigate accordingly.

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[4] Watkin also emphasises that although love is placed front and centre in this conceptualisation, faith and hope are other integral aspects of a Christian ethic.

Aims	Research's aims contribute to improving human existence and, where possible, alleviating suffering by broadening and/or deepening our understanding of the past and present.
Purpose	Research increases knowledge of the world through robust accounts and theories informing approaches to improve human life that do not degrade the life of the planet but rather foster greater appreciation for it. Research strengthens both "self- and mutual understanding" while reducing "exploitation, marginalization, and other morally offensive circumstances" (p. 6).
Conduct	A Christian metaphysic calls for research conduct that is egalitarian, respects the rights of all people and engages participants/collaborators with a commitment to minimise harm and wherever possible maximise benefit by being of service. Research must be conducted and reported honestly and openly within the limits of agreed upon confidentiality and anonymity.
Fruits	While the outcomes of research cannot be known before or during an inquiry process, a Christian researcher endeavours to glorify God by either displaying the glory of Creation, alleviating suffering, challenging exploitation and/or improving the well-being of humans as well as the "animal and material world in its entirety" (p.6).
Application	Christian researchers have a responsibility to be concerned with the potential and actual application of their findings, as well as how these are translated into practice. As such the building of bridges to evidence-informed practice is a central, rather than peripheral, concern.

An ethic of love, humility and service demands a relational orientation that acknowledges the personhood of the researcher as well as the people they work with. The epistemology that underpins this study has relationality at its core (Evans, 1979; Jarvis, 2018; Rist, 2020; Smith, 2003, 2011, 2015; Van Pelt and Spencer, 2023).

2.1.3 A covenant or relational epistemology

The position I take on knowing, what can be known and how we come to know is centrally informed by philosopher Esther Meek's *covenant epistemology*, which I refer to as *relational epistemology*. Meek's work on covenant epistemology is anchored in scientist-turned-philosopher, Michael Polanyi's, "modernity-dispelling account of how we know" (Polanyi, 1951, 1974; Thorpe, 2001; Ray, 2009; Meek, 2017; Nye, 2017; Subramanian, 2018; Cadora and Meek, 2023).

Cadora and Meek (2023) contend that "Our modern outlook is first of all an epistemology
[…] In this milieu, knowledge is information: explicit statements disentangled from any
personed anchorage, impersonally transferable, linearly amassed, and eminently
commodifiable to the end of human mastery". Things are broken down into their
component parts in the interest of "exhaustive control and power" as well as the
comprehensive amassing of "eminently quantifiable" information (p.19). They also
highlight how this "knowledge-as-information" epistemology impersonalises the real and
drains it of meaning often espousing "reductionism – the presumption that the real reduces
to merely its tiniest components" (p. 20). This conceptualisation is echoed in Hopkins'
(2024) engagement with Jurgen Habermas' three paradigms of human knowing (technical,
practical and critical). Writing in the context of school improvement, Hopkins contends
that "the technical or top-down paradigm…is dominant. The type of human interest that it
represents is prediction and control; the kind of knowledge that it values is instrumental"
(p. 21). Elsewhere Meek (2017) writes that contrary to this paradigm or positionality,
"radical attentiveness is humans' proper epistemic posture. But the Enlightenment's
theoretical paradigm […] including its pretension to or rejection of 'a God's-eye view,' has
entirely occluded any possibility of such a lively, personal engagement of and participation
in the real" (p. 296-297). However, rather than try to replace this epistemology, Meek
(2011, 2017, 2023) has articulated a positive alternative philosophy that she refers to as
covenant epistemology.

Knowing is conceived of as transformative, personed, personal and relational. It
encompasses the personhood of the knower, the personlikeness of the yet-to-be-known as
well as the interpersoned character of their relationship (Cadora and Meek, 2023; Meek, 2011,
2017, 2023). A relational or convenant epistemology is at its core "a nonpossessive account
of knowledge," whereby we explore, discover, and learn *not* to master or dominate reality,
or any aspects of it. Instead we acknowledge that "created reality […] has its own intrinsic
freedom, goodness, desire and generosity" (p. 292) and knowing "grasps the whole only in
being called constantly beyond itself to what remains even greater" (Meek, 2017, p. 288
quoting Von Balthasar). A covenant or relational epistemology, along with the
philosophical anthropology that augments it, presupposes that every person has the
capacity to reorient their relationship to the real, consenting to relate to reality, including
being, or - to use a Polanyian vocabulary - to indwell reality through personal involvement.
This is itself a process of discovery and/or rediscovery.

Polanyian epistemology prompts a reorientation of knowing to conceptualise it in terms of discovery (Fennell, 2017; Polanyi, 1951, 1974). Knowing involves an active orientation in relation to the yet-to-be-known. "Following through the nature of discovery, we are led to a total rethinking of the general idea of knowledge in our culture. Discovery is the point within science that leads to a truer understanding of knowledge and of ourselves" (Gelwick quoted in Cadora and Meek, 2023, p.28). Meek (2017) posits that "recovering reality engenders hope – hope, not of total explanation, but of something even better: encounter and communion with the ever-lively real. Discovery and exploration will never get old in a world of continuing, surprising, generous excess […] Recovering reality is hope-filled for us all. Reality beckons and self-attests in its surprising self-disclosure." (p. 297).

2.1.4 Clarifying the social in social science

> "Social science is the study of *people*: as individuals, communities and societies; their behaviours and interactions with each other and with their built, technological and natural environments" – Academy of Social Sciences[5], Emphasis added

> "A person 'is more intelligible than a mechanical event, more completely knowable, not because there is less mystery but precisely because there is more.'" – Esther Lightcap Meek, *Contact with reality: Michael Polanyi's realism and why it matters* (2017)

In the study of (and with) people, I maintain, it is paramount to have a clear understanding of human personhood. Lyon (1983) writes that while social scientists "may admit…to some relationship between their discipline and a view of humanness (or philosophical anthropology), the latter may simply be assumed (and therefore thought to be unproblematic)." (p. 40) For example, views of humanness which arose out the Enlightenment rested on a central assumption that "humans are autonomous agents (that is, people who have no higher law than that which they choose)" (p. 40). This formative myth of individual autonomy is also pulled into acute focus by the philosopher Mary Midgley (2011) and others (MacIntyre, 1999; Taylor, 1989, 2004).

I maintain that researchers working in this constellation of social science disciplines that often fruitfully converge in educational research (Aubrey and Riley, 2019; Soudien, 2019c; Boronski and Hassan, 2020), have an ethical and professional responsibility to clearly articulate the definition of personhood that underpins their work, particularly as they seek

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[5] Academy of Social Sciences, "What is social science?" https://acss.org.uk/what-is-social-science/

to explore, analyse, understand and describe the individual and/or shared experiences of human persons in specific contexts. During my apprenticeship as a social researcher I have been struck by the general silence, or assumed philosophical alignment, in many branches of the social sciences and humanities on the definitions and presuppositions about what it means to be a human person that inform and shape much of the research that is undertaken (Blakely, 2020; Evans, 1979; Lyon, 1983; Midgley, 2014; Rist, 2020; Smith, 2003, 2011).

The question of human personhood is central to a Christian ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Within this metaphysic it is held that all human persons are made in the image of God (Imago dei) which means that every person has inherent dignity and purpose (Evans, 1979; Smith, 2011) as well as the agentic capacity for both good and evil. Human persons comprise body (*soma*), soul (*psyche*), and spirit (*pneuma*) and are also distinguished by their capacity for rational thought (MacIntyre, 1999; Holmes and Lindsay, 2018).

In his book *Moral, Believing Animals* (2003) Christian Smith describes humans as moral, believing, narrating animals and posits, as others have, that whether individuals subscribe to an organised religion or not (Holmes, 1977, 1983, 1984, 1997; Lyon, 1983, 1985), they inhabit and make sense of the world in these terms:

- *Moral* because humans are oriented "toward understandings about what is right and wrong, good and bad, worthy and unworthy, just and unjust" that are believed to "exist apart from them, providing standards by which […] desires, decisions and preferences can themselves be judged" rather than being solely established by an individual's own desires, decisions, or preferences (p. 8).
- *Believing* because humans' knowledge and understanding of the world is based on nonuniversal beliefs and assumptions that cannot be independently or objectively verified.
- *Narrating* because "the larger cultural frameworks within which the morally oriented believings of the human animal make sense are most deeply narrative in form. We are makers, tellers, and believers of narrative construals of existence and history" (Smith 2003, p. 151). The storied nature of human personhood is also widely studied in psychology. We live by stories and the stories we tell ourselves, and one another, are formative in our becoming as well as how we make sense of the world. As argued by Blakely (2020) and Bevir and Blakely (2018) this has important implications for how we approach social scientific research (McAdams,

1993; Mcadams, 2001; McAdams, 2013; McAdams et al., 2006; McAdams and McLean, 2013).

Drawing on Smith's (2011, 2015) evolving thinking on personalist theory, the work of C. Stephen Evans (1979), David Lyon (1983), John M. Rist (2020), Chris Watkin (2022) and others, as well as observations from engaging in collaborative educational research with young people, school leaders and staff, I expand on Smith's (2003) list to describe human persons as moral, believing, narrating, *purposed, agentic, relating creatures* (Burgos, 2018; Evans, 1979; Jarvis, 2018; Lyon, 1983; McAdams, 1993; Midgley, 2014; Nye, 2017; Rist, 2020; Smith, 2011, 2015; Van Pelt and Spencer, 2023; Watkin, 2016, 2022).

- *Purposed* because human persons "are not merely centres of skills, knowledge, and capacities. They are centres *with* purpose, centres *of* purpose" (Van Pelt and Spencer, 2023, p. 29). As a "subsistent, autonomous but essentially social being," a person's purpose is neither purely individual or primarily collective, rather it is anchored "between the extremes of liberal individualism and collectivisms" unfolding relationally from a personal centre (Burgos, 2018, p. 32, 231).
- *Agentic* because a person is "a conscious, reflexive, embodied, self-transcending centre of subjective experience […] who – as the efficient cause of his or her own responsible actions and interactions – exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity" (Smith, 2011, p. 61).
- *Relating* because a human person's self is developed and sustained in "relationships with other personal selves and with the nonpersonal world" (Smith, 2011, p. 61).

The use of the word *creature* instead of animal, as employed by Smith (2003), is an intentional decision rooted in a Christian metaphysic in which the creator-creature distinction is foundational to thought and life (Holmes, 1983; Holmes and Lindsay, 2018; Kreitzer, 2005; Watkin, 2017, 2022). Humans are part of a created order in relation to all of which God is transcendent and Other. Yet humans are also distinct within that created order by virtue of *imago Dei,* which means that while they are part of nature they also transcend it in comprising a complex, mysterious interplay of body, soul, and spirit as well as the capacity for purpose-driven, agentic, rational thought, creativity and imagination (Holmes, 1983; Holmes and Lindsay, 2018; Poythress, 2023; Smith, 2011; Strauss, 2020). These are inherent design features, they are not earned, accrued or *merely* socially

constructed over time. Although human personhood is undoubtedly also shaped by the social in a broader sense. This is, as Smith (2011) highlights, a question of dignity[6]:

> "…human persons possess an inherent dignity by virtue of the properties of their existent personal being. Simply by being the kinds of creatures they are ontologically, persons are characterised by real dignity. Dignity is not an extra benefit conferred upon persons by social contract or positive law. Dignity is not the culturally relative invention of some people who socially construct it in their minds and discourse. Dignity is a real, objective feature of human personhood […] The question is whether human minds understand, acknowledge, and respond to the fact that human persons possess dignity" (pp. 434-435).

A core presupposition I bring to this work is that all humans have inherent dignity, worth and agency, which cannot be divorced from an engagement with the world that is moral, believing, narrating, purposed, agentic and relational. This understanding of human personhood, which I believe constitutes an edifying foundation for collaborative, narrative social inquiry, informs every aspect of this study from the research design and strategy to my engagement with the cited theorists and scholars as well as the approach I have taken both to collaborating with school leaders, staff and learners and interpreting these collaborations. In the next section I further consider the interplay of the ontology, epistemology and axiology that underpin my work and outline a rationale for a collaborative, narrative methodology I consider to be congruent with these foundations.

2.1.5 Towards congruence: The rationale for a collaborative, narrative methodology

The literature on qualitative research emphasises the importance of a clear methodological framework in ensuring the rigour and value of a research project. These frameworks also provide foundations for transparent decision-making as well as process design and implementation (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Liamputtong, 2020, 2022; McMeekin et al., 2020; Clark et al., 2021).

The methodology this study employs is first and foremost **collaborative**. From the earliest design and implementation stages a commitment to exploring and employing collaborative research strategies was central to how the work unfolded (Prentice, Imperial and Brudney, 2019; Stout and Keast, 2021). Given the emergent nature of the RPCs, another principle that became increasingly important was taking a **narrative** and **interpretive** approach to the inquiry and analysis process. The methodological framework, building on a Polanyian

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[6] Smith (2011) defines dignity as "an inherent worth of immeasurable value that is deserving of certain morally appropriate responses" (p. 435).

epistemology, prioritises **knowledge discovery** and augments it with an emphasis on **stewardship**. In articulating and framing this methodology I draw on Lyon's (1983) approach *critical integration* which calls for mutually beneficial "two-way traffic" between a Christian metaphysic and social science: "[I]t is *critical* integration, in two senses; one, that biblical revelation is accepted as the ultimate criterion, at crucial points in the formulation of a Christian social perspective; two, that the product of integration is both self- and socially-critical, in an ongoing and open-ended manner" (p. 14, Emphasis as in original text). This approach – while established on distinct foundations and framed by a Christian metaphysic – is congruent with key values in social scientific research in emphasising transparent reflexivity on the part of the researcher (Finlay, 2002; Nowell et al., 2017; Canosa, Graham and Wilson, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2019; Miles, 2020; Byrne, 2022; von Unger et al., 2022) to bolster the rigour of qualitative, critical interpretation of social phenomena (Malterud, 2016; Bevir and Blakely, 2018; Blakely, 2020; Liamputtong, 2022).

Collaborative

The outlined philosophical foundations, particularly the philosophical anthropology, of this study are congruent with a methodology that centrally values and harnesses collaboration (Ainscow, 2016; Stout and Keast, 2021). Collaboration, broadly speaking, refers to a process of working together with others towards a shared objective. Etymologically its roots are traced to the late Latin word *collaborare*, which means to labour or work together (Camarihna-Matos and Afsarmanesh, 2008; Lawrence, 2017). The presupposition that all human persons have inherent dignity and are moral, believing, narrating, purposed, agentic, relational creatures, aligns with a methodology that values discovering and stewarding knowledge *with* people rather than merely about, around or 'on' them.

While personal experiences and perspectives are valued as integral aspects of many knowledge discovery and stewardship endeavours, collaborative research also offers a helpful, albeit partial, corrective to each individual's inherent limitations in observing, interpreting, and navigating the world. Collaboration, however, does not present a silver bullet whereby we can claim to overcome said limitations by, for example, adding ever-more collaborators to a project until we find the optimal combination or convince ourselves we have achieved 'saturation' (Clark et al., 2021; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Liamputtong, 2020). As we labour together in knowledge discovery and stewardship we grow in learning and understanding but given that reality presents a "superabundant gift"

we humbly relate to, as opposed to comprehensively capture, I caution against the temptation to instrumentalise collaboration as another strategy of mastery or control (Holmes, 1977, 1983, 1997; Meek, 2017). I expand on the importance of a critical, carefully considered, engagement with collaboration in the concluding section of this chapter.

The methodological commitment to collaboration has touchpoints with symbolic interactionism, but there are also crucial areas of philosophical divergence that cannot be overstated. The perhaps most critical of these is the belief in branches of symbolic interactionism that the "study of humans is not the study of 'real' or concrete events in the external world" (Willis quoted in Liamputtong, 2020 p. 177) and that "interaction is based, instead, on how humans interpret their world. It is thus symbolic meaning rather than concrete meaning that is most important in symbolic interaction studies" (ibid, p. 177). While I readily acknowledge the importance of the symbolic as well as meaning and interpretation in qualitative social inquiry (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Midgley, 2011), I posit that certain proponents of this methodology have gone a step too far in embracing the notion that epistemological subjectivity – which I agree is part of any human effort to better understand the world – is fundamentally incompatible with metaphysical objectivity and demands its wholesale (or partial[7]) rejection (Holmes, 1977, 1983).

As outlined above, I maintain that researchers have an ethical responsibility to consider the possible effects and/or outcomes of how they conduct research as well as any findings they formulate (See 4.1.2). To work with people on a research process in which you purportedly value their interpretations and experiences, yet simultaneously distinguish these from "concrete meaning" or real/concrete events is to invite them into the trap that is set by the overreach of assuming that the acknowledgement of their (and your) epistemic subjectivity somehow renders any notion of metaphysical objectivity obsolete or suspect. To claim that an experience is lived and felt is itself a claim about its valuable, *real* existence and while, as repeatedly outlined, there are limitations to any individual's meaning making endeavours this does not mean they are detached from the real. They are a valuable aspect

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[7] The reference to a "partial" rejection is bracketed. As stated above our fundamental orientation to the real and reality is either *yes* or *no* and even the act of rejecting reality rests on an objective claim that implies there is some absolute point of reference that allows for such an assertion to be made. Nevertheless, the tendency to what might be described as "partial" rejection or qualified acceptance of the real or reality in qualitative inquiry, is – among other things - indicative of the limits that are encountered in pursuing the relativist or subjectivist alternatives to their conclusions (Holmes, 1977, 1983; Poythress, 2011).

of its abundance that needs to be discovered and stewarded in relation to the whole (Meek, 2011, 2017).

Collaboration, as a principle, opens a host of research possibilities (strategies and methods) that allow us to explore how relationships between 'the one and the many' continually unfold in our social world (Kreitzer, 2005; Poythress, 2011, 2023). The collaborative research tradition is rich, cross-disciplinary and multi-facetted (For example: Chung and Lounsbury, 2006; Fahlberg, 2023; Glassman and Erdem, 2014; Janes, 2016; Kemmis et al., 2014; Macaulay, 2017; Sandwick et al., 2018; Tuck, 2009) and has greatly enriched educational research (For example: Chapman et al., 2016; Fowler et al., 2014; Glassman and Erdem, 2014; Guy et al., 2020; Meyer and Balfour, 2020; Stern, 2019; Visser and Kreemers, 2020). As such social researchers have a wealth of methodological and empirical literature to draw on when considering how a commitment to collaborative inquiry may be operationalised.

As with the prevalent methodological frameworks, it is important to get to grips with the philosophical presuppositions that have over time been woven into different collaborative and/or participatory research strategies. One I will highlight is the tendency to emphasise the emancipatory or empowering nature of collaborative/participatory research (Brennan et al., 2022; Burke and Hadley, 2018; Caraballo and Lyiscott, 2020; Morales et al., 2017; Zeller-Berkman et al., 2020). The notion that research - or a specific research study/project/process - can emancipate or empower people is one I approach with caution. Research may create a range of formative opportunities for researchers and other epistemic communities to learn, develop, identify opportunities for change or even collaborate on working towards certain (change) objectives, but research is not a saviour (Holmes, 1977, 1983). Beyond a scope creep rooted in what I would describe as a fundamental misunderstanding of what research is, the notion that a researcher can – or should – emancipate or empower others has the potential to serve as a trojan horse for several reductionist and dehumanising views of human personhood (For example: Freire, 2017; Sanders, 2020).

Researchers are human persons just as any individuals or communities they may work with are. To imply that they somehow hold a key to the emancipation of others is to reinforce some of the very power differentials that qualitative researchers are so vigilant to problematise and minimise (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Pendlebury and Enslin, 2001; Scheper-Hughes, 1992). I posit that an ethic of service, as the one this study is anchored in, provides a helpful antidote to the potential tyrannies of the emancipatory

imperative while maintaining a commitment to considering how research can intentionally foster a positive, meaningful space for the people who engage with it and contribute to the improvement of their lives and contexts (Bettencourt, 2020; Canosa et al., 2018; Felner, 2020; Mathikithela and Wood, 2019).

Narrative

As asserted above, humans are narrating creatures. To use psychologist, Dan McAdams', turn of phrase "the stories we live by" are integral to our being and becoming in relation to ourselves and others (McAdams, 1993; McAdams et al., 2006; McAdams and McLean, 2013). The stories we live by can root and/or untether us in our social world while also contributing to its ongoing development and evolution (Blakely, 2020; McAdams, 2013; Poythress, 2009, 2011; Weil, 2002). As C. Smith (2003) writes, "Narrative is our most elemental human genre of communication and meaning making, an essential way of framing the order and purpose of reality […] culture and motivation are generated and sustained by various narrative constitutions of what […] is real, significant and good. The normative is thus organised by the narrative" (pp. 151-152). The growing interest in narrative inquiry, which - similar to collaborative inquiry - is a rich and multi-facetted sub-concentration of qualitative research, is one of many acknowledgements of the centrality of narrative in the human experience (Barone, 1995; Bochner, 2001; Elliott, 2005; Gubrium and Holstein, 1998; Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995; Smith, 2016; Smith and Sparkes, 2009; Webster and Mertova, 2007).

In the context of this study the prioritisation of narrative has been emergent along with the shift in focus to the RPCs with the four schools. As I reflected on the process of collaborating with the four schools and observed my attempts - as well as those of my collaborators - to make sense of what we were doing together. I decided to add an additional dimension to the methodological framework by focusing on the stories we collaborated by (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998; Smith and Sparkes, 2009; Webster and Mertova, 2007). This methodological commitment to the narrative form and process resonates with aspects of both phenomenology and symbolic interactionism (Clark et al., 2021; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Liamputtong, 2020; Rossman and Rallis, 2017):

- Phenomenology's emphasis on understanding and describing people's perspectives on, or interpretations of, their experiences of their world and everyday life, is echoed in different strands of narrative research (Bochner, 2001; Elliott, 2005; Kim,

2016; Polkinghorne, 1995; Webster and Mertova, 2007). As McAdams (1993) writes, "We [human persons] seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives […] we manufacture our dramatic personal myths by selectively mining some experiences and neglecting or forgetting others" (p. 11). The phenomenological imperative to examine and understand 'lived experience' is, I would argue, optimally served by a narrative approach to social inquiry that seeks to understand the stories a person or group of people live by in relation to specific themes or phenomena of interest (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Liamputtong, 2020).

- Symbolic interactionism, similarly, emphasises meaning and interpretation. Interactions are understood as key points of shared meaning making, these meanings – they contend – become the reality of those who have made them. As mentioned above, I diverge from branches of symbolic interactionism that explicitly or implicitly propagate metaphysical subjectivity, but I share their emphasis on the interplay between interactions and meaning making. We do not become storied creatures in isolation (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; McAdams, 1993; McAdams et al., 2006; Midgley, 2011), rather we gradually learn from the earliest stages of life to relate to ourselves, others and the world through narratives informed by the meanings we assign to, or associate with, things, events, and experiences that are formed through a dynamic interplay of interaction and interpretation (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Liamputtong, 2020, 2022).

Over the past several decades there has been a steadily growing interest in narrative inquiry particularly in qualitative research (Bochner, 2001; Elliott, 2005; Gubrium and Holstein, 1998; Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995; Pushor and Clandinin, 2014; Webster and Mertova, 2007). Polkinghorne (1995) maintains this, "interest is merited because narrative is the linguistic form uniquely suited for displaying human existence as situated action. Narrative descriptions exhibit human activity as purposeful engagement in the world" (p. 5). Polkingthorne highlights two invaluable aspects of narrative that both inform this study's methodology: its suitedness to highlight human existence as "situated action" as well as its rich potential to evince human persons' purposeful engagement with the world around

them. McAdams (1993) and Polkinghorne (1995) both reference the two modes, as articulated by Jerome Bruner, that humans employ in making sense of the world[8]:

- The *paradigmatic mode of thought* in which "we seek to comprehend our experience in terms of tightly reasoned analyses, logical proof, and empirical observation" (p. 29).

- The *narrative mode of thought* in which "we are concerned with human wants, needs and goals. This is the mode of stories, wherein we deal with 'vicissitudes of human intention' organised in time" (p. 29) and "seek to explain events in terms of human actors striving to do things over time" (p. 30).

Social inquiry will often foreground the paradigmatic mode of thought in the design and implementation of studies, and this mode can certainly enrich how we go about making sense of the world, but along with the above cited scholars and others (Holmes, 1977, 1983; Midgley, 2011; Schwandt, 1995; Taylor, 2004; Watkin, 2022), I maintain that to ignore the narrative mode of thought, particularly in any form of collaborative inquiry, is to miss an opportunity as a "story is a natural package for organising many different kinds of information. Storytelling appears to be a fundamental way of expressing ourselves and our world to others" as "the human mind is first and foremost a vehicle for storytelling. We are born with a narrating mind" (McAdams, 1993, pp. 27-28). This applies to the social researcher as much as to any individual person they work with or engage through a social inquiry process.

But stories, narratives, or myths – to employ a term used by McAdams (1993) and others – are not merely relevant to the individual person (Midgley, 2011): "Myths capture a given society's basic psychological, sociological, cosmological, and metaphysical truths. A society's myths reflect the most important concerns of a people. By giving narrative form to a diverse collection of elements, they help to preserve the society's integrity and assure its continuity and health" (p. 34). Stories enable individuals and collectives to move from ambiguity or chaos – aspects of human existence that tend to resist the attempts of paradigmatic mode of thought to make sense of them – to coherence and continuity even as key transitions, disruptions and/or crises are navigated (Bochner, 2001; Elliott, 2005; Gubrium

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[8] These quotes are from McAdams (1993) but Polkinghorne (1995) also structures aspects of his discussion of narrative inquiry around Bruner's two modes of thought.

and Holstein, 1998; Mcadams, 2001; McAdams, 2013; McAdams et al., 2006; McAdams and McLean, 2013; Midgley, 2011; Polkinghorne, 1995; Smith and Sparkes, 2009). In Chapter 4 I outline the approach I took to the narrative, reflexive thematic analysis of the qualitative feedback, input, and reflections I gathered throughout the four RPCs. Given the varied understandings of what is meant by both 'narrative' and 'thematic' in qualitative inquiry, I clarify how this approach has been defined and operationalised in this study.

Interpretive

Stories or narratives are particularly valuable in conveying coherence and meaning, and thus necessarily involve interpretation both on the part of the teller and those who engage with the narrative (Mcadams, 2001). The project's methodology draws on, and critically integrates, aspects of the interpretivist and hermeneutic traditions, in particular the central premise that seeking to understand through interpretation is central to how human beings engage with one another and the world (Malterud, 2016; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Bevir and Blakely, 2018; Liamputtong, 2020). I start from the assumption that human actions are meaningful and that one key task within social inquiry is to unearth meaning (Schwandt, 1995, 2000; Ciulla, 2019; Miles, 2020; Braun and Clarke, 2021). The shared commitment to collaborative, narrative inquiry means that the interpretive process is not limited to my perspective and experiences, rather the emergent, youth-championing RPCs presented an opportunity to work with school leaders, staff and learners as collaborators in a process that incorporated elements of narrative and interpretive social inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1995; Pushor and Clandinin, 2014; Kim, 2016; Bevir and Blakely, 2018).

The young people engaged in the prototyping process as collaborators, contributing to unearthing and making meanings both related to their individual engagement with the questions we explored through the developmental intervention, as well as their experience of the collaborative process. I deliberately use the plural of meaning above as I acknowledge that there are potentially as many meanings to explore as there are collaborators in an RPC. At the same time the ontology that underpins the project means that while I see these meanings - including mine - as valuable and honestly articulated representations of specific perspectives and subjectivities of individual persons at a particular point in time, they are not comprehensive when regarded in relation to reality as a whole (Holmes, 1977; Bevir and Blakely, 2018; Blakely, 2020; Watkin, 2022).

Beyond simply prioritising interpretation in service of deeper understanding, a commitment to selected tenets of action research also encompassed an intention to engage in ongoing observation and reflection that in turn informed the active prototyping of the developmental intervention through the RPCs (Ashton et al., 2020; Buchanan, 1992; Kemmis et al., 2014; Lewrick et al., 2018; Pushor and Clandinin, 2014). The ongoing optimisation of the intervention was directly experienced by learners in the school contexts and as such the research and developmental processes unfolded in tandem. The dual commitment to research and development highlights another set of interconnected principles that inform this study's methodology: Knowledge discovery *and* stewardship.

As outlined above, a clear methodological framework can strengthen a study in several ways, constituting a vital part of a robust foundation for social inquiry (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Liamputtong, 2020; Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2020). I have endeavoured to outline a *meta-hodós* – the way (*hodós*) I have sought to look beyond and behind (*meta*) several months of collaborative engagement with four schools (Wallenfang, 2019) – and to make explicit how my approach to social research flows out of my philosophical and theoretical foundations. I am aware that even as I have outlined the study's methodology I have been engaged in weaving it into the broader story that is presented in this thesis, a story which is itself a collection of several narrative strands. In the following section, I briefly describe how the ontology, axiology, epistemology, and methodology have informed a shift from knowledge creation to an emphasis on knowledge discovery and stewardship before outlining how these foundations have been translated into a central focus on creating hospitable, enabling spaces for CKD&S through RPC.

2.2 Knowledge *discovery* and *stewardship*

The process of narrating and interpreting four interconnected, emergent, youth-championing RPCs with schools has highlighted the importance of framing the learning, unlearning, understanding, and knowing that has happened in terms of *discovery* rather than creation, extraction or exploitation (Henry and Tait, 2016; Holmes, 1984; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Skelton, 2008). This shift has also been prompted by the relational epistemology that underpins the study, which is informed by Polanyi's call for a reorientation of knowing to discovery (Polanyi, 1951, 1974; Fennell, 2017; Meek, 2017; Nye, 2017).

Knowledge discovery is defined as an active, ever-unfolding exploration of, and participation in, reality. A focused pursuit of truth which simultaneously acknowledges that the very abundance of truth means this quest evades consummation (Fennell, 2017; Meek, 2017; Sertillanges, 1998). While anchored in an ontology of Christian neorealism, which presupposes that "truth exists out in the world, independent of human minds, and is discoverable by us" (David, 2025, p. 12), knowledge discovery's active participation in reality eschews naïve realism with its assumption "that the world is [simply] as it appears to be" (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p. 169). It is a personal, relational and value-laden pursuit, which involves "self-directed freely cooperating individuals submitting themselves to the authority of fellow explorers…who are themselves electing to act in the same fashion. Within the context of commitment to truth and discovery of reality, individuals …enjoy independent constructive activity while extending the same opportunity to others" (Fennell, 2017, p. 128).

In attempting to move beyond what Eagleton (2009) refers to as "stale Cartesian dualism," I follow Thomas Aquinas' line of thinking in conceiving of "the encounter between subject and object not as a confrontation but as a collaboration, in which the mind actively participates in reality and, by raising the inherent intelligibility of objects to light, brings them and its own powers to fruitful self-realization. The world becomes somehow more real in the act of being understood, while the mind comes into its own in the process of doing so" (p. 78). In this paradigm the world is not primarily our possession "to be moulded and manipulated how we please, but a gift which incarnates an unknowable otherness, one whose material density and autonomy must be respected" (p. 79). Here Eagleton (2009) echoes the work of Polanyi (1951, 1974) as well as Meek (2011, 2017, 2023) and also highlights the interconnectedness of discovery and stewardship.

The study's dual emphasis on discovery and *stewardship* (Hitzhusen and Tucker, 2013; Fujimura, 2017; Hitz, 2020; Winters, 2023; Brox, 2024) foregrounds the importance of care-fully considering how knowledge that is discovered through an inquiry or learning process can be nurtured, conserved and carried forward ethically in service of those who discover it, as well as their context, and – where possible – society more broadly. I posit that these considerations and commitments are shared – albeit at times articulated in varying language – across large portions of the body of literature and practice on RPP, RPC and related collaborative methodologies (See 2.4).

The definition and framing of stewardship varies across disciplinary contexts ranging from business ethics (For example: Caldwell et al., 2008; Hernandez, 2008; Caldwell, Hayes and Long, 2010; Bacq and Eddleston, 2018; Dominguez-Escrig et al., 2019; Baudoin et al., 2023) to biology, conservation and ecology (For example: Hitzhusen and Tucker, 2013; Krasny and Delia, 2015; Merenlender et al., 2016). In education research, the concept is most often used in the context of environmental or sustainability education (For example: Merenlender et al., 2016; Taylor, 2017; Goodale, Gilmore and Griffiths, 2024). In the context of this study stewardship "connotes the care of something that exists for the benefit of [self and] others… a responsibility to nurture, conserve and carry forward." As a concept it is "connected to scales of time" by "caring for the identity and values…that have been built over time while identifying opportunities for future growth" (Winters, 2023, p.153).

2.3 Spatialising collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship

Education research "is spatially rich in metaphors used to name and understand social processes and relations, but analytically and theoretically weak in accounting for the differences that space makes" (Robertson, 2009, p.22; See also: Robertson, 2018). Writing well over two decades ago, Edwards and Clarke (2002) note that although the "spatial has received some attention in educational research…there have been few attempts to examine specifically spatial dimensions of education and the spatialising metaphors through which education is mobilised" (pp. 153-154). Although some progress has been made in addressing and exploring these gaps from various perspectives in the intervening period (Alexander, 2023; Ashton et al., 2020; Edwards and Fowler, 2007; Edwards and Miller, 2007; Gerdin and Ovens, 2016; J. J. Hall, 2020; Paechter, 2004), Robertson (2009) contends that the reading of space that is offered in this disciplinary context is still "a relatively banal" one "of the 'all too obvious' ways in which space matters – such as identifications with particular spaces and so on" and thus misses "the very real, powerful and significant ways in which the social relations within the multiplicity of overlapping education spaces are constantly being strategically, spatially recalibrated, reorganised and reconstituted" (p. 25; See also: Robertson, 2018). In short: space matters. But what do we mean when we refer to space and spatialising education, learning, knowledge discovery or collaboration?

In this section, I centrally draw on Robertson's (2009, 2018) work on the spatialisation of education, in which she synthesises conceptualisations and lexicons of space developed by Harvey (2006), Jessop et al. (2008), Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (1994, 1999, 2005) to

illustrate how education research's engagement with space may be enriched. The understanding of space that underpins this study is indebted to all of these thinkers and is further augmented by, and anchored in, Charlotte Mason's (1897, 1925) notion of "the atmosphere of environment", the concept of hospitality (Bretherton, 2004; Alexander, 2019; Smith, 2023b) and the theory of enabling spaces (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b, 2014a, 2016, 2017) to map the dimensions of what I propose to refer to as an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S.

Harvey (2006) points to the "seemingly infinite sites of deployment" of the word *space* and considers the rendering of "any generic definition…a hopeless task" (p. 270). This study starts from the ontological assumption that space is real and social, "that spaces are social relations stretched out; and that space is socially produced" (Robertson, 2009, 2018). In making sense of how space may be known, it draws on Robertson's (2009, 2018) synthesis of Massey's (1999) emphasis on a unified understanding of *space-time*; Harvey's (2006) tripartite division of space as absolute, relative and relational; Lefebvre's (1991) epistemology of space as perceived, conceived and lived; as well as the spatial lexicon consolidated by Jessop et al. (2008) that prompts us to think of space in terms of territory, scale, place and network, which is augmented by Sheppard's (2002) understanding of positionality.

In varying, but largely complementary, ways these thinkers problematise both modernist narratives that suppress the importance of the spatial and reinforce ambiguous relationships to the temporal by, for example, reifying notions of timelessness (Massey, 1999). They also highlight the fetishization of space in branches of postmodern, critical theory in the wake of the "spatial turn" (Harvey, 2006, p. 278) that allow "the mental realm of ideas, representations, discourses and signs, [to envelop and occlude] social and physical spaces" (Robertson, 2009, p.16). Harvey, Massey, Lefebvre and others articulate various dimensions of sociospatial relations that are ideally "viewed as mutually constitutive and relationally intertwined" nudging us beyond a "one-dimensionalism" that conflates any individual part or facet with the whole, "whether due to conceptual imprecision, an overly narrow analytical focus, or the embrace of an untenable ontological (quasi-)reductionism" (Jessop, Brenner and Jones, 2008, pp.389 and 391). In Figure 1, I summarise the various, mutually enhancing dimensions they each equip us with.
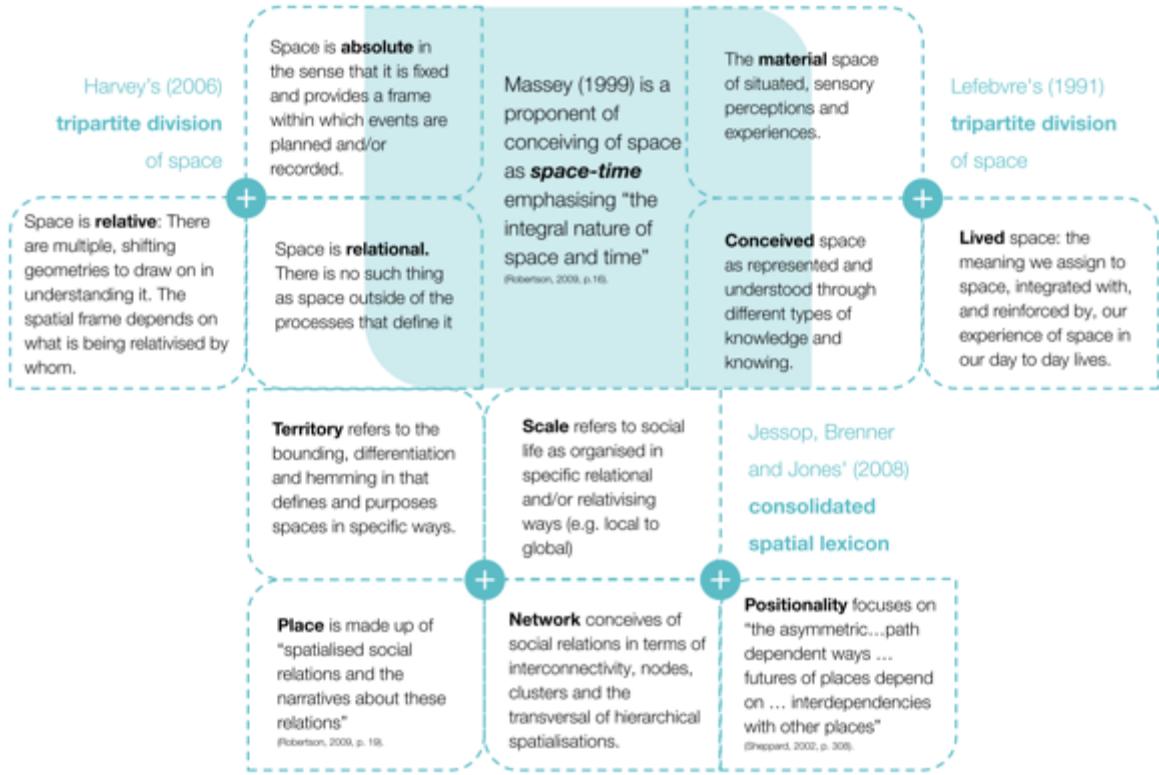
Figure 1: A multi-dimensional, polymorphic understanding of space

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen. Development of visualisation was centrally informed by Harvey (2006), Jessop et al. (2008) and Lefebvre (1991).

In drawing on these different understandings of space there is the ever-present risk of veering into the territory of "bad abstractions" (Sayer, 1992) or "chaotic conceptions" (Jessop et al., 2008) that "arbitrarily divid[e] the indivisible and/or lum[p] together the unrelated and the inessential… *carving up* the object of study with little or no regard for its structure and form" (Sayer, 1992, p. 138). However, the broadly shared emphasis across these approaches on a polymorphic understanding of space that keeps its different dimensions in a productive, dialectical tension, and constantly considers the dynamic interplay between them, goes some way in keeping both one-dimensionalism and chaotic abstraction in check.

When considering how we might spatialise education, learning and/or collaboration, it can be helpful to start with a single dimension "as a *simple entry point* into a more *complex inquiry* but this requires reflexive attention to combining different dimensions of sociospatial analysis with other features of the research object in question" (Jessop, Brenner and Jones, 2008, p. 392). Figure 2 visualises the shift from a single dimension as a point of entry, or even a reading of two complementary tripartite divisions as a starting

point, to a multidimensional engagement with space-time, albeit in a "stubbornly two-dimensional" format (ibid, p. 396). As the angles of a diamond refract, disperse, and reflect light, so a polymorphic reading of space allows these different dimensions to function in counsel, mutually enhancing and illuminating our understanding of the spatial and enabling "movement towards a multidimensional, polymorphous account" of space-time (ibid, p. 393).
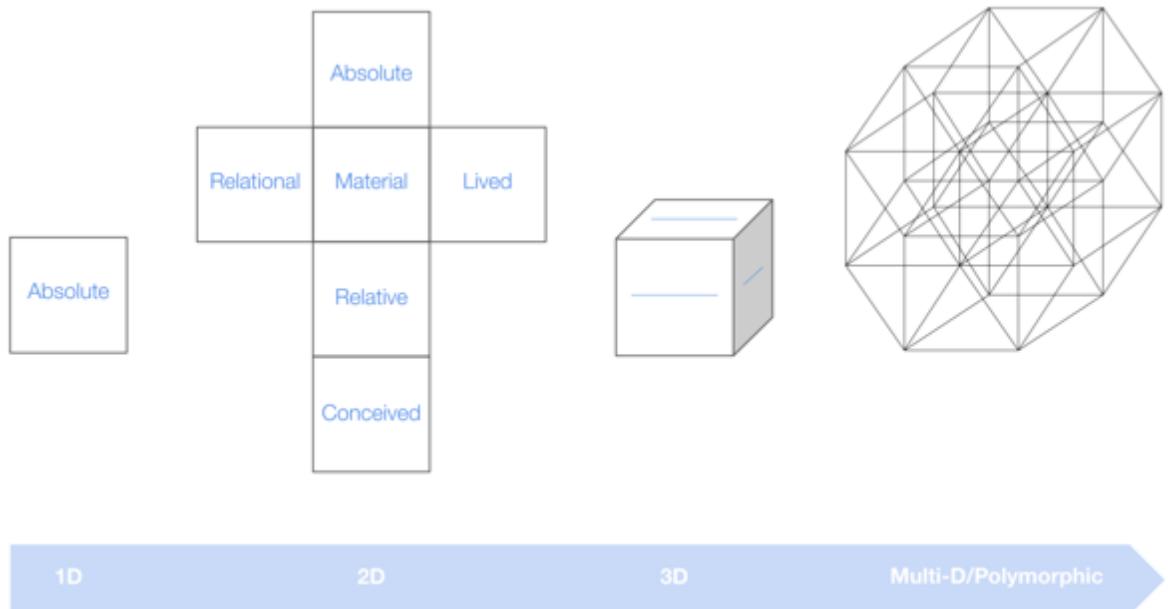
Figure 2: A dynamic continuum from a single point of entry to a polymorphic engagement with space-time

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen. Development of visualisation was centrally informed by Harvey (2006), Jessop et al. (2008) and Lefebvre (1991).

In the following sections I build on this foundational ontology and epistemology of space by considering how Mason's (1925) understanding of "the atmosphere of environment" further strengthens the case for nuanced engagement with why space-time matters in education, learning as well as CKD&S. I draw on the concept of hospitality to outline an axiology of space-time that is congruent with this study's broader philosophical foundations, and conclude by exploring how the theory of enabling spaces both enriches and anchors the study's understanding of space-time.

2.3.1 "The atmosphere of environment"

Charlotte Mason (1897, 1925, 2019) summarised her educational philosophy in twenty principles that present the key axiological, epistemological, and ontological tenets as well as the distinctive philosophical anthropology that informed her thinking and practice (Cadora and Meek, 2023; Sendra Ramos et al., 2022; Van Pelt and Spencer, 2023). The

first two principles pertain to the personhood of children and young people, affirming that they are persons in their own right with possibilities for good and for evil, predicated on their inherent free will and dignity (See 2.1.4). The third and fourth principles emphasise the necessity of authority and obedience in any learning endeavour, provided these are limited by the respect due to children and young people given their personhood. While these assertions may seem run of the mill, or even old-fashioned, to a 21st century reader, they were ground-breaking ideas at the time Mason was writing where the notion that children had rights of any kind would have been a radical one (Van Pelt and Spencer, 2023) and her thinking still offers valuable provocations for educational philosophy and practice (Cadora and Meek, 2023; Cooper, 2012, 2023a, 2023b; Millar, 2023; Sikkema, 2023; Smith and Thorley, 2023; Ward, 2023; Whiteside, 2023).

As part of these principles (five to eight), Mason proposed three educational instruments to employ in cognisance of the necessary limitations presented by the first four principles. These instruments are "the atmosphere of environment", "the discipline of habit", and "the presentation of living ideas". Through these three instruments, Mason emphasises the importance of space-time in the broadest sense in learning and education. Their interplay seems to highlight a distinct - if largely intuitive - awareness on Mason's part of the sociospatial dimension of learning and knowledge discovery (E. Cooper, 2023; H. Cooper, 2023b; Jessop et al., 2008). Rather than isolating or limiting education and learning to designated territories or places (Jessop et al., 2008; Robertson, 2009, 2018), the child or young person's entire environment as well as the persons and things (Heschel, 2005; Mason, 1897) that are part of it should be the space that they are encouraged to learn in and from (Ashton et al., 2020).

Mason's tripartite approach to educational instruments allows for a polymorphic reading, navigation and harnessing of space-time in learning as well as knowledge discovery and stewardship. Edwards and Clarke (2002) highlight that a school might "be represented as a space of enclosure, in which people are subject to disciplinary constraints and in which they enjoy a sense of belonging" (p. 156). Such environments have their "own laws and disciplinary constraints…spaces of enclosure which people come into, where they can be held, cocooned or overwhelmed" (ibid, pp. 155; 162). They highlight an important tension, which Mason also alludes to in her emphasis on the personhood of children and young people serving as a limiting value and principle in dynamics of authority and obedience in teaching and learning. Schools as spaces of enclosure have the potential to harness

discipline and constraints fruitfully but if, for example, sight is lost of the personhood of children, young people and/or teachers and staff the entire atmosphere, nature and relationality of the space-time can take on a different character that inhibits learning and/or CKD&S (Edwards and Clarke, 2002; Mason, 2019; Van Pelt and Spencer, 2023).

In foregrounding the atmosphere of environment, Mason conceives of a polymorphic space-time in which the intentional formation of disciplines or habits of mind and body that support learning is facilitated (Edwards and Clarke, 2002; Khurana, 2022; Kokko and Hirsto, 2021; Reinius et al., 2021). Children and young people are invited and supported to develop disciplines of habit that allow them to flourish as learners and they are presented with "living ideas" in an awareness that they need generous intellectual, moral, and physical sustenance in their learning journey and should be encouraged to develop a discerning, critical appetite for knowledge as they nourish their minds with a wide range of ideas (Mason, 1925; Ward, 2023; Whiteside, 2023). In her principles, as well as the three instruments she proposes, Mason has interwoven ontological, epistemological, and axiological considerations as part of a conceptualisation of a relational spatiotemporality for learning and education. Her framing attunes us to the importance of ensuring that our philosophy of space-time also explicitly encompasses the axiological.

2.3.2 Hospitality: Spatialising an ethic of love, humility and service

In her synthesis, Robertson (2018) outlines an ontology and epistemology of space-time but leaves explicit questions of axiology – of what makes a space good, moral, ethical and/or valuable – largely unaddressed[9]. In this section I unpack the concept of hospitality - particularly as juxtaposed with the notion of tolerance - and consider how it may contribute to framing conversations about the value-laden nature of fostering spaces for CKD&S.

Bretherton (2004) notes that "…while hospitality can be seen as a generic term…it does not have a universal definition" (p. 92). Before proposing a definition to inform the ethic and practice of hospitality that underpins this study, I will briefly discuss the "the nature and limits of tolerance," which Dasli (2017) writes, "in its broadest sense, can be understood as a moral attitude or virtue…[as] an individual disposition, used to describe a character or person, who is on the whole capable of suppressing what is disliked or

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[9] Robertson's apparent assumption that an ethic of power/violence is pervasive - a view that arguably veers into the realm of the axiological - weaves throughout her discussion.

disapproved, but nonetheless chooses not to do so" (p. 678). Dasli seemingly infers a link between this disposition and an ability to co-exist peacefully in society, a broadly held assumption that is not self-evident (Bejan, 2017; Derrida, 1998; Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 2000; MacIntyre, 1999).

Smith (2023b) argues that tolerance, which "merely asks me to endure those who are different" presents a potentially useful first step but is - on balance - a low bar in ethical *and* developmental terms (p. 5). This is echoed and expanded upon by Bretherton (2004) who considers whether "there is an inherent contradiction between any programme of education (which necessarily involves the claim that a person needs to change in some way, that they are not where they can or should be) and the promotion of tolerance…(which involves the claim that we should refrain from seeking to change someone's mind or attitude)" (p. 82). He references John Horton's "paradox of toleration" which "requires that it is right to permit that which is wrong" (p. 84) as well as Bernard Williams' observation about the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of tolerance (p. 86).

A key fault line Bretherton (2004) and others identify in tolerance - particularly as a substantive value - is that it rests on a conception of the good that is rooted in an assumption of the primacy of individual autonomy. This negates "the ways in which an individual is embedded within a wider community of relations and how that community…is constitutive of an individual's ability to make 'good' choices" (p. 86). He adds that this privileging of individual autonomy can lead to "detachment from one's own particular community and its conception of the good life" (p. 87). At a time, as Alexander (2019) notes, "when many people feel psychologically alienated in an increasingly globalised world and grasp for community in all sorts of ways" (p. 660) it is important to consider the foundations of the concepts we orient relational space-time around as well as the actions and practices that may emanate from them (Bretherton, 2016, 2019; Dasli, 2017; Smith, 2023b, 2024). Derrida (2003), Bretherton (2004), Smith (2023), Dasli (2017) and others have further expounded the limits of tolerance, highlighting how an ethic of hospitality may provide a better way to accommodate and navigate differences, enabling "both the 'concrete' and 'general' respect that is essential for proper attention to both particularity and sameness or how we are simultaneously different and equal" (Bretherton, 2004, p. 89).

Hospitality involves actively seeking the good of your neighbour but also of the stranger who may be marginalised and/or excluded in society writ large or specific pockets of it (Bretherton, 2016; Smith, 2023b, 2024). As an active, outward-looking mode of engagement, it rests on the foundational assumption of the inherent dignity of all humans and reinforces an understanding of personhood that acknowledges individual particularity without losing sight of our relational nature which is forged in the various communities we are connected to (Alexander, 2019; Bretherton, 2004; Burgos, 2018; Watson, 2023). Hospitality fosters a culture of abundant reciprocity in which everyone is welcome to receive, and everyone has something to give (Alexander, 2019; Burwell and Huyser, 2013).

Rather than framing those who initially extend a gesture of hospitality as the sole 'givers' or 'hosts,' the dynamism of hospitality demands that we humbly open ourselves to receive from those we welcome as we learn with, and from, them in a new shared relational space-time that exists somewhere beyond our respective comfort zones and remits of control (Derrida, 2003; Smith, 2012, 2023b). Another assumption hospitality is predicated on is abundance. Alexander (2019) writes: "Christians are to practice hospitality in recognition that they have already received infinite, and infinitely gracious, hospitality from God" (p. 667). Out of this abundance, Christians are exhorted to extend hospitality freely and joyfully to others out of the overflow of the Divine hospitality they continually live in (Bretherton, 2004, 2016). This dynamism, however, does not demand an untethering of the self or the community from their traditions. Bretherton (2019) proposes a "roots down, walls down approach" whereby communities and individuals "maintain within themselves deeply rooted understandings of, commitments to, and debates about their own traditions while being ready and open for conversation with others that may bring in new people and ideas" (As discussed by Alexander, 2019, p. 669). In concluding this section, I borrow and adapt a turn of phrase from Harvey (1979):

> The problem of the proper conceptualisation of *hospitality* is resolved through human practice with respect to it. In other words, there are no philosophical answers to philosophical questions that arise over the nature of *hospitality* - the answers lie in human practice. The question 'what is *hospitality*?' Is therefore replaced by the question '*how do we engage in the practice of hospitality as individuals, communities and society?*'" (Adaptations in italics from a quote on p. 13).

This question is echoed across different corners of the literature and there is an acknowledgement that hospitality, which "has inspired a wide variety of concrete social practices" (Bretherton, 2004, p. 100) should be "*practiced* at a structural and systemic level" (Alexander, 2019, p. 664, Emphasis added). Smith (2023b) highlights the importance of developing our capacity for hospitality and the need for "opportunities to learn and live into the dispositions that might enable [us] to live well amid difference, not falling back on fear and control but grounding [our]selves in patience and care" (p. 6). This is an active process of formation whereby we foster certain dispositions, skills, and commitments. As Smith (2024) notes elsewhere: "We need ways of working on the interpersonal skills, attitudes toward others, and shared ethical commitments that can sustain hospitality as a communal practice" (p. 3). Centring the value of hospitality presents an opportunity to spatialise an ethic of love, humility, and service by intentionally fostering relational space-times that enable us to live, learn and/or collaborate well amid our differences (Smith, 2023b, 2024).

2.3.3 Towards a shared vocabulary for the facets of an enabling, hospitable space for collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship

One potential critique of the ontology, epistemology and axiology of space-time that has been outlined, is that this rather philosophical approach stops short of Harvey's (1979) admonishment to grapple with space-time in, and through, human practice. The theory of enabling spaces provides discrete, yet inter-connected, points of entry for concrete discussions about the design of relational space-time, as well as a lens for clearer assessments of the impact of space-time on unfolding social relations (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014a, 2014b; Ebersöhn, 2016).

Peschl and Fundneider (2014b) define an enabling space as "a space supporting, enabling and facilitating processes of innovation and knowledge creation in teams and networks" (p. 8). Enabling spaces are multidimensional and in their design the focus is on optimally integrating the architectural, social, emotional, cognitive, epistemological, and technological dimensions to support collaborative knowledge creation and radical innovation. This is a broad and multidimensional understanding of space, "as a container providing a set of… enabling structures, elements that facilitate and smoothly intervene, as well as constraints allowing knowledge processes to flow and to develop their own dynamics" (Mason and Fundneider, 2014b, p. 9).

I draw on Peschl and Fundneider's theory to inform an exploration of how relational space-time for CKD&S may be fostered in schools. The theory augments a polymorphic understanding of space-time and provides an additional framework to conceive of space as multidimensional, while emphasising the importance of the integration and interplay of different dimensions. In this section I briefly outline the six dimensions of such a space and, how, when integrated, they have the potential to foster an emergent spatiality that is greater than the sum of its parts:

Architectural and physical

An enabling space has a physical, material, or absolute dimension in which CKD&S processes take place. Wherever possible, it should be designed or set up with the explicit intention of supporting a flow of social interaction and knowledge. Peschl and Fundneider (2014b) note that often "today's architecture leads to 'disabling spaces'" that have the opposite effect (p. 11). Harvey (2006) underlines the importance of asserting a material presence in the conceptualisation and navigation of space-time: "We can…debate interminably all manner of ideas and designs expressive of the relationality [of collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship] but at some point something has to be materialised in absolute space and time" adding that "…there is a serious danger of dwelling only upon the relational and lived as if the material and absolute did not matter" (p. 292). A focus on the architectural and physical dimension also allows us to "…situate [learning and collaboration] in the integrated and interstitial spaces where human bodies meet other objects in intra-active ways" (Ashton, Mah and Rivers, 2020, p. 180).

Social, cultural and organisational

Knowledge discovery and stewardship are necessarily embedded (Schwandt, 2000; Taylor *et al.*, 2017; Hartner-Tiefenthaler *et al.*, 2018; Robertson, 2018; Cadora and Meek, 2023). Interaction, collaboration, and exchange are indispensable for the discovery and stewardship of knowledge and for these processes to develop and maintain momentum a "social container" must be built (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014a, p. 24). "Building a good container means to build a good holding space for a generative social process" (Scharmer, 2018, p. 13). It could also be described as a social atmosphere, landscape, or field in which knowledge discovery dynamics, which can be highly complex and fragile, can gain strength. Trust and openness are among the most important enablers of this social dimension of an enabling space (Caldwell et al., 2010; Frei and Morriss, 2021; Laage-Hellman et al., 2021; Moilanen et al., 2015; Thomson, 2021).

Scharmer (2018) defines the social field – a concept which is comparable to the social dimension of an enabling space - "as the quality of relationships that give rise to patterns of thinking, conversing and organising, which in turn produce practical results" (Scharmer, 2018, p. 14). In the context of this study, I have primarily focused on the relationships I fostered with different collaborators during the RPCs while also seeking to operate in awareness of existing relationships within and across different collaborator groups in the four schools. Linked to this, knowledge discovery processes are also embedded in an institution's culture and organisational structures (Hargreaves, 1995; Ivaniushina and Alexandrov, 2018; Meredith et al., 2023; Stoll, 2000; Van Der Westhuizen et al., 2005; Weick, 1976). Organisational culture includes the shared assumptions, mindsets, behavioural patterns, and values that shape decision-making and problem-solving within an organisation. These are passed on over time and can be identified by looking at stories, shared language, and norms as well as practices (Huyghe and Knockaert, 2015; Sporn, 1996).

Epistemological

An important initial step in designing an epistemologically enabling space is the identification of the knowledge discovery and/or stewardship processes that are relevant in the different phases of a project. Identifying these processes allows for the necessary constraints to be put in place to allow knowledge dynamics to "develop…grow and flow" (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014a, p.355). Constraints are an essential part of a CKD&S process and "the resulting spaces will look very differently according to the supported knowledge process and organisational culture and social setting" (ibid, p. 355). The epistemological dimension of an enabling space also prompts us to consider what types of knowledge are valued and why this is the case. Particularly in contexts where different epistemic communities seek to come together and engage in CKD&S, assumptions about knowing as well as what can, should or is worth knowing need to be surfaced (Akkerman et al., 2021).

As contended above (See 2.1.3 and 2.2), collaborative knowledge discovery is not primarily an analytic or mechanical process it is an emergent phenomenon that is facilitated by "providing the appropriate set of constraints" or to put it differently, "a context of restrictions and interventions" for the whole knowledge discovery and stewardship process (Peschl and Fundneider, 2013, p.20). Here too the value of conceiving of an enabling space as an environment of enclosure of which constraints are features, not

bugs, is worth noting. While flexibility can be an invaluable aspect of CKD&S, discourses of flexibility appear to have little effect on "an enduring desire for spaces of enclosure" (Edwards and Clarke, 2002, p. 163).

Cognitive

Although the social, cultural, and organisational dimensions have a decisive impact on any knowledge discovery process, cognition - collective and individual - is another key consideration in knowledge discovery and stewardship. Cognitive enablers, such as analysis, dialogue, listening, observation, practical intelligence, prototyping, reflection, and so forth, are of central importance in the design of an enabling space (Lewrick et al., 2018; Peschl, 2019a, 2024; Yeager et al., 2016). This design process is informed by an awareness that the relationship between individual and collective creative activity can best be thought of as an emergent phenomenon (Claxton, 2012; Eisner, 2002; Massey, 1999; Peschl and Fundneider, 2014a).

Emotional

Knowledge discovery, while a cognitive process, is always embedded in emotional or affective states (David, 2016; Feldman Barrett, 2017; Smith, 2018). A robustly designed enabling space will generally include features that trigger emotional states that support knowledge discovery and stewardship (Kinitz, 2022). These include trust, openness, resilience, security and so forth. It is important to note that security is not synonymous with comfort as it can at times be necessary to step outside of established comfort zones or deeply ingrained patterns and mental models to create or maintain momentum in a knowledge discovery process (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b, 2014a; Smith, 2018). In considering how an optimal balance may be struck in this regard, Susan David's (2016) concept of emotional agility, which refers to a capacity to manage counterproductive emotions, patterns, or modes of thinking consciously, and align actions with values and objectives, provides a helpful lens that applies to individual persons as well as teams or groups (König et al., 2016). Here the necessary integration and interplay of the six dimensions of an enabling space is evident.

Technological

This is the dimension of processes, methods and tools. Drawing on Peschl and Fundneider (2013) technology is a "well-defined and structured practice, process or procedure which itself may involve other technologies (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b, 2014a).

Philosophically speaking, technology plays the role of a tool, a means, or an instrument in order to achieve some desired state or goal" (Peschl and Fundneider, 2013, p. 27). In short, technology encompasses a wide range of means from the low-tech, for example, pencils, printed worksheets and whiteboards, to the more high-tech such as the digital platforms that are used for communication or virtual collaboration. Niederhauser (2013) notes that "[t]here does not appear to be anything in the nature of the technology that necessitates that it be used in ways that reflect a particular ontological, epistemic or pedagogical orientation" (p. 264). Yet it is important to interrogate the assumed neutrality of technology (and technological progress), acknowledging that the broader societal discourse around technology has at times elevated it from the realm of tools, methods or processes to that of formative, yet apparently value-neutral - social force (Lyon, 1984; Postman, 1989, 1993).

Emergence: Towards a space that is greater than the sum of its parts

In the design of an enabling space, the six dimensions are conceived of as integrated, related and mutually enhancing. Similar to Harvey, Lefebvre, Massey and others, Peschl and Fundneider (2014a) underscore that these "dimensions must not be seen as separat[e]… almost all dimensions are heavily dependent on each other and [an enabling space] only makes sense, if they are related to each other" (p. 354). The integration of these six dimensions or facets creates what Peschl and Fundneider (2014b) call an emergent space which is more than the sum of its parts. Enabling spaces are always context-specific and in their design the goal is to create "new integrations of signs, things, actions, and environments" that address the needs and values of the individuals in that context and create an enabling environment for the discovery and stewardship of knowledge that addresses "the concrete needs and values of human beings in diverse circumstances" (Buchanan, 1992, p. 21).

If I ask what creating an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S means, "then the only way I can seek an answer is to think in relational terms" (Harvey, 2006, p. 275) and to consider how "different human practices create and make use of different conceptualisations of space" (Harvey, 1979, p. 13). In the next section the focus shifts to human practice, specifically to research strategies and practices that, among other things, seek to foster, strengthen, and harness relationships between different, yet related, epistemic communities in education research, practice and policy through collaborative engagement. The discussion considers some of the key themes and gaps in the growing body of literature

about these strategies through the lens of fostering enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S.

2.4 Vehicles for collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship

When considering the myriad ways that researchers and practitioners work together the literature both within, and across, disciplines evades neat, systematic review as a wealth of related yet different terms are employed to refer to collaborative engagement, partnership working or knowledge discovery (Bernstein, 2015; Macaulay, 2017a). Concepts include knowledge co-production (McCabe et al., 2023; Miller and Wyborn, 2020); transdisciplinary collaboration, co-production and/or research (Bernstein, 2015; Meyer and Balfour, 2020; Polk, 2015); collaborative and participatory action research (Kemmis et al., 2014; Macaulay, 2017b); 'post-normal' science (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993), practice-based or practice-led research methodologies (Dixon, 2023; Snow, 2015); design-based implementation research (Henriksen and Ejsing-Duun, 2022; LeMahieu et al., 2017; Parmaxi and Zaphiris, 2020); communities of practice (Pyrko et al., 2017; Wenger, 1998); community-based research (Sanchez-Betancourt and Vivier, 2019); community-based participatory research partnerships (Brush *et al.*, 2020), community-engaged research (Ross *et al.*, 2010) and community-campus partnerships (Boser, 2006). As the adage reminds us, *there is nothing new under the sun*. This certainly applies to the rich, multi-faceted and -disciplinary tradition of researchers working with practitioners, which can be traced back many decades (Macaulay, 2017a).

In education research alone a broad range of related concepts and approaches has emerged including collaborative education research (CER), participatory, place-based methodologies (Riley, 2013; Jansen and Blank, 2015; Chapman et al., 2019), practice embedded education research (Snow, 2015), school-university partnerships, university-school partnership (Sjölund *et al.*, 2022b), school-community partnerships (Bhengu and Svosve, 2019), university-community partnerships (Baum, 2000), university-community-school partnerships (Silbert and Bitso, 2015) and teacher-research partnerships (Vardy, 2023) to mention a few, but there are further configurations in the literature. McGeown (2023a), commenting on this heterogeneity, writes: "the use of different terminology and/or definitions of these collaborative structures illustrates the many different ways in which researchers and practitioners are working together" (p. 54). In this study, I centrally

focus on the related concepts or approaches of research-practice partnership (RPP) and research-practice collaboration (RPC).

2.4.1 Discovering and stewarding knowledge across epistemic communities: Research-practice partnerships, research-practice collaboration, and related collaborative approaches

Snow (2015) describes a shift in educational research towards "a new model that emphasises the interconnections of research and practice rather than the gap between them" (p. 460), characterising RPPs and other examples of practice embedded educational research (PEER) or collaborative educational research (CER), as expressions of this broader shift. The RPP concept was introduced in the US and has mainly been deployed and discussed there (Coburn et al., 2013; Sjölund et al., 2022b; Welsh, 2021), with growing interest in other contexts including the UK, Sweden, Germany and Japan (Ainscow, 2021; Chapman and Ainscow, 2021; Penuel, 2023; Sjölund et al., 2022a).

A widely cited definition of RPPs was outlined by Coburn et al. (2013) who highlight five distinct features of these types of partnerships: 1) they are long-term; (2) they focus on addressing problems of practice; (3) they are mutualistic; (4) they have intentional strategies to foster partnership relations; and (5) they produce original analyses (Sjölund et al., 2022b, 2022a; Welsh, 2021). A more recent definition by McGeown (2023b) usefully augments this, describing RPPs as "collaborative approaches" to conducting educational research that "aim to improve children and young people's educational experiences and outcomes, by drawing upon, and synthesising the collective knowledge, expertise, and experience from both research and practice" (p. 6). These collaborative partnerships are often established to identify and clarify research priorities, and to facilitate research activities as well as the dissemination of research findings. W. R. Penuel (2023) has also expanded on the earlier definition, outlining four features of RPPs:

1. Research is the leading activity within the partnership.
2. RPPs are designed and run to engage diverse perspectives and challenge power dynamics.
3. RPPs should result in actions that promote and pursue educational improvement.
4. RPPs are long-term collaborations designed to span multiple projects (Referenced in McGeown, 2023a, p. 56).

It has been argued that the relationships between researchers and practitioners are the key element of an RPP and that these partnerships should prioritise a shift towards greater engagement across different epistemic communities, rather than maintaining a critical distance (Dixon, 2023; McGeown, 2023b; McGeown *et al.*, 2023). However, some scholars contend that there is merit in carefully considering how much distance should be maintained across different dimensions of collaborative modes of engagement that often encompass research and developmental activities (Biesta, 2007; Penuel et al., 2020; Mat Noor and Shafee, 2021; Kelley et al., 2022). Broadly three categories[10] of RPPs have been identified: (1) Inquiry (Research alliances), (2) Design (Design research) and (3) Improvement science (NICs) (Coburn et al., 2013; Sjölund et al., 2022b). There is also growing interest in better understanding the different roles researchers and practitioners navigate in RPPs and related collaborative approaches (Duxbury et al., 2020; Farley-Ripple et al., 2018; Sjölund et al., 2022a; Skipper and Pepler, 2021).

McGeown (2023a) notes that "there is arguably a spectrum of work that fits under the umbrella term of RPPs" (p. 54) and further contends that resource constraints may at times make it impossible to establish partnerships that meet all the criteria that have been specified for RPPs. She adds that allowing for a greater measure of flexibility in collaborations or partnerships may open up opportunities such as "being able to bring in new practice partners (from different sectors) for specific projects where their expertise or insights are particularly relevant for these specific projects" (p. 56) without necessarily needing to have formal partnership arrangements in place. Against this backdrop it is useful to consider how the similar, yet distinct, RPC approach relates to and potentially augments RPPs.

Bender (2022) writes that "research–practice collaborations (RPCs) feature in various approaches, each presenting a variety of terminologies, underlying concepts and normative implications...Despite all the differences in these approaches, the direct social interaction between academia and other societal domains outside the world of academics serves as a common reference point" (p. 1694). A key related concept and approach - with multi- and trans-disciplinary reach - is co-production (McCabe et al., 2021, 2023; Miller and Wyborn,

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[10] Sjölund (2023) summarises the three main categories of RPPs to organise school improvement and research: "(1) Inquiry in order to extend knowledge on a problem of practice; (2) Design in order to design a solution to a problem of practice; and (3) Dissemination in order to share experience and expertise to facilitate school improvement."

2020; Polk, 2015; Turnhout et al., 2020; Wyborn et al., 2019) or co-creation (Skålén et al., 2015; Skipper and Pepler, 2021).

RPCs often involve aspects of applied research, they prioritise proactive involvement of practitioners at any and all relevant stages of the research process, they tend to exclude activities that place practitioners in a passive role – particularly in relation to academics – and often emphasise the importance of shared learning and formation processes for researchers and practitioners (Duxbury et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2022; McDonald et al., 2021; Meilinger, 2022; Perez Arredondo, 2022; Turnhout et al., 2020). In Figure 3, streamlined definitions of RPPs and RPCs have been placed side by side. In Figure 4, the areas of overlap between these approaches are foregrounded.

Research-practice partnerships (RPPs)

> long-term
> mutualistic
> focus on addressing problems of practice
> have intentional strategies to foster partnership relations
> produce original analyses

three types: research alliances, design research partnerships, and networked improvement communities (NICs)

As defined and categorised by Coburn et al. 2013

Research-practice collaborations (RPCs)

> various approaches and terminologies
> direct social interaction between academia and other societal domains
> proactive involvement of practitioners in any stage of research process
> excludes research activities that assign a passive/non-influential role to non-academic actors
> knowledge co-production
> (often) applied research

As defined by Bender (2022)

Figure 3: Comparing definitions of RPPs and RPCs

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen. Sources of cited definitions are referenced in visualisation footnote.

The Venn diagram shows overlapping circles labelled **RPP** (left) and **RPC** (right).

RPP (left circle):
- > long-term
- > seek to increase "research use"
- three types: research alliances, design research partnerships, and networked improvement communities (NICs)
- > anchored in education research with broad focus on school improvement
- > strong tradition in US (growing in UK, Australia, Canada, Sweden etc.)

Overlap (centre):
- > research-led° (broad assumption: researchers have more power than practitioners in RP work)
- > seek to address "research-practice gap"
- > mutualistic
- > direct social interaction between academia and other societal domains
- > focus: addressing problems of practice
- > (often) applied research
- > have intentional strategies to foster partnership relations
- > proactive involvement of practitioners in any stage of research process
- > produce original analyses
- > knowledge co-production

RPC (right circle):
- > various approaches and terminologies* e.g. research-practice cooperation; practice-based research; engaged scholarship; transdisciplinary research/collaboration; collective action etc.
- > excludes research activities that assign a passive/non-influential role to non-academic actors°
- > varied disciplinary and geographic footprint

*There is also terminological variation in the RPP literature but clearer consensus about a shared definition that is traced back to Coburn et al. (2013) | °These are broadly identified trends in the reviewed literature but there are examples of studies that depart from them.

Figure 4: Tracing overlaps between RPP and RPC definitions

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen.

The strong thematic overlap in the RPP and RPC literature is striking yet unsurprising given their broadly shared imperatives, including closing the so-called research-practice/policy 'gap' through collaboration and knowledge co-production (Biesta, 2007; Mols et al., 2020). One distinguishing feature of RPCs are, however, their greater variance in terms of the formality and duration of the collaborative arrangements. Given the heterogeneity of the collaborative research landscape, McGeown (2023a) highlights the difficulties that are encountered in trying to "reach a consensus on how [to] define RPPs." However, she also suggests that the identification of shared "values and principles [that] underpin successful [collaborative research] (e.g. respect, trust, non-hierarchical relationships)" (p. 57) may provide a useful point of reference while still maintaining a measure of flexibility for these approaches. In the remainder of this section, the potential benefits and challenges of what I will refer to as RPC/Ps, as well as a selection of methodological considerations that apply to both approaches are briefly outlined:

Potential benefits

Macpherson (2023) maintains that there is great promise in facilitating closer collaboration between educational researchers and practitioners, a sentiment that is echoed by several others. The benefits outlined below are, given the necessity for further research, framed as potential (Crane, 2023; Dixon, 2023; McGeown, 2023a, 2023b; McGeown et al., 2023; Norbury, 2023; Snowling, 2023; Vardy, 2023):

- Research conducted as part of an RPC/P is more likely to align with educational practitioners' priorities.

- These approaches may increase the likelihood of engagement with, or uptake of, research in educational settings.

- An RPC/P approach may democratise the generation of research evidence by directly involving education practitioners in setting the research agenda and research knowledge.

- RPC/P processes can support both researchers' and teachers' professional development by, for example increasing teachers' confidence and self-efficacy in engaging with research or improving researchers' ability to frame research questions and designs in practice-informed ways.

- RPC/Ps present opportunities for focused investments in relationship- and trust-building between researcher and practitioners.

- Beyond relationship-building, the sustained interactions that researchers and practitioners have as part of RPC/Ps allow for deepened mutual understanding of practice and research to facilitate more effective integration, for example of research into decisions around practice change.

Challenges

There seems to be widespread consensus among researchers that it is extremely challenging to create and sustain a 'successful' or 'effective' RPC/P (Bender, 2022; Jensen et al., 2022; Keller and Bender, 2020; McGeown, 2023a; Sjölund et al., 2022a; Vardy, 2023). Snowling (2023) writes: "RPPs can…be difficult to establish. A major challenge is suspicion on both sides - to move from the perspective of researcher as 'expert' to that of an equal partner typically entails a change in power dynamics" (p. 24). A few of the key challenges that are raised by these, and other authors, are summarised below:

- RPC/Ps require a significant investment of time to build and sustain relationships and effectively draw on, and integrate, different stakeholder perspectives.

- Researchers and practitioners often have different priorities and perspectives when it comes to the relevance and utility of research.

- RPC/Ps require researchers to adapt or reframe their research interests to foster alignment with practitioners' priorities. An unwillingness to do so may mean that research appears to be irrelevant to issues of practice.

- In RPC/Ps researchers and practitioners generally need to work in atypical ways. This requires openness, margin, and capacity-building.

- Optimal modes of collaboration and communication within RPC/Ps need to be discussed and established to avoid miscommunication and/or misunderstandings that can lead to disconnects, damage trust or inhibit collaboration in other ways.

- Due to the collaborative nature of the work, an RPC/P process can be harder to predict and plan. This is challenging when engaging with funders, ethical procedures, and other accountability structures.

- If partners in an RPC/P do not understand their counterparts' priorities and constraints, there is the potential for irrelevant outputs and/or outcomes that do not contribute to improvement or collaborator formation.

- There is potential in RPC/Ps for imbalances in power as well as counter-collaborative micropolitics and/or hierarchies to be reproduced or amplified.

Sjölund (2023b) highlights the effect of biased research infrastructure that has evolved to primarily recognise and value more traditional types of research. As such "procuring long-term funding for long-term sustainability is still considered a large and recurring issue for RPPs" (p. 19). The research infrastructure also means that funding is generally directed at, and held by, researchers which can create challenging dynamics in collaborative working (Farrell et al., 2018; Penuel et al., 2020; Brown and Allen, 2021; Coburn, Penuel and Farrell, 2021; Meyer et al., 2023). Other cited barriers to working in RPC/Ps include a lack of time, supportive infrastructure, established relationships and experience, which are compounded by incentive structures for academics and practitioners that do not create an enabling context for tackling and overcoming these barriers (McGeown *et al.,* 2023; Sjölund, 2023b; Vardy, 2023).

Sjölund et al. (2022b) have noted that "as the interest and investments in partnerships between research and practice increase, so must the research efforts regarding such structures" (p. 18). As part of the ongoing exploration of the potential of RPC/Ps it is also essential to consider how these approaches can be assessed and evaluated (Arce-Trigatti,

2021; A. Cooper, MacGregor, et al., 2020; A. Cooper, Macgregor, et al., 2020; Farrell et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2010).

2.4.2 Assessing and evaluating RPC/Ps

The term impact is pervasive in discussions of the goals and desired effects or outcomes of social research and notably prevalent in literature on RPC/Ps (Alonzo et al., 2022; Arko-Achemfuor et al., 2019; Campanella et al., 2022; Datnow et al., 2023; Ghiso et al., 2019; Meilinger, 2022; Wilcox and Zuckerman, 2019). It has gained increasing currency in a context where the funding of research has shifted from a patronage model to an investment one. Funders and universities increasingly view research through a cost-benefit analysis lens, seeking returns on their investments in the form of direct, demonstrable 'impact' on policy and/or practice (Hammersley, 2014).Yet, as a metaphor it arguably obscures more than it clarifies[11] (Akkerman et al., 2021; Hammersley, 2014).

One way it does this is by reducing the complexity and dynamism of the research landscape as well as the host of interconnected policy and practice communities, landscapes or spaces research findings may be 'directed at' or 'shared with' through the increasingly ubiquitous dissemination, outreach, and knowledge mobilisation efforts of researchers (Finnigan, 2023; Newman, 2014; Newman et al., 2016; Skipper and Pepler, 2021). These efforts are generally driven by an imperative to close or bridge 'the gap' between researchers and other epistemic communities with a specific emphasis on influencing decision making in policy and/or practice (Conaway, 2020; Weiss, 1982, 1991, 1995). Questions of research quality are often intertwined with notions of impact and influence highlighting the importance of unpacking and interrogating these pervasive concepts (Conaway, 2020; Hammersley, 2007, 2014; Poppen, 1968).

In this section, I draw together a few of the key strands of thinking about how RPC/P approaches can, and should, be assessed and evaluated – a multi-facetted discussion that, among other things, grapples with questions of impact, quality, efficacy, accountability, relevance, scope, and value, as well as whose perspectives are considered in the design and implementation of evaluations or assessments of RPC/Ps. In the following section I turn my attention to selected unpursued opportunities in the RPC/P literature and highlight a few of the assumptions and blind spots I encountered in my engagement with it. It is,

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[11] This thesis builds on a research project I completed as part of a Master of Arts at the Universität der Künste Berlin in 2018. In the dissertation on that project (Cruywagen, 2018), I unpacked and visualised Hammersley's elucidation of the perils of impact in further detail.

however, worth noting that the overarching question of how we can or should assess or evaluate RPC/P approaches itself points us to several gaps and opportunities in this area of education and social research.

Bender (2022) notes that despite a flourishing of empirical research that has provided a "better understanding of collaborative processes or [produced] guidelines on how to (or not to) design and implement such projects…little empirical knowledge is actually available about the impact of RPCs on social change, how they bring about change (or not) and how they compare to alternatives" (p. 1693). Sjölund (2023b) highlights the effect of existing research infrastructure on how the quality of research is judged even "when research is conducted in collaboration with practitioners" adding that the "quality criteria for more traditional research… need to adapt…to also account for the practice perspective" (Emphasis added, p. 20).

McGeown (2023b), Snowling (2023), Bartunek and Rynes (2014) and others also emphasise the importance of evaluating RPC/Ps from researcher *and* practitioner *perspectives* "to contribute to our increasing understanding of effective practice" (McGeown, 2023b, p. 11) and to avoid situations where "we fail to ask the questions that [practitioners] want answers to, which may have implications for their interest in the research and its outcomes" (McGeown, 2023a, p. 54). Turnhout et al. (2020) highlight the advantages of ensuring projects are "bounded and have clearly defined goals which allow for…evaluation of effectiveness to take place" (p. 18).

Penuel et al. (2020) have outlined a few provisional criteria for assessing the quality of research conducted with collaborative methodologies (Akkerman et al., 2021):

1. Research is not only *accountable* to the research community, but also to other stakeholders. Methodologies and research processes that explicitly emphasise collaborative approaches and integration with practice need to be evaluated in terms of "the value [other] stakeholders place in the research conducted" (Sjölund, 2023b, p.20).
2. The *focus* of both research and development must be warranted from multiple stakeholder *perspectives*.
3. Change strategies within research designs must be submitted to *systematic testing and refinement.*

4. When judging the *quality* of the research, a *broader range of research products or outputs* must be evaluated including, for example, any materials, tools, or strategies that are developed to improve teaching and/or learning.

Adequate and sustainable funding for RPC/Ps is an oft cited challenge in the literature (Alonzo et al., 2022; Gamoran, 2023; Sjölund, 2023b; Sjölund et al., 2022a; Welsh, 2021) but as McGeown (2023a) points out evaluation, which assesses the partnership as well as the projects that arise from it, needs to be built into new RPPs from the outset, "to evidence the 'value-added' contribution they make to educational research, policy and/or practice" (p. 57) and establish a robust case for funding RPPs in their own right. As part of the evaluation of RPC/Ps it will also be important to consider: "who…research [is] for, who judges the quality of research, and what outcomes would be considered a measure of success" (p. 59).

Boaz and Ashby (2003) outline four key dimensions of research quality, (1) methodological quality, (2) quality in reporting, (3) suitability of methods to the aims of the study, and (4) relevance to practice and policy (Referenced in Welsh, 2021). In considering how to assess and evaluate education RPC/Ps, these four dimensions are all pertinent. A focus on methodological quality applies both to the practice and process of research as well as educational practice from policymaking through to classroom practice and there is immense potential for the two to mutually enrich one another (W. Penuel et al., 2020; Friesen and Brown, 2023; Rivera and Chun, 2023). As mentioned above the quality of reporting of findings and learning is key and needs to expand beyond 'traditional' research outputs to include formats and products that serve all stakeholders. The suitability of methods applies both to discrete research activities or projects that are undertaken within RPC/Ps and the methods that are employed to equip researchers and practitioners for this mode of working or to build collaborative/partnership infrastructure, as well – crucially – as the methods that are employed to formatively and summatively assess and evaluate different dimensions of RPC/Ps. It is also important to consider the relevance and value of an RPC/P for practice, policy, and research.

Rather than primarily framing discussions around questions of impact or influence (Antonacopoulou, 2009; Ebersöhn, 2016; Cooper et al., 2020; Penuel et al., 2020), there is a rich tradition in education research of prioritising *improvement* from the classroom- to

the school- to the systems-level (Hopkins, 1997; Hopkins, Reynolds and Gray, 1999; Hopkins, 2000; Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001; Harris, 2003; Hopkins et al., 2014; Hopkins, 2015a; Chapman et al., 2016; Hopkins, 2020; Chapman and Ainscow, 2021). I posit that a focus on *improvement* has the potential to:

- mitigate some of the pitfalls of pursuing impact, influence or even relevance - a process in which there is often the risk of these notions becoming ends in themselves;
- provides an ever-present prompt to integrate research and practice;
- foregrounds the formative potential of RPC/Ps as collaborative spaces in which researchers, practitioners, learners and policymakers can develop and grow in their craft; and;
- places an ethical imperative to improve teaching, learning and the interconnected processes, spaces and systems that enable them at the heart of collaborative education research.

In short, an intentional shift from impact or influence to improvement – a value that is already evident across much of the educational RPC/P literature – may present a useful key in addressing a number of challenges and opportunities that have been identified by scholars working in this area (Dixon, 2023; Rivera and Chun, 2023; Sjölund and Lindvall, 2023).

2.4.3 Selected unpursued opportunities, assumptions, and blind spots in the research about RPC/Ps

In this section I outline a selection of unpursued opportunities for further research, as well as a few assumptions and blind spots, in the RPC/P literature:

Unpursued opportunities

McGeown (2023b) notes although there has been an increase "in the number of academic publications focused on sharing and evaluating the effectiveness of RPPs …considerable gaps remain" (p. 11), a sentiment which is echoed in relation to RPCs (Bender, 2022; Duxbury et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2022) Two key 'gaps' McGeown identifies are "how to optimally include children and young people's perspectives" and "how to manage RPPs when strong hierarchical relationships exist," both of which are particularly relevant in school contexts. Along with various other scholars, she also highlights the need for more

concerted investments in training and equipping of researchers and practitioners to engage in collaborative approaches like RPC/P (Crane, 2023; Dixon, 2023; Duxbury et al., 2020; Nealer, 2007; Norbury, 2023; Sjölund and Lindvall, 2023; Vardy, 2023). Other unpursued opportunities identified in the literature include:

- The necessity of clearly articulating the advantages, downsides and methodological considerations associated with RPC/Ps across different projects, partnerships and/or collaborations, with specific attention paid to different dimensions of the research process (Duxbury et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2022; McGeown, 2023b, 2023a).

- The general relegation of policy considerations in discussions of RPC/Ps despite the importance of policy in framing and shaping school priorities and, to some degree, research agendas (Conaway, 2020; Macpherson, 2023; Snow, 2015; Weiss, 1995).

- An over emphasis on "getting research into practice" with too little attention paid to how you might get practice into research (Dixon, 2023; McGeown, 2023b; Snow, 2015).

- Bender (2022) notes that "it is not clear how processes for generating co-produced knowledge look in terms of actor constellations and interactions, what happens during the process and how processes are linked to outcomes or impacts" (p. 1693).

- Although, power dynamics, considerations and constellations are often highlighted as a concern in the literature on RPPs and RPCs, they are rarely explored systematically (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014; Denner et al., 2019; Keller and Bender, 2020) leading to a de facto depoliticization of co-production (Turnhout *et al.*, 2020) and a lack of attention to the "micropolitics" of RPC/Ps (Bender, 2022).

This study centrally focuses on two of the highlighted opportunities in the reviewed literature, both of which are explored by Ghiso et al. (2019): Equipping researcher and practitioners for collaborative educational research (Crane, 2023; Dixon, 2023; Norbury, 2023; Sjölund, 2023b; Vardy, 2023), and championing the specific contributions children and young people can make to educational research (Crane, 2023; Norbury, 2023; Vardy, 2023). Drawing on the traditions of youth participatory action research, or youth-led participatory action research (YPAR), "through which youth engage in systematic inquiry alongside adult researchers to … develop solutions for social change" (Anderson, 2020, p. 243), I posit that young people with their aptitude for "multiliteracies and multimodalities" are uniquely positioned to enrich CKD&S processes (Burke and Hadley, 2018, p. 218).

In the literature, there is often an implicit or explicit assumption that RPC/P work will, or should, be research-led (A. Cooper, Macgregor, et al., 2020; A. Cooper, MacGregor, et al., 2020; McGeown, 2023b; W. R. Penuel, 2023). However, this is at times also challenged (Sjölund, 2023a, 2023b; Snow, 2015). For example, W. R. Penuel (2023) explicitly states that the work should be research-led, rather than by design, practice and/or professional development considerations. The position he articulates appears to rest, as with many other researchers working in this area, on the assumption that research will necessarily improve practice (McGeown, 2023a; McGeown et al., 2023; Snowling, 2023). The positioning of researchers as "the experts" has the potential to undermine "the extensive knowledge, experience and insights that teachers have of their students and context" (McGeown, 2023b, p. 8).

The imperative to facilitate research use as part of RPC/Ps has already been addressed above, and in some cases researchers seem genuinely baffled by the fact that practitioners do not use research in the ways they expect of them:

> "…our study of previous research indicates that practitioners seem to have a certain degree of autonomy when it comes to choosing how to use research" (Sjölund et al., 2022b, p. 16)

> "It is curious that we persist in calling on others to use evidence from research, even in the face of strong evidence that how people *actually* use research does not conform to our wishes" (Penuel, 2023, pp. 15-16)

Another related assumption is that a dearth of research use - or the use of research by practitioners in ways that do not align with researcher expectations - reflects a lack of access, capacity, capability, and/or specific ideological orientations or belief systems on the part of practitioners that influence their interpretation of research findings (Lezotte et al., 2022; Weiss, 1970; Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980; Welsh, 2021). A legitimate concern researchers have in this regard is the symbolic use of research to justify pre-existing conclusions or decisions, regardless of whether these are supported by findings (Weiss, 1982, 1995; Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980).

While there is an increasing acknowledgement of the need to upskill researchers to more effectively engage in these collaborative approaches, there is less critical reflexivity about the, for example, instrumental use of RPC/Ps processes by researchers who write about the importance of harnessing "non-academic expertise to inform research projects" (McGeown, 2023b) and carefully considering which practitioners are best placed "to guide and inform your research" (ibid, p. 10). Although, the literature is littered with references

to power dynamics and the importance of researchers reflexively acknowledging and mitigating their power in these collaborative arrangements – a stark and telling assumption in itself which reveals specific belief systems and ideological orientations on the part of researchers (Bender, 2022; Denner et al., 2019; Keller and Bender, 2020; McGeown, 2023b; Welsh, 2021) – decidedly fewer words are dedicated to reflecting on the different ways researchers *use* the resources, expertise, and experiences of practitioners through RPC/P processes in service of their objectives and priorities (Bender, 2022; Turnhout et al., 2020).

In acknowledging these and other unpursued opportunities, assumptions and blind spots in the work that has been undertaken to date, I echo McGeown's (2023a) sentiment that as researchers "we need to be humble and approach partnership work with a learning orientation ourselves" embracing that "we learn together as we research ways to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of children and young people" (p. 57).

2.5 Factors of collaborative working

Patel et al. (2012) home in on another theme that is highlighted in the RPC/P literature: "For a concept so widely used in everyday language there is a surprising lack of a clear understanding of what it is to collaborate, and of how best to support and improve collaborative working" (p. 1). In addressing the questions of *what* and *how*, the authors propose a model of collaborative working that draws together a range of interconnected factors including context, support, tasks, interaction processes, teams, individuals as well as a set of overarching factors that "are relevant to, and interact with, the six main factors and with sub-factors under those" (p. 5). Their model, which is anchored in a detailed review of literature on collaborative working, was tested and refined through a large, international research project.

I will consider how the overarching factors they identify may helpfully augment both the literature on RPC/P as well as the lens of fostering enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S. The overarching factors they foreground are trust, conflict, experience, goals, incentives, constraints, management, and time. Their model allows us to consider factors that facilitate the integration of the six dimensions of an enabling space (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b) and provides useful vocabulary to proactively consider the relationality of space-time from different vantage points:

Trust

Patel et al. (2012) describe trust as personal or informal as well as impersonal or institutionalised. They emphasise that strong "collaborative relationships are built on mutual trust and respect, and these should be established early on in a new project or team" (p. 13). They also establish a link between an organisation's collaborative readiness and its willingness to trust partners enough to communicate and share information openly (Frei and Morriss, 2021).

Conflict

Conflict is not necessarily a negative indicator of the health of collaborative working as it can be channelled to foster greater clarity and - if tackled in a timely manner - strengthen relationships (Bender, 2022; Kali et al., 2023; Meilinger, 2022; Patel et al., 2012). It is helpful to distinguish between *interpersonal* conflict, which can if left unaddressed be extremely corrosive in collaborative working, and *task* conflict, which can if proactively harnessed strengthen a collaboration by clarifying expectations around the definition and execution of tasks (Duxbury et al., 2020).

Experience

Experience encompasses a shared history of collaborating as well as task- or team-related competence that is relevant to a specific collaborative endeavour. Past (positive) experiences of working together, which may engender trust, can often be indicators of successful collaboration and contribute to streamlining collaborative working in key resource-intensive areas including communication, establishing shared workflows and interpersonal dynamics (Jurkowski et al., 2023; Patel et al., 2012; San Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2005).

Goals

In collaborative working it is imperative that partners clearly articulate the vision and objectives they have for the project or process so that conversations can be pursued about aligning goals and objectives to provide a shared framework within which to outline mutual goals and strategies (Coburn et al., 2013; Farrell et al., 2018, 2022; Norbury, 2023; W. R. Penuel et al., 2015; Sjölund and Lindvall, 2023). This clarity, beyond bolstering alignment, also provides a robust foundation for communication, task definition and delegation, as well as the monitoring of performance and progress over time. Individuals and teams will have their own goals for participating in a collaborative process that may not always align

with the organisational ones, as these different layers of goals can drive both successful and unsuccessful collaboration there is merit in taking time to grapple with them (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014; Bender, 2022; Keller and Bender, 2020; Patel et al., 2012).

Incentives

Patel et al. (2012) aptly note that "[p]eople respond to incentives and adapt their behaviour accordingly" (p. 14), an observation that is echoed across the literature on RPC/Ps (Arce-Trigatti et al., 2018; Baum, 2000; He et al., 2020; Sjölund, 2023b). In collaborative working it is important to identify the incentive structures that shape and drive the behaviour of members of different epistemic communities or organisations who are coming together, and to consider what supportive or counterproductive implications these structures may have for work across these communities and/or organisations (Penuel et al., 2020; Scholz, LaTurner and Barkowski, 2021; Lezotte et al., 2022).

Constraints

In collaboration, constraints are relevant and need to be navigated at different levels from the individual or team level, a process or task level, a support or resourcing level as well as an organisational level. As part of a collaborative process, these constraints need to be identified and negotiated across socio-organisational cultures and sub-cultures (Newbury et al., 2023; Patel et al., 2012; Snowling, 2023). As with conflict, constraints are not a blanket negative. They are often a necessary and productive aspect of a collaborative process if harnessed and navigated intentionally (Buchanan, 1992; Peschl and Fundneider, 2013, 2017; Ashton, Mah and Rivers, 2020). This is also reflected in the conceptualisation of the epistemological dimension of an enabling space, where it is acknowledged that constraints are needed for optimal knowledge discovery and stewardship (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b).

Management

Supportive management tends to improve productivity and contribute to likelihood of success in collaborative endeavours (Moilanen et al., 2015; van der Voet and Steijn, 2021). Intentionality, clear guidance and communication are core management competences in collaborative working (Engeström, 2004; Grosz and Hunsberger, 2006; Yeh and Wetzstein, 2020). Patel et al. (2012) discuss leadership as part of their exploration of management and highlight that "good leaders can inspire others to work collaboratively and bridge disciplinary boundaries and can overcome organisational and process

weaknesses" (p. 14). They also note that different leadership styles (e.g. transformational, transactional) can contribute to effective collaborative working and that the best suited approach is generally determined by the nature of the project and the collaborative context (Sjölund, 2023b; Snowling, 2023).

Performance

Assessing or evaluating collaborative performance will likely look at how well a team worked together in pursuit of shared objectives and consider the likelihood of the team being able to work together in future (Wei and Huang, 2022; McCabe et al., 2023). A range of performance indicators may be relevant in collaborative working - encompassing individual as well as collective efforts – and are ideally tailored to a specific process or project's objectives. Task types, levels of trust between individuals, teams and/or organisations, training and capacity, as well as quality of leadership, are other factors that influence performance (Patel, Pettitt and Wilson, 2012; Murphy, Arenas and Batista, 2015; Frei and Morriss, 2021).

Time

Collaborative working is pursued in time with cycles of activity, work rhythms, as well as time limits and deadlines, structuring not only how teams work but also significantly influencing the climate they work in and the quality of their experience (Lau, 2022; Patel et al., 2012). Change and variation - whether of collaborator capacity, team constellations, task definition/scope or other features of collaborative working – are to be expected over time with some aspects being more stable and others more dynamic (Barker Scott and Manning, 2024; Hinds et al., 2011). Key milestones in time, such as the formation of a collaborative team, have a significant impact on collaborative working well beyond that specific juncture (Patel et al., 2012). While, increased collaborative experience over time can strengthen joint working, in the case of corrosive developments, such as unaddressed conflicts, increased experience over time may have the opposite effect (Kali et al., 2023; Patel et al., 2012).

Collaboration is "a complex phenomenon with many interactions between factors contributing to performance at any one point in time." Rather than zooming in on one factor or dimension, Patel et al. (2012) outline a set of "relevant factors [organisations or partners] can use to think about how they currently collaborate and identify where and how they do things well and where there is room for improvement" (p. 23). In keeping with a

multi-dimensional view of collaboration – as well as the enabling, hospitable space we seek to foster for it – models such as the one they propose present a useful tool to anchor and concretise discussions about the *what* and *how* of collaborative working. As with the theory of enabling spaces, the objective is to move beyond focusing on one factor - with the potential effect of minimising or ignoring others - and to foster an integrative view collaboration.

2.6 Fuelling collaborative engagement: Selected concepts and constructs

Castañer & Oliveira's (2020) differentiate collaboration from coordination and cooperation, highlighting the importance of attitudes, behaviours, and outcomes in clarifying which mode of engagement is being employed. Collaboration is characterised by the self-directed or voluntary nature of involvement (Keast and Mandell, 2014; Stout and Keast, 2021). The critical importance of researchers and practitioners developing the dispositions, skills and knowledge base to span boundaries and engage in brokering in RPC/Ps is also a recurring theme (Baum, 2000; McGeown, 2023a, 2023b; Sjölund, 2023b; Sjölund and Lindvall, 2023; Wentworth et al., 2023) as these approaches necessitate them working in "atypical ways, which require an openness and training to do so" (McGeown, 2023b, p.9). This emphasis on investment in developmental "opportunities for researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to learn the skills needed to do this work" (Conaway, 2020, p. 8) is often augmented by a focus on the need for organisational and collaborative infrastructure that encourages and incentivises the active prioritisation of these opportunities over other professional commitments (Sjölund, 2023b; Vardy, 2023; Welsh, 2021).

Questions of how to fuel and foster collaborative engagement thus need to encompass considerations of individual attitudes, dispositions, behaviours, and skills, as well as how those connect with organisational culture, constraints and structures, especially incentive structures (Hargreaves, 1995; Huyghe and Knockaert, 2015; Stoll, 2000). Below I collate a preliminary set of concepts that pull certain qualities and characteristics that have been highlighted at individual and/or team or organisational levels in the literature into focus:

- **Openness** is an individual or organisation's willingness and ability to be open to, and engage with, a collaborative process. Openness encompasses interactions as it is concerned with what these actors do or choose not to do in specific relationships or networks, for example by sharing or combining resources in pursuit of shared

objectives. It also refers to the positionality and culture that these actors reinforce in relation to how knowledge is discovered, disclosed and/or exchanged within and between individuals and/or organisations (Moilanen, Halla and Alin, 2015; Tsai, Melia and Hinsz, 2020; Laage-Hellman, Lind and Perna, 2021; Skipper and Pepler, 2021; Thomson, 2021; McGeown, 2023b). Alexander (2019) embeds the notion of openness in her discussion of hospitality, highlighting that "the very roundedness and connection that people can experience in communities that embrace both rootedness and openness can help people *feel* 'at home'" (p. 670) in a context or process.

- **Readiness** is defined as being ready by harnessing preparedness, promptness, aptitude, and willingness (Rosas and Camarinha-Matos, 2009; Also see: Romero et al., 2009; Rosas and Camarinha-Matos, 2008). Collaborative readiness is evidenced by the provision of resources including staff, infrastructure and training to support a collaborative process. Readiness is often bolstered by past or ongoing collaborative experience (Patel et al., 2012).

- **Alignment** is helpfully conceptualised by Corsaro and Snehota (2011) in terms of the alignment of objectives and practices as well as views and perceptions (cognitive). They identify cognitive alignment as being a key enabler of collaboration as it aids trust-building as well as the facilitation of communication and mobilisation of knowledge within a CKD&S process (Ingstrup et al., 2021; Kragh and Andersen, 2009; Skålén et al., 2015). Although alignment encompasses agreement on objectives, practices as well as values and mindsets, it extends beyond it to an in-practice calibration of individual and/or organisational resources in support of collaboration (Coburn et al., 2013; McGeown, 2023b; Sjölund, 2023b; Welsh, 2021).

- **Intentionality** is defined as a mental *and* practical directedness towards a collaborative process, whereby cognitive, emotional, social, and organisational resources and energies are actively invested in, and directed towards, the collaboration (Grosz and Hunsberger, 2006; Jacob, 2023; Yeh and Wetzstein, 2020). Although, intentionality is observed and discussed at school-level in Chapter 5, the complexities around claims of shared or collective intentionality are acknowledged (Farny and Kibler, 2022; Schweikard and Schmid, 2021; Slors, 2023; Tomasello and Moll, 2010). In-practice the intentionality that fuels collaboration or co-production is often a characteristic of different individual

collaborators, rather than something that can primarily be driven through memoranda of understanding or official agreements. Shared or collective intentionality, like collaborative advantage, is often a fruit of intensive, sustained engagement and never a guaranteed outcome (Bömelburg and Gassmann, 2024; Farny and Kibler, 2022; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Slors, 2023).

- **Integration** refers to the extent to which a collaborative process is embedded in the organisational context across the different dimensions of an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S to bolster a unity of effort in pursuit of shared objectives (Axelsson and Axelsson, 2006; Sjölund et al., 2022b, 2022a). Ashton et al. (2020) helpfully distinguish "between integration understood as an ability to break down a form into its smallest parts and then add the relationship back in, and integration that deals with 'complex wholes and complex process [that] imply some kind of synergetic action at the level of complexity' that cannot be 'approached through its smallest parts'" (p. 180). The concept as defined in relation to fragmentation also highlights the potential of drawing together different epistemic communities through approaches like RPC/P (See the discussion of Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967 in Axelsson and Axelsson, 2006).

- **Capacity** is defined by Foster-Fishman et al. (2001)'s as the conditions required at individual, relational, organisational, and programmatic levels to catalyse, sustain and promote collaboration. Collaborative capacity is operationalised and measured in a number of ways in literature on collaboration and partnership (For example, see: Alexander et al., 2003; Barker Scott and Manning, 2024; Gazley, 2010; Weber et al., 2007), but these four levels usefully highlight key aspects that need to be considered in any CKD&S process.

- **Cooperation** is defined by Castañer and Oliveira's (2020) in terms of attitude, behaviour, and outcome: "A cooperation attitude refers to the willingness to work toward the achievement of an agreed-on common goal. A cooperation behaviour refers to actions undertaken by the partners to achieve the collectively envisioned goal. A cooperation outcome is, for example, the degree to which an agreed-on common goal is attained." (p. 984). Wei and Huang (2022), drawing on Engeström's (2008, 2015) work on modes of partnership, define cooperation as "a mode of interaction in which actors 'focus on a shared problem, trying to find mutually acceptable ways to conceptualise and solve it', however, "they are not

flexible enough to react to new emerging problems…The reason is that neither researchers nor [practitioners] question the 'scripts' in their mindset" (p. 141).

To foster or encourage the attitudes, dispositions, behaviours, and skills that practitioners and researchers need to engage in collaborative approaches like RPC/P, it is important to start by carefully considering what these might be. The list outlined above is by no means exhaustive and may be read as a collation of key qualities or dispositions that recur in the literature as well as a prompt for further discussion and clarification of what it would mean to operationalise this widely acknowledged priority. Investing in capacity-building of researchers and practitioners is just one of the necessary costs associated with building and sustaining RPC/Ps. In the following section, I draw together a range of perspectives on the importance of carefully considering the costs associated with collaboration.

2.7 Counting the cost of collaboration

Collaboration is often championed as a potential corrective to some of the pitfalls of individual or siloed action (Huxham and Macdonald, 1992; Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Vivona et al. (2023) challenge a few assumptions about collaboration including that it is "a value in itself", "a superior way to pursue objectives" and that it is "inevitable in order to achieve innovation objectives" (p. 879-880). Bender (2022) also points to an idealistic view of RPCs based on an assumption of "quasi-automatic beneficial social impact" (p. 1693). While collaborative advantage is possible[12] it is not an inevitable outcome of collaboration, which is a complex endeavour presenting its own pitfalls and risks (Doberstein, 2016; Bömelburg and Gassmann, 2024).

The literature on collaborative research strategies, including RPP and RPCs, repeatedly highlights the significant investment of time, money, energy, and other resources that collaborative or partnership working demands (Baum, 2000; Brown-Luthango, 2013; Duxbury, Bakas and Pato de Carvalho, 2020). McGeown (2023b), for example, emphasises the importance of "fully appreciating the time, resources, skills, or dispositions required for RPPs to be effective" and considers "…what compromises …researchers and teachers [should] not expect to make when working" in this way (p. 12). Bender (2022) highlights some of the "potential unintended adverse effects [of RPCs] on knowledge

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[12] Collaborative advantage, broadly defined, is a form of advantage which does not primarily stem from natural or historical capabilities or qualities but from the various elements of a system working together more effectively than their counterparts in comparable systems or contexts (Huxham & Macdonald, 1992).

generation" by not paying attention to relational dynamics, and their influence on outcomes, in these types of research arrangements.

Vivona et al. (2023), who also underline the tremendous resources required for collaboration, add that it "can be unappealing due to several potential costs" and "the risk of collaboration failure is significant" (p.879). They identify and characterise three types of costs that need to be considered in a collaborative process: "*transaction costs* derive from the nature of the innovation problem and the structure of the collaboration, *cooperation costs* derive from the costs of making idiosyncratic interests compatible and the indirect costs of innovation failure or opportunism, and *knowledge costs* derive from the need to manage both inflows and outflows of knowledge" (p. 892). Bender (2022) also emphasises the importance of considering the significant costs associated with RPCs "in terms of time, funds, conflicts and management requirements" and carefully assessing whether the anticipated benefits will outweigh them or not (pp. 1693-1794). Given the extensive costs and the fact that working collaboratively may require compromise in research and/or practice priorities (Macpherson, 2023), McGeown (2023b) highlights the importance of carefully considering at which points in a process it makes sense, and would add value, to collaborate with partners from other epistemic communities.

A more foundational, and arguably essential, deliberation is whether - given the significant costs associated with collaboration - it is advisable to pursue it at all (Baum, 2000). The importance of honest, focused conversations between prospective partners about objectives and priorities as well as constraints and obligations, is stressed in the RPC and RPP literature (Coburn et al., 2013; Farrell et al., 2018, 2022; McGeown, 2023a; Norbury, 2023; Penuel et al., 2015; Sjölund and Lindvall, 2023). These initial, and ongoing, investments of time can foster, reinforce and/or maintain alignment and clarity while ensuring that opportunities for mutually beneficial synergies are explored and harnessed. By prioritising clear dialogue, partners are better able to identify whether they can justify pursuing collaboration or not, these exchanges also present opportunities for learning and relationship-building (Coburn and Penuel, 2016; Dixon, 2023; Skipper and Pepler, 2021; Welsh, 2021).

Chapter summary

In this chapter I started by outlining the philosophical and methodological commitments that buttress my work as a social researcher. I positioned the study's focus on how enabling, hospitable spaces can be fostered for CKD&S through approaches like RPC in

relation to salient literature. The concept of *space* that underpins this thesis was unpacked and linked to notions of spatialising education. Building on this foundational understanding of space, the theory of *enabling* spaces was augmented by the concept of *hospitality* as well as Charlotte Mason's understanding of *the atmosphere of environment.* The fledgling body of literature on the RPC approach was reviewed in relation to the ever-expanding discussion and exploration of RPPs in education research, with a specific focus on strategies for the assessment or evaluation of these collaborative approaches as well as selected unpursued opportunities, assumptions, and blind spots in the reviewed literature. Some overarching factors of collaborative working were outlined and a preliminary selection of concepts for collaborative engagement were also collated from salient multi-disciplinary research on collaboration. The chapter concluded with a brief discussion of the importance of counting the costs of collaboration.

CHAPTER 3 | ENGAGING the CONTEXT and the KEY COLLABORATORS: RESEARCH ABOUT, WITH and AROUND SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

In attempting to review and recount even one episode in the story of the South African (SA) education system, a key question I grapple with is: *Where* to begin? The framing of this question prompts me to consider 'the system' as a relational space-time (Massey, 2005; Robertson, 2018; Scharmer, 2018) and to interrogate the metaphor of 'a system' both in terms of what it reveals and what it obscures (Davis et al., 2020; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Midgley, 2011, 2014). It also serves as a reminder that, in anchoring this thesis in context, I am necessarily making various decisions about where the boundary lines of its narrative fall (Elliott, 2005; Sayed et al., 2003; Soudien and Harvey, 2021b; Webster and Mertova, 2007).

I am demarcating a territory within a dynamic, evolving, complex and multi-modal system (Jessop et al., 2008; Lang, 2023; Spaull, 2019a). Rather than attempting to answer all possible questions about this study's collaborative context - the Metro East District of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) in SA – I draw on literature from a range of disciplines including economics, education, development studies, and legal theory to highlight different dimensions of this complex terrain (Bloch, 2009b; Jansen, 2019; Schirmer and Visser, 2023d).

Drawing on Jessop, Brenner and Jones' (2008) consolidated spatial lexicon[13], this chapter employs a socio-spatial and -temporal lens to anchor the thesis' narrative in salient literature about the SA education system, considering how this *territory* is demarcated as well as how it may be conceptualised very differently depending on the *scale* that is applied, whether global, national, provincial, local or person(al). The school is explored as territory, *place* and positionality with a particular focus on the many different ways these spaces are categorised and conceptualised in the SA context (Christie, 2013; Riley, 2013). The *positionality* and place of the study's key collaborators– specifically learners, teachers, and school leaders – within schools as space-times, as well as the system more broadly, is considered.

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[13] The concept of positionality, as defined by Sheppard (2002), augments their lexicon.

I start by briefly interrogating the COVID-19 pandemic, as perceived watershed moment in the SA context, with a focus on the experiences of learners, teachers, and school leaders in navigating the pandemic and some of the ways its impacts on teaching, learning and related priorities exacerbated pervasive systemic challenges that pre-dated it (Jansen, 2020c; Wills and Qvist, 2023; Wills and Van der Berg, 2022). I discuss the notion of a 'new' education system in a 'new' SA, highlighting a few distinct aspects of this evolving landscape and exploring some of the echoes of the Apartheid government's educational ideologies, strategies and practices in what education looks like 30 years since the first democratic elections. Ongoing discussions around SA learners' worrying performance in international psychometric assessments of literacy and numeracy are unpacked along with the country's overwhelming focus on the National Senior Certificate (NSC) or 'matric' as success indicator (Gustafsson, 2020; Jansen, 2012; Pretorius and Morris, 2024; Schirmer and Visser, 2023b).

Given the acute, complex challenges faced across the SA education system, the earlier discussion on the importance of counting the cost of collaboration is anchored in literature on this context (See 2.7). A few opportunities for collaborative research in, with, and around SA schools, with a specific focus on research-practice collaborations and/or partnerships (RPC/Ps) and youth-involvement in collaborative research in the SA context are outlined. The chapter concludes with a shift of focus that acknowledges the multi-system nature of the SA education landscape – itself arguably an aspect of the Apartheid legacy – and considers how a multi-system lens might enrich how we map, describe and interpret both the challenges and opportunities in this context from the national to the local (Jansen, 2019; Levy et al., 2018; Spaull, 2019a).

3.1   In search of an 'initiating event': A qualified engagement with the COVID-19 pandemic as disruption

In storytelling, the question of where to begin is often answered in terms of an initiating event (McAdams, 1993). The immense shock of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that for a few years in our recent past it became a globally imposed initiating event for many of the stories we told about our lives from the individual to the societal level (Chapman and Bell, 2020; Greenhow et al., 2021; Honey-Rosés et al., 2021; Soudien, 2020). The SA context was no exception and in the initial framing of this study I was sure it would be a central focus in my collaboration with schools (Jansen, 2020b; Soudien and Harvey, 2021a;

Struwig et al., 2021; Tanjga, 2021). While the pandemic – as well as socio-political reactions to it – had far-reaching effects on most aspects of life, I briefly synthesise perspectives on the SA context that caution us to engage critically with any notions of the pandemic as a particularly catalytic moment in this system's trajectory (Gustafsson and Deliwe, 2020; Pretorius and Morris, 2024; Schirmer and Visser, 2023d). I also draw on insights from participatory research that was conducted during the pandemic that highlights experiences of learners and teachers in navigating this time, and foregrounds certain challenges and priorities that pre-dated it (Jansen and Farmer-Phillips, 2021; Jansen and O'Ryan, 2020).

Rather than a primary cause of crises, the COVID-19 pandemic sent significant shockwaves through the SA education system amplifying existing fault lines and disrupting vulnerabilities in areas including hunger reduction (Stats SA, 2024; S. Van der Berg, Zuze, et al., 2020), rates of school enrolment (Statistics South Africa, 2022; S. Van der Berg, Wyk, et al., 2020) and reading support (Bisgard *et al.*, 2022; Spaull, 2023) where the country had made some progress in recent decades (Schirmer and Visser, 2023b). It was estimated that the global learning losses due to the pandemic could amount to up to $10 trillion US dollars (Azevedo *et al.,* 2020). In the SA context, significant learning losses were reported, and these impacts were felt most acutely in non-fee-paying schools where learners lost the equivalent of between 70 and 100% of a school year, with effects varying across the nine provinces (Bisgard et al., 2022; Shepherd and Mohohlwane, 2021; Spaull, 2023; S. Van Der Berg et al., 2019). In a small minority of schools, the pandemic prompted a more systematic use of tools and infrastructure for remote learning and/or digital engagement with learning that were either already in place or introduced in response to the pandemic (Mhlanga and Moloi, 2020). These types of investments were, however, not available in the majority of schools with teaching and learning coming to a complete halt in most non-fee-paying schools (Jansen, 2020a; Statistics South Africa, 2021, 2022).

During the SA lockdown, two national collaborative social inquiry projects invited children and young people (Jansen and O'Ryan, 2020) as well as teachers (Jansen and Farmer-Phillips, 2021) to share their experiences of learning and teaching at this time in their own words. Stories were sent in by learners and teachers in public and independent schools from across the country's nine provinces (EMIS, 2023). While some of the common themes specifically related to teaching and learning under lockdown, several highlighted systemic challenges that predated the pandemic. Five of these themes are

briefly discussed below and linked with broader discussions in the literature about the pandemic's impacts and compounding effects:

The challenges of learning and teaching in isolation

Young people highlighted the challenges they encountered as they tried to engage in learning in the absence of teacher and peer support as well as the clearly defined material and temporal structures that the in-person school day would normally offer (Edwards and Clarke, 2002; Riley, 2013). Many expressed concerns about distractions and the lack of support, or even pressure, to remain engaged in learning on an ongoing basis. At the same time, some saw the process of learning to manage distractions as an opportunity to develop new skills and grow in maturity as they learned to learn on their own (Christie, 2021; Soudien and Harvey, 2021a).

The intensification of inequalities and (digital) exclusion

Experiences of teaching and learning during the pandemic varied widely based on, among other factors, the socio-economic realities of schools, teachers, and young people (Soudien, 2020; Statistics South Africa, 2022; Tanjga, 2021). Students from private or higher quintile public schools often already had the necessary devices and systems in place for remote learning, allowing for a smoother transition to engaging with their classes from home.

SA is still largely a mobile first country, with many households not having access to high-speed internet connections not to mention the devices – aside from mobile phones – to make use of such connections (Statistics South Africa, 2022, 2024). Even where households had one or more mobile phones at their disposal the prohibitive cost of mobile data - often purchased on a pay-as-you-go basis - meant that accessing information shared via web-based tools was not always possible at a time where families reported having to choose between mobile data and food or other necessities (Statistics South Africa, 2022; S. Van der Berg, Zuze, et al., 2020).

Although many teachers shared stories of trying to find creative workarounds for their students by disseminating learning materials via COVID-compliant school parking area pickups or 'what's app' rather than fully relying on data-heavy platforms such as MS Teams, this still presented a barrier for some families due to the long distances some live away from schools as well as the mobile data required to access these groups and messages, which involved an expense that some could not afford (Mhlanga and Moloi, 2020; Tanjga, 2021). For those who lived in overcrowded, noisy homes and/or neighbourhoods it became clear that schools were also places of refuge offering order and stability for learning to take place (Jansen, 2020a).

Schools as socio-relational spaces

Young people and teachers' experiences of the pandemic emphasised the importance of relationships in teaching and learning, and schools as key socio-relational spaces particularly for children and young people (Ngware et al., 2021; Robertson, 2018; Shula et al., 2022). For young people they had the opportunity to learn in the immediate context of family and to experience how family dynamics can be more central to learning for better or worse (Ochonogor and Seroto, 2021; Segoe and Bisschoff, 2019; Theron et al., 2022). Teachers also described how the pandemic emphasised the need for strong parent-school connections and partnership (Heystek, 2011; Segoe and Bisschoff, 2019). In the SA context, a key factor in this respect is the fact that some parents have not had the opportunity to complete basic formal education and this, coupled with other challenges in struggling households and communities, needs to be considered in laying the groundwork for more active parental engagement (Chikoko et al., 2015; Lumadi, 2019; Soudien, 2013; Spjeldnæs, 2021).

The need for adaptability among learners and teachers

Jansen and Farmer-Phillips (2021) write that the "post-pandemic future requires different kinds of teachers" but this could be reframed in terms of a need for teachers as well as young people and children to be supported to be as agile, adaptable, and responsive as possible in response to change or crises such as the pandemic (Adams and Soudien, 2020; Christie, 2021; Jansen, 2020a; Soudien and Harvey, 2021a). The need for specific technical and social skills became abundantly clear during the pandemic. These, however, may not strictly speaking be new needs but rather ones that were pulled into stark focus by the pandemic's pressures (Gustafsson and Deliwe, 2020; Jansen, 2020b; Tanjga, 2021).

In terms of teachers, more multifaceted pedagogical toolkits, assessment approaches and overall success management as well as an understanding of core principles of andragogy - particularly when engaging parents with various degrees of formal education - were highlighted as key priorities for ongoing professional development (Greenhow et al., 2021; Mhlanga and Moloi, 2020). As discussed further below, there is a general need in the SA context to improve the skills and capacity of teachers (Schirmer and Visser, 2023b, 2023e; Spaull, 2019b). It would thus be important to ensure the basics are in place before expecting teachers to develop additional specialised skills or prioritise externally imposed special interest programmes (Fleisch, 2008; Frempong et al., 2013; Mcdonald et al., 2022; Taylor, 2019, 2023).

For children and young people schools are a lot more than just a place to learn a curriculum, they are essential social spaces (Lund et al., 2022; Riley, 2013). Schools can be refuges that offer safety, security, and physical nourishment for learners as well as social connections and the opportunity to learn how to be, and relate, in the world (Masa et al., 2020; Stats SA, 2024; S. Van der Berg, Zuze, et al., 2020). For some learners it is the one place where they will experience interacting with a loving, caring, and listening adult (Lund *et al.*, 2022; Skeen *et al.*, 2022). Against this backdrop, there is a need to develop a more holistic view of the functions and potential of schools as enabling, hospitable spaces for collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship for learners, teachers, school leaders and communities (Christie et al., 2007; Jansen and Blank, 2015).

3.2   New South Africa, *new* education system? The ever-present effects of SA's Apartheid legacy

2024 marks the 30th anniversary of SA's first democratic elections (Enslin, 1994; Soudien, 1994). The 2024 elections were the first since SA's transition to democracy where the African National Congress (ANC) did not win an outright majority, and the subsequent formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) has ushered in a new phase in the nation's democratic becoming (CDE, 2024; Pretorius and Morris, 2024). Despite significant progress over the past three decades, the legacy of the Apartheid regime's dehumanising ideology, policies, and practices – which were enforced and materialised in the lives of South Africans for over forty years – are still visible in different aspects of the nation's socio-relational space-time (Karlsson, 2004; Soudien, 2007b; Hayem, 2017; Christie, 2020; Zembylas, 2023).

In the second volume of *Education in South Africa* (1977), the educationalist E.G. Malherbe wrote, "The national aims and ambitions of the country are often better expressed in its educational system than in any other institution (Kirkwood, 1978, p. 91). Over the intervening decades others have echoed this sentiment and highlighted different ways the country's education system still appears to operate within many of the boundary lines that were drawn during, and before, the Afrikaner-Nationalist government was in power (Karlsson, 2004; Bloch, 2009b; Daniel Thobejane, 2013; Schirmer and Visser, 2023e).

Under Apartheid, several education systems were established to 'serve' different racialised groups within the society (Christie and Collins, 1982; Enslin, 1994; Daniel Thobejane, 2013). The lion's share of funding was invested in the education of 'white' South Africans, while the majority of the nation's children and young people were educationally disenfranchised and trained for a life of servitude within a political dispensation that denied their inherent dignity and potential (Christie, 1990; Lang, 2023; Soudien, 1998, 2006, 2013). These education systems were bound, differentiated, and hemmed in to align with specific political, economic, and social imperatives, and some of this territorial demarcation was maintained through proactive policymaking and careful negotiation by the Apartheid government as part of the democratic transition (Kallaway, 2019; Veriava, 2024).

In this section, I highlight two profound challenges in the SA education system that can in part be traced back to Apartheid as well as the colonial dispensations that spearheaded key aspects of what the Afrikaner-Nationalist government would systematically entrench in law, policy, and social fabric (Soudien, 2019a). The first is *inequality* and the second is the *dysfunction* that plagues large portions of the system (Lang, 2023; Schirmer and Visser, 2023e; Spaull, 2015). In unpacking what has been described as system-wide dysfunction, I consider documented examples of pervasive corruption (Ncala, 2022), the widespread, yet unconstitutional, practice of cadre deployment (Department of Basic Education, 2016; Schirmer and Visser, 2023c), as well as concerns about disordered accountability (Levy, 2018b; Levy et al., 2019; Schirmer and Visser, 2023d; Spaull, 2019b) and how this relates to schools as (dis)organisations (Jansen, 2020c).

3.2.1 Inequality and the 'poverty trap'

SA is one of the most unequal societies in the world, an oft-cited social reality that is acutely observable in various aspects of the education system (Jansen, 2019; Levy et al., 2019; Mohohlwane, 2019; Moonsamy Maistry, 2022; Motala and Carel, 2019; Soudien, 2020; Spaull, 2019a). Commenting on the "disturbing" nature of SA's educational inequality Van der Berg and Gustafsson (2019), point out that this inequality is still racialised, which means "the education system does not sufficiently contribute to reducing racial divisions" in key educational and socio-economic outcomes. A phenomenon which raises "the very pertinent question of whether the educational system largely reinforces rather than overcomes economic, social and racial inequalities" (pp. 25-26).

These persistent inequalities have also been described as a "poverty trap" by Spaull (2015), who along with others, has highlighted the ways in which low quality education keeps many SA learners stuck in intergenerational cycles of disadvantage (Bloch, 2009b; Jansen, 2019; Mohohlwane, 2019; Taylor, 2019; Chikoko and Mthembu, 2021). Educational inequalities are reflected in everything from throughput rates (Spaull, 2019b), to school infrastructure (Christie et al., 2007; Development Bank of Southern Africa et al., 2023; Jansen and Blank, 2015) to the quality of teaching that learners have access to (Mcdonald et al., 2022; Taylor, 2019, 2023) - particularly in non-fee-paying schools (Lang, 2023). Although formerly advantaged schools (ca. 20%) have seen notable rates of integration over the past decades, with parents who are able to afford the fees sending their children to these institutions (Soudien, 2007b, 2010; Roodt, 2011; Machaisa and Mulaudzi, 2019). This relatively small group of schools a.) cannot accommodate all the children and young people in SA who have a constitutional right to quality education and b.) on average charge school fees many South Africans cannot afford (Jansen, 2019; Spaull, 2015, 2019a). In Section 3.4 I further unpack how schools have been conceptualised and categorised in the SA context.

In his 2009 book, *The Toxic Mix: What's wrong with South Africa's schools and how to fix it*, Graeme Bloch identified a combination of intersecting factors that contribute to the widespread dysfunction and poor learning outcomes in the SA context. Inequality is a key part of this picture, but it is necessary to consider its interplay with a lack of accountability and capacity in the system (S. Van Der Berg et al., 2016). In the following sub-sections I discuss specific aspects of these challenges, highlighting corruption and undue union influence through the practice of cadre deployment as well as disordered accountability, which is often rooted in a lack of capacity at different levels of the system (Department of Basic Education, 2016; Levy, 2018b, 2018a; Levy et al., 2018, 2019; Ncala, 2022; Schirmer and Visser, 2023c).

3.2.2 Corruption and cadre deployment

In a 2013 investigation by the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) about rural literacy evidence of widespread teacher union involvement in corrupt teacher hiring and promotion processes was uncovered. However, as the report was met with resistance from the main unions who were implicated, it was only published in 2015 (Schirmer and Visser, 2023c). In parallel a team of investigative journalists from the *City Press* newspaper uncovered a 'cash-for-jobs' scheme that was being run by the country's biggest teachers union, SADTU, whereby they were selling school leadership

posts and using violence and intimidation to oust people so that their jobs could be resold to SADTU cadre (Harper, 2015a, 2015b; Masondo, 2015b). They also uncovered cases of posts being sold for livestock (Masondo, 2015a) and sex (Masondo, 2014).

In response to these revelations the SA Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, appointed a Ministerial Task Team (MTT) in 2016 to investigate allegations of corruption and cadre deployment (Schirmer and Visser, 2023c; Spaull, 2019b; Van Der Berg et al., 2016). Cadre deployment – an unlawful, unconstitutional practice - is when loyal union members are actively appointed throughout public sector organisations to ensure the union has increasing influence over budgets, decisions and other key strategic matters (Schirmer and Visser, 2023c).

The MTT, which was chaired by Professor John Volmink, uncovered criminality ranging from corruption to violence, including murder. They found extensive evidence of conflicts of interest due to systematic cadre deployment by SADTU. The MTT was careful not to conflate the "cash-for-jobs" racket and cadre deployment but did emphasise that this practice was a gateway for further corrupt practices. The MTT also found that the educational departments at provincial and national levels had been infiltrated by SADTU members to the point where six out of nine provinces were *de facto* under the union's control, which further amplified conflicts of interest as the administrators who were supposed to hold principals and teachers accountable were members of the union (Department of Basic Education, 2016). The MTT's report was submitted to the DBE in 2016 and the Minister promised to act on its recommendations, but in the face of intense pressure from the unions these commitments never materialised. As recently as 2023 the chair of the MTT confirmed that none of their recommendations had been implemented and to the best of their knowledge the identified practices and criminal activities were still underway (Bernstein, 2023a; Schirmer and Visser, 2023c). A more recent investigation, which was informed by accounts of corruption submitted by 3667 South Africans, detailed the persistence of the corrupt and criminal practices that were identified by NEEDU, the *City Press* journalists and the MTT (Ncala, 2022). As underlined by Van Der Berg et al. (2016) and others, corruption and cadre deployment erode accountability mechanisms and trust at every level of the system (Cooper and Gamble, 2023; Ncala, 2022).

3.2.3 Dysfunction and disordered accountability

The SA education system is described by some as dysfunctional and calls for a wide-reaching systemic overhaul abound (Bernstein, 2023a; Bloch, 2009b; Pretorius and Morris,

2024; Schirmer and Visser, 2023d, 2023e, 2023b). An oft-cited, critical fault line that seems to run through every aspect of the landscape is a lack of accountability (Department of Basic Education, 2016; Schirmer and Visser, 2023a; Van Der Berg et al., 2016; Wills, 2019). As outlined above there are well-documented cases of corruption and criminality that plague the system, which have contributed to the erosion of accountability (Ncala, 2022; Van Der Berg et al., 2016). However, this systemic challenge cannot be entirely chalked up to misconduct, it is also rooted in issues of institutional and cross-institutional capacity as well as a lack of clear, consistently employed accountability mechanisms and workflows (Levy, 2018a, 2018b; Levy *et al.*, 2019).

S. Van Der Berg et al. (2016) highlight how a lack of accountability combined with a lack of support interact to create four "binding constraints"that negatively impact learning outcomes for children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These constraints are 1) weak institutional functionality; 2) undue union influence; 3) weak teacher content knowledge and pedagogical skill; and 4) wasted learning time. Consequently, they maintain that both issues need to be addressed to progress towards change and optimise the efficacy of any interventions, whether at national-, provincial- or local/school-level (Fleisch, 2008; Hoadley et al., 2009; Spaull, 2015).

In aligning accountability and support it is also important to consider how "hierarchical and horizontal approaches to the governance and accountability of the [education] sector" should be navigated and employed, particularly in a context where levels of capacity vary (Levy et al., 2019, p. 127). It is not sufficient to put state-of-the-art, world-class accountability mechanisms and workflows in place if they are not combined with capacity-building, training and support that ensures people are able to do that which they are being held accountable for (Chilenga-Butao et al., 2020; Frempong et al., 2013; Van Der Berg et al., 2016). In the following section I unpack how international and national standardised assessments have framed certain discussions about the SA education landscape, an example that highlights the importance of aligning investments in accountability and support.

3.3 From the global to the local: The SA education system through the lens of scale
In the following sections I consider how the SA education system is organised and conceptualised in specific relational and/or relativising ways from the global or international to the provincial to the local. I start by synthesising key observations about SA learners' performance in international psychometric assessments (PIRLS, SAQMEC

and TIMSS) and consider some of the implications of using this lens to assess the state of the system. I then look at the strong emphasis, particularly at a national level, on the annual National Senior Certificate (NSC) or 'matric' results, drawing together key observations about the limitations of centrally prioritising this indicator at the expense of other educational priorities (Gustafsson and Taylor, 2022; Jansen, 2012).

In the absence of standardised national assessments of key cognitive outcomes including literacy and numeracy, recent discussions of the state of the SA basic education system have often homed in on how learners perform in the three international assessments the country participates in: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ), and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Bloch, 2009b; Gustafsson, 2020; Pretorius and Morris, 2024; Schirmer and Visser, 2023b; Van der Berg and Gustafsson, 2019). See Van der Berg and Gustafsson (2019) for a nuanced analysis of SA's participation in these international assessments since the democratic transition.

For well over a decade, alarm bells have been sounded by academics and advocacy groups alike at SA's persistent presence at the bottom or near bottom of the international rankings prepared based on these, and other (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2015), assessments. The sub-standard performance – on average – of the tested learners is also routinely highlighted (Bloch, 2009a; Lang, 2023; Schirmer and Visser, 2023e; Spaull, 2019b). While the SA education system faces significant challenges both in terms of the educational attainment and learning outcomes of the children and young people it serves, Van der Berg and Gustafsson (2019) have highlighted the importance of a more nuanced engagement with the results of international assessments that accounts, among other things, for the system's bi- or multi-modality (Van Der Berg, 2015; Van der Berg, 2015; van der Berg, 2016; Gustafsson, 2020; Gustafsson and Taylor, 2022).

While acknowledging the country's stark inequalities, they have also been at pains to contextualise – both nationally and internationally - the educational progress that has been made in SA since 1994, a development they identify - albeit in qualified terms - as pre-dating the democratic transition (Gustafsson, 2020; Gustafsson and Taylor, 2022; Van der Berg and Gustafsson, 2019). One matter on which there is widespread agreement is that the learning loss children and young people in SA experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic further intensified - rather than caused - many of the inequalities that plague the

systems within the system (Gustafsson and Deliwe, 2020; Statistics South Africa, 2022; Van der Berg, Wyk, et al., 2020; Van der Berg, Zuze, et al., 2020).

The country's own Annual National Assessments (ANAs), which replaced the National Assessment Surveys (2001-2007), were trialled in 2008 and 2009, and ran from 2011 to 2015 (Chilenga-Butao et al., 2020). The disputed ANAs were "abruptly" discontinued in 2015 following pressure from teacher unions (ibid, p.133). The ANA's various flaws and vulnerabilities led to a fundamental questioning of the mechanism's voracity and utility, often against the backdrop of concerns about whether the SA education system was sufficiently robust to implement standardised assessments (C. Van Wyk, 2015). Despite these flaws some have argued that an optimised ANA, accompanied with investments in teacher capacity building, could have served the system well (Frempong, Reddy and Mackay, 2013; Van Der Berg, 2015; Van der Berg, 2015; Van der Berg and Gustafsson, 2019), not least in providing more comparable, school-level data to understand the progress and needs of learners throughout their educational trajectory rather than going 'all in' on the NSC as key indicator of both attainment and outcomes (Chilenga-Butao et al., 2020; Jansen, 2012).

The severe inequality in SA, means that any reading of average results for the entire country - whether gathered via national or international assessments - will miss the stark differences between the systems within the system (See 3.7), discrepancies that often still reflect the racialised organisation of education under the Apartheid government (Spaull, 2015, 2019a; Van der Berg and Gustafsson, 2019) as well as the stark socio-economic inequalities that have flowed out of decades of systemic discrimination (Jansen, 2019; Spaull, 2015, 2019a).

Analyses of the results of international and national assessments highlight the importance of drilling down to better understand what the results look like for different types of public schools, for example: fee-paying versus non-fee paying (Gustafsson and Taylor, 2022; Van der Berg and Gustafsson, 2019), or urban versus rural (Spaull, 2015), as well as how these compare to the small but gradually increasing crop of independent schools (EMIS, 2023).

Given the challenges the system faces around accountability, the need for robust and adequately contextualised intelligence about whether learners are learning, as well as how teachers may be supported to respond to differentiated learner needs in different contexts, continues to be emphasised (Schirmer and Visser, 2023c, 2023d; Spaull, 2019b). Analysts

and commentators underline the necessity of a whole-system approach that nevertheless keeps the complex, context-specific realities schools in different categories (or sub-systems) navigate in focus, considering how they might be supported to improve in relation to where they currently are (Christie et al., 2007; Hopkins, 2024; Hopkins et al., 2014; Jansen and Blank, 2015; Schirmer and Visser, 2023d).

In the initial post-Apartheid period (1996-2001) the National Senior Certificate (NSC), or matriculation exam ('matric'), which learners write at the end of their final year of schooling in Grade 12 was the only standardised assessment learners completed in the schooling system (Chilenga-Butao et al., 2020). A disproportionate number of resources were channelled to optimising the results of the NSC, arguably at the expense of investments in better understanding learning outcomes and progress earlier in the educational trajectory (Bernstein, 2023b; Van Wyk, 2015).

On the surface average NSC results have steadily improved over the past decades, a development which some may take as an indicator of overall learning improvement (Gustafsson and Taylor, 2022; Schirmer and Visser, 2023b; Van der Berg and Gustafsson, 2019). However, the much-emphasised statistic of average national pass rates, obscure several factors (Bernstein, 2023b). These include high drop-out rates (Van der Berg, Wyk, et al., 2020), low throughput rates, over half of learners on average repeating grades (Van Wyk, 2021), several changes to curricula (Luckett, 2016; Ramatlapana and Makonye, 2012), and – perhaps most significantly – the low standards required to pass the NSC[14] that are coupled with concerns about a further lowering of criteria through the national standardisation of the NSC examination (Bloch, 2009b; Gustafsson and Taylor, 2022; Jansen, 2012).

A case could be made that the system's NSC "obsession"[15] is another systemic fault line that was amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bernstein, 2023b; Wills and Van der Berg, 2022). At this time even more lenient progression policies were instated that significantly reduced repetition rates and inflated the numbers of matriculants, including those with the exemption needed to qualify for university (Wills and Van der Berg, 2024). A move which, while providing a sense of positive progress in the short-term, glossed over learning losses and further eroded the quality and utility of the NSC as an assessment and

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[14] 40% in three subjects of which one must be the home language, 30% in another three subjects.
[15] Here I borrow the word Chilenga-Butao et al. (2020) employ in their discussion.

key transitional qualification (Schirmer and Visser, 2023b; Wills and Van der Berg, 2022; Wills and Van der Berg, 2024).

Beyond the work of researchers and policy analysts who intentionally take a closer look at the data to understand differentiated outcomes for distinct types of schools, the broader public discourse in SA often focuses on a small set of averages (e.g. the NSC pass rate at national and provincial level or absolute rates of *access* to basic education). These foci are, in some cases, prioritised at the expense of confronting learning progress and outcomes (Bernstein, 2023b; Wills and Van der Berg, 2024), especially for socio-economically disadvantaged learners whose *de facto* experience of education often still looks a lot like it would have under the Apartheid dispensation (Gustafsson and Taylor, 2022; Spaull, 2019a, 2019b; Van der Berg and Gustafsson, 2019). To solely deal in averages is to lose sight both of the acute challenges, as well as the strengths and opportunities for change and improvement, in this system (CDE Insight, 2020, 2024; Christie et al., 2007; Jansen and Blank, 2015; Mcdonald et al., 2022; Spaull, 2023). In the following section I zoom in on the school as place, positionality and territory, and consider how this space-time has been conceptualised in the SA context.

3.4 The school as place, positionality, and territory in the SA context

Jansen (2020c) describes schools as complex, compact, contrived, confined and sometimes chaotic places (p.1). Schools as key spaces in the lives of learners, educators, school staff and leaders, parents and broader communities are constituted by "spatialised social relations and the narratives about these relations." These places "exist in relation to particular criteria" around teaching and learning, notions of progress and performance, as well as commitments to formation and socialisation. They are materialised and embodied by the dynamic, multi-perspectival "fixing of particular meanings on space" (Robertson, 2009, p. 19). Schools are spaces of interdependencies, both internally and externally. They are continually made and remade in relation to other entities in space time – including governance structures, other schools and individuals (Sheppard, 2002). They are demarcated and differentiated from other key formative places in our lives (Christie, 2013; Ebersöhn, 2015; Edwards and Usher, 2000; Riley, 2013) in absolute, relative, and relational (Harvey, 2006), as well as material, conceived and lived terms (Lefebvre, 1991).

In this section I explore some of the different ways schools have been conceptualised in the SA context over the past thirty years, highlighting how the Apartheid regime's educational ideology still reverberates in some of the language that is used to describe and categorise

schools (Roodt, 2011). I collate and consider some of the key challenges faced by SA schools, particularly those that have been described as '(dis)organisations' (Bergman, 2013; Jansen, 2020c; Mawdsley et al., 2014) or 'cognitive wastelands' (Spaull, 2019b), and reiterate the value and potential of a differentiated engagement with the school landscape to better understand the specific challenges faced by different schools, or groups of schools, as well as the people who work and learn in these places (Köhler, 2020; Schirmer and Visser, 2023a; Stats SA, 2024; Vondip and Agai, 2024). The section concludes with a look at the phenomenon of 'schools that work' in SA – often despite significant resource challenges – and selected lessons, characteristics, and strategies from investigations into these success stories are briefly highlighted (Christie et al., 2007; du Plessis, 2019; Jansen and Blank, 2015).

3.4.1 Conceptualising 'the school' in SA

It would be interesting to poll a representative cross-section of South Africans and ask them what a normal, typical, or mainstream SA school looks like. I attended a so-called "former Model C" school (Roodt, 2011), a label that was assigned during the transitional period in the early nineties to one of the categories of schools reserved for white South Africans during Apartheid (Christie and McKinney, 2017). I would most likely describe one of these schools as normal or mainstream, because growing up I was privileged enough to attend them. However, as Christie et al. (2007) note,

> "the majority of South African schools – the mainstream – are black schools in relatively poor socio-economic circumstances. The language of teaching and learning in most of these schools is English, which is not the home language of most of their teachers or learners. Schools are often under-resourced in terms of laboratories, computers, sports fields, and opportunities for extra-curricular activities. These mainstream schools need to be valued for what they are, and what they can do and be. It is these schools, not privileged schools 'on the edge', that are 'the normal school' for most South African learners" (p. 123).

In conceptualising 'the' SA school we find ourselves in a strange hall of mirrors. Apartheid's educational dispensation is a key point of reference when schools are described as 'previously advantaged' or 'disadvantaged' (Du Plessis, 2019; Motseke, 2020; Naidoo and Perumal, 2014; Oswald and Engelbrecht, 2013) and the regime's racialised labels are also still widely employed when schools are referred to as (former) black, coloured, Indian or white schools (Pillay, 2014; Soudien, 2015; Ndimande and Neville, 2018; Moses, 2023). Alternatively, some still refer to the former Model C, House of Delegate (HoD) or House of Representative (HoR) schools (Roodt, 2011), but the two 'house' labels are not employed as often as former Model C.

More recently a distinction has been made between fee-paying and non-fee paying (fee/fee-charging and no-fee) schools (Jansen, 2019; Lang, 2023; Pretorius and Morris, 2024; Spaull, 2015). This broad distinction overlaps with the Quintile ranking of schools, which was introduced in 1996 with various modifications in the intervening years (Kanjee, 2009; Maistry and Africa, 2020; Ogbonnaya and Awuah, 2019; van Dyk and White, 2019). Based on this system schools are put into one of five quintiles: quintiles one to three schools are *non- fee-paying* schools and quintiles four and five schools are *fee-paying* schools. Quintile one to three schools receive a higher annual subsidy per learner, quintile four and five receive lower annual subsidies per learner as they are able to supplement this public funding with school fees (Western Cape Government: Education, 2013). Income, literacy, and unemployment levels in the community around a school are the main indices in determining a school's ranking (Standing Committee on Education, 2020). This, however, does not account for the fact that SA schools are not strictly bound by geographical catchment areas with many learners traveling significant distances to attend schools that are not located close to where they live (Lumadi, 2019; Zuze and Juan, 2020).

In the Western Cape, where this study was conducted, the Cape Winelands has the most quintile one schools (ca. 170 quintile one schools) whereas some other districts only have a single quintile one school (Standing Committee on Education, 2020). In this province, which has one of the highest percentages of quintile four and five schools in the country, the majority of non-fee paying schools are located in rural or previously marginalised areas (Isaacs, 2020; Standing Committee on Education, 2020; Western Cape Government: Education, 2013).

It is important to note that the quintile framework has increasingly been called into question and this ongoing call for reform intensified due to the COVID-19 pandemic's substantial impact on the socio-economic realities of schools' feeder communities (Du Plessis, 2020; Isaacs, 2020; Maistry and Africa, 2020; Mestry and Berry, 2016; Ogbonnaya and Awuah, 2019; Van Dyk and White, 2019). This issue has been tabled for discussion and investigation at different levels of the Western Cape provincial government as schools that are, for example, categorised as fee-paying quintile four and five have increasingly reported an inability on the part of parents and families to pay fees due to job losses and other impacts (Kanjee, 2009; Maistry and Africa, 2020; Van Dyk and White, 2019).

Although Quintile four and five schools are both generally referred to under one headings as 'fee-paying' or 'Section 21' schools, the material realities of these schools are often

very different with some in the Western Cape charging R1000 (ca. £40) or less per year in school fees (20%), just over half charging R7040 (ca. £300) or less per year (55%), and 10% charging over R35,794 per annum (ca. £1570) (Jansen, 2019; Motala and Carel, 2019). These are all public, fee-paying schools but in terms of their financial resources and infrastructure they are worlds apart.

Two other labels that are routinely foregrounded in the description, categorisation, and conceptualisation of SA schools are whether they are public or independent (EMIS, 2023). As highlighted with reference to 'public' schools, this simple term encapsulates an entire host of very different schools and the same applies to 'independent' schools as there is as wide a spectrum of these and the sector continues to grow (Lang, 2023; Pretorius and Morris, 2024).

The example of quintile one schools in the Western Cape, highlights the necessity of also distinguishing between urban (or peri-urban) and rural schools as it is well-documented that their realities are often starkly different (Christie and Gaganakis, 1989; Christie and Gordon, 1992; Moletsane et al., 2015; Spaull, 2015; Zenda, 2020). Finally, it is important to account for a school's medium of instruction, whether uni-, bi- or multilingual as the systematic denial of access to education in a home language – particularly in early childhood development and primary phases – was one of the most destructive features of how education was organised under the Apartheid regime (Brock-Utne, 2001; Christie and McKinney, 2017; Mda, 1997; Mohohlwane, 2019; Moses, 2023; Woolman and Fleisch, 2013).

3.4.2 Finding ways through 'cognitive wastelands' and '(dis)organisations'

In an analysis of results of standardised assessments of literacy in specific SA grades, Spaull (2019b) concluded that almost half of the country's primary schools were "cognitive wastelands" where hardly any children could read or make inferences by the time they reach Grade 4 (aged 9 to 10 years old). Van der Berg and Gustafsson (2019) similarly found that in almost half of SA's secondary schools, "not a single learner…reached 475 points, the TIMSS Intermediate International Benchmark. In this respect South Africa did much worse than any other country" (p. 19). Looking at non-fee paying schools, Spaull (2019b) observed that their "learners are approximately 2,5 years behind the curriculum in Grade 3. By Grade 9 they are 4-5 years behind the curriculum, showing the compounding effect of not getting primary school learning right" (p.10).

Another label that has been used for some SA schools is "(dis)organisations" (Christie, 1998; Jansen, 2020c; Jansen, 2019) or dysfunctional spaces (Bergman, 2013). These are schools – often previously disadvantaged, now non-fee-paying ones - where little teaching or learning happens. This "'breakdown of the culture of teaching and learning," which largely affects formerly 'black' schools is another legacy of the Apartheid regime (Christie, 1998, p. 283). It is striking and concerning that 25 years after Christie first used this term, it still applies to a significant proportion of SA's schools (Schirmer and Visser, 2023e, 2023b). Christie (1998) could easily be writing in 2024:

> "These schools are part of communities suffering from poverty, unemployment and violence, and these conditions show few signs of change under the new government. But at the same time as recognising the power of social context, it is also important to recognise the importance of human agency. Social context is not all-determining, and building agency and responsibility at the school level is an important dimension of changing these schools…Development of new policies needs to be based on the important moral imperative of redress in the process of building a more equitable schooling system for a non-racial and democratic society" (p. 297).

Agency, responsibility, accountability, and motivation at the school level have meant that in some previously disadvantaged schools, teaching and learning have continued and even thrived despite a lack of resources and various other contextual challenges (Chikoko et al., 2015; Jacobs and Richardson, 2016; Mawdsley et al., 2014; Van der Merwe, 2020). In the following section, I unpack some of what studies have highlighted about the phenomenon of 'schools that work.'

3.4.3 Learning from 'schools that work'

In 2007 a DBE Ministerial Committee (MC) on 'schools that work' produced a report about middle quintile schools that managed to achieve good NSC results while other similarly categorised and resourced schools did not (Christie et al., 2007). The MC sought to better understand the dynamics and strategies in these schools that enabled their relative success as well as whether these might be replicable or transferable. Another central point of inquiry was whether departmental policies and requirements aligned with and/or supported the practices in these schools. The MC's research team visited 18 middle quintile schools in SA's nine provinces from all former Departments and collated their findings for the DBE.

Jansen and Blank (2015) undertook a similar project, documenting the characteristics and common strategies of 'schools that work' along with lessons for the broader system and

commonly made mistakes or fault lines in the SA education system. In this section I summarise key insights from across these studies that echo aspects of what has already been discussed in this chapter and inform this study. As part of their discussion of 'schools that work,' Jansen and Blank (2015) address some systemic fault lines that make it harder for schools to make it work in the SA context. Four of these, as highlighted below, are particularly relevant in the context of this study:

01	Overburdening schools with complex policies and changing curricula while neglecting basics.	**06**	Neglecting solid foundations in literacy and numeracy early in the school cycle.
02	Introducing change or innovations into schools that are not managing their core mandate.	**07**	Lenient promotion policies that devalue qualifications and ignore learning losses or back logs.
03	A lack of social will to tackle social, political and economic obstacles to school improvement.	**08**	Obsessing over things that go wrong/don't work at the expense of gleaning successful practice.
04	Prioritising reactionary, short-term crisis management over sustainable solutions.	**09**	Investing in small-scale interventions when many students do not have access to adequate schooling.
05	Focus on generic teacher training when context-specific support for teachers is needed.	**10**	Presenting national or provincial averages that conceal the realities of many underperforming, neglected schools.

Figure 5: Fault lines in the SA education system

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen. Highlighted faultlines are drawn from Jansen and Blank (2015).

The highlighted fault lines informed the design and ethical guardrails of this study. They prompted me to make every effort to better understand collaborator (and organisational) capacity and priorities (See 5.1.4) and to grapple with questions of sustainability (See 4.7). In the following chapters, I further discuss how I navigated these fault lines and outline some of the implications they had for this study.

Both studies also identified lessons that can be taken from 'schools that work' to inform broader systemic investments (Christie et al., 2007; Jansen and Blank, 2015). Several of these lessons are also addressed by others who have grappled with similar questions about the SA context (Bloch, 2009a; Schirmer and Visser, 2023a, 2023d; Spaull, 2019b; S. Van Der Berg et al., 2016):
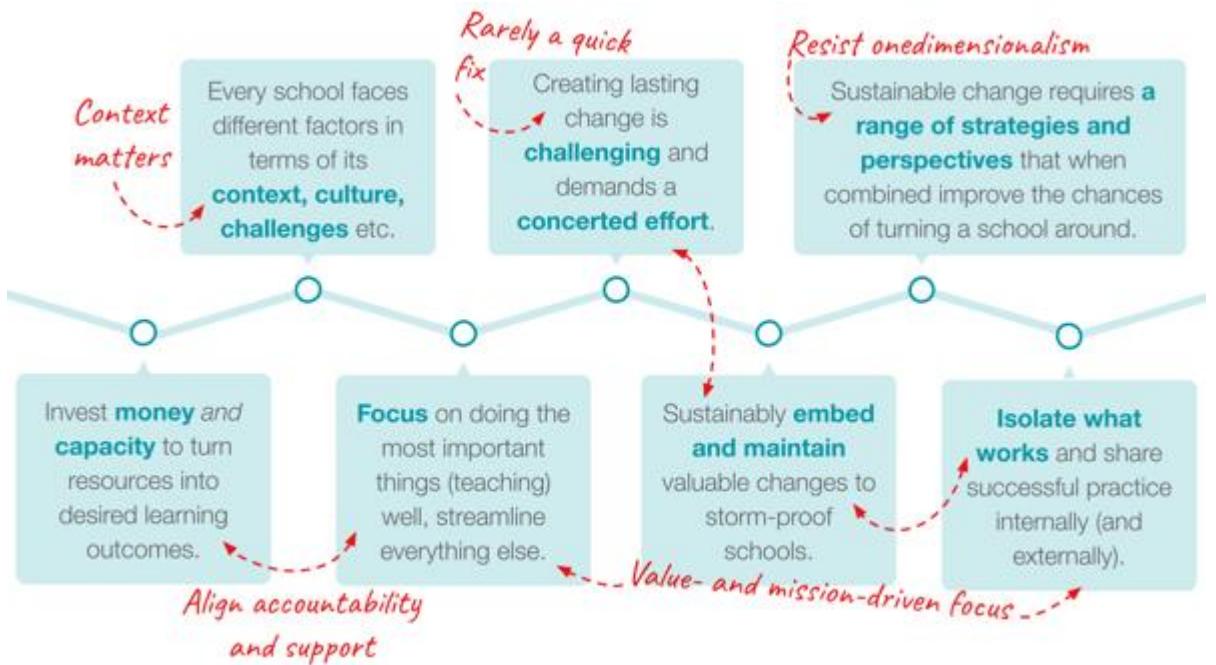
Figure 6: Lessons from 'schools that work'

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen. Highlighted lessons are drawn from Christie et al. (2007) and Jansen and Blank (2015).

The emphasis on aligning accountability and support is also seen here (Van Der Berg et al., 2016). In outlining some of the characteristics of 'schools that work, Christie et al. (2007) and Jansen and Blank (2015), helpfully move beyond the technical or managerial – important as they may be – and underline the importance of mission, values, ethics, and relationships (including relationships to community and networks of support) in these schools, presenting an implicit alignment with several of Mason's educational principles (Mason, 1897, 2019):

Figure 7: Selected characteristics of 'schools that work'

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen. Highlighted characteristics are sourced from Christie et al. (2007) and Jansen and Blank (2015).

Based on their study, Jansen and Blank (2015) outline ten strategies for improvement in schools, several of which echo insights highlighted by Christie et al. (2007). Three of these, as foregrounded below, specifically were central to the design of this study:

01	Establish and maintain firm routines around teaching and learning.	**06**	Actively involve parents in the life of the school.
02	Extend the time for learning.	**07**	Principals are visible in their leadership of the school.
03	Teachers should be teaching every day in every class.	**08**	Schools create value in their communities.
04	Confront learners with high expectations.	**09**	Proactively manage the external environment around the school.
05	Provide learners with discipline and care.	**10**	Offer learners a compelling vision for life beyond school and actively support them to pursue this.

The collaborative process that is narrated and interpreted in this thesis centrally prioritised and championed young people through RPC. The developmental intervention, which is outlined in the following chapter was designed to foster an enabling, hospitable space for, and with, young people that is firmly anchored in the school environment and prompts reflection on that space while also encouraging them to cast a vision beyond it (McAdams, 1993; McAdams et al., 2006). Although, the developmental work undertaken as part of this study was not assessed as part of the core curriculum, its exploration of questions of identity, purpose, and their interplay with learning - as well as the school as key learning space - encouraged and challenged young people to consider how their goals and aspirations align with their engagement in the school context (Everatt, 2024a; Ochonogor and Seroto, 2021; Skeen et al., 2022) and beyond it. In the following section I take a closer look at the positionality and place of learners, educators and school leaders in the school context.

3.5 The positionality and place of learners, teachers, and school leaders in SA schools

Riley (2013) challenges us to look at schools through the lens of whether they create a space for young people to be secure in who they are and whether they help them find their place in the world as they learn more about how they might shape it. Schools are spaces where, ideally, children and young people can explore their relationship to themselves and the world as they are equipped with knowledge and skills to build on in the future (Soudien, 2019b; Western Cape Education Department, 2019a; Department of Basic Education, 2020b; Lund et al., 2022; Skeen et al., 2022). Learners are supported in these endeavours by teachers, school leaders and staff who administer, coach, teach and offer pastoral care, among other forms of support (Hayes *et al.*, 2004; Grant, 2006; Roux and Marais, 2013; Zuze and Juan, 2020). Schools are also places of becoming for these 'grown ups' where they find, navigate and/or negotiate their place in the world (Grant, 2019; Mogadime et al., 2010; Msila, 2020; Van den Berg and Schulze, 2014). In this section I explore distinct aspects of the positionality and place of learners, teachers, and school leaders in schools in the SA context. I start by considering the question of where learners are in this system and context by unpacking key shifts around how they have been

conceptualised within educational rhetoric in SA. and (Harris and Mahlaba, 2023; Lappeman et al., 2020).

It is widely acknowledged that the quality of an education system depends on the quality of its teachers (Hopkins and Stern, 1996; Pritchett, 2013; Hopkins, 2015a, 2020; Schirmer and Visser, 2023a, 2023b; Hopkins, 2024). I consider the rhetorical positioning of SA teachers as both problem and solution, highlighting specific challenges and opportunities that have been outlined about the role they have in improving and transforming this educational system (Bloch, 2009a, 2009b; Jansen and Blank, 2015; Schirmer and Visser, 2023b; Spaull, 2019b). I conclude the section by looking at the question of leadership in SA schools. I focus centrally on principals as school leaders, but also consider how their remits interact with other forces of control, leadership, management, and manipulation both within and around schools (Heystek, 2006; Mokoena and Machaisa, 2018; Schirmer and Visser, 2023c; Shava and Heystek, 2019).

3.5.1 Where are the 'learners'? Thinking beyond children (and young people) in buildings

With the introduction of the since discontinued and discredited Outcomes Based Education (OBE) system in 1998, 'pupils' were rebranded as 'learners' in SA (Isaacs, 2020). In full acknowledgement of its baggage, I have opted to refer to the young people I collaborated with as part of this study as 'learners'. In this section, I will briefly consider the question of where these learners are in the SA education system. On the surface this likely appears like a strange question. Many of them are in schools and on this metric of *access* – 'children in buildings' – SA has made significant progress over the past three decades (Gustafsson and Taylor, 2022; Schirmer and Visser, 2023b; Van der Berg and Gustafsson, 2019). But are they *learners*? Are they *learning?* As noted above the data seems to tell a range of different stories in response to that dual question (See 3.4.2).

It is striking that both the characteristics of 'schools that work' as well as the strategies for change and improvement proposed by Jansen and Blank (2015) foreground, prioritise and even honour the place of children and young people in schools. Schools exist so that children and young people can learn (Hopkins, 2024; Pritchett, 2013). If many children and young people are not learning or falling very behind in their learning progress – and evidence seems to indicate that is the case in SA (Spaull, 2015, 2019b; Van Der Berg *et al.*, 2016; Lang, 2023; Schirmer and Visser, 2023e) – then one possible explanation is that the system has lost sight of its learners (Everatt, 2024a, 2024b; Fleisch, 2008; K. Hall, 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2022).

One area where this is observed is in the system's obsessive focus on NSC results, especially national and provincial averages (See 3.3). It has been argued that the lowering of standards and slackening of promotion policies is primarily driven by an imperative to generate the impression that the system is performing well. However, this happens at the expense of many young South Africans who leave school with a systematically degraded qualification and very little academic learning to show for the twelve plus years they spent in school buildings (Gustafsson and Deliwe, 2020; Gustafsson and Taylor, 2022; Jansen, 2012; Wills and Qvist, 2023; Wills and Van der Berg, 2024). The case for earlier intervention through concerted investments in early childhood development as well as the foundation phase of primary school has already been made persuasively (For example, see: Fleisch, 2008; Pillay, 2018; Spaull, 2019b; Ashton, Mah and Rivers, 2020). This would ensure that children are well established in terms of literacy and numeracy to make the most of the basic education they have access to. However, for all of this to work the SA education system needs teachers who know what to teach and how to teach it (Mcdonald et al., 2022; Nakidien et al., 2021; Taylor, 2019, 2023; Van Der Berg et al., 2016).

3.5.2 Teachers: A critical lever for system change

The quality of teachers and teaching is a decisive factor in the strength of any education system (Hopkins, 2020, 2024). S. Van Der Berg et al. (2016) echo this in emphasising that the failure or success of the SA education system, broadly speaking, depends on one factor: teachers and "the battle for improved education for the poor is won or lost on the appointment, allocation, training, supervision, competence and behaviour of teachers" (p. 23). Spaull (2019b) points to a growing body of evidence that shows "the majority of South African teachers do not…have the content knowledge or pedagogical skills necessary to impart the curriculum" (p.8). The systemic challenges around accountability and performance management make it is challenging for different levels of the education system to hold one another to account for a lack of progress or poor learning outcomes (Bernstein, 2023a; Schirmer and Visser, 2023c). The decoupling of accountability and support has further compounded a general lack of trust in proposed performance management or assessment mechanisms. These are often seen as punitive measures directed at teachers rather than shared sources of intelligence to bolster improvement (Chilenga-Butao et al., 2020; Frempong et al., 2013; Van Der Berg et al., 2016).

Investing in training, improving, and retaining as many good teachers as possible appears to be an opportune, evidence-informed lever for change (Hopkins et al., 2014; Hopkins, 2015a) in the SA education system, especially as half of all teachers who were in post in

2021 will retire by 2030 due to an aging teaching corps (Van Der Berg et al., 2016; van den Berg and Gustafsson, 2022). This retirement wave will require an increase of between 7500 and 17500 teachers per year joining the education system to maintain educational supply depending on policy decisions around class sizes (Van der Berg and Gustafsson, 2022; Schirmer and Visser, 2023c). Recent analysis has highlighted that in 2021 only about 50 percent of university graduates who qualified as teachers were hired by PEDs. A phenomenon which is in part explained by teacher salaries "growing at a faster rate than what is being allocated to the education budget" (Ntaka, 2022). Concerns have also been raised about the quality of initial teacher education (ITE) offered by SA tertiary education institutions (Taylor, 2019, 2023; Taylor and Muller, 2014). As discussed below (See 3.7), this 'lever' needs to be viewed from as many different perspectives as possible.

3.5.3 Who's (really) in charge here? School leadership in the SA education system

Strong, capable, and visible leadership is one decisive factor in schools that produce better outcomes in even the most challenging circumstances (Chikoko et al., 2015; Naidoo and Perumal, 2014; Shava and Heystek, 2019). 'Schools that work' almost always have a dedicated principal (and/or leadership team), who is present, holds staff and learners accountable, involves parents and the broader community, and develops strategies to interface effectively with other parts of the education system (Makgato and Mudzanani, 2019; Mthembu, Bhengu and Chikoko, 2020).

What is often observed in practice, is that these leaders find ways to align accountability and support mechanisms in their context in ways that cascade across the whole school (Katewa and Heystek, 2019; Weiss and Cambone, 1994). Teachers and learners are confronted with high expectations *and* supported to meet them (DeMatthews, 2014; Jansen and Blank, 2015). In several of the stories highlighted by Jansen and Blank (2015) it is striking that principals are strong, even demanding, leaders but they are also servants who lead by example in serving staff, learners and parents (Shula et al., 2022).

Along with excellent teachers who know *what* and *how* to teach, high quality school (and educational) leaders – including principals, departmental officials and teachers – who know how to lead, how to bring out the best in staff and learners, and who have an unwavering commitment to improving learning experiences and outcomes for children and young people have an essential role to play in changing and improving the SA education system (CDE Insight, 2024; du Plessis and Heystek, 2020; Grant, 2006; Riley, 2013).

School leaders were key collaborators in this study and the significance of their role throughout the process is discussed further in the Findings and Discussion chapters.

3.6 Collaboration, experimentation, intervention: Necessary but insufficient

Given the acute, systemic challenges faced in the SA context, experimental, intervention-based work in schools is often framed with a note of caution (Bloch, 2009b; Jansen and Blank, 2015; Schirmer and Visser, 2023d). While these measures have in some instances proven to be effective, they are generally resource-intensive and successful scaling to ensure system-wide benefit remains a challenge (Schirmer and Visser, 2023a; Van Der Berg et al., 2016). Similarly collaborative education research (CER) projects, while often adding value in specific contexts, present similar practical and ethical challenges when questions of reach and sustainability are considered (Gwandure and Mayekiso, 2013; Mathikithela and Wood, 2019; Mkonto, 2018; Silbert and Bitso, 2015).

The implication is not that these approaches should be rejected wholesale, but rather that careful consideration is needed of how specific collaborative or experimental interventions – particularly ones that are found to add value – can be scaled up and across the education system more broadly (Bisgard et al., 2022; Fleisch, 2008; Spaull, 2023). Investments in experiments, interventions or collaboration need to be coherently aligned with broader commitments to building capacity and developing mechanisms that materialise a dual commitment to accountability and support (Van Der Berg et al., 2016). They can be effectively harnessed as one part of a broader, concerted improvement agenda (Gustafsson and Taylor, 2022; Schirmer and Visser, 2023d). These types of approaches, however, should not be pursued at the expense of investing in the capacity and resourcing of schools to deliver on their core mandate around teaching and learning (Baum, 2000; Bloch, 2009b; Jansen and Blank, 2015; Dixon, 2023).

This study specifically focuses on research-practice collaborations (RPCs), an approach – along with research-practice partnerships (RPPs) and other forms of practice-embedded research – that is still relatively under-explored in the SA context (Asare et al., 2022; Philpott and Muthukrishna, 2019; Silbert and Bitso, 2015). As discussed in the previous chapter it is important to count the cost of collaboration (See 2.7), and this is particularly critical in the SA context. As noted by Jansen and Blank (2015), assumptions about the readiness of schools to engage with experiments, interventions or collaborative education research (CER) need to be interrogated. I would add that in the SA context it is imperative

that CER, RPC/P or PEER is informed and driven by the developmental, pedagogic needs and priorities of the school, district or department researchers are collaborating with rather than a question or hypothesis that has solely emerged from a review of academic literature. It is thus important to have clear conversations with potential collaboration partners to assess capacity and readiness as well as priorities (See 6.7). While these types of collaborative strategies can be employed to focus on specific learning outcomes, for example related to reading and literacy (Bisgard *et al.*, 2022; Spaull, 2023), there is also scope to focus on teacher professional development (Guerrero-Hernández and Fernández-Ugalde, 2020; Jesson and Parr, 2019; Scharber et al., 2021).

An RPC approach offers collaborators a relative degree of flexibility and allows them to accrue some collaborative experience without committing resources to a formal partnership (See 2.4), but even in these modes of working questions of sustainability need to be prioritised to ensure that investments of time, energy and capacity are contributing to sustainable improvements in the school as collaborative context (Alonzo et al., 2022; Snowling et al., 2022; Wilcox and Zuckerman, 2019). Two of the other systemic fault lines highlighted by Jansen and Blank (2015) can also inform clearer conversations about potential CER activities:

- Partners can consider how school-, circuit- or district-level collaboration creates opportunities to explore capacity-building for teachers and education officers that is tailored to their context.
- Secondly, in considering what to collaborate on partners need to be careful not to get stuck in cycles of reactionary interventions or experiments that are divorced from a school (and the system's) broader mission and values.

Further research is needed about how approaches like RPC/P could most effectively be employed at different levels of SA's multi-modal education system. A key challenge will be considering how these approaches can be aligned with and amplify broader efforts to strengthen the system's capacity to deliver on its core mandates around teaching and learning.

3.7 An interconnected, polymorphic reading of systems within the SA education system

The concept *education system* "refers to the patterns of organisation of education provision approached usually at country (or nation) level" which have for the past century in most

parts of the world been "characterised by their public character…they are provided directly by the state or their provision is supervised by the state, as a public good" to ensure universal or quasi-universal access to education in key phases, particularly primary and secondary school levels, via mass provision (Archer, 2013; Hatos, 2014, p. 1837). While this definition certainly applies in the SA context, speaking of the country's education system in singular form runs the risk of obscuring that it is perhaps more accurately described as having a multi-system educational landscape in which learners will – on average – have vastly different experiences and outcomes, depending on where they are able to materialise their constitutional right to access basic education (Jansen, 2019; Lang, 2023; Ncala, 2022; Spaull, 2015, 2019a, 2019b). The SA system has also been described as bi-modal (Fleisch, 2008; Spaull, 2015; Van Der Berg and Burger, 2003) and I will go one step further in outlining a case for a multi-modal or polymorphic reading of its educational landscape.

In a bi-modal reading one distinguishes between "the bulk of the system that historically served the black population and the historically advantaged former white schools" (Van der Berg and Gustafsson, 2019, p.25). This bimodality pulls a key aspect of the system into focus, however, there is merit in considering further facets or lenses that may enrich our interpretation of the system. I will focus on two key points of entry for a multi-modal engagement with the SA education system:

1. The first is to build on the tradition of highlighting differentiation across the country's nine provinces, and,
2. The second – builds on a bi-modal reading – but emphasises the importance of drilling down even further and engaging with additional points of entry that allow us to better understand the realities of public schools.

Across both 'points of entry' I will highlight selected limitations in how data about SA schools is presented to the public by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) (Department of Basic Education, 2024; EMIS, 2023).

Acknowledging the historical legacy of bi-modality, I maintain that it is important to also engage with the notable differences across SA's nine provinces – each of which have their own Provincial Education Department (PED). Levels of inequality vary across the provinces, as do educational attainment and outcomes (Levy, 2018a; Levy *et al.*, 2019). It is

also necessary to consider the ramifications of the majority of the PED's *de facto* being under the control of the highly politicised SADTU (Department of Basic Education, 2016; Schirmer and Visser, 2023c).

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in the Western Cape (See Figure 9), an outlier in terms of educational attainment and learning outcomes as well as capacity and resources (Levy et al., 2018; Western Cape Government: Education, 2013). It is also one of the few provinces in the country that are not controlled by SADTU (Department of Basic Education, 2016). In clarifying and interpreting a collaborative context within this system, it is important to move beyond national averages and understand the differences between provinces as well as the nuances, challenges and opportunities within each of these contexts (Soudien, 2001b; Van Der Berg and Burger, 2003; Mentz and Van Der Walt, 2007; Gilmour and Soudien, 2009; Levy, Cameron and Naidoo, 2018; Venter and Jeffries, 2020; Van Wyk, 2021; Christian and Sayed, 2023; Phala and Sutherland, 2024).

1 Department of Basic Education (DBE) with over **766** employees*.

9 Provincial Education Departments (PED) with over **80** education districts, of which **8** are in the Western Cape.

12.7 million *learners*, of which
1.2 million are in the Western Cape.

409K *teachers*, of which **39.8K** are in the Western Cape.

22.5K ordinary, public *schools*, of which **1 467** are in the Western Cape.

Source: 2023 School Realities Report by DBE, published in December 2023. *Source: DBE Annual Report 2023/24.

Figure 9: Systems within the system - The Western Cape's educational landscape in numbers

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen. Sources of cited data referenced in visualisation footnote.

The DBE already provides province-level data in publications such as its annual *School Realities* report (EMIS, 2023), but aspects of the data are presented in potentially misleading ways. One example is that the presentation of teacher or educator figures does not explicitly indicate whether the reported numbers include posts that are funded by the School Governing Bodies (SGBs) of fee-paying schools. The inclusion of these posts when Learner to Educator Ratios (LER) are presented improves overall averages. In Figure 10, I juxtapose key figures on public and independent schools including the total number of institutions, educators, and learners, highlighting LERs as well as Educator to School

Ratios (ESR). In presenting the LERs and ESRs for public schools I have used the available data to reverse calculate the ratios without the inclusion of SGB-funded posts, an adjustment which notably alters these ratios.

409 488 educators*

30.1 Learner-Educator Ratio (LER) when SGB-paid posts are removed the LER is 34,2.

22 511 public schools

18.1 Educator-School Ratio (ESR)* when SGB-paid posts are removed the ESR is ca. 16.4°

564 Learner-School Ratio (LSR)

12 701 575 learners

45 261 educators

16.3 Learner-Educator Ratio (LER)

2325 independent schools

19.4 Educator-School Ratio (ESR)

317 Learner-School Ratio (LSR)

738 108 learners
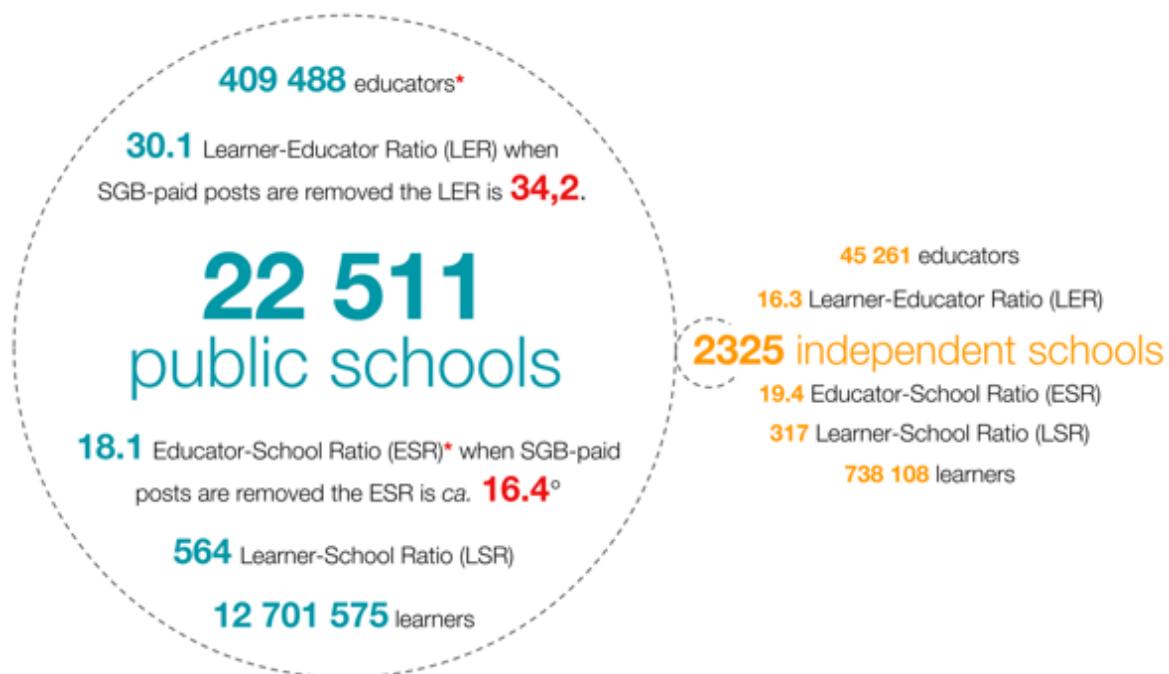
Source: 2023 School Realities Report by DBE, published in December 2023. | *Includes state-paid and School Governing Body (SGB)-paid educators. | °This number is based on a reverse calculation informed by the reported LER without SGB-paid posts included, but in the absence of the actual educator numbers it lacks precision.

Figure 10: Key reported stats about public and independent schools in SA

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen. Sources of cited data referenced in visualisation footnote.

I maintain it is essential to drill down even further in the provincial level data to, for example, develop a clearer understanding of what these figures and ratios look like across fee- and non-fee-paying schools or how they differ for urban versus rural schools (Spaull, 2015; Van der Berg and Gustafsson, 2019). When factoring in SGB-funded posts, the Western Cape has the second *lowest* LER (26.8) and the second *highest* ESR (27.5) in the country (EMIS, 2023). When these SGB-funded posts are removed the LER jumps to 36.7, a figure which further emphasises the importance of understanding the realities in lower quintile, non-fee-paying schools as the Western Cape has the highest number of Quintile 4 and 5 schools in the country (EMIS, 2023; Western Cape Government: Education, 2013). In Figure 11, I highlight some of the other dimensions that may be useful to harness in a multi-modal view of the SA education system including whether schools are primary, secondary, and combined institutions, as well as their medium of instruction (Maistry and Africa, 2020; Ogbonnaya and Awuah, 2019; Roodt, 2011; Spaull, 2015; Veriava, 2024; Vondip and Agai, 2024).
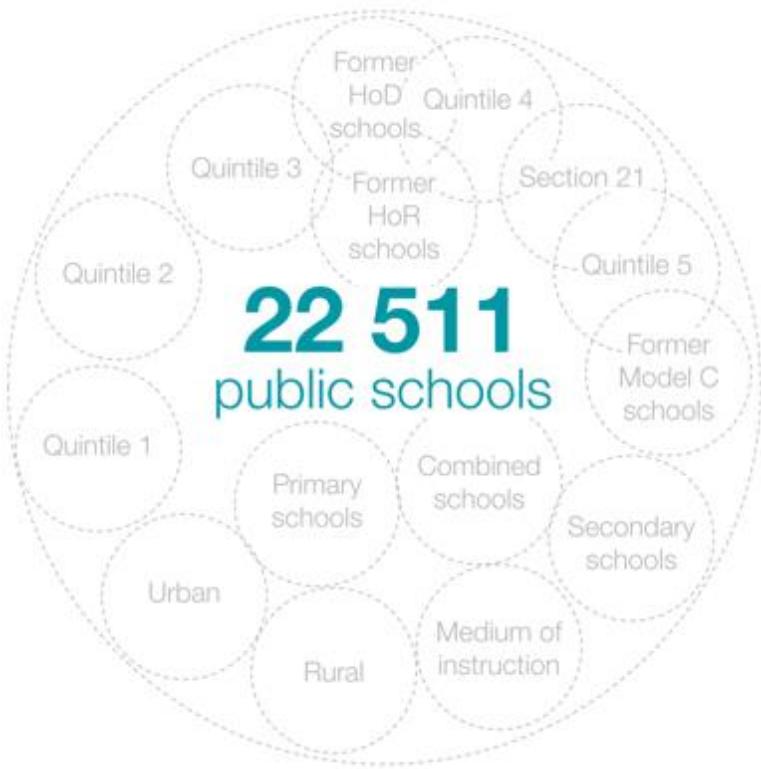
Figure 11: What the publicly available data about SA public schools does not always tell us

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen

Although acceptable[16], the data that are published by the DBE, PEDs and Statistics SA can make it challenging for members of the public - as well as researchers and policymakers - to get a concrete, consistent sense of the persistent inequality in the majority of SA schools (Statistics South Africa, 2021, 2022; S. Van der Berg, Wyk, et al., 2020; S. Van der Berg, Zuze, et al., 2020; C. Van Wyk, 2015, 2021). However, research confirms that the realities of non-fee-paying schools are vastly different to those of fee-paying ones in terms of learning outcomes, infrastructure, governance structures and capability as well as other key enablers of effective teaching and learning (Gustafsson and Taylor, 2022; Levy, 2018b, 2018a; Spaull, 2015, 2019a). As such, there is a need to better understand the realities of the systems within the system, as well as how these are experienced at the level of the school.

Throughout this chapter I have considered the SA education system from various "points of entry" (Jessop et al., 2008), each providing a potentially valuable perspective. However,

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[16] In using this word, I defer to the expertise of economists and educationalists working in the SA context who routinely access and analyse data provided by the DBE and PEDs to ensure that I do not mischaracterise the general state of data accessibility, consistency, and intelligibility. Based on their assessments, this is another area where there has been some positive progress over the past three decades (S. Van der Berg, Wyk, et al., 2020; S. Van der Berg, Zuze, et al., 2020; C. Van Wyk, 2015, 2021).

there can be a temptation to treat one-dimension as *the* key to fixing the system (Bloch, 2009b; Schirmer and Visser, 2023a; Soudien, 2020). For example, it is widely acknowledged in SA and elsewhere that the quality of teachers is decisive in the strength and efficacy of an education system (Hopkins, 2020; Van Der Berg et al., 2016). To home in on this one-dimension (See Figure 12), without considering its interplay with the many other factors that shape the system, is - for example - comparable to going all in on accountability without considering the importance of support (Levy, 2018a; Levy et al., 2019; Mcdonald et al., 2022; Van Der Berg et al., 2016).
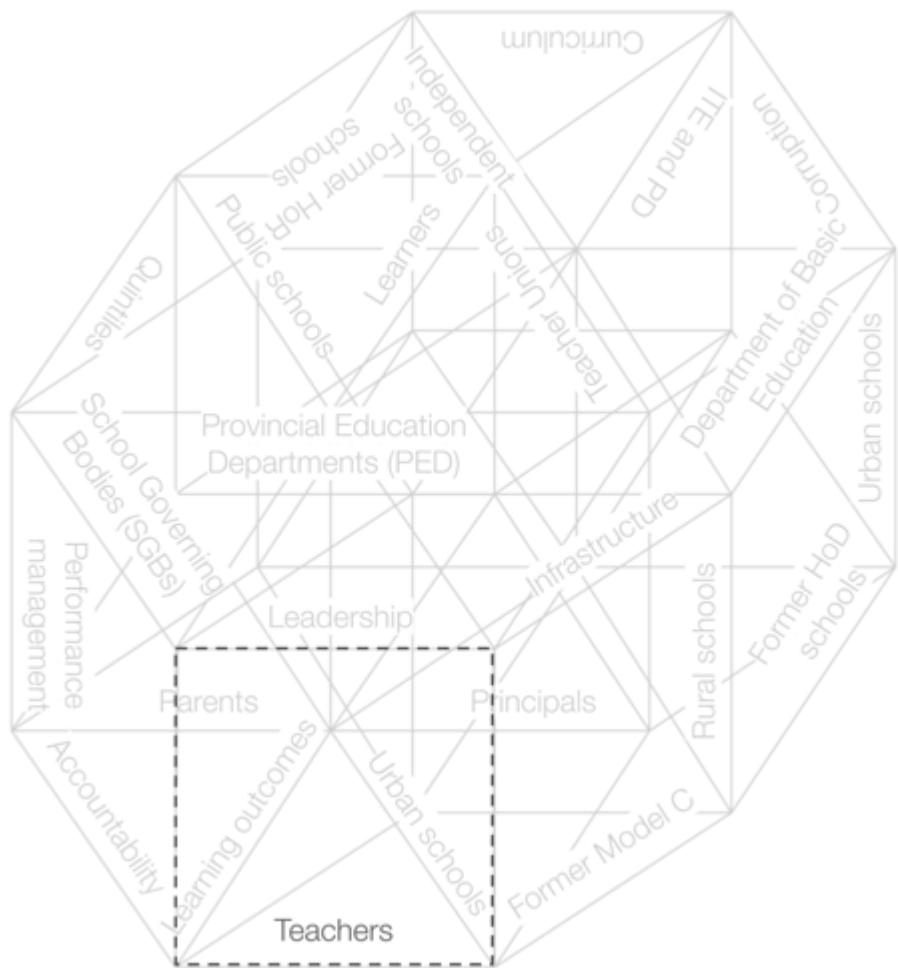
Figure 12: The risk of one-dimensionalism in conceptualising, or assessing, an education system

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen

The dimensions do not all need to be considered simultaneously in every policy development or intervention, but an approach that acknowledges their complex, dynamic interplay arguably allows for more robust approaches to be conceptualised and operationalised (CDE Insight, 2020, 2024; Gustafsson and Taylor, 2022). SA needs more teachers (Ntaka, 2022; van den Berg and Gustafsson, 2022). It also needs these teachers to

be equipped both in terms of subject knowledge and pedagogical know-how (Mcdonald et al., 2022; Taylor, 2019, 2023). This is, in a sense, a challenge for the nation but one that looks very different in each province, as well as the districts and circuits within those provinces (Statistics South Africa, 2021, 2022; Van Der Berg et al., 2019; Van Der Berg and Burger, 2003; Venter and Jeffries, 2020), and even in individual schools (Christian and Sayed, 2023; Du Plessis, 2020; Zulu et al., 2021). The system's multi-modality demands a polymorphic perspective that considers the varying realities at these different 'levels' as well as the other factors that have shaped what different SA schools look like today – some of which can be traced back to the Apartheid regime (Bloch, 2009b; Soudien, 1998, 2010; Spaull, 2015).

Teachers need to be supported through better quality initial teacher education and professional development (Mcdonald et al., 2022; Schirmer and Visser, 2023a), as well as accountability mechanisms that are counterbalanced with support as well as clear shared values and principles (Christie et al., 2007; du Plessis, 2019; Jansen and Blank, 2015; Mawdsley et al., 2014). In Figure 13 I highlight just a few of the factors and dimensions that need to be considered. The role of different governance structures from the local (SGBs) to the provincial and national - including teacher unions - also needs to be factored in (Levy, 2018a; Levy et al., 2018, 2019). While there is evidence of dysfunction – in some cases even corruption and criminality – at all these different levels, there are also opportunities to build the system's capacity to collaboratively pursue change and improvement (Spaull, 2019b, 2023; Veriava, 2024).
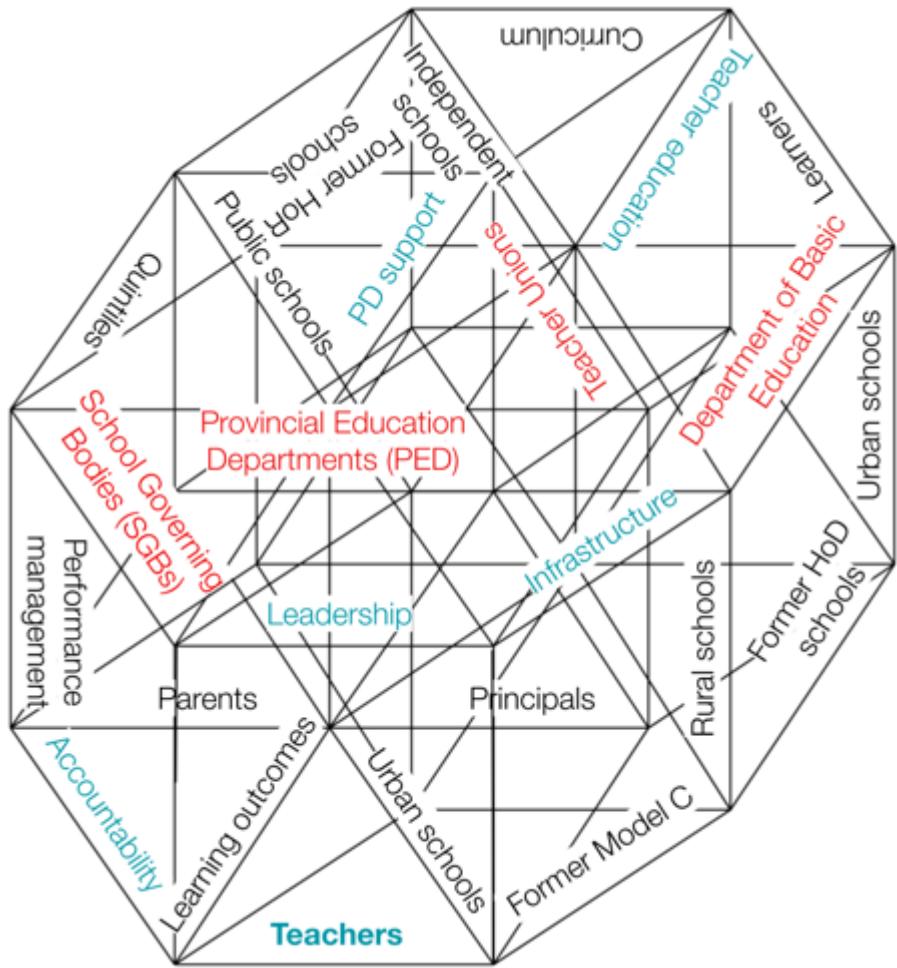
Figure 13: Navigating and harnessing the complex, multi-modal nature of the SA education system

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen

The study that is narrated in this thesis centrally championed young people, but teachers were key collaborators in the RPCs and - as explored in the Findings and Discussion chapters below - their contributions were essential to the process. While the intervention at the core of the RPCs (as well as the study in its entirety) centrally focused on *support* through exploring how enabling, hospitable spaces for collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship (CKD&S) can be fostered through collaborative working in SA schools, there is scope to build on context-specific collaborations to explore how accountability mechanisms can be redesigned, reframed and re-anchored across different parts of the SA education system (Du Plessis, 2019; Makhalemele and Nel, 2021; Prew, 2009; Segoe and Bisschoff, 2019; Shava and Heystek, 2019; Silbert and Bitso, 2015; Soudien, 2016). The active engagement of the schools I collaborated with – as seen in the above cited work on 'schools that work' - is a further testament to the energy, will and solutions that are already in the system(s) (Scharmer, 2018, 2020; Peschl *et al.*, 2019).

Chapter summary

Given the importance of context in RPC/P and related approaches, this chapter has anchored the thesis in salient literature about the **SA education system and context.** It drew on Jessop, Brenner and Jones' (2008) consolidated spatial lexicon to apply a socio-spatial and -temporal lens to considering how the SA education system is demarcated as *territory* and how it may be conceptualised very differently depending on the *scale* that is applied. The COVID-19 pandemic as perceived watershed moment in the SA context was interrogated, highlighting some of the ways its impacts on teaching, learning and related priorities exacerbated pervasive systemic challenges that pre-dated it. The notion of a "new" education system in a "new" SA was unpacked and some of the echoes of the Apartheid government's educational ideologies, strategies and practices in what education looks like 30 years since the first democratic elections were unpacked. The school as *place* and positionality was explored with a particular focus on the different ways these spaces are categorised and conceptualised in the SA context. The *positionality* and place of learners, teachers, and school leaders within SA schools, as well as the system more broadly, was also unpacked. Given the acute, complex challenges faced across the SA education system, the earlier discussion on counting the cost of collaboration was anchored in this context. The chapter concluded with an interconnected, polymorphic reading of the systems within the SA education system, which highlighted the importance of moving beyond one-dimensional engagement with the challenge and opportunities in these interconnected systems.

CHAPTER 4 | RESEARCH DESIGN and STRATEGY: FROM COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY to EMERGENT, YOUTH-CHAMPIONING RPC

In this chapter I outline the collaborative, narrative, qualitative research strategy and design that were employed in this study to answer the study's four interconnected research questions (Bryman, 2007; Clark et al., 2021; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Liamputtong, 2020, 2022). I start by reiterating the study's research and then present how the flexible research design adapted through learning in the field from a process of collaborative inquiry to youth-championing RPC. The process of designing and implementing the developmental intervention that was at the core of the emergent, youth-championing research-practice collaborations (RPCs) is outlined and I describe the identification and recruitment of the collaborating schools as well as the participant-collaborators for the developmental intervention in each of the schools. I explain how feedback and reflective data was collected and analysed to inform the narration and interpretation of the RPCs presented in this thesis. The ethical considerations that informed the research design are outlined, along with questions of rigour, transferability and reflexivity. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations.

4.1 The research questions

The study explored the following overarching research question as well as three related sub-questions:

Research question 1 (RQ1): How can enabling, hospitable spaces for collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship (CKD&S) be fostered through emergent, youth-championing research practice collaborations with four public, fee-paying schools in the Metro East District (Western Cape, South Africa)?

- **Research question 1A (RQ1A):** How can these RPCs, and the developmental intervention at their core, be adapted and optimised for each school context based on their needs, priorities, capacity, and constraints?
- **Research question 1B (RQ1B):** How can the developmental intervention be harnessed to work with young people in key transitional grades (Grade 7 and 9) to explore their lived definitions of identity and purpose as well as their interplay with learning and the school as a key learning space?

- **Research question 1C (RQ1C):** How can the value and transferability of this emergent model of youth-championing RPC be interpreted drawing on qualitative data collected across the four collaboration sites?

4.2 Flexible (research) design, firm foundations

The initial proposal for this study envisaged a youth-championing collaborative inquiry process whereby learners in key transitional grades in SA would be invited to explore questions of identity, purpose, and their interplay with learning through a developmental intervention. The objective was to gather qualitative data through the process of running the intervention and analyse it in relation to the central themes. However, as I started working with schools it became increasingly clear that the process of embedding and adapting the intervention for each context, required a broader collaborative effort and thus the focus shifted to narrating and interpreting the emergent, youth-championing RPCs:

- *Emergent* because what was designed as a youth-championing collaborative inquiry process evolved into a broader collaboration between the researcher and the other collaborator groups that was tailored to each school context. This shift in framing and focus was not planned but rather occurred in response to my experience of working with the four schools.
- *Youth-championing* because the study prioritised the direct and central involvement of over 200 young people in the collaborative prototyping of a toolkit of activities. Their ongoing input and feedback over two school terms informed the adaptation and optimisation of the individual activities as well as the overall toolkit. They were the biggest group of collaborators in each of the RPCs and their input most strongly informed the optimisation of the developmental toolkit. Although the invaluable perspectives of other collaborators within the schools are acknowledged, this study has centrally prioritised exploring the potential of engaging young people as key collaborators in an RPC.
- *RPC* because the prototyping of the developmental intervention became a vehicle for collaboration with four schools. In the context of this study an RPC is defined as a purposive, multi-dimensional collaborative process with interwoven research and developmental strands. In an RPC, researchers work with collaborators from other epistemic communities (learners, school leaders, staff) on a jointly prioritised process of knowledge creation, discovery and/or stewardship (Bender, 2022; Duxbury et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2022; McCabe et al., 2023; McDonald et al.,

2021; Meilinger, 2022; Perez Arredondo, 2022). The RPCs are described as emergent because what was designed as a youth-championing collaborative inquiry process evolved into collaborations that were tailored to each school context.

The data collection and analysis methods outlined in this chapter were, wherever possible, adapted to reflect this shift in focus and allow for the narration and interpretation of the collaborations. The limitations of the study in this respect, and others, are discussed in the final section of this chapter (See 4.7).

4.2.1 Designing a first prototype of the developmental intervention

Before commencing fieldwork in December 2022, I developed a first prototype for what I have come to refer to as a developmental youth-championing intervention to implement with Grade 7 and 9 learners who are in the General Education and Training Phase (GET) in two primary and two secondary schools in the Metro East District of the Western Cape Education Department. Although, Grade 7 and 9 bookend the GET they are two key transitional years in the SA education system (Western Cape Education Department, 2019a; Department of Basic Education, 2020b). Given the disproportionate focus in the SA context on the matric year and the National Senior Certificate, I decided to direct this study's developmental resource towards other critical transitions that students navigate during their school career (Enslin, 1992; Soudien, 2001a; Bloch, 2009b; Pendlebury, Henderson and Tisdall, 2011; Jansen, 2012; Jansen and Blank, 2015; Motseke, 2020; Ngware et al., 2021; Theron, Ungar and Höltge, 2022). The intervention was furthermore designed so that it could be flexibly embedded in each school context.

In the sections below I briefly outline the different elements of the intervention which created space for young people to explore aspects of their identity, purpose as well as their interplay with specific learning experiences they have in the school context. In the next chapter the learning that emerged from the collaborative process of prototyping the intervention is outlined along with the study's other findings.

4.2.1.1 Developing a first draft of the intervention toolkit

Youth participatory action research, or youth-led participatory action research (YPAR), is "a process through which youth engage in systematic inquiry alongside adult researchers to learn about social injustices and develop solutions for social change" (Anderson 2020, p. 243). Drawing on Otto Scharmer's Theory U (2018) the initial coordinates of the developmental intervention were anchored in the hunch that the ideas needed to reimagine the future of education, teaching and learning can be found within the education system

itself and that young people - with their aptitude for "multiliteracies and multimodalities" - are uniquely positioned to identify and/or develop solutions (Burke and Hadley 2018, p. 218).

A core principle that informed the design of the developmental intervention is drawn from Burke and Hadley's (2018) work on youth participatory action research (YPAR), namely that "youth are active producers of knowledge and culture who see, know, and engage with their communities in ways that may be different from the adults around them" (p. 219). Literature on other YPAR projects (Anderson, 2020; Shamrova and Cummings, 2017; Tuck and Habtom, 2019) confirms that knowledge generated by young people has the potential to augment the work being done by other epistemic communities in invaluable ways. Another formative principle was that young people have points of access to their communities that are beyond our reach as researchers and thus by working with them as participant-collaborators valuable insights may be gleaned about how schools and other teaching and learning spaces are adapting and evolving in the wake of COVID-19 and could continue to do so in the future (Honey-Rosés et al., 2021; Skeen et al., 2022; Tuck and Habtom, 2019; Whalley et al., 2021).

Paulo Freire (2017) advocated *praxis*: action rooted in critical reflection. A commitment to action is integral to critical participatory action research but it also presents researchers with a range of challenges (Zeller-Berkman et al. 2020). In developing the prototype, I posited that a useful starting point for Freire's *praxis* is the intentional carving out of spaces designed to foster CKD&S (Freire, 2000, 2013, 2017). John Dewey was an early proponent of learning by doing and experimentation rooted in reflection and rigorous inquiry methods (Aubrey and Riley, 2019; Boronski and Hassan, 2020). He framed reflective practice as a forward-looking, cyclical process which connects active experience and learning (Aubrey and Riley, 2019). In Dewey's notions of experimentation and reflection, we see connections with Freire's (2017) concept of *praxis* and a compelling case for youth-championing approaches to CKD&S that position young people as key collaborators.

In its first design iteration, the intervention consisted of eight phases and 23 elements, encompassing the general warm up exercises and the substantive exercises that explore identity, learning and their interplay with the school as key learning space. It was envisaged that these phases could be worked through in different constellations of sessions depending on what could be accommodated by schools. The programme was

conceptualised to be presented in-person in schools and schools that agrees to participate would be asked to offer a room on their premises where the programme could take place during or outside of school hours. The groups of learners would be recruited in collaboration with school staff and per programme there will ideally be no fewer than six and no more than ten participants in a group.

The individual elements or exercises were clustered in phases according to different thematic foci. The initial design considered that some of these phases or elements could also be offered as stand-alone workshops. One of the original objectives was, however, to refine an integrated programme that could be used in schools and other settings. As such the priority was to run the entire programme as many times as possible in the four to six participant schools with the goal of offering it to all learners in a particular grade. If individual phases or elements were run in other schools, the learning from these sessions would inform the optimisation of the elements that were utilised so that the overall programme could also function well as a toolkit of exercises that teachers or other practitioners could draw on in their work.

See Appendix 1.1 for summary descriptions of the different phases and elements of the programme as reflected in the initial design. The table below outlines an overview of the intervention pre-fieldwork alongside the key adaptations that were made for, and during, the active collaborative prototyping phase in schools:

Table 2: The developmental intervention at a glance

Pre-fieldwork design	Adapted design for prototyping*
What is it and how does it work?	
A youth-centred developmental programme in an interactive workshop format focused on identity, purpose, learning and their interplay with the school as a key learning space.	A youth-championing development programme that seeks to engage young people as participants and collaborators whose feedback informs the ongoing optimisation of the programme.
The programme is modular in nature including up to twenty-three elements that can be completed in a few extended blocks (for example, over the course of a couple of days) or as a longer series of shorter sessions.	A modular programme including up to ten possible exercises to choose from that is delivered over two (max. 90 minutes per session) or four sessions (ca. 40 minutes per session).
The exercises or modules are organised around three inter-related themes of identity, learning and their interplay in the school as key learning space.	In the process of incorporating input from different collaborators three overarching questions were identified to focus on: • Who am I? • Why am I here? • What do I need for my life journey? In addition to the three questions another overarching question emerged through the

Pre-fieldwork design	Adapted design for prototyping*
	prototyping process as a useful scarlet thread that runs through them: • What's my story?
The programme can either be integrated into the school day as part of the core curriculum or as an extra-curricular activity that is delivered during school hours. Alternatively, it can be offered outside of school hours on weekday afternoons or weekend days.	The developmental programme is integrated in the school day as an extra-curricular activity, but relevant links to the curriculum are highlighted and harnessed wherever possible.
The programme is facilitated by a qualified systemic coach and social researcher who adapts it for each school context.	The programme is adapted for each context based on extensive, site-specific input from school leaders and staff.
The sessions are delivered in an interactive workshop format. Rather than providing extensive content-based input on the focus themes, the above-mentioned questions are explored through a range of exercises that provide structured parameters for reflection in written, visual and/or verbal form individually, in pairs or as a group.	The nature of reflective engagement with individual exercises – whether individual, dialogic or group-based – depends on the guiding questions. With more personal questions related to identity, there may be a preference for individual reflection. It is important to offer dialogic and group-based reflections as options not compulsory elements.
Who is it for?	
The programme is for learners in key transitional grades in the SA education system. Grade 7 (Primary School) and Grade 9 (Secondary School) are the proposed grades. I initially envisage working with four to six schools.	The programme was prototyped with English medium learners in the two proposed grades in four schools (two Primary; two Secondary).
In its first iteration the programme is only available in English and thus will only be offered to learners who are fluent in English.	Although the programme was offered to all English medium learners there was a shared acknowledgment among collaborators that all learners would have benefitted from it.
Although the programme itself is for learners, opportunities to work with school leaders and staff to adapt and/or facilitate it are welcomed.	School leaders and staff played an instrumental role in the embedding and prototyping of the developmental programme. However, as unpacked elsewhere there is scope to explore how this type of collaborative working could be designed with specific benefits for these groups in mind.
What are its objectives?	
The programme is designed to foster an enabling space for learners to reflect individually and with their peers on questions of identity, purpose and their interplay with the school as a key learning space.	In addition to fostering space for reflection and skills development, the programme can serve as vehicle for addressing or exploring related priorities of school leaders, staff and/or learners, including for example, strengthening learner engagement or supporting learners to navigate key decisions in their school career.
In addition to offering a space for theme-specific reflection and exploratory learning, the programme exercises are designed to support the development of transferable skills including listening, observation, communication (written, verbal and/or visual), giving and receiving feedback, reflection, critical thinking etc.	Additionally, the importance of fostering skills including the capacity to provide informed consent – particularly in environments where learners will not routinely have the opportunity to develop this mode of engagement – emerged as a priority.

Pre-fieldwork design	Adapted design for prototyping*
The development programme also serves as a vehicle for qualitative data collection about how young people make sense of questions of identity, purpose and their interplay with learning and the school as key learning space.	In addition to collecting data through individual elements or exercises of the developmental programme, the importance of designing and harnessing as many feedback touchpoints as possible throughout the process was identified through the collaborative prototyping. While the process had significant limitations in this regard, this learning informs future research and collaboration of this nature.
How do we measure its success or impact?	
By whether it can successfully be embedded for a first round of prototyping in a group of schools over two school terms.	By whether it has, based on the assessment of learners, provided a valuable space for reflection on the core themes as well as the development of transferable skills.
By whether learners voluntarily opt to participate in the developmental programme as it is not be framed or offered as a compulsory activity.	By whether it has, based on the assessment of school leaders and staff, been a valuable addition to the school's curricular or extracurricular offering.
By whether the learners who opt to participate in the developmental programme complete all sessions and exercises.	By whether it has aligned with as many of the priorities and/or goals of other collaborators as feasible.
For more on the success criteria that emerged through the collaborative process see 4.2.1.7.	

In the pre-fieldwork design of the intervention, I became increasingly aware based on initial conversations with colleagues engaged in collaborative research and educators working in the Western Cape that it would be necessary to take a collaborative approach to refining and optimising the initial prototype I had developed. I thus assumed that based on the input and insights from school leaders, teachers and other stakeholders, the pacing and structure of the programme would be significantly optimised to make it more fit-for-purpose for the schools I worked with. When I reached out to schools, I shared the full potential toolkit with them for consideration but also signalled that it was not set in stone and we could discuss how to adapt if for their context (See Appendix 1.2).

From my very first conversations with school leaders and staff, I was provided with humbling reality checks that sent me back to the drawing board knowing that I would need to trim the intervention toolkit down to a maximum of four or five activities to be delivered in no more than four 40-45 minute sessions or two 80-90 minute sessions. The activities initially included opportunities for learners to engage in data collection through participant observation and interviewing in the school context as well as other key spaces in their life (See Appendix 1 for an overview of the initial list of exercises and proposed running order for the full set). The necessity of adapting the intervention to each school's constraints presented me with a series of invaluable nudges in refining the toolkit.

When the school year started in January 2023, I had trimmed the toolkit for the developmental intervention down to a set of ca. 10 activities, including icebreakers, warm-ups and other bridging activities, that I proceeded to test and refine in the first two schools I started working in (See Appendix 1.3). At this point the focus was still centrally on the themes of identity, learning and their interplay with the school as key learning space. By the time I started working with learners in the third school (See Figure 17 for a high-level timeline of the collaborations) the focus had been refined around the core questions (Who am I? Why am I here? What do I need for my life journey? What's my story?). The toolkit encompassed a core of six activities with four additional, optional activities. Although I still made some adjustments to how these were used in that context I did not add or remove any activities at that point. Please see Appendix 1 for a high-level overview of how the toolkit of exercises evolved in the earliest phases and Appendix 4 for the final set of exercises as collated in the post-fieldwork toolkit. In the following sub-section, I briefly outline the core concepts, theories and tools that informed the framing of the intervention's thematic foci as well as the pedagogical design of individual exercises.

4.2.1.2 Exploring the big questions; developing transferable skills

Charlotte Mason's (1897, 1925, 2019) educational philosophy, which affirmed the personhood of children and young people predicated on their inherent free will and dignity, was foundational to the conception of identity, purpose and their interplay with learning in the developmental intervention (Cadora and Meek, 2023; Sendra Ramos et al., 2022; Van Pelt and Spencer, 2023). Mason proposes three educational instruments to employ in cognisance of the personhood of children and young people as well as the necessity of authority and obedience in any learning endeavour, provided these are limited by the respect due to children and young people given their personhood. These instruments - which emphasise the importance of an enabling space-time in learning, knowledge discovery and stewardship - were key considerations in the design of the developmental intervention as a whole as well as individual exercises:

- the atmosphere of environment – by considering the different dimensions of an enabling space (See 2.3.3) for collaborative knowledge discovery and how they could best be integrated to enhance the overall process.
- the discipline of habit – by providing and facilitating a clear overall structure for learners within which they could reflect, explore and discuss their ideas, and by harnessing tools such as collaboration agreements (See 4.2.1.4) to jointly carve out clear boundaries for how the groups worked together.

- the presentation of living ideas – by inviting learners into the big questions of identity, purpose and their learning journey, and encouraging them to consider how they might continually and actively engage with these.

In exploring the question "Who am I?" learners were provided a couple of different points of entry to unpack it from including a pillars of identity exercise[17] as well as a time capsule or personal timeline exercise. The two latter exercises, which were introduced as the protoyping process progressed, allowed them to approach the question in less abstract terms than the pillars of identity one. The exercises on purpose invited learners to engage with the big *Why* question (i.e. why am I on this planet? What might my purpose be?) but also to connect it to the here and now by reflecting on their immediate 'here' – the school environment - and why they are there as well as how it fits into their learning journey. The exercises that explored learning prompted learners to consider their entire environment as well as the persons and things that are part of it as part of the space they are able to learn in and from (Jessop, Brenner and Jones, 2008; Robertson, 2009, 2018; Ashton, Mah and Rivers, 2020).

The design of the intervention also drew on the concepts of scaffolding and a spiral curriculum (Aubrey and Riley, 2019), as well as legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger, 1998). As it was designed to run with smaller groups of learners (maximum ten), it presented an opportunity to take them through a process where they gradually grew in confidence as they grappled with questions of identity, purpose, and their interplay with learning. The intervention also in part functioned as a spiral curriculum as the overarching questions (Who am I? Why am I here? What do I need for my life journey?) allowed us to revisit, reflect on, reinforce central themes in pursuit of greater depths of understanding. The sessions built on one another, and the response and reflection worksheets provided participant-collaborators with frameworks to work within. Given the compact nature of the developmental programme I ran in schools, the approaches to scaffolding, spiral curriculum and legitimate peripheral participation were also condensed, but I nevertheless endeavoured to maintain these as design features that ran through every aspect of the intervention.

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[17] This exercise (See Appendix 4), which is informed by tools used in systemic coaching (Whitmore, 2017), is based on the German psychologist Hilarion Petzold's model of integrative psychology, "The Five Pillars of Identity."

Cognitive enablers, such as analysis, dialogue, listening, observation, practical intelligence, prototyping, reflection, and so forth, are of central importance in the design of an enabling space and can also be conceived of as transferable skills that can be developed and practiced (Lewrick et al., 2018; Peschl, 2019a, 2024; Yeager et al., 2016). In developing the individual exercises, I thus also considered how they could be harnessed as opportunities for young people to practice and develop these and other skills.

4.2.1.3 Roles and responsibilities of the facilitator and the participant collaborators

A central priority in the design of the developmental intervention was to foster clarity about the roles, rights and responsibilities I had as researcher/facilitator and those of the young people/learners who were contributing to the collaborative prototyping process as participant-collaborators. The intervention was designed with the goal of fostering an enabling, hospitable space for them to reflect, collaborate and articulate knowledge about their identity, purpose, learning experiences and other themes that emerged.

Within this shared space, the objective was to give participant-collaborators the freedom to express themselves in a variety of ways through words, visuals, or other modes of expression, but the sessions still had a clear structure and as the facilitator I was responsible for keeping the groups and individual participants on track. The management of sessions also drew on aspects of design thinking workflows (Buchanan, 1992; Lewrick et al., 2018) by incorporating background music and timekeeping at certain junctures to contribute to an enabling atmosphere for individual and collaborative reflection (Mason, 2019, 1925). The pacing of sessions was adapted on an ongoing basis based on learning about which of the exercises demanded more time and space for reflection than others.

The participant collaborators were encouraged to complete all the activities. If they found an exercise particularly challenging or noticed that they had mental, emotional, or other blocks to certain questions, space was created for them to process this one-on-one with the facilitator or, if they were comfortable, to discuss it with a peer or the group. The decisions about how to best support learners in such situations depended on the dynamics in the group and the extent to which trust had been established.

The participant-collaborators were briefed about every activity before working on it, but the design of the activities also afforded room for them to interpret how they would go about completing them. Wherever possible, the rooms the sessions were hosted in were set up to give the learners and I as much freedom of movement as possible. The learners were not expected to always sit or work in one place or posture throughout a session. However,

they were expected to respect the collaboration agreements that the group jointly agreed on at the outset.

4.2.1.4 Collaboration agreements

During the first session of the developmental intervention, the group of learners jointly agreed on a set of collaboration agreements to frame their engagement with one another and the researcher-facilitator throughout the process. Collaboration agreements pertain to how the group want to work together and communicate. The approach is adapted from the Crossing Borders Education resources,[18] specifically the dialogue agreements that they use in their work. Each group is presented with one or two examples of what these agreements might look like to kickstart a discussion. The agreements are broadly structured around ways of interacting and communicating that there is either zero tolerance for in the group, and ones that are positive and will contribute to an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S.

The discussion and articulation of collaboration agreements was a used as a warm-up exercise as it presented an opportunity for the group to get to know each other better and understand each group member's needs and preferences in terms of communication, interaction and so forth. If the need arose during subsequent sessions to revisit and refine the collaboration agreements this could easily be done as they were visualised on a large sheet of paper. The developmental intervention was designed to allow room for both the researcher-facilitator and participant-collaborators to grow and improve their ability to communicate well with others. The articulation of collaboration agreements presented a practical opportunity to practice these skills and establish a shared commitment within the group to modes of engagement that make it easier for everyone to engage in the collaboration (Gardner, 2005; Prentice et al., 2019).

One or more of the following potential collaboration agreements and principles may be used to kick-start conversations but the objective was to transition to the group discussing what they value as quickly as possible:

- Openness: A shared commitment to learning to understand ourselves and one another better and not trying to persuade or "win".
- Personal: A shared commitment to use personal language and avoid hurtful generalisations.

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[18] Crossing Borders Education. Dialogue Agreements. https://crossingborders.education/resources/slide-decks/

- Resilience: A shared commitment to listening even when something is hard to hear and engaging with challenging aspects of the programme.

- Airtime: A shared commitment to sharing "airtime" as carefully and equally as possible.

- Respect: A shared commitment to valuing every person in the team and not interrupting them.

Adapted from Crossing Borders Education (2021)

The process of articulating each group's collaboration agreements presented an opportunity for individual and team reflection on communication more broadly, as such it also kickstarted the intervention's ongoing emphasis on reflection.

4.2.1.5 Thinking through the ethics together

Another focus in the design of the intervention was to consider how the space it created could be harnessed to think through the core ethical considerations with learners. At the outset of the first session with each group, I addressed and explained a few key ethical concepts including informed consent, confidentiality, minimising harm and maximising benefit. All the learners were informed that their participation and collaboration was voluntary and contingent on their ongoing, dynamic informed consent. We also discussed the fact that my commitment to respect confidentiality would be meaningless if just one other individual in the group decided to go and tell a friend, teacher, or someone else about a reflection that someone had shared (Fisher and Anushko, 2008; Pendlebury and Enslin, 2001). The importance of this design feature became increasingly apparent as I worked in the schools, and I discuss it further in the Findings and Discussion chapters below (See 5.2.1 and 6.3.2).

4.2.1.6 Sharing formative and summative feedback

The intervention prototype was designed with the view of gathering feedback from learners throughout the process. In addition to ongoing check-ins at transitions between individual activities, the anonymous feedback survey at the end of the last session presented an opportunity for written, summative feedback to be shared by all participant-collaborators. This mechanism was particularly important as certain individuals may not be comfortable to share their feedback verbally in front of the whole group. Learners were also invited to share feedback during sessions. If conflicts arose, wherever possible, these moments were reframed as opportunities for dialogue, feedback and reflection, the collaboration agreements provided useful anchors in these conversations that were at times also

opportunities to expand on, or clarify, the agreements. The formative and summative feedback from collaborators was integral to assessing the success and value of the developmental intervention, as discussed further in the next sub-section.

4.2.1.7 Defining and measuring the success of the developmental intervention

As the intervention was taken into the field in a prototype form, it became increasingly clear through the RPCs that its success would need to be defined and measured differently to similar programmes that have already gone through several iterations and been refined based on feedback and other learning.

In terms of ongoing observational monitoring, individual runs of the intervention were considered successful if as many of the following 'criteria' as possible were met. As summarised in Table 2 above, the criteria for success evolved and were refined through my collaborative engagement with school leaders, staff and learners:

- All learners gave their informed consent at the outset and were comfortable to confirm this consent throughout the sessions and at the conclusion *or* demonstrated that they understood the implications of their dynamic informed consent by choosing to prioritise other academic or extra-curricular priorities and sharing this decision with me.
- All learners contributed to the articulation of collaboration agreements for the group.
- All learners engaged with the activities and captured their reflections using the worksheets. The sharing of reflections with the group, while welcomed, was not an indicator of success as it was more important from an ethical perspective that the learners understood that they could choose to do so if they wished but were not obligated to.
- All learners who completed the final session shared summative feedback. Throughout the sessions, learners were encouraged to share verbal, formative feedback on the process but like the sharing of reflections with the group this was not defined as an explicit indicator of success as some learners were not as confident in speaking up in the groups as others.
- We were able to cover all the overarching questions (Who am I? Why am I here? What do I need for my life journey?) during the sessions available to us. This varied from group to group and in some cases, we needed to adapt in real time when timetable changes meant that sessions were significantly shorter.

The overarching measure of the success and value was the input and formative and summative feedback from the learners, staff, and school leaders. Although the indicators above provided valuable orientation in terms of each run of the intervention, I assessed the success of the intervention and the collaborative process based on the feedback from these other collaborators about the overall quality of their experience and whether it added value for them.

The intervention as outlined in this section was a prototype. As part of this study, I took it into schools for collaborative testing, refining, optimisation and, where necessary, reworking or reframing. A central objective was to hold the programme and its composite elements with an open hand and to engage with the different collaborator groups' experiences and input about how it could be improved or reworked. Therefore, the different measures and mechanisms for gathering input and feedback from school leaders, staff and learners proved to be an essential aspect of the research design (See 4.3).

4.2.2 The identification and recruitment of schools

I collaborated with four ordinary[19], fee-paying public schools in the urban/peri-urban fourth, eighth and ninth circuits of the Metro East District of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) . These circuits in the District partially encompass the Helderberg area which covers the towns Strand, Somerset West and Gordon's Bay as well as surrounding suburbs and informal settlements. I grew up in, and attended, primary and secondary school in this district and have an existing network within the education sector in the area that I also drew on in the process of identifying and recruiting schools.

I was granted formal approval by the WCED to collaborate with schools in this District. In my application to the WCED, I provided a list of twelve potential collaborator schools. This list was informed by my network in the district as well as a group of schools that were already active in another District-level community collaborative called *Strong Schools*. It was suggested by stakeholders in the area that the schools' involvement in this initiative potentially signalled an openness and readiness to engage with collaborative, developmental initiatives. Furthermore, I focused on the institutions that offer English medium instruction or parallel medium instruction with one of the main languages being

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[19] As of November 2024, based on the Western Cape Education department's school directory, 79 of the 181 ordinary, public schools in the Metro East District were in the fee-charging bracket and the other 101 are classified as non-fee charging schools (Western Cape Education Department 2022).

English as the developmental intervention was first developed in English and any future translation thereof would follow on from the collaborative prototyping and optimisation process that happened as part of this study.

Initially I had intended to collaborate with public schools across the Education Department's five quintiles with priority wherever possible given to the lower quintiles (Western Cape Government: Education, 2013; Department of Basic Education, 2020c; Isaacs, 2020; Standing Committee on Education, 2020), but as I started engaging with stakeholders in the Western Cape it became clear that it would be logistically challenging to cover all five quintiles as many of the quintile one schools in the province are rural schools (Department of Basic Education, 2020c).

As a lone researcher, for practical and safety reasons I needed to find a group of schools located in a relatively contained sub-section of one District to allow for working across schools within the space of a single school day and/or week. Working in the Helderberg area of the Metro East District allowed me to invite Quintile two, three, four and five schools to join the collaboration. I unfortunately received no responses from the Quintile two and three schools I contacted. The four collaborating schools were selected based on their availability and willingness to host the programme over the first two school terms of 2023. Two of the four schools I collaborated with were classified as quintile five and the other two as quintile four (See 3.4). In future iterations the programme could be run in other schools and when translations of the developmental intervention are available in Afrikaans and isiXhosa the pool of schools could further expand.

4.2.3 The identification and recruitment of participants for the developmental intervention

The opportunity to participate in the developmental intervention was offered to all English-medium learners in grade 7 (age 12-13) and grade 9 (age 14-15) in the three schools where the collaboration progressed to the involvement of learners. In one school I presented the programme to the entire English-medium cohort (two classes) and the learners had the opportunity to ask questions about the intervention as well as the research project (School 1). In the other two schools we did not host a general information session for all English-medium students in the respective grades. At the beginning of the process of working with each small group in all three schools, I explained the focus of the intervention and the research project again or for the first time and answered any questions the learners had before they completed a pre-survey which also included their initial written consent to participate in the intervention. In all three schools the principal provided consent *in locus*

parentis for the intervention programme to run but given the collaborative, youth-championing ethos at the core of the study it was important to have each learner understand that they could choose whether they wished to participate and that their informed consent was extended dynamically (Varnhagen *et al.*, 2005).

In all three schools the pacing of the intervention was planned so that every learner in the English-medium classes in the focus grades could be accommodated if they opted to participate and contribute to the process. The groups were compiled randomly within each of the classes and where possible individuals were reassigned if they missed a specific group's start date due to illness or another commitment. The group sizes varied based on the overall class sizes and the total amount of time I had available to work in each school. For example, in two of the schools the group sizes were generally between six and ten students (School 1 and 2) and in the other the groups had around twenty students in them (School 3). In all three schools the programme was offered during the school day. This had several advantages, centrally that it made the intervention more accessible to all learners.

4.2.4 Collaborative prototyping of a developmental intervention

The study's overarching focus on CKD&S aligns with the principle of iteration which is integral to a commitment to collaborative prototyping (Buchanan, 1992; Lewrick et al., 2018). As Lewrick et al (2018) write, "the most important thing is that I learn and iterate at a fast pace. This, in turn, only works when the questions are asked – and challenged – as early as possible and the things developed so far are looked at from a different perspective." (p. 144) They go on to write that the most promising way to achieve this is to engage the desired users of the programme or product you are developing, as well as experts within and outside of your discipline. In the emergent RPCs, school leaders, staff and learners contributed as experts and users, and their input informed rapid adaptations of the developmental intervention based on our collaborative knowledge discovery. By gathering as many different perspectives on the developmental intervention before it was taken into schools, as well as during its implementation in the three schools, I had qualitative, multi-perspectival feedback to inform the ongoing optimisation of the intervention as it was adapted in, and for, each context.

Before I started working with learners in any of the schools the input from school leaders and staff provided invaluable reality checks about the time constraints the intervention would need to be adapted to work within. I met with school leaders and staff in-person, and they shared their feedback, input, requirements, and requests in these meetings. I adapted

the proposed intervention structure as well as the timeline for the overall period I would work in each school based on their input and shared it with them for further input. There was also a clear understanding in each school that they could provide feedback and input on an ongoing basis, i.e., the process was kept as open and flexible as possible to draw on ongoing collaborative knowledge discovery. Once I started running the intervention with groups of learners, their ongoing formative (verbal) and summative (written) feedback informed the structural and detailed optimisation of the overall programme as well as individual activities. The opportunity to draw on the perspectives of these different collaborators, meant that the ongoing prototyping of the intervention was anchored in each school context.

4.2.4.1 Adaptation for context

I collaborated with four, public, ordinary, fee-paying schools in the Metro East District of the Western Cape Education department between December 2022 (Commencement of preliminary discussions) and June 2023. The focus of the four, interconnected RPCs was the embedding and prototyping of a developmental intervention for students in Grade 7 and Grade 9 based on the needs, constraints, and opportunities in each school context. The timeline of the collaborative process is visually summarised below:
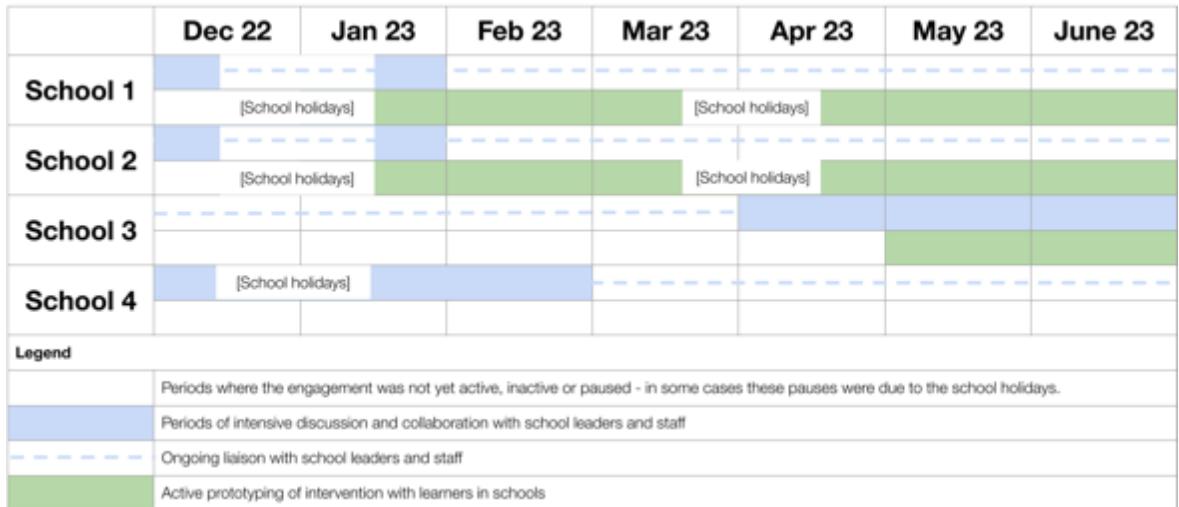
Figure 14: A high-level timeline of the collaborative process

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen

Across the four schools the process was a combination of relationship- and conversation-led:

- In the first instance I would describe the process as **relationship-led**. In two of the four schools I had pre-existing relationships as a former student that were

instrumental in opening doors because I was a known person to at least some of the staff. These relational connections were augmented by those of my parents who are both semi-retired educators who worked at different schools in the Metro East District during their careers and also made introductions at the schools. It seems that approaching the schools via these types of relational networks was decisive in first getting a foot in the door to discuss how we might get the actual collaborations off the ground. Given the legal personhood of each school, the official approval I had from the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) was useful from a compliance perspective, but it did not appear to have any currency in terms of opening doors into the schools. I identified and reached out to eight other schools in the district where I did not have existing relational networks and, despite highlighting that the project had been vetted and approved by the WCED, I did not receive any replies to these email enquiries about arranging meetings to discuss the project. There could of course be many different explanations for this turn of events, but it does seem to suggest that the fact of a project's official approval does not necessarily translate into cooperation by schools (See 3.4). Given the study's focus on collaboration, this is framed as positive as it strengthens the observation that the four schools who did engage with the process did so voluntarily rather than due to an externally imposed directive.

- The process was also **conversation-led**. The proposal I had prepared for prototyping the developmental intervention, which included an overview of the draft toolkit, was a conversation starter and within those broad parameters I explored how the process could be adapted for each school context based on their priorities, needs, constraints and opportunities. Conversations were central to my collaboration with all of the different collaborators – from school leaders to learners - and their willingness to engage in ongoing dialogue enriched the prototyping process and actually relieved pressure I would otherwise have put myself under to have answers and solutions in every situation. The finding that the process was conversation-led, highlights the importance of harnessing ongoing conversations as vehicles for data collection about the collaborative process (See 6.7).

In the process of adapting the prototyping process and intervention for each school context we navigated practical and thematic considerations and constraints:

Chief among the **practical** considerations was the necessity to work within the constraints of the timetable. In each school the key liaison proposed a time window or set of time

windows they could accommodate, and I developed a proposal to cover the overarching questions (Who am I? Why am I here? What do I need for my life journey?) within the available time. The available time varied across the four schools and from the outset there was an awareness that time would be limited but the reality was even starker once the prototyping began and as such the intervention needed to be trimmed down even further in most cases based on ongoing feedback from learners. Across all four schools I was confronted with the necessity of trimming the intervention down to only the essential components. As researcher-facilitator I could not afford to be precious about the toolkit I had developed. The collaborative process demanded a readiness to cut, reimagine and remould the intervention to make the core elements work within each school's constraints. In this process the value of having a set of overarching questions that guided the process but also provided thematic anchors became increasingly clear.

Although the schools all broadly welcomed the intervention's focus on identity, purpose, and their interplay with learning, we explored varied **thematic** emphases in each context. For example, in one there was a central focus on the relationship between individual values and the values of the school community, in another the exploration of the overarching questions was directed to supporting learners in their decision-making around subject choices. Other key thematic priorities were an alignment with, and reinforcement of, aspects of the Life Orientation curriculum as well as facilitating reflection by learners in support of greater engagement with the learning process. The initial design of the intervention and its component activities allowed for adaptation around these discrete areas of thematic interest. The integration of the sessions in the school day, meant that in some cases the links to the curriculum were actively foregrounded as I worked with learners during their Life Orientation or Arts and Culture periods. Although, opportunities to align the intervention with curricular themes were harnessed wherever possible, its mode of delivery was intentionally differentiated from learners' standard learning experiences by, for example, facilitating group sizes that were significantly smaller than the usual class sizes which afforded us greater flexibility when it came to employing a conversation- and narrative-led approach to the collaboration that led to the exploration of an additional focus question: What's my story?

4.2.4.2 Optimisation through youth-championing collaboration

The overarching practical and thematic constraints and priorities were negotiated with school leaders and staff, but the detailed, ongoing optimisation of the intervention was

largely based on verbal and written feedback from the learners who participated in the sessions. In all three schools where the intervention ran with learners, they were the central collaborators in refining individual activities as well as the overall toolkit to develop that which has emerged (See Appendix 4). In compiling the updated toolkit, I then established clear links to the Life Orientation curriculum for the Senior Phase (Grade 7-9) of the General Education & Training (Grades R - 9) component of the South African school curriculum (Department of Basic Education, 2020b, 2020a).

As mentioned above, the reflection that occurred within sessions was largely individual, with learners capturing their thoughts visually and in writing on the worksheets for each of the activities. As such the process could not be described as collaborative in the sense that they collaborated with one another in discovering or stewarding reflections about the intervention's focus questions. The learners did – to varying degrees – collaborate with me on the ongoing optimisation of the intervention's toolkit by sharing their feedback. The work that was done around articulating shared collaboration agreements (See 4.2.1), presented another opportunity for them to engage in CKD&S.

The RPCs are described as youth-championing because the process prioritised both their role as collaborators as well as their benefit through the developmental dimension of the intervention. In engaging them as collaborators, I needed to refine the invitation I extended to them and be clear about the potential benefits for them. In addition to refining the intervention toolkit, I was also developing my capacity to think through the benefits for different collaborators, centrally the learners I worked with (Felner, 2020; Morrow and Richards, 1996). To me these benefits were clear, but this was not the case for them and based on the questions they asked I was able to draw out aspects that better connected with their needs and priorities. I observed a clear distinction between schools where learners (as well as school leaders and staff) were almost overwhelmed with the number of options they had for activities over and above the standard curriculum and ones that do not have the resources to invest in these types of programmes. However, in both types of settings the importance of thinking through the benefits for learners and articulating these as clearly as possible was a recurring theme.

4.2.4.3 School leader and staff input

Although the prototyping process was youth-championing, guidance from school leaders and staff who, for example, emphasised the importance of simplifying and clarifying language in introductions, explanations and on worksheets was invaluable. A collaborative process like this one would benefit from a longer dedicated phase of work with a bigger

group of staff where a prototype toolkit is put through a first round of optimisation based on their knowledge about the language skills of the learners in their schools. A context-specific approach is important as even dual medium (Afrikaans and English) schools in the South African context will not necessarily always have first-language or mother tongue Afrikaans or English speakers in the Home Language classes for each of these languages. Assumptions about levels of fluency and/or literacy that may, for example, be anchored in the salient literature can nevertheless inhibit collaborative engagement if they are not sense-checked through adequate contextualisation (McKinney and Soudien, 2007; Woolman and Fleisch, 2013).

Teachers at the collaborating schools also shared their observations of a general reduction in engagement with learning, particularly as schools have sought to recover from the COVID-19 period. One area I observed this was in the learners' capacity to listen and understand (listening comprehension), an experience I shared even in very small groups where I often needed to explain individual activities several times. Another was related to their capacity for abstract thinking, as a few of the activities did require the learners to think in more abstract terms using metaphors such as a personal lifeline or a time capsule. The inclusion of the time capsule as an alternative to the personal timeline or lifeline, emerged out of the observation that many of the learners were having difficulty drawing their life to date as a timeline with key events mapped on it. However, in a few cases the students also struggled with the idea of time capsule that would allow them to share a few things that are important to them and tell a story about who they are at this point in their lives to future generations. Having more than one option for the groups, allowed for different points of entry to the overarching questions on identity, purpose, and their interplay with learning as well as their personal narrative. Observations and experiences such as this one pushed me to revisit activities and consider how I could make them clearer and more accessible to collaborators.

4.3 Data collection and analysis

In this section, I outline how data was collected through different aspects of the four interconnected, emergent RPCs, as well as the method that was employed to analyse qualitative feedback and my fieldwork notes about the collaborative process. The selected data collection and analysis methods are anchored in the pertinent methodological literature, and I explain the rationale for employing these methods.

4.3.1 The developmental intervention as vehicle for data collection

Qualitative data was collected through the developmental intervention that was prototyped in three of the four schools. In the process of participating in the intervention, learners completed a range of activities through which they reflected visually and in written form on questions of identity, purpose, and their interplay with learning.

The sessions with learners were not recorded as audio or video and as such the completed activity worksheets constituted the bulk of the qualitative data. The decision not to make audio-visual or video recordings of the sessions had practical and ethical catalysts:

- Given, the uncertainty about the rooms I would work in - even within individual schools - the logistics of creating a consistent recording set up was a practical barrier. The frequent electricity black outs in SA also meant that I could not be sure that it would be possible to utilise equipment requiring electricity (Matsheta and Sefoka, 2023; Yende, 2024).

- The sensitive nature of the themes that were explored through the intervention led me to conclude that the presence of a video camera or audio recorder, that could easily become the centre of the conversation, would inhibit open conversations (Bettencourt, 2020; Duncan et al., 2009).

- Across the board, with one or two exceptions the group sessions involved more individual reflection than group reflection through discussion and as such the audio recording of entire sessions would have yielded a relatively small amount of data in relation to the effort and logistical focus it would have required.

- A video recording of entire sessions may have yielded interesting visual data for analyses of group dynamics and body language, but I posit that the presence of a video camera would potentially have been a disruptive factor in the sessions and significantly reduced the likelihood of sustained consent to continue engaging in the collaborative process (Collier, 2019; Varnhagen et al., 2005).

The worksheet data that was collected has not been analysed as part of this thesis' narration and interpretation of the RPCs. The learners who contributed to the process as participant-collaborators consented to share their completed worksheets and activity materials for analysis as part of the research process, but these analyses go beyond the scope of this thesis. Collaborators were also invited to share verbal and written input and feedback on the process of prototyping of the developmental intervention.

4.3.2 Feedback data from students

The learners who contributed to the prototyping of the developmental intervention as participant collaborators provided written input via a pre-survey (See Appendix 2), which also encompassed their written consent to participate in the process, as well as verbal feedback during sessions and written feedback through an anonymous post-survey (See Appendix 2).

Verbal feedback that was shared by the learners during the session was captured in the fieldwork notes I recorded after each session. Through the ongoing invitations for verbal feedback as well as the summative post-intervention feedback survey, the learners were encouraged to share their experiences and views on the aspects of the intervention programme they were able to engage with, ones that were less clear or helpful, as well as other aspects of the intervention that needed improvement.

The pre-survey doubled up as a warm-up activity with each of the groups and invited participant collaborators to share a self-assessment of their capacity as learners, how they engage with and define learning spaces and other related questions. It was completed early in the first session with each group of learners, once the intervention programme and process had been introduced and all their questions had been answered. The survey also included a section where they were asked to provide their written consent to continue participating. As I captured informed consent through these surveys, they were not anonymised.

The post-survey, which invited summative feedback on the process of working with me on the developmental intervention, was anonymous. It was completed at the end of the final session with each group by all learners who were still in attendance. The ongoing verbal feedback from learners as well as their summative anonymous feedback were valuable sources of input about the intervention. The data from these surveys informed the ongoing optimisation of the intervention and was also analysed as part of the narration and interpretation of the collaborative process. Please see Appendix 2 for the surveys.

4.3.3 Input and feedback from staff and school leaders

School leaders and staff provided verbal input and feedback before and throughout the prototyping process in schools as well as written summative feedback via an anonymous survey at the conclusion of the collaborative process (Please see Appendix 3 for the survey). From the earliest research design phases, I acknowledged the value of intentionally drawing on the views of school leaders, staff, and other educational

stakeholders in a collaborative research process. However, in my initial research design I had anticipated that I would do so through a series of interviews and/or focus groups before the collaborative prototyping commenced combined, if possible, with follow-up interviews and/or a workshop for staff in each school where findings from the process could be presented and discussed.

The process was, however, far more flexible and dynamic with school leaders and staff providing verbal input and feedback on an ongoing basis. As the collaborations progressed school leaders and staff generally stepped back somewhat as most of the logistical and organisational routines fell into place, but the lines of engagement and communication nevertheless remained open with ongoing conversations via email, what's app or as we passed one another in the hallways. Although there was interest across the schools in hosting a developmental workshop for staff, the competing demands school leaders and staff faced meant that this did not come to fruition in any of the four schools.

The decision to employ a survey was largely driven by the fact that attempts to schedule interviews, focus groups and/or workshops was very challenging logistically and as it was a priority to ensure that school leaders and staff could formally share their feedback on the process, I opted to have them do so via an anonymous written survey. In the following chapter the verbal and written feedback I received from school leaders and staff is outlined and I also present some reflections about missed opportunities in the collection of data that are particularly relevant to this group of collaborators.

4.3.4 Researcher fieldwork notes

Although this study is not an ethnography, the emergent nature of the RPCs meant that my researcher fieldwork notes were another crucial source of qualitative data in the narration and interpretation of the collaborative process (Lönngren, 2021; Pisano, 2024). These notes were recorded from the point where I started preparing for fieldwork based on a research proposal which at that time was still premised on a researcher-led process of running a collaborative youth-led or -centred developmental intervention in a group of public, ordinary schools in the Western Cape, SA (Gambold, 2017; Wimark et al., 2017). The notes were recorded in audio format after every significant interaction or milestone, including email exchanges, meetings, school visits as well as key developments in the theoretical and philosophical framing and - once the prototyping commenced - after intervention sessions with groups of learners. During the emerging RPCs, the notes doubled up as process documentation allowing me to capture aspects of the unfolding

narrative, including verbal input and/or feedback the other collaborators shared on a rolling basis.

The ongoing discipline of recording audio fieldwork notes was augmented by a handwritten research journal with hard copy notes – including short- and longhand – as well as reflections about the fieldwork process and evolving ideas for the visualisations that were developed into the figures featured throughout this thesis (Lönngren, 2021; Wimark et al., 2017). Key reflections, questions, and pieces of input from the monthly online check-ins with my supervisors were also captured in this journal. As I often discussed different challenges I was encountering in the field during these check-ins – whether practical, strategic, or theoretical – the exchanges with supervisors provided another important opportunity to discuss how the intervention and overall collaborative engagement could be refined based on learning in the field.

While the observations and experiences captured in my fieldnotes encapsulated an important dimension of the four interconnected RPCs, I was repeatedly struck during the narrative, reflexive thematic analysis by the limitations of my individual perspective on the process as well as the shortcomings of my assessments of how other collaborators were experiencing it. Thus, in interpreting and narrating the collaborative process triangulating my perspectives with theirs – as expressed in written and verbal feedback – was essential. Furthermore, given the emergent nature of the RPCs I acknowledge the limitations of the available process documentation and feedback touchpoints and - as outlined in the next section - further augmented this data triangulation with a set of theoretical lenses as sketched out in Chapter 2 (See 4.7 for an overview of the study's key limitations).

4.3.5 Strategy for triangulation: Data and theory

Given the emergent nature of the youth-championing RPCs that are narrated and interpreted in this thesis, the triangulation of data is augmented by the triangulation of complementary theoretical lenses. In triangulating collaborator perspectives, I am not drawing together the views of homogenous groups within or across the four schools. Although I will - in the interest of brevity –often use the shorthand of collaborator groups in this thesis, I am triangulating and interpreting the views of groups of individuals who, while they had shared and comparable experiences of a collaborative process, nevertheless often reflected their personal experiences in the feedback they provided. Beyond its central importance in the narrative, reflexive thematic analysis of the collaborator insights and observations, the recognition of different, context-specific social, cultural,

organisational and epistemological dynamics as well as pressures and priorities (Weick, 1976; Hargreaves, 1995; Stoll, 2000), was also an essential aspect of building strong relationships with collaborators.
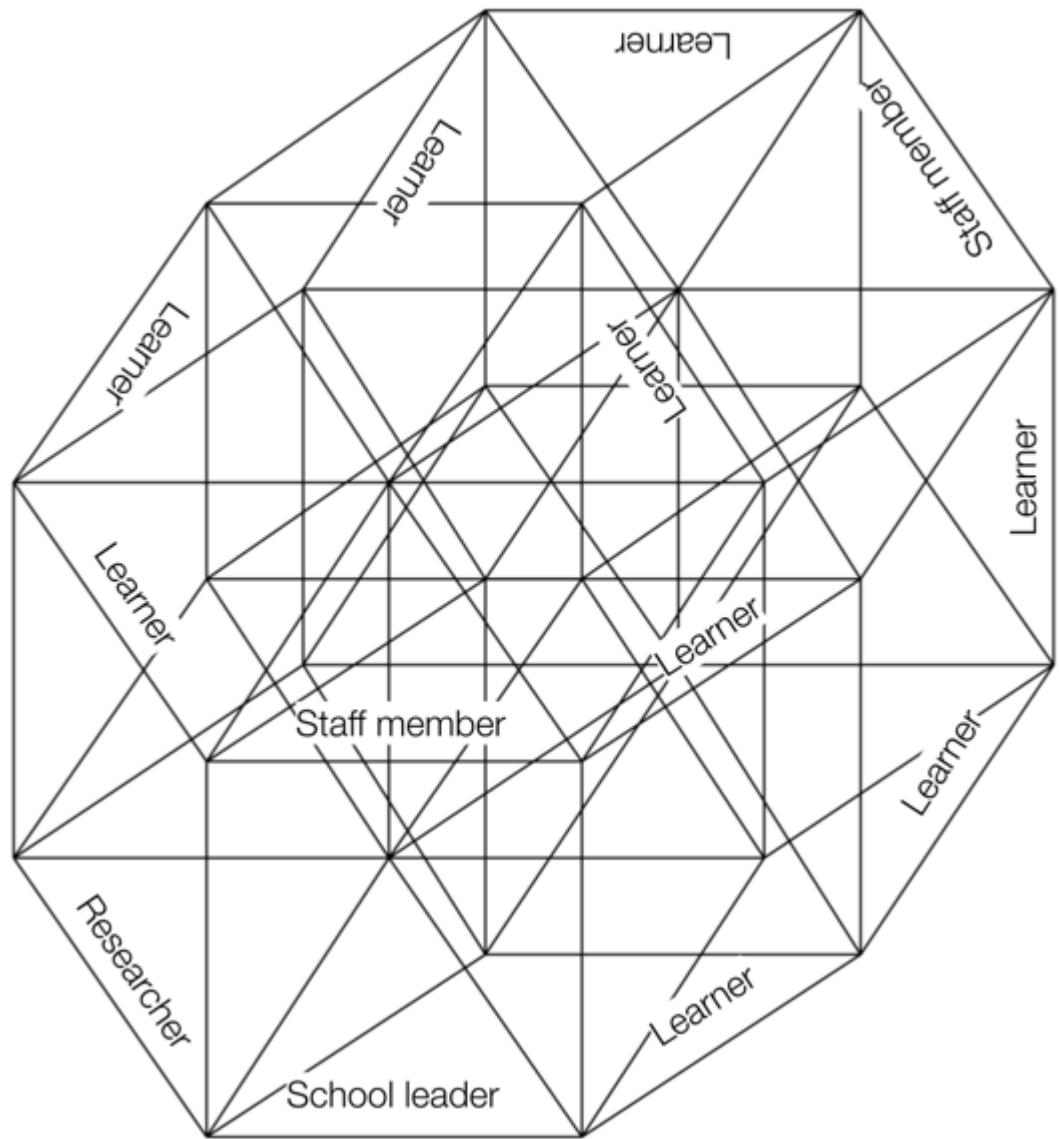
Figure 15: Triangulating collaborator insights and observations – Beyond a homogenous view of 'collaborator groups'

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen

School leaders and staff

In all four schools the school leader (principal, head teacher) was a key point of contact and gatekeeper for the overall collaborative process. The school leaders vetted the proposed developmental intervention and my first interactions via email and in-person meetings were with them. In one school the deputy head was also actively involved in initial conversations about how the intervention may be adapted for their context. In two of the four schools I was introduced to the several staff members at a check-in meeting

(School 1 and 3) and in one I had the opportunity to briefly present the proposed collaboration to the entire team at an all staff meeting (School 4). In one school the school leader was my key contact throughout the process, but in the other three the task of liaising with me was delegated to one or two staff members. I documented feedback from these different collaborators through my fieldwork notes and they were all invited to share their written feedback via the summative feedback survey at the conclusion of the project.

Learners[20]

I collaborated with 209 learners in three of the four schools over the course of the first two school terms of 2023. These participant-collaborators experienced one iteration of the programme and provided verbal feedback during sessions as well as summative written feedback on their experience and how the individual activities and/or overall programme could be improved.

Researcher/Facilitator

The feedback from other collaborators provided essential counterpoints to my impressions and interpretations of the unfolding process as captured through audio and written fieldwork notes. As mentioned above, I also utilised these notes to document feedback I received from school leaders, staff as well as the participant-collaborators (learners) throughout the process. Although I was one collaborator among many in this project, the notes also provided an insight into the ongoing navigation of different roles on my part – chief of which were that of researcher and facilitator (Sjölund et al., 2022a).

Theoretical triangulation

In the context of this study the theory of enabling spaces (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b, 2014a, 2016, 2017; Peschl, 2019a, 2019b) as well as a selection of Charlotte Mason's twenty principles (Mason, 1925, 2019) have been employed both in the design of the youth-championing developmental intervention as well as in the development of a framework to narrate, interpret and present the context-specific, yet interconnected, experiences of collaborating in and with each of the four schools (Bevir and Blakely, 2018; Moustakas, 2011). The theory of enabling spaces is particularly useful as part of the theoretical triangulation this study employs as its conception of enabling spaces is necessarily context-specific and their design and establishment prioritises the "new integrations of signs, things, actions, and environments" that address the values, priorities, aspirations and needs

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[20] Please see 3.5.1 for a brief explanation of why I have opted to use the term "learners" instead of "students" or "pupils."

of the individuals in that context and creates enabling conditions for the creation of knowledge, innovation and solutions that address "the concrete needs and values of human beings in diverse circumstances" (Buchanan, 1992, p. 21). The theory's emphasis on the optimal integration of the six dimensions of an enabling space to support collaborative knowledge discovery, provides a framework for a consistent and integrated discussion of the narrative, reflexive thematic analysis (Bevir and Blakely, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2021; Pushor and Clandinin, 2014) of qualitative process and feedback data collected across four different school sites. To my knowledge, this study is the first one to employ the theory of enabling spaces as both a core research design feature and as part of a narrative thematic analytic lens for collaborative educational research.

In the triangulation approach, the theory of enabling spaces is augmented by the concept of hospitality and personhood, which is anchored in Mason's educational philosophy and principles (See 2.1.5 and 2.3.2) as well as a set of key concepts around collaborative engagement that were observed in the four school contexts (See 2.6). These concepts have in turn been anchored in salient literature to add another layer to the discussion of triangulated collaborator perspectives as well as the four collaborative contexts. I unpacked these interconnected concepts in Chapter 2. This selection of concepts, which is not exhaustive, reflects insights and observations drawn from the four interconnected RPCs that are further augmented by a set of overarching factors in collaborative working (Patel et al., 2012).
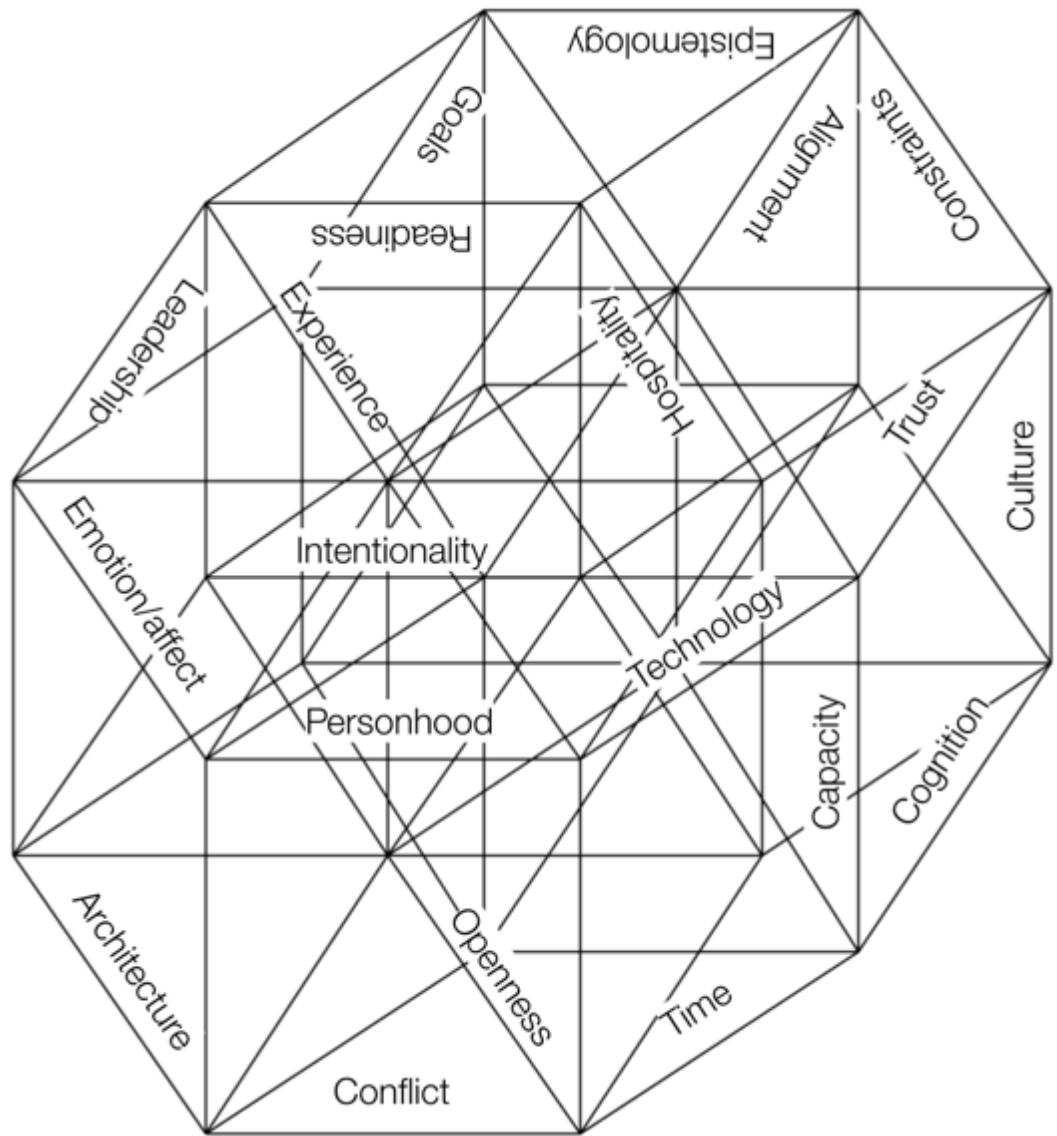
Figure 16: Triangulating theoretical frameworks: A polymorphic reading of a collaborative process

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen

In triangulating these theoretical frameworks, a multi-faceted or polymorphic lens is formed to frame the narration and interpretation of the RPCs. These epistemologically compatible theoretical frameworks enhance one another and serve as exemplars for how a shared vocabulary may be articulated that supports the design, development, implementation, and assessment of RPC as vehicles for CKD&S. The Discussion chapter, which models a critical, polymorphic reading of an emergent enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S, concludes with a proposal for a multi-dimensional, dialogic heuristic based on these theoretical frameworks, as well as learning that emerged about them through the RPCs, which is designed to support conversations about CKD&S.

I have employed a narrative, reflexive thematic analysis approach to analyse the qualitative feedback and input as well as reflective process data that was collected as part of the collaborations with the four schools. In addition to drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2021) conceptualisation of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019; Byrne, 2022; David, 2025), this approach integrates narrative configuration in interpreting the RPCs. Polkinghorne (1995) writes, "narrative configuration [refers] to the process by which happenings are drawn together and integrated into a temporally organized whole. The configurative process employs a thematic thread to lay out happenings as parts of an unfolding movement that culminates in an outcome. The thematic thread is called the plot, and the plot's integrating operation is called emplotment. When happenings are configured or emplotted, they take on narrative meaning. That is, they are understood from the perspective of their contribution and influence on a specified outcome" (p. 5). Given the integration of these complementary approaches, the study's broad orientation is mapped out on the table below in terms of the variations in reflexive thematic analysis as posited by Braun and Clarke (2021) to clarify how this blended analytic approach builds on the previously outlined philosophical and theoretical foundations (See Chapter 2).

Table 3: Positioning the analytic strategy in terms of the variations of reflexive thematic analysis

Orientation to data	More **inductive**: analysis is located within, and coding and theme development are driven by the data.		*		More **deductive**: analysis is shaped by existing (and emergent) theoretical constructs, which provide the 'lens' through which to read and code the data and develop themes.
Focus on meaning	**Semantic**: analysis explores meaning at the more surface, explicit or manifest level.			*	**Latent**: analysis explores meaning at the more underlying or implicit level.
Qualitative framework	**Experiential**: analysis aims to capture and explore people's perspectives and understandings.		*		**Critical**: analysis focuses on interrogating and unpacking meaning around the topic or issue.
Theoretical frameworks	**Realist, essentialist**: analysis aims to capture truth and reality, as expressed within the dataset.		*		**Relativist, constructivist**: analysis aims to interrogate and unpack realities expressed within the dataset.

The structure and wording of the content of this table is directly adapted from Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 10).

Narrative inquiry, and even its sub-concentration narrative analysis, is multi-facetted and there are almost as many related but varying understandings of what is meant by narrative as there are researchers active in this domain (For example, Bochner, 2001; Burck, 2005; Elliott, 2005; Gubrium and Holstein, 1998; Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995; Pushor and

Clandinin, 2014; Smith, 2016; Smith and Sparkes, 2009; Webster and Mertova, 2007). For the purposes of the interpretation and narration of the RPCs, I employ the definition of narrative as articulated by Polkinghorne (1995): A narrative is a text, or collection of texts, *thematically* organised by plot through a particular process of narrative configuration: emplotment. Emplotment is a process of drawing events and actions into "an organised whole by means of a plot. A plot is a type of conceptual scheme by which a contextual meaning of individual events can be displayed" (p. 7). In this conceptualisation narrative configuration is employed as an analytic tool to interpret data that was not exclusively collected in narrative form. Throughout this thesis I refer to narrative and story interchangeably. Stories are understood as

> "narratives that combine a succession of incidents into a unified episode. [...] A storied narrative is the linguistic form that preserves the complexity of human action with its interrelationship of temporal sequence, human motivation, chance happenings, and changing interpersonal and environmental contexts. [...] The subject-matter of stories is human action. Stories are concerned with human attempts to progress to a solution, clarification, or unraveling of an incomplete situation" (p. 7).

The outlined understanding of emplotment is augmented by *story grammar* as defined by McAdams (1993). A story has a setting, characters, an initiating event (or series of events), attempt(s) to achieve a specific goal that lead to consequences and reactions to those consequences. These elements are sequenced in the episodes that constitute the story. As these episodes build, a story takes form and often tension builds which prompts a desire on the part of the reader for a resolution or *denouement*. These elements of a story's grammar provide useful anchors in narrating and interpreting a collaborative process, but they also prompt a range of reflective questions, including:

- Who are the characters in this story?
- Who are the protagonists?
- Is there an antagonist or perhaps several?
- What is obscured by foregrounding and centring one individual as a protagonist when several people are part of how a story unfolded?
- Are the goals that the protagonist is focusing on really the most important ones?
- What qualifies as a resolution and who is it a resolution for?

In the following chapters, I attempt to weave together several, related narrative strands and trace for the reader how my fellow collaborators and I coalesced around the goal of embedding the developmental intervention in each school context. However, I also

critically interrogate my positionality as narrator in this story, acknowledging some of the key limitations this presents.

The analytic strategy employed in this study is narrative *and* thematic. Reflexive thematic analysis, as developed and defined by Braun and Clarke (2021), "is a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic process of data coding to develop themes – themes are your ultimate analytic purpose" (p. 4, Emphases in original text removed). Although there are several points of interwovenness between their conceptualisation of reflexive thematic analysis (TA) and the approach I have taken to "developing, analysing and interpreting patterns" across the qualitative data I collected, I have at certain points adapted their stipulated process in the articulation of a multi-dimensional narrative in which themes are key "shared meaning patterns" (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p. 231). See Appendix 5 and 6 for the thematic/shared meaning pattern maps and narrative maps that were developed as part of the study's analytic process. The analytic process – including these maps - was informed by worked examples of reflexive thematic analysis, an approach which explicitly acknowledges the researcher's role as author of their "analytic story" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021; Byrne, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017).

In this study's narrative, reflexive thematic analysis, themes are distinguished from tone (e.g. optimistic or pessimistic), imagery, motives and ideology. "A story theme is a recurrent pattern of human intention and/or meaning. It is the level of story concerned with what the characters in the narrative want and how they pursue their objectives over time" (McAdams 1993, p. 67). Themes exist within stories, motives by contrast are understood as existing within a person's personality, as internal dispositions that "help to organise our behaviour, providing energy and direction for various things we do. Motives help to shape our identities by emphasising particular themes in a personal myth" (p. 73). Ideology is defined as "a systematic body of values and beliefs" that "provide a backdrop of belief and value upon which the plot" of an individual or collective story unfolds (p. 67). In the first sections of Chapter 2, I presented the reader with the foundational principles, beliefs and values that provide a backdrop to how I investigate, interpret, and narrate the social world. Each of my collaborators brought their own foundations to the process of working together. The decision to clarify mine ideally allows the reader to see the narrative I present against a clear, rather than obscured, backdrop. While I attempt to weave the expectations (what they wanted from the process) and experiences (how they pursued these objectives) of the different collaborators, including myself, into the narrative I am not in a

position to make accurate assertions about motives other than my own and where observations are shared that appear to venture into this territory, these are to be read as commentary based on my interpretive process rather than a foolproof description of any other collaborator's internal disposition(s).

To interpret and narrate any series of events is a process of synthesis and configuration that seeks to produce an explanation or a set of explanations. The development of the story is an analytic process that "involves recursive movement from the data to an emerging thematic plot" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 16). Emplotment is an evolving, iterative process in which different types of data are configured into a coherent narrative. Initial attempts at emplotment are assessed in relation to the available data and if the framing of the plot conflicts with specific events or actions, the idea is adapted to reflect the dataset more accurately, as well as the relationships between different categories or types of data. For example, if I was only to look at the reflective, narrative data I collected through my fieldwork notes the emplotted story would look very different to how it did once the perspectives of my collaborators were factored into the emplotment process. "The development of a plot follows the same principles of understanding that are described by the notion of the hermeneutic circle. The creation of a text involves the to-and-fro movement from parts to whole that is involved in comprehending a finished text" (p. 16). This process involves ongoing decision-making about the data elements that are most pertinent to the emerging plot. I reflect further on this process in the following two chapters.
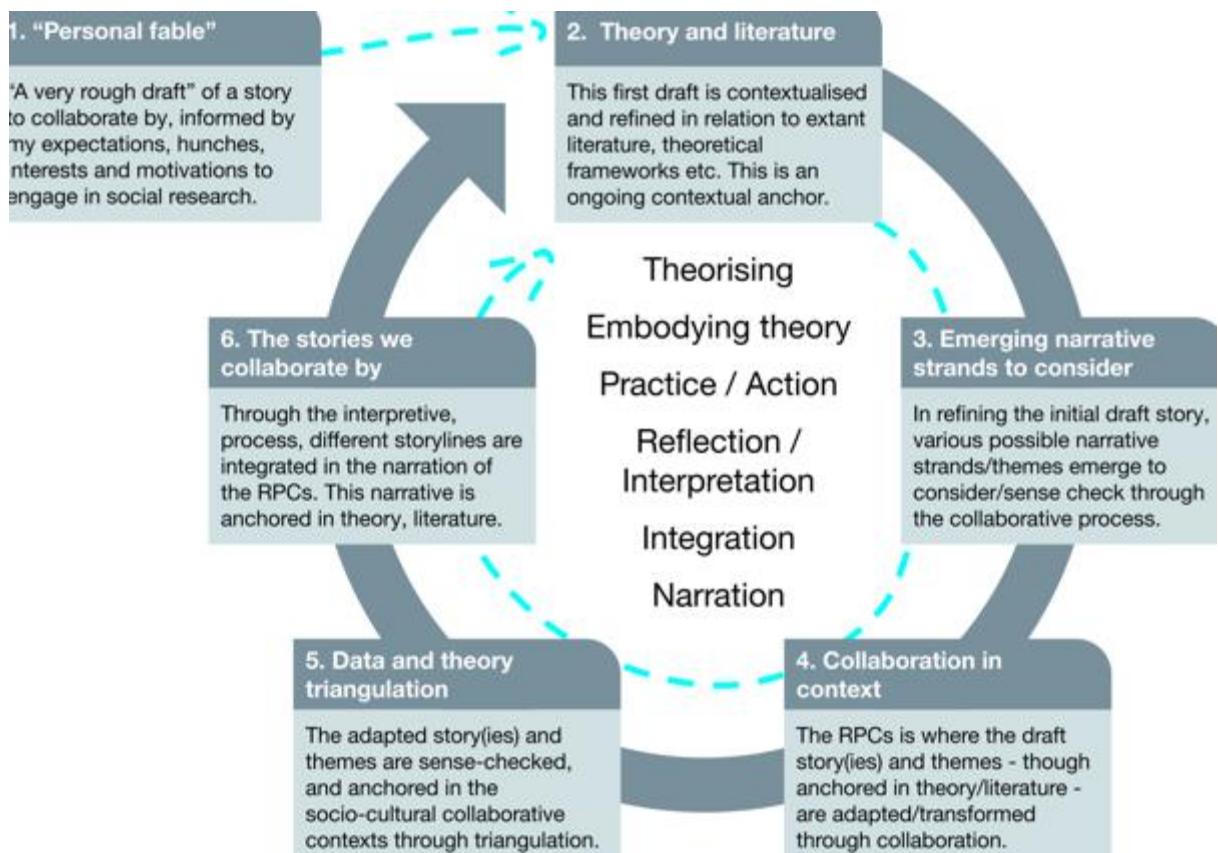
Figure 17: An adapted hermeneutic circle

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen

The combination of narrative analysis and reflexive thematic analysis is summarised and situated within the entire research process in the table below, broadly drawing on the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). These phases are summarised in the left-hand column and their touchpoints with key aspects of the adapted hermeneutic circle are outlined in the right-hand column:

Table 4: Operationalising a collaborative, narrative, interpretive methodology through narrative, reflexive thematic analysis

Design, data collection and tracing initial narrative coordinates		
Focus	**Touchpoints with adapted hermeneutic circle**	
Initial literature review	Personal "fable"; Theory and literature	
Development of research proposal and preliminary research questions	Personal "fable"; Theory and literature	
Research design	Personal "fable"; Theory and literature;	
Data collection and initial familiarisation with data	Collaboration in context; Theory and literature; Emerging narrative strands to consider	
Refining research questions to reflect focus on emergent, research-practice collaboration		
Reflexive thematic analysis	*Narrative analysis*	
Initial analysis, description and narration		
Phase	**Focus**	**Touchpoints with adapted hermeneutic circle**

1	Familiarisation with dataset (written and verbal feedback from collaborators; researcher fieldwork notes)	Theory and literature; Emerging narrative strands to consider
2	Coding the data as part of narrative, reflexive thematic analysis	Theory and literature; Emerging narrative strands to consider; Data and theory triangulation
3	Initial generation of shared meaning patterns	Theory and literature; Emerging narrative strands to consider; Data and theory triangulation
Further refining research questions to reflect emergent conceptual lenses based on data and theory triangulation.		
Consolidation, further analysis and final narration		
4	Assessment and continued development of shared meaning patterns as narrative themes	Theory and literature; Emerging narrative strands to consider; Data and theory triangulation
5	Link overarching themes with key narrative coordinates	Data and theory triangulation; The stories we collaborate by
6	Conclude the analysis: Craft a narrative	The stories we collaborate by; (Reframed) personal "fable"

Given the emergent nature of the RPCs, as well as the fact that I have employed a narrative, reflexive thematic analytic strategy with data that was not collected in narrative form by design, I have augmented the triangulation of qualitative feedback, input, and reflective data with theoretical triangulation. In doing so, this narrative process actively draws on both paradigmatic and narrative modes of thought (McAdams, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1995) – or explanatory theory (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2021) – to make sense of the interconnected stories of the four RPCs and the story that may be told across them. It also allows for a sense checking of my observations about the CKD&S process with themes from the broader literature on collaboration and seeks to highlight some of the ways these context-specific narratives can contribute to our growing understanding of collaboration and different forms of collaborative engagement.

4.4 Ethical considerations

In this section I outline the key ethical considerations that informed the research design and strategy including the approaches taken to informed consent as well as maintaining confidentiality and carefully stewarding personal data. I also unpack the imperative to shift from minimising harm for collaborators to maximising benefits for them. The section concludes with a few considerations about navigating vulnerability and resilience in youth-championing, collaborative social research. The study navigates these core ethical commitments against the backdrop of the ethic of humility, love and service that underpins the study as well as an imperative to foster enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S.

4.4.1 Informed consent

Liamputtong (2020) writes, "The method of providing consent in qualitative research depends on various factors, including the type of research, its level of sensitivity, its cultural context, and the potential vulnerability of the participants. In some contexts, the protection of vulnerable participants may favour a formal, written process of consent; in other contexts, an oral process." (p.35-36). A multi-layered approach was taken to ongoing, dynamic informed consent to accommodate the differentiated, evolving involvement of multiple collaborator groups, as well as the different time points at which consent was verified and confirmed throughout the process (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

At the outset consent was garnered from school leaders on behalf of their school *in loco parentis* for the collaborative prototyping of the developmental intervention with learners. Additionally, the learners who contributed to the process were asked to give their consent. Informed consent materials, including participant information sheets and consent forms, were developed with the respective audiences and collaborator groups in mind to ensure that they had a clear understanding of the research and collaborative prototyping process before making a commitment to participate (Liamputtong, 2020; Morrow, 2008; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Skelton, 2008). This included an age-appropriate plain language participant information hand out for the learners who were invited to participate in the intervention. However, once I started engaging with learners it became evident that the development of clear speaking points for a verbal introduction of the intervention and collaborative process, which covered all the information contained in the participant information documentation, was as important as the documents I had prepared in advance (See Appendix 5).

The learners wanted to have the process explained to them verbally and the opportunities I had to present it to them, whether during a dedicated information session or at the beginning of the first session with each group, centred on a verbal presentation of the intervention, how we would work on prototyping it together, how this was embedded in a research project and what that meant for their personal data. The script/set of speaking points I used was refined throughout the fieldwork process, based on questions and feedback from the young people who participated, as well as input from school staff based on the way I explained the process to them. Presenting the information to learners was also harnessed as an opportunity to invite them into a conversation about the project parameters and they were encouraged to ask all questions they had before giving their consent. During the introductory session I explained to the learners what it meant for their informed consent

to be dynamic and that they could reassess their decision at any point if for any reason they were no longer able or willing to participate.

For the participant-collaborator groups, the research background, their rights (e.g. participants are able to withdraw consent either partially or fully during course of fieldwork period) and how their data would be used were also covered during the initial verbal presentation of the intervention before they were asked to provide their written consent to participate via the pre-survey. Upon completion of the intervention programme, learners were explicitly asked for their consent to share their worksheets to be analysed as part of related research activities. The decision was made to garner this consent separately as I wanted learners to be able to consider their response based on the reflections they had captured on their worksheets during the sessions, rather than seeing it as an obligatory confirmation of consent they had given at the outset based on their initial understanding of what the activities might involve.

In three out of the four schools, the school leader delegated the task of working with me on the collaborative prototyping process to one or more staff members. To my knowledge these individuals were not given an opportunity to choose whether they wanted to collaborate with me as the task was assigned to them in their capacity as staff member. Given the emergent nature of the RPCs I also did not ask these individuals for written informed consent to collaborate with me. I discuss the ethical ramifications of this further in Chapter 6. The school leaders and staff who completed the summative, anonymous feedback survey, however, all provided informed consent for the data they shared to be analysed as part of the study.

4.4.2 Confidentiality

The research design and strategy centrally prioritise maintaining the confidentiality of all collaborators who contributed to the process (Clark et al., 2021; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Liamputtong, 2020, 2022). Within each school context the collaborators did not remain anonymous during the process as their colleagues and/or peers were aware that they were working with me and/or participating in the developmental intervention. In the analysis and write-up of the thesis, however, all references to experiences with specific collaborators were anonymised and in cases where the description of an incident would identify an individual, these have not been included.

As part of the developmental intervention, I had in-depth discussions with the learners about the importance of confidentiality and my commitment as researcher-facilitator to

maintaining their confidentiality. However, I also highlighted that as we were working in groups my commitment was limited and dependent on each individual learner also respecting the confidentiality of their peers by not sharing private reflections that peers divulged during sessions with others who had not been in attendance. This did not apply to their own reflections, and they were encouraged to share and sense check those with family and/or friends. In clearly outlining these limitations to the assurances I could make around confidentiality, there was an opportunity to highlight the importance of trust in the collaborative process (Denner et al., 2019; Pendlebury and Enslin, 2001) and engage in fruitful exchanges with the learners about why ensuring confidentiality is an important aspect of conducting ethical and rigorous research (Clark et al., 2021; Fisher and Anushko, 2008; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Liamputtong, 2020, 2022).

The data generated through every aspect of the RPC, from the pre-conversations with school staff to the developmental intervention with learners and the feedback from staff after the completion of the collaboration, was treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times. The only exception was my research fieldwork notes that are also analysed as a key data point in this study. In this case there is no way to maintain confidentiality as I worked as a lone researcher on the project. All personal information about school staff and students was destroyed once the project was completed, unless participants explicitly gave their consent for findings to be shared with them after the project's completion. All names and other material likely to identify individuals was anonymised and, where applicable, participants may be referred to by pseudonym in future publications (Lahman *et al.,* 2015). The learners, school leaders and staff I collaborated with are not named in acknowledgement section of this thesis and will not be named in any other publications based on the study, unless they provide explicit permission for me to do so. Given the small number of collaborating schools, the individual schools have not been named in the acknowledgement section of this thesis or other publications to ensure their confidentiality and maintain their deidentification in the analysed, discussed data.

4.4.3 Approach to managing personal data

The personal data of school leaders, staff or other potential collaborators was only retained and utilised for the preparation and duration of the fieldwork for the purpose of scheduling meetings or liaising about the embedding and prototyping of the intervention. These details were accessed via the schools with the school leaders being key facilitators in this regard. The mode of communication – whether email, telephone calls and/or what's app messaging – was determined based on the preferences of individual collaborators.

I received hard copy class lists for the English-medium classes in the relevant grades at the three schools where I collaborated with learners. The purpose of my receiving these lists was to assign learners to small groups for the prototyping of the intervention. The class lists were structured differently across the three schools and thus I received varying personal data, including date of birth or sex, respectively. In the proposals I prepared for the school leaders and staff to consider I shared the proposed small groups with them so that they could liaise with the relevant subject and/or grade teachers, but beyond the inclusion of the students' first and last names in these lists, I did not digitise the personal data from the lists I received in any other formats. The hard copy lists were stored securely along with my hard copy fieldwork notes throughout the duration of the fieldwork and disposed of securely upon completion of the fieldwork.

I have only retained the contact details (work email addresses and/or mobile numbers) of the school leaders and staff who consented to receive updates or outputs outside of the RPC. I have not retained any personal details of any collaborators – whether school leaders, staff, or learner - in an electronic or hard copy database or shared any personal details with my supervisory team or any other researchers, practitioners, or stakeholders.

4.4.4 From minimising harm and distress to maximising benefit for collaborators

In the context of this study, I endeavoured to foster enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S through RPCs that sought to centrally champion a group (young people) that is defined as vulnerable (Morrow & Richards, 1996; Valentine et al., 2001). A key priority throughout was to minimise any potential harm for this group and ideally steward a process that was also beneficial to them and the other collaborators (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Fisher and Anushko, 2008; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Kipnis, 2003; Liamputtong, 2020, 2022). However, the varying levels of benefit between myself and the other collaborators who contributed to the process demanded ongoing reflexivity on my part (Canosa et al., 2018; Felner, 2020).

Across the different data collection touchpoints with school leaders, staff, and learners, I repeatedly reminded the collaborators that I was available to discuss any questions or concerns they had about the process that may have given them pause or caused uncertainty. I also assured the learners that although their participation added immense value to the project they could withdraw their consent at any point without giving a reason (Canosa et al., 2018; Duncan et al., 2009; Fisher and Anushko, 2008). If the learners were not comfortable raising issues with me, they were able to go to the key liaison staff member

and similarly the staff had escalation routes to the school leader, if necessary, and the school leader to my supervisors and/or the university. Although, these escalation routes were never required it is important to ensure that collaborators have clear processes to raise issues if necessary (Kennelly et al., 2023; Morris et al., 2012).

The developmental intervention integrated check-ins where learners were invited to share their feedback on how the process was going and whether they were comfortable with sharing their reflections on the core themes with the group. After every individual exercise within the programme, participants were given the opportunity to share feedback and reflections. These pauses were also designed to provide opportunities for participants to indicate if they needed support or a break. The use of tools such as collaboration agreements also sought to create an enabling, hospitable space for the participants to engage in individual and collaborative reflection.

In each of the three schools where I worked with learners, I also discussed the approved internal workflows and resources I could draw on if any learners required additional support to process specific themes that came up during the developmental intervention. Two of the schools had social workers on campus a few days a week (School 1 and 2) and in the other school we agreed on an alternative support route whereby I would inform the school leader and key liaison staff members (School 3). These referral pathways were utilised once in School 1 and once in School 3.

Before the programme was taken into schools an outline proposal was shared with school leaders via email for review and presented to them and staff in meeting settings where they had the opportunity to raise questions and share their feedback on how the intervention should be optimised to best work within the constraints and priorities of each school. The intervention was tailored and refined for each school context based on this initial input, but staff were given the opportunity – along with learners who contributed to the process as participant-collaborators – to provide feedback on how the intervention could be further optimised based on their needs and priorities. Across the board the imperative was to explore ways to maximise benefit for all the collaborators who were contributing to the process. The developmental intervention was designed to be a beneficial experience for the learners who engaged with it as participant-collaborators. The benefits for the school leaders and staff who worked with me to embed the intervention in their context were indirect as the intervention added value for the learners in their schools.

4.4.5 Vulnerability

The developmental intervention that was at the core of the RPCs, invited students to reflect on their identity, purpose and becoming, and how these relate to their experiences of learning in the school context and beyond. As a facilitator and researcher, I was aware of the potential sensitivity of these topics and the importance of sustaining an enabling, hospitable space for students to participate in the different reflective exercises on their own terms (Burke and Hadley, 2018; Conrad et al., 2017; Pendlebury et al., 2011; Spindel Bassett and Geron, 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2022) while also acknowledging their potential vulnerabilities in both the design and facilitation of the process.

Kipnis (2003) identifies seven characteristics of children (and young people) that may make them especially vulnerable in a research process. Of these five were particularly relevant in the design and implementation of this study:

1. They commonly lack, or are still in the early stages of developing, the capacity to make mature decisions *(Incapacitational vulnerability)*
2. They are generally subject to the authority of others *(Juridic vulnerability)*
3. They may be deferential in ways that can mask underlying dissent *(Deferential vulnerability)*
4. Their rights and interests may be socially undervalued *(Social vulnerability)*
5. They may lack important socially distributed goods or not have a direct say in how these goods are distributed *(Allocational vulnerability)*

These characteristics of children and young people are interconnected and throughout the RPCs I sought to work in awareness of them and harness every opportunity to mitigate them. In the next chapters, I further discuss the interplay of these different characteristics as observed in my experiences of the RPCs as well as those of my collaborators and consider the implications for ethical CKD&S.

4.5 Establishing rigour and trustworthiness

Rigour, which is also sometimes referred to as trustworthiness in qualitative research, concerns the quality and legitimacy of the research process as well as the competence and integrity of the researcher (Tobin and Begley, 2004). Building on the prevalent definitions, Davies and Dodd (2002) propose an expanded understanding of rigour that better reflects the nature of qualitative research by including, "attentiveness, empathy, carefulness, sensitivity, respect, honesty, reflection, conscientiousness, engagement, awareness, openness, context" (p. 288). The trustworthiness or rigour of any study or research project

is inextricably linked to its situated ethics (Holmes, 1984; Pendlebury and Enslin, 2001; Fisher and Anushko, 2008; Lowney, 2017b). Rossman and Rallis (2017) maintain that for "a study to be trustworthy, it must be more than reliable and valid. It must be ethically conducted and sensitive to power dynamics" (p. 51).

Rigour has been conceptualised in several different ways to inform the assessment or evaluation of qualitative enquiry, particularly as it pertains to its necessary differentiation from quantitative research (Clark et al., 2021; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017; Porter, 2007; Rolfe, 2006; Rossman and Rallis, 2017). In this section I outline this study's approach to establishing rigour drawing on the criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1989) in combination with a selection of established strategies for establishing rigour in qualitative research (Clark et al., 2021; Liamputtong, 2020; Nowell et al., 2017; Seale, 2017). The strategies are broadly clustered by the criteria they most strongly correspond with, but these are to be read as part of an integrated approach:

Table 5: Strategies for establishing rigour

Criteria	Corresponding strategy/strategies
Credibility and authenticity are employed to ascertain "whether the research is genuine, reliable, or authoritative," in short, whether "the research findings can be trusted" (Liamputtong, 2020, p.27). These criteria also pertain to whether "the explanation fits the description and the description is credible" (Tobin and Begley, 2004, p.391).	I spent six months in SA conducting the fieldwork for this study to enable a prolonged engagement with the four schools and allow me to build relationships with the other collaborators and develop a deeper understanding of each context. As discussed elsewhere, the decision to work in multiple schools in parallel had advantages in terms of collaborative cross-pollination and learning, but it did also place restrictions on the amount of time I could spend in each individual school (See 5.4).
	In narrating and interpreting the four RPCs, I was acutely aware of the importance of triangulating my perspectives and experiences with those of my collaborators. The verbal and written input as well as feedback I received from school leaders, staff and learners allowed me to strengthen the credibility of the descriptions and interpretations presented in this thesis as they are informed by the assessments and experiences of multiple collaborators. Given the emergent nature of the RPCs, this triangulation was augmented by theoretical triangulation.
Transferability or applicability consider the extent to which the study's findings can be applied in other contexts/settings or to other	Another strategy for enhancing rigour is anchored in the selection of a methodological framework that strengthens the research

Criteria	Corresponding strategy/strategies
individuals or groups, or whether the qualitative findings can inform and/or facilitate insights in contexts other than the one(s) in which the study was conducted (Liamputtong, 2020; Clark et al., 2021).	design. In Chapter 2, I outlined how this study's collaborative and narrative methodological framework is congruent with the philosophical foundations that underpin my work as a social researcher. The operationalisation of this framework through a series of emergent RPCs as vehicles for CKD&S, as well as the decision to employ a narrative, reflexive thematic approach to the analysis and interpretation of the data that was collected, further contribute to the congruence of the overall research design, strategy and implementation.
Dependability is concerned with the consistency of research over time, including across methods and researchers. This criterion also considers whether the findings adequately correspond to the data they are derived from (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Liamputtong, 2022).	Throughout the narration and interpretation, I employ rich, thick description, by writing in as much detail as possible about the design, implementation, context and collaborators of this study so that readers can better assess the reliability of the findings as well the study's potential philosophical, methodological and thematic transferability. Furthermore, I have explicitly outlined the philosophical foundations that underpin my work as a social researcher to ensure that readers are able to trace the understandings of reality, being, knowing and valuing that frame how I approach collaborative social research (See 2.1) and critically appraise it accordingly. My PhD supervisors provided peer review and auditing support at every stage of this study and in this context, I was held accountable in terms of documenting the process and ensuring that the design, implementation and analytic decisions I was making were congruent with the overall research strategy (Nowell et al., 2017; Tobin and Begley, 2004). In this chapter I have presented some of these decisions, but they will be discussed in further detail in the Findings and Discussion chapters.
Confirmability "attempts to show that findings and the interpretations of those findings do not derive from the imagination of the researchers but are clearly linked to the data" (Liamputtong, 2020, p.27; Tobin and Begley, 2004; Nowell et al. 2017). To ensure confirmability, findings need to be determined by respondents and/or the conditions of inquiry, not the positionality (assumptions, biases, interests, motivations) of the researcher (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).	In presenting the findings of this study in the next chapter, I draw on triangulated qualitative data as well as triangulated theoretical frameworks to support the narration and interpretation I present. Insights from the summative written feedback from school leaders, staff and learners, are augmented by a selection of verbatim quotations to highlight how collaborators expressed meanings in their own words (Liamputtong, 2022). The triangulation of data was augmented by the triangulation of different theoretical frameworks that provide transparent anchors or

Criteria	Corresponding strategy/strategies
	structuring principles for the narration and interpretation of the RPCs. Countless stories could have been told about the six months I spent working with these four schools, but by drawing on a selection of epistemologically compatible theoretical frameworks I was able to mitigate some of the limitations of each and anchor the narrative in salient literature on collaboration and learning.

4.6 Reflexivity

Lincoln et al. (2018) define reflexivity as "the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher" (p. 143). Liamputtong (2020) describes reflexivity as a crucial strategy for the entire qualitative research process and a resource that can enhance the credibility and authenticity of findings (p. 29-30). Reflexivity demands that I interrogate the different roles – whether researcher, facilitator, collaborator, or others - I have played in these CKD&S processes from design through implementation and analysis (Akingbola & Brunt, 2023; Liamputtong, 2020; Rossman and Rallis, 2017).

Given my active involvement in all four RPCs I do not claim to have maintained an objective distance from the research, rather I have sought throughout this thesis to pull my positionality – including philosophical commitments and assumptions – into clear focus and to highlight my presence as narrator of the collaborative process (Finlay, 2002; Lincoln et al., 2018; von Unger et al., 2022). By doing so, I have also sought to make my contribution to this interpretive process clear and to critically engage with the perspectives, experiences, beliefs, and personal history I bring to my work as social researcher in order to enhance its trustworthiness (Angen, 2000; Cherry et al., 2011; Liamputtong, 2020; Rossman and Rallis, 2017; Shope, 2006).

By working with a range of different collaborators during the RPCs and having the opportunity to triangulate my perspectives and experiences of the RPCs with theirs, I have been able to see some of my blind spots, biases and errors more clearly. Given the collaborative mode of working I was in some cases able to course correct based on input from my collaborators as well as my reflections on the unfolding RPCs. In other cases, I was only able to see deficits and strengths clearly as I undertook the narrative, reflexive thematic analysis of the qualitative data. Examples of both types of learning are outlined and critically discussed in the next two chapters. In the next section of this chapter, I unpack the study's key limitations to further allow readers to assess the value and

relevance of the research (Liamputtong, 2020; Rossman and Rallis, 2017; Whittemore et al., 2001).

4.7 Tracing the limitations of emergent, youth-championing RPC

In this section I outline the study's key limitations by research design and strategy (4.7.1), the developmental intervention (4.7.2), implementation (4.7.3), as well as analysis and presentation (4.7.4). Given the emergent nature of the research-practice collaborations (RPCs) that are narrated and interpreted in this thesis, limitations are also referenced and unpacked in the following chapters as part of the presentation and discussion of the findings.

4.7.1 Research design and strategy

Lyon (1985) highlights the importance of distinguishing clearly between an explanation and the thing (or phenomenon) to be explained. In the context of this study, however, the four interconnected, emergent RPCs sit somewhere between the former and the latter. As the focus shifted from analysing insights from youth-championing collaborative inquiry to narrating and interpreting the collaborations with four schools, the RPC concept provided a key anchor within that explanatory process. However, the RPCs were also fitting vehicles to foster enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S in the four schools. In narrating and interpreting these RPCs I draw on a triangulation of data and theory. Several other approaches may have been taken to presenting the process, but I have sought to clearly outline the foundations and coordinates of this narrative so that readers may critically assess both its limitations and strengths.

There is a rich and extensive body of literature in educational research on research-practice partnerships (RPPs) and this study has greatly profited from that growing body of work. However, in the narration and interpretation of the collaboration with the four schools I made an intentional decision to conceptualise and facilitate these as RPCs as no claims can be made about the establishment of mid- or long-term partnerships with any of the schools. Nevertheless, there are significant areas of methodological overlap and compatibility between these approaches as well as other collaborative research strategies. I also acknowledge that RPPs have potential advantages in terms of sustainability (Arce-Trigatti, Chukhray and López Turley, 2018; Alonzo et al., 2022; Sjölund et al., 2022a; Crane, 2023; Friesen and Brown, 2023; McGeown, 2023a; Norbury, 2023; Sjölund, 2023b).

SA is a multi-lingual context, but schools are often in terms of official languages of instruction at most bilingual spaces (McKinney and Soudien, 2007; Mohohlwane, 2019;

Moses, 2023; Woolman and Fleisch, 2013). The intervention I designed and prototyped with the four schools was only available in English. The three schools where I worked with learners were all dual medium Afrikaans and English schools. Although, I was able to extend the opportunity to participate in the intervention to all English-medium learners, their Afrikaans peers were not offered the same opportunity. This was a necessary constraint as I would not have had the capacity to translate the entire intervention toolkit and continue translating it on an ongoing basis as it was optimised throughout the collaborative process. Both in terms of the process' inclusivity, as well as collaborator expectations, this was a key limitation.

In the initial research design, I planned to use a combination of interviews, focus groups and/or surveys with the different collaborator groups to gather their input and feedback about the process of running the intervention in their context. However, as my focus shifted from merely analysing the data collected through the developmental intervention to narrating and interpreting the collaborations that centred on prototyping it, I became aware of the limitations of the data collection methods I had employed for a significant portion of the study. The ongoing verbal feedback as well as the summative, written feedback from my collaborators augmented my perspective invaluably but in future research I would broaden the method toolkit and ideally consider with the other collaborator groups how we might best collect the stories they are collaborating by on an ongoing basis in ways that provide rich insights into their experiences without proving unrealistic in terms of the demand on their time. The feedback I received from the collaborators also highlighted the importance of having even clearer conversations from the outset to strengthen any collaborative endeavours that may be pursued (See 5.1 and 6.7).

Throughout the collaborative process I navigated the disconnects between a research design and strategy that made sense to me, and the at times messy reality of collaborating in dynamic, ever-adapting contexts, where the knowledge discovery or stewardship processes that are valued and thus prioritised do not necessarily align with a neat set of data collection methods and workflows. Working within and around these disconnects is part of the story I tell through this thesis and this limitation itself highlights the importance of ongoing consideration of how the expertise, capacity and tools of different epistemic communities or collaborators can most fruitfully be mobilised in service of a shared objective.

4.7.2 The developmental intervention

I have described the developmental intervention as collaborative and youth-championing, and every effort was made to run it in this manner across the three of the four schools where learners were engaged in the prototyping process. However, the school as place presents challenges and limitations for a youth-championing RPC as learners may not always in the first instance be acknowledged as practitioners in this context but rather as products, participants or even consumers of a service (Davis et al., 2020). There are also limitations to the commitments a researcher can make to collaborators in terms of ensuring that their insights or reflections inform practice in the school more broadly. In the context of this study, I could commit to drawing on their feedback in refining the intervention programme although even in that respect there were limitations as I needed to aggregate feedback and could not always act on every individual piece of feedback. But in terms of feedback or insights they shared about their experiences of the school more broadly I was not able to make any guarantees about whether that could or would be acted upon at the school level.

In light of these limitations, the intervention programme thus by design had an individualistic focus and the four overarching questions that underpinned the exercises centred the reflections and experiences of individuals. As mentioned above, I had assumed that there would nevertheless be opportunities for the small groups of participant collaborators to also share reflections amongst themselves, something which rarely transpired in practice. However, the stronger focus on individual reflections around the questions, meant that there was scope to encourage and challenge learners to reflect on how they could harness the opportunities in their school context, as well as work around challenges and constraints in that environment, to make the most of this phase of their learning journey in support of the vision they had cast for their future.

Susan Mendus, emphasises the importance of understanding how people are interdependent and well as independent: "We need to explain how autonomy is formed, not solely from the internal nature of individuals, but also from the nature of the society in which they find themselves" (Referenced in Bretherton, 2004, p. 86). The process of prototyping a toolkit of exercises to explore questions of identity and purpose as well as how they relate to learning – and particularly the school as key learning space - confronted me with how pervasive the assumption of individual autonomy is in our socialisation as well as a lot of social scientific and educational literature (Aubrey and Riley, 2019; Boronski and Hassan, 2020; Bradbury, 2019; Siedentop, 2015; Walker, 2022). Although,

the initial set of exercises included prompts that encouraged learners to consider their identity and purpose in relational terms, a great deal of the framing and overall design (e.g. individual reflective exercises) was unconsciously anchored in the aforementioned assumption of the primacy of individual autonomy, which inadvertently informed a set of exercises to nurture "autonomous, self-reflexive subjects or 'unencumbered' selves" (Bretherton, 2004, p. 89). The collaborative process was, to some extent, a corrective to this skewed framing as I harnessed components such as the articulation of collaboration agreements to intentionally foster a shared space from the outset, and considered how to present and frame exercises in ways that encouraged the learners to consider how their emerging autonomy was also being formed by the social world they find themselves in and what their place in that world might look like going forward. However, in future collaborative and/or developmental research it would be important to prioritise conversations with collaborators that – among other dimensions – foster a space in which assumptions and framings such as this one can be unearthed and critically discussed (See 6.7).

Although I clearly communicated to school leaders, staff, and learners that we would be engaging in a process of refining the developmental intervention, I still put immense pressure on myself to have all the answers as the researcher-facilitator. After initially presenting the intervention programme, I was asked by a few learners: What's in it for us? I would come away from these sessions with a sense that I had failed in providing a compelling answer that would convince them to engage. While I acknowledge the importance of communicating clearly as a researcher and investing time in thinking through the benefits for different collaborators and/or participants, as I have narrated and interpreted this collaborative process I see that I missed opportunities in these instances to direct a question back to these collaborators and ask them what would be beneficial or interesting to them. By artificially engineering a pressure to perform and have all the answers, I at times inadvertently underestimated the ideas they could bring to the table as well as their capacity to articulate what would motivate them to engage in a CKD&S process.

4.7.3 Implementation and emergent collaboration

As an individual researcher working with four schools over two school terms, there were limitations to the flexibility I could offer them when it came to embedding the intervention in their timetables, liaising with staff and so forth. A bigger research team with dedicated resources for each school could go some way in mitigating this in future work, or

alternatively lone researchers could consider reducing the number of schools they work with or taking an even more staggered approach to working in schools. The latter could, however, have some impact on collaborative cross-pollination (See 5.4).

It is important to acknowledge both the value and limitations of having an outsider come into a school context to facilitate the type of developmental work the RPCs centred on. While a new perspective on a socio-cultural and -organisational context can sometimes identify opportunities or shed fresh light on particular challenges, a collaborative process that is reliant on the involvement of an external party has significant limitations in terms of its sustainability. A limitation or missed opportunity across the RPCs was considering how to involve a bigger group of staff even more intensively in the collaborative prototyping process. Related to this, existing relationships in the schools could have been tapped into with greater intentionality to consider how internal collaborative networks or teams could be established that continue the work beyond the timeline of an RPC. Systems thinking dictates that the required solutions are often already in the system and this series of RPCs bears that up (Grisold and Peschl, 2017; Peschl, 2019b, 2020; Scharmer, 2018, 2020). More time could, for example, have been spent in prioritising intensive engagement with school leaders and staff to map their successful and innovative practice in exploring themes around identity, purpose, and their interplay with learning to consider how the intervention could build on or augment these approaches in ways that add value to their classroom practice. However, in order to pursue such additional strands of collaborative activity leadership buy-in and sponsorship would be necessary (Hopkins, 2015b, 2017).

The importance of relationship- and trust-building in the RPCs cannot be understated and I am acutely aware that the nature of the implementation of this study has meant that I collaborated intensively with four schools for six months and then returned to the United Kingdom to complete the PhD. Although, I have maintained relationships with the school leaders and some of the staff, the same is, for example, not true of the learners. In the two primary schools, the students I worked with have since moved on to different secondary schools and although future collaborations with those schools can build on this first phase of work, this study cannot claim to have established any groundwork for sustained engagement with the young people it in other ways sought to centrally engage as collaborators. In the case of the secondary school, there could be opportunities to build on the collaboration with learners who remain in the school for the three final years of high school and indeed the learners expressed the value of developmental opportunities that are more sustainably embedded in their context.

The developmental intervention was designed to be youth-championing and the active engagement of learners with the intervention was a notable feature of the RPCs. However, more could arguably have been done to consider how to create opportunities for the learners to take a more explicit leadership role in different aspects of the collaboration. In the following chapters, examples of initiative and leadership on their part are highlighted that illustrate the immense potential and capacity of this key group of collaborators (Brennan et al., 2022; Caraballo and Lyiscott, 2020; Cummings, 2024; Thomoson and Gunter, 2014).

4.7.4 Analysis and presentation

In writing up this thesis I have constantly grappled with the fact that the emergent nature of the RPCs has meant that in hindsight I see opportunities that were missed to gather input from other collaborators more systematically throughout the project. This also has ethical implications as I only collected data with the methods I had approval for. Given the emergent nature of the RPCs one key contribution I have endeavoured to make in the narration of this proof of principle study is to flag up questions and opportunities for other researchers and practitioners doing similar work to factor into their conversations and planning from the outset.

In analysing and presenting the findings from this study I recognise that some of the insights from individual schools are most pertinent in those environments and do not necessarily translate to other contexts. When it comes to insights that are specific to each of these school contexts, I cannot make any claims to the generalisability or transferability of the findings, but this thesis seeks to contribute to an ongoing conversation in and beyond academia about how different epistemic communities can more fruitfully collaborate on the discovery and stewardship of knowledge. In the following two chapters I have thus sought to highlight and discuss findings with broader relevance including cross-cutting themes and areas of collaborative cross-pollination that were observed across the four schools (See 5.3).

Another central limitation of this thesis is that it has a single author and presents a proof of principle for fostering enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S based on insights from a series of emergent RPCs that were facilitated by one researcher facilitating it. In presenting the narrative of four dynamic, interconnected, emergent RPCs with well over 200 collaborators I have made every effort to counterbalance my perspective with those of the other collaborators, but the final phase of crafting this narrative has not been a collaborative endeavour. I sought to mitigate the limitations related to the emergent nature

of the RPCs and the data that was collected, by triangulating a set of theoretical frameworks and anchoring the narrative in these as well. By alerting readers to key narrative decisions, structuring principles and philosophical foundations, my objective has been to proactively aid their critical engagement with the findings that are presented and discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter summary

In this chapter the collaborative, narrative research strategy and design that were employed to answer the study's research questions were outlined. I described key aspects and considerations from the process of designing and implementing the developmental intervention that was at the core of the emergent, youth-championing RPCs and outlined how feedback and reflective data was collected and analysed to inform the narration and interpretation of the RPCs presented in this thesis. The ethical considerations that informed the research design were unpacked, along with key questions of rigour, transferability and reflexivity. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the study's limitations.

CHAPTER 5 | FINDINGS: EXPECTATIONS, EXPERIENCES and LEARNING by COLLABORATING

In this chapter the study's findings on emergent, youth-centred research-practice collaborations (RPCs) are presented in relation to the project's research questions. In the first section findings that emerged through the collaboration with four schools on the prototyping of the developmental intervention are unpacked drawing on the perspectives of the different collaborators. In the next section, I present findings related to fostering an enabling space for collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship (CKD&S) for, and with, young people. In the remainder of the chapter the findings are structured by each of the four schools as contexts for CKD&S, and dynamics around cross-cutting themes and collaborative cross-pollination across the schools are outlined with reference to concrete examples. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the data that was not collected due to the emergent nature of the youth-centred RPCs and highlights two characteristics of the South African educational context that are particularly conducive to collaboration. The connections between the findings outlined in this chapter and the extant literature presented in Chapters two and three, as well as the research questions and objectives, are expanded upon and critically discussed in the next chapter.

Key facets of shared meaning patterns that emerged from narrative, reflexive thematic analysis of the triangulated collaborator perspectives are presented with a focus on the interplay of expectations and experiences in an emergent RPC, and the four collaborative contexts are sketched drawing on a theoretical triangulation of the theory of enabling spaces (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014a, 2014b, 2016, 2017; Peschl, 2019a, 2019b), factors of collaborative working (Patel et al., 2012) as well as selection of concepts for collaborative engagement that were observed during the fieldwork and in turn anchored in relevant literature on collaboration (See 2.6). Please see Appendix 5 and 6 for the thematic/shared meaning pattern maps and narrative maps that provide visual representations of key stations in the narrative, reflexive thematic analytic process.

The study's research questions focus on how enabling spaces for CKD&S can be fostered through emergent, youth-centred RPCs with public, fee-paying schools in the Metro East District in the Western Cape, SA. The RPCs all centred on a developmental intervention designed for learners in two key transitional grades (Grade 7 and 9) that bookend the Senior Phase of the General Education and Training trajectory in the South African education system (Western Cape Education Department, 2019a; Department of Basic

Education, 2020a, 2020b). The research questions also specifically explore how this intervention, which explored questions of identity, purpose and their interplay with learning, was adapted, optimised, and collaboratively prototyped in each school context and harnessed to work with young people, who are framed as participant-collaborators because of their participation in the intervention and their key role as collaborators within the broader RPCs. Qualitative feedback data that was shared by the different collaborators across the four school sites was analysed in response to the final research question, which focuses on interpreting the impact, efficacy, and transferability of what is, in the context of this study, conceived of as emergent, youth-centred, RPC.

The findings presented in this chapter are informed by the triangulation of insights and observations drawn from the qualitative written and verbal feedback shared by school staff and learners with my process documentation through fieldwork notes. Given the emergent nature of the RPCs, there are limitations to the process documentation and feedback that was collected (See 4.7) and the findings presented in this thesis are thus best understood as a first proof of principle for the potential of RPCs in fostering enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S (Kendig, 2016). This triangulation process was thus augmented by theoretical triangulation to ensure that the articulated findings are clearly anchored in salient literature around fostering CKD&S (See 4.3.5).

Research on collaboration is transdisciplinary and extensive. This thesis, which interprets and narrates a first proof of principle study on CKD&S, makes no claims to comprehensively positioning the RPCs it is narrating and interpreting in relation to the body of literature on collaboration even within educational research. Rather, three complementary theoretical frameworks are employed to clearly structure and anchor the narration and interpretation of the RPCs in a way that allows readers to critically assess its strengths and deficits. I further build upon the triangulation of key theoretical frameworks as part of the discussion of the findings in the next chapter and outline a visual, dialogic heuristic to support and facilitate conversations around the development of CKD&S endeavours. I have developed this heuristic based on the insights that emerged through the implementation, narration, and interpretation of the RPCs at the core of this study. While this heuristic may be counted among this study's contributions it is first and foremost an invitation to engage in further research and collaborative knowledge discovery to test and refine it.

5.1 Expectations, experiences and emergent collaboration: Triangulating collaborator perspectives

In this section the following two research questions are addressed:

- **Research question 1A (RQ1A):** How can these RPCs, and the developmental intervention at their core, be adapted and optimised for each school context based on their needs, priorities, capacity and constraints?
- **Research question 1C (RQ1C):** How can the value and transferability of this emergent model of youth-championing RPC be interpreted drawing on qualitative data collected across the four collaboration sites?

Relationships and relationship-building have been central to this project and their importance is acknowledged in the multi-facetted tradition of cooperation, collaboration and purposive interaction between researchers and practitioners from communities, sectors and organisations outside of academia that this study draws from and builds on (Arko-Achemfuor et al., 2019; Duxbury et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2022; Nealer, 2007; Silbert and Bitso, 2015). The relationships that were established and developed in each school context made for different collaborative dynamics, opportunities, and learning, but it also meant that as a researcher I needed to navigate a range of expectations of the collaboration while also critically reflecting on the potentially limiting effects of the set of expectations I was bringing to the work with the schools.

In their scoping review on success in long-standing community-based participatory research, Brush et al. (2020) identify seven indicators of success in relationships among partners or collaborators. These are:

- Trust
- Mutual respect
- Openness and transparency
- Recognition of pressures, priorities, and worldviews
- Embracing cultural differences
- Awareness and attention to power imbalances
- Conflict recognition, response, and resolution

Several of these indicators and others are echoed across the literature on research-practice partnerships (RPP) and RPC (Denner et al., 2019; Dixon, 2023; Lezotte et al., 2022; Macpherson, 2023; Vardy, 2023), and the corrosive effects of what might be called their

shadow sides, including distrust and inequitable power dynamics, are also unpacked extensively (For example, see: Chak, 2018). In the narrative analysis and triangulation of different collaborator perspectives on the emergent RPCs, a theme that has usefully cut across these different success indicators is that of the interplay between expectations and experiences in relationships, relationship-building and collaboration. The analysis of different collaborator perspectives presented here builds on Section 5.1.2's exploration of how needs, priorities, capacity, and constraints were navigated in each school context with each of the collaborator groups.

In triangulating collaborator perspectives, I am drawing together an at times diverging range of narrative strands from qualitative data that was not collected as part of a narrative research design (See 4.3.5). What I present here is not a singular, unified narrative of the overall collaborative process or even a set of such narratives for each of the RPCs. Rather I, as one collaborator, am interpreting the process through a narrative lens to better understand how the stories the school leaders, staff, learners, and I collaborated by intersected in a series of four, interconnected, emergent RPCs. Given the complexity of this endeavour, as well as the limitations of the qualitative feedback and input I had at my disposal (See 4.7), the data triangulation is augmented by theoretical triangulation to ensure that the analysis is also structured around a clear set of concepts and frameworks that relate the interpretation and narration of these RPCs to different understandings of collaboration while also informing critical considerations of how we might support greater clarity in conversations about the stories we collaborate by (See 6.7).

As stories can be told in many ways from many perspectives, in the sub-sections below I draw on the interplay of expectations and experiences for the different collaborators in engaging with the emergent collaborative process to begin to outline some of the different narrative strands. I also consider some of the implications of this interplay for relationship-building in and through this type of collaborative work, drawing on some of the indicators highlighted by Brush et al. (2020).

5.1.1 Learners

Across the three schools where the collaborations progressed to prototyping the developmental intervention, 209 of the 241 English-medium learners (87%) participated in, and contributed to, one or more session of the programme. Of these 209 learners, 190

(91%)[21] completed the whole programme and of these learners, 148 (78%)[22] provided anonymous written feedback. The ongoing verbal feedback shared by learners was captured thematically (rather than verbatim) through my fieldwork notes and the discussion in this section also reflects those themes and narrative strands.

Learners were invited to share anonymous, summative feedback in written form at the conclusion of the final session. In School 3 the learners provided their feedback in their own words in response to one two-dimensional prompt question. Students in Schools 1 and 2 were provided with a combination of prompts for feedback with Likert scales as well as free-text fields where they were invited to share their feedback in their own words. A differentiated approach was employed in School 3 because of the larger group sizes (ca. 20 learners per group) and resulting time constraints.

Not all the participants who opted to share feedback did so in their own words. Although all learners who were invited to participate in, and contribute to, the collaborative prototyping process were in English-medium classes not all of them were necessarily comfortable sharing written feedback in their own words in English. I recognise the limitations of working with statements as prompts for responses via likert scales (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Clark et al., 2021; Liamputtong, 2022), but this approach did mean that learners could share some feedback without having to write additional comments. The full set of responses to the feedback survey is summarised below as percentages of the total number of responses in each category:

Table 6: Learner feedback on collaborative prototyping of developmental intervention

Prompt	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
This programme was a good use of my time	56%	34%	10%	n/a	n/a
I learned new things about myself during the programme	45%	39%	15%	1%	n/a
I have formulated a few clear goals for my own learning	24%	56%	18%	2%	n/a
The individual activities were explained clearly	39%	46%	11%	4%	n/a
I found the worksheets helpful	28%	57%	15%	n/a	n/a
I could ask questions whenever I needed to	49%	35%	14%	2%	n/a

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[21] Percentage of the number of learners who participated in, and contributed to, the prototyping process not the total number of English-medium learners.

[22] Percentage of the number of learners who completed the whole intervention programme, **not** the total number who participated in one/more sessions **nor** the total number of English-medium learners.

Prompt	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I had enough time to complete the different activities	48%	42%	10%	n/a	n/a
I didn't have to share anything with the facilitator or the rest of the group that I didn't want to	48%	40%	10%	1%	1%
The facilitator treated me with respect	80%	20%	n/a	n/a	n/a
The participants treated one another with respect	50%	45%	5%	n/a	n/a
I would recommend this programme to my friends or classmates	51%	39%	9%	1%[23]	n/a

Unfolding, differentiated expectations

Among the learners I observed what I would describe as unfolding expectations. They started the intervention process not necessarily knowing what to expect and were more likely to articulate expectations as we progressed from one session to the next. I would also describe their expectations as necessarily differentiated in nature from the ones that the school leaders, staff and I brought to the work as their expectations were often primarily focused on the developmental opportunity the intervention presented for them individually. In the sub-sections below, I outline various other expectations I drew from the narrative, reflexive thematic analysis of the formative and summative feedback shared by learners.

Respect

A key, multi-dimensional theme that was emphasised across the collaborator groups was respect. Learners valued being treated with respect by the researcher-facilitator and it was important to them that their capacity to engage with complex questions be acknowledged and engaged. As one learner put it, *"...Ask deep questions that will make them [learners] talk because they, and we, know as much as you know."* Across all the groups in all three schools, respect came up as a priority during the process of articulating collaboration agreements. The conversations with learners about how they wanted to work together presented an opportunity to clarify what respect meant to different people in terms of behaviours and interactions. Respect among peers was a big priority for the learners and several called out disrespectful behaviour on the part of their classmates in their feedback:

> *"I want people to stop talking and not to make noise and [they] must have respect for other people and what they are doing does not give respect to others."*

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[23] One of the participants who selected "Disagree" shared that the reason they would not recommend the programme to others is because they do not like talking to others about the type of questions we were exploring (Who am I? Why am I here? What do I need for my life journey? What's my story?).

"We need some children to listen more and to stop talking when others are it is very disrespectful."

The intervention programme was also framed by some learners as an opportunity to learn more about respect, including how to respect themselves and others: *"Ms Magriet taught me what is important to me and how to respect other persons."*

Clarity

Another expectation that learners had of the intervention programme was thematic and structural clarity. This expectation was expressed in verbal and written feedback and when it was met it often went hand-in-hand with a positive experience of the programme: *"I like to be here because the teacher makes things more understandable thank you so much."* In the analysis of my fieldwork notes, I observed an ongoing wrestling with the question of how to improve the clarity of the programme introduction as well as the explanation of activities and other aspects of the process. Although, there was some improvement in this area over the six months disconnects were still noted between the learners' expectations and the experiences they had. In their own words:

"It was a bit confusing but understandable in other things."

"Activities were confusing but were tried to explain clearly."

Before I started working with learners, I anticipated that clarity of communication would be an important indicator of my collaboration with this group and thus I included a prompt in the summative feedback survey to assess the extent to which they thought the individual activities had been explained clearly. 39% of the respondents strongly agreed that the activities had been explained clearly, 46% agreed, 11% were neutral and 4% disagreed. This confirmed my observation that it was an area where there was room for ongoing improvement.

To ascertain whether different aspects of the process have been communicated with sufficient clarity it is important to foster an enabling space in which learners feel comfortable to ask questions when they do not understand something (Bettencourt, 2020). Here too a prompt was included in the feedback survey to establish an overarching sense of the extent to which learners felt they could ask questions when they needed to. 49% strongly agreed that they could ask questions whenever they needed to, 35% agreed, 14% were neutral and 2% disagreed. Although the majority had a positive experience in this respect, it would be important to consider how barriers to this type of engagement may be

identified and proactively addressed in future collaborative work. As one learner put it, *"Even when I wasn't sure the teacher explained very well."* Ideally, the objective would be to ensure that all learners have a similar experience of the collaborative process.

Purpose

The expectations learners had related to purpose were also multi-dimensional. On the one hand they expected clear information about the purpose of the developmental intervention and what they might gain from engaging in the process. As one learner asked, *"What do I earn (achieve) from doing this?"* The onus was on me to clearly explain the developmental intervention and the different thematic, as well as skills development, opportunities it offered learners, including through the contribution they would make to the collaborative prototyping process. Each individual learner would still need to decide whether it was an opportunity they wished to make use of, but their ongoing feedback contributed significantly to understanding how I might clarify the purpose of the intervention as well as the prototyping process.

Their expectations around purpose, however, also related to the question of their individual purpose and a marked interest in opportunities that support their reflection on questions of purpose in the short-, mid- and even long-term. One learner commented, *"This programme [has] been helpful for my future inside and outside of school."* Another wrote, *"I learned lot of things in the class and also about my life and what I want in life or what is my goal in life."* During the sessions I repeatedly emphasised that learners did not need to feel any pressure to answer the questions we were focusing on in full, rather that the process we were engaging in might more helpfully be seen as one small part of a lifelong journey of learning and reflection. Several of the comments suggested that learners actively engaged with, and sought to apply, the questions:

> *"It was really nice here but there's one question that got me really thinking about why I'm here and what are my purposes."*

> *"I think it gives us a choice to make it - if we know what we want in life and in the school and future that we make."*

> *"These worksheets really helped me find who I am and why I am here."*

Fun and play

Learners expected the activities to be fun and playful. As one put it, *"I just want to come back again cause it's fun."* They also valued an approach to the facilitation of the sessions that incorporated humour and a relaxed energy on my part as facilitator. One learner wrote, *"I had lots of fun it was the best workshop. You could maybe loosen up just a bit."* The

importance of harnessing play – which had also been a consideration in the development of the initial prototype toolkit – was confirmed by several learners. Factors including time limitations (See 6.5), a general lack of collaborative experience between myself and the learners (See 6.3.3) and the at times misconstruing or even warping effects of my own expectations of the process (See 5.1.3), meant that in practice I at times lost sight of this essential aspect of the collaborative process. The ongoing feedback I received from learners was an invaluable corrective with verbal and written feedback providing necessary reminders: *"You could have more fun activities but everything else is fine with me."* Although I was not able to integrate all their suggestions during the prototyping process, they highlighted considerations that have informed the analysis presented in this thesis:

> *"Doing activities outside with balls and physical activities but other than that you are very fun."*

> *"Group [work] so we could get to know [one another]; Fun group work with fun activities. More drawing."*

Space and time to reflect

Learners repeatedly highlighted the value of having dedicated time and space for personal reflection, expression, and development. Although, the feedback they shared about the intervention programme was decidedly positive, there was also an acknowledgement that it would be better to have access to opportunities to engage in the type of reflection it facilitated on a regular basis in their school context:

> *"This was indeed a helpful fun experience. It really helped me know myself more, what I love doing. I wish miss would start a group where all teenagers would talk about their daily challenges."*

> *"By coming more often because we are not used to these programmes."*

> *"I would like to have this programme every week and one-to-one programme with the facilitator."*

> *"You could improve giving this kind of classes like every week at least once because this is a good class we share our matters."*

Several learners also mentioned that it would have been helpful to have more time for the sessions and/or intervention programme. As discussed elsewhere (See 6.5), time – particularly the lack thereof – was a factor across all four RPCs and although I made every effort to facilitate the sessions in a way that would avoid learners feeling rushed, they were nevertheless privy to the limitations we faced in this respect:

"I really like the workshop. It is nice and peaceful. I only wish there was more time for the workshop. I really enjoy being here."

"Make the period longer and better by teaching us more."

"It's just the time. I would rather it be longer."

Related to the desire for more time for these types of reflective, developmental activities, learners also expressed the importance of ensuring that more learners in their school and others have access to similar opportunities. Their expectation of greater inclusion was shared by school leaders, staff and myself:

"I think that a lot of children in different schools will appreciate what you do because some people don't really get the freedom of expression that you give us."

"I would share that this programme should keep up cause it helps in many things and it can help many people that would like to join the programme."

"That we should let other people also find out who they are and what are their goals and what difficulties do they face."

Expectations of peers

As highlighted above learners had clear expectations around respect, and I was surprised to find that the strongest disconnects between their expectations and experiences were often expressed in terms of the behaviour of their peers. I put a lot of pressure on myself to maintain a certain standard in the facilitation of the sessions and in the analysis of my fieldwork notes was struck by the distress I at times experienced because I was convinced that I was falling short of the expectations I believed my collaborators had of me, but in analysing their feedback I was struck by the number of comments that included critical feedback directed at their peers or apologies for the behaviour of their peers:

"I want people to stop interrupting other people and talking and laughing."

"Maybe you can tell them [Peers] that they can't use the bathroom because they are taking you for granted."

"I really enjoyed the time you were teaching us. The two sessions were amazing and I really appreciate all you did for me these two days [...] though [Peer] and [Peer] were making a noise. I ask if you can please excuse them but thank you again."

"I'm sorry for my table, we are often labelled as the worst class but really its only one or two kids. It doesn't feel good."

During the articulation of collaboration agreements in each group's first session, learners had the opportunity to consider and share the expectations they had of their peers. We also referred to these agreements throughout the process and harnessed them as an accountability mechanism in the collaborative process.

5.1.2 School leaders and staff

Across the four schools, I liaised with a total of fourteen school leaders and staff of whom ten (71%) provided anonymous, summative feedback on the collaborative process in written form. The feedback survey was differentiated slightly to reflect the fact that in School 4 we did not progress to prototyping the developmental intervention. The staff were overwhelmingly positive in the feedback they shared in response to the prompt and likert scale section of the feedback survey (See Appendix 3). The feedback they added in their own words helpfully augmented these responses and provided specific examples of areas where the collaboration could be improved and/or expanded (McGeown, 2023a). It also highlighted dimensions that were particularly important to them (Snowling, 2023). In this section a few key themes related to the interplay of school leaders and staff's expectations and experiences are unpacked. In Section 5.4. where I build on what is presented here and differentiate it further by school. As in the previous section, a number of key narrative, thematic strands have been identified and are outlined below:

Formative expectations

I would describe the expectations school leaders and staff brought to the process as formative both in terms of how the overarching thematic foci were approached in each school context as well as the overall structure of the intervention and how this was adapted to work within the time constraints that were stipulated. Although none of the school leaders or staff expected any fundamental changes to be made to the intervention's thematic strands or the design approach to individual activities, they wanted the exploration of identity, purpose, and their interplay with learning to be contextualised based on specific priorities they had identified.

Respect and understanding

As with the learners, the school leaders and staff expected respect to characterise the collaborative process. As one respondent wrote in their feedback: *"She treated everyone with the utmost respect."* Particularly, I observed that they expected me to be respectful of the constraints and priorities they were navigating as part of the process. From the earliest conversations we had about the possibility of integrating the developmental intervention in each school, I noticed that a respect for, and an understanding of, their context was important to them (Conaway, 2020). One respondent highlighted the interplay of respect and a willingness to adapt to each context in their feedback: *"She was very respectful and willing to adapt, so no need to change behaviour."*

In my initial presentation of the intervention, I envisaged potentially running several sessions with learners or even having it be a full-day workshop but the school leaders and/or staff were very clear that although they were open to collaborating with me, significant adjustments would need to be made – particularly in terms of the length of the intervention – to make it feasible to even consider integrating it their schools. In clearly articulating these constraints, they were nevertheless very respectful in their interactions with me as well as their assessment of the intervention. Respect was thus not merely expected but also extended and modelled by school leaders and staff.

Flexibility and contextual integration

School leaders and staff expected a degree of flexibility on my part when it came to the collaborative prototyping of the developmental intervention. Their input allowed me to adapt the intervention to each of the three schools where I ran it with learners and this process did require varying degrees of flexibility on my part. I also experienced a willingness to be flexible on the part of the school leaders and staff. They were, within their constraints, willing to move sessions around or try new things and they also did not make any efforts to micro-manage the collaborative process. As I was working with four schools in parallel, there were limits to how flexible I could be and this was reflected in the feedback I received with one collaborator writing, *"Be more flexible and more time to work with all the Gr. learners and to also present to Afrikaans learners."*

School leaders and staff also expected what I would describe as contextual integration. It was important to them that the developmental intervention was effectively integrated in the school day in ways that did not disrupt regular teaching and learning, and that - wherever possible - it reinforced existing curricular foci. Effectively responding to this expectation required flexibility on my part as a researcher. When asked how we may have managed to progress the collaboration to working with learners in School 4 the respondent wrote, *"Start as part of a Life Orientation programme or get it set into the timetable."* The experiences I had of collaborating with the four schools seem to confirm the validity of this proposed strategy, which however requires active involvement by a larger group of staff responsible for this subject area.

Professionalism

I also posited that school leaders and staff expected and valued professionalism on my part as researcher and facilitator. In the absence of collaborative experience (See 6.3.3), they chose to trust me to work with large groups of learners who they were responsible for and

an implicit expectation throughout the process was that I would work with staff and learners professionally, respecting each school's culture and rules (Hargreaves, 1995; Meredith et al., 2023; Stoll, 2000; Van Der Westhuizen et al., 2005). The feedback I received from school leaders and staff suggested that I met the expectation of professionalism:

"The researcher is extremely professional in her approach."

"She handled [the] situation well."

"She was well prepared, knew which learners to call and was always punctual. She ticked all the boxes."

"She was amazing with the learners, as well as the teachers."

In analysing the feedback data from school leaders and staff as well as my fieldwork notes, it was clear that – as highlighted above – I was operating on assumptions and that it would have been helpful to have even clearer conversations about their specific expectations related to professional conduct to avoid situations where I was - despite my best efforts or intentions – misaligning with professional norms in the schools. The feedback I received from school leaders and staff suggests that this was not the case, but the interpretation and narration of the collaborative process also highlighted the importance of proactively considering how to facilitate and systematically capture ongoing clarifying conversations as part of working together.

Inclusion and benefits for learners

An expectation, or rather imperative, that I shared with school leaders and staff was ensuring that the developmental intervention was as inclusive as possible. It was a priority for me to ensure that all English-medium learners be offered at least one opportunity to participate in the intervention as participant-collaborators. As a lone researcher, I was however not able to commit to more than this over the course of two school terms. Nevertheless, some of the school staff still expressed some disappointment at the fact that the intervention was not made available to all learners including the Afrikaans medium ones. As quoted above one respondent wrote that the process could be improved by making *"...more time to work with all the Gr. 9 learners and to also present to Afrikaans learners."*

Related to this, school leaders and staff also expected the developmental intervention to benefit the learners in their context. Another expectation that I shared with this group of

collaborators. Their feedback, as well as that which I received from learners, indicates that this expectation was met:

"Learners need more exposure to these types of programmes."

"Our learners benefitted."

"We were very happy that she worked with our kids."

Feedback and insights

An expectation that school leaders and staff had that surprised me was to receive feedback about where they might improve practice. I anticipated that they would be interested in general feedback about learning from the process of collaborating with learners but not necessarily for reflections beyond that, but as one respondent wrote: *"Give us some feedback on where we can improve."* This group of collaborators also expressed an interest in learning more about the research findings in both their verbal and written feedback. In practice, it has proven challenging to arrange times for sessions with staff to discuss preliminary insights that have emerged from the study, but these conversations are ongoing and a clear interest and expectation has been expressed by school leaders and staff to learn more about themes that were highlighted through the developmental intervention that apply to their practice.

5.1.3 Researcher

Throughout the collaborations with the four schools, I captured my observations and reflections in the form of audio and written fieldwork notes. These notes were recorded after key meetings as well as sessions with groups of learners. Additionally, I recorded general reflections about the overall collaborative process and research project at key junctures. In this section I highlight a few aspects of the interplay between the expectations I brough to the collaborations with the four schools and the experiences I had of working with them. As with the learners, school leaders and staff, I start by outlining an overarching characterisation of the expectations I brought to the work and then highlight selected narrative, thematic strands, several of which overlapped to varying degrees with the expectations of other collaborators.

Misconstrued yet evolving expectations

As I reflected on my expectations of the study – particularly the fieldwork - I noticed that I initially envisaged the process as having a neatly organised trajectory whereby the four schools and I would "collaborate" on testing and refining the developmental intervention. The outcome of this process would be an optimised intervention programme and toolkit

that included learning from the schools. In this conceptualisation of the process (See Figure 18), I would emerge from this process better versed in collaboration and learning. Although the plan was to work with and in schools, I smoothed over the dynamism and messiness this would likely entail. In short, I took an almost mechanistic view of the process when I made it all about the one research project, rather than a series of interconnected collaborations within a social research project.
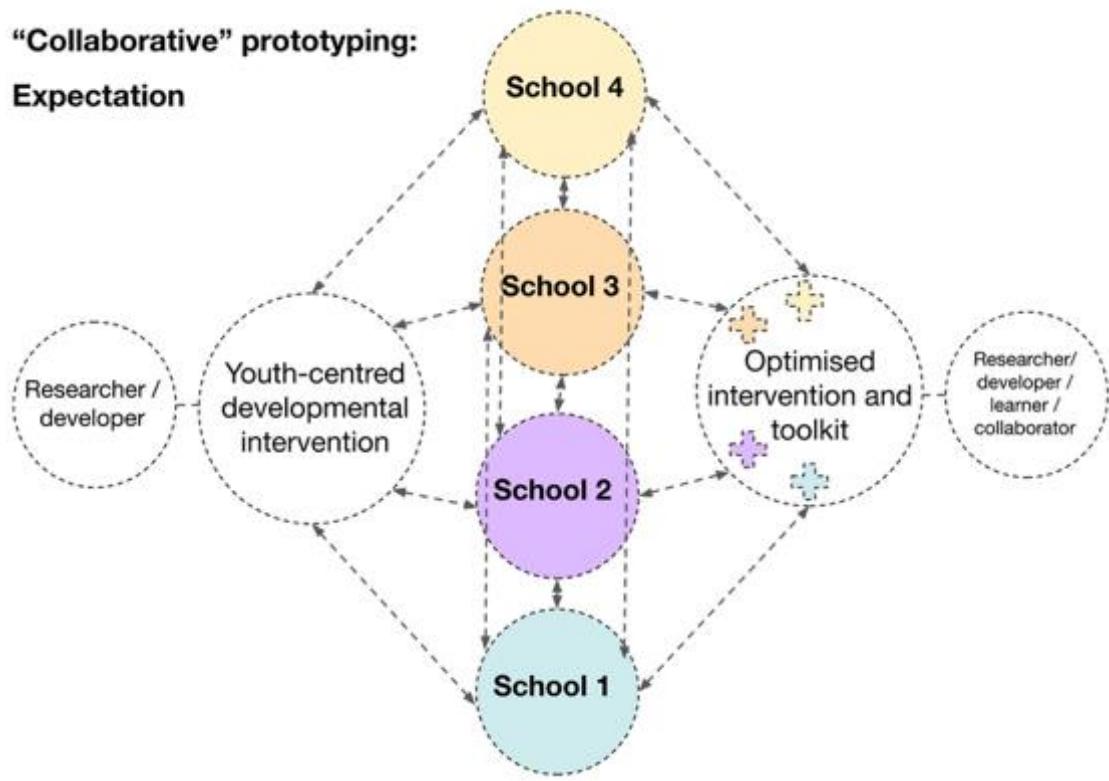
Figure 18: The expectation I had of the "collaborative" prototyping process with schools.

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen

The practical experience of working with the four schools was a valuable corrective to my misconstrued expectations. From the earliest conversations with school leaders and staff it was clear that flexible adaptation for each context would be essential and that an insistence on my part to centralise the prototyping process would inhibit our progress. Throughout this thesis, I describe the four RPCs as emergent and this dynamic is aptly illustrated here. I was expecting a collaborative inquiry project with an element of prototyping that I would facilitate and manage, but the process of working with each of the schools highlighted the value of interpreting and narrating the engagement through the lens of RPC as a CKD&S process.

Initially I invested a lot of mental, emotional, and physical energy in trying to deliver a near-perfect "experience" for the other collaborators and I noticed a real dissonance around the project's emphasis on prototyping and this self-generated pressure. I had set out to engage in collaborative inquiry with elements of prototyping and ongoing optimisation, but because I expected myself to have the entire process under control, I experienced intense concern when I identified areas of the intervention programme that needed improvement. This was particularly acute in the first cycle of the intervention that I ran in Schools 1 and 2. Listening back to the notes I recorded around those sessions was a taxing experience, as I could hear how much distress I was in due to a sense that I had failed both as a researcher and as facilitator/partner to the schools. As has happened at key junctures throughout the PhD journey, I needed a shift in perspective and a reminder of what I had set out to do (McAlpine et al., 2020; Platow, 2012). Input from supervisors and colleagues as well as the active involvement of collaborators in the schools catalysed and supported a course correction that led to the aforementioned shift in focus and framing.

In Figure 19 below, I visualise in very broad strokes what my experience of collaborating with the four schools developed into. We navigated constraints and opportunities across different dimensions[24] with ongoing learning and input from collaborators in each of the school contexts contributing to different aspects of the collaborative prototyping effort. Rather than representing the collaborative process primarily as a linear exercise, the rich learning from these RPCs has extended well beyond those six months of active, face-to-face collaboration. In the final sections of the next chapter, I expand on how the learning around this corrective shift in expectations through the accrual of collaborative experience (See 6.3.3) could inform more nuanced conversations in future CKD&S endeavours about different aspects of the work (See 6.7).

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[24] Represented in Figure 19 in terms of the six dimensions of an enabling space as conceptualised by Peschl and Fundneider as well as embodiment and a selection of the factors of collaborative working (Patel et al., 2012). However, other factors and concepts were also relevant in the process. These are explored further in the following chapter.
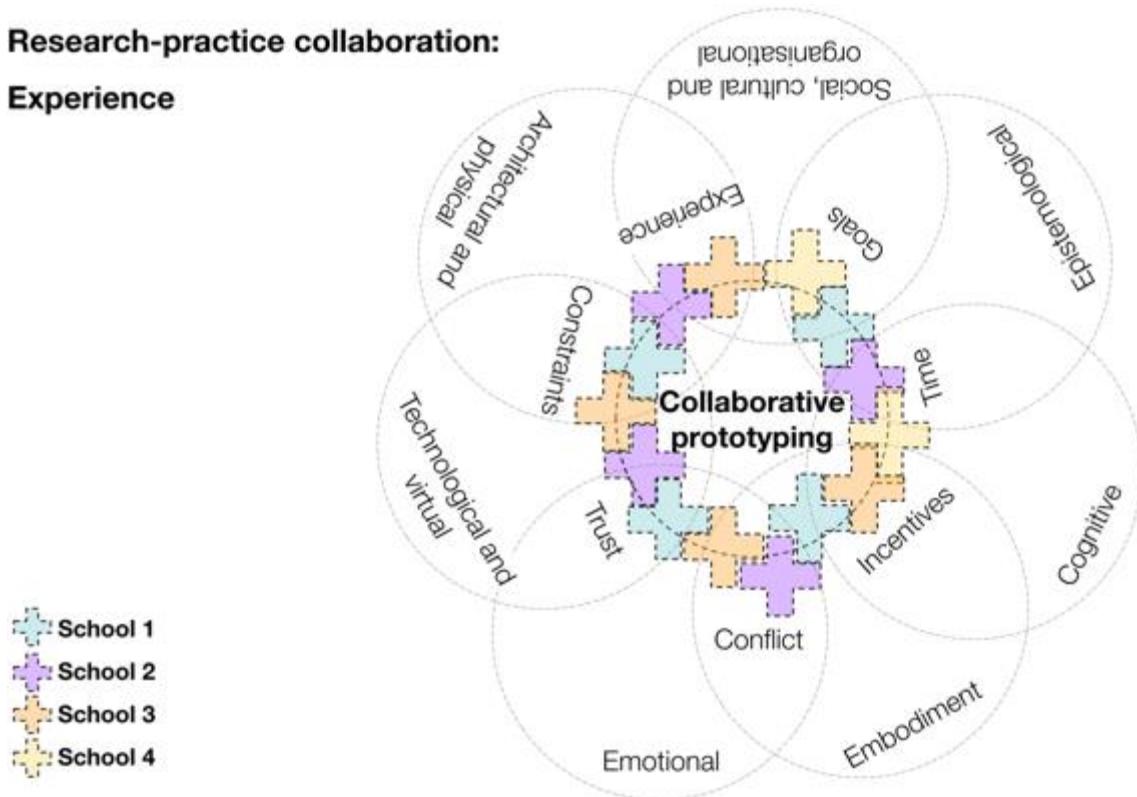
Figure 19: The experience of four emergent, interconnected RPCs centred on collaborative prototyping

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen

Respect

A constellation of expectations that were shared across all collaborator groups centred on respect. I expected myself to be respectful of other collaborators' time, needs, priorities and headspace. I observed a particularly strong drive to ensure that I treat learners with respect throughout the process and facilitate a space in which they treat one another with respect as well. As mentioned above, I at times framed expectations of the process in a way where the question of whether a facet of the collaboration was working or not was entirely my responsibility. For example, I have a responsibility to respect the learners but if they are not respectful towards me it is because I have failed to adequately manage group dynamics. Upon reflection – as discussed elsewhere (See 5.1.3) – I see the significant deficits of how I initially framed these expectations.

The articulation of collaboration agreements presented a valuable opportunity to take shared responsibility for values including respect and it provided all collaborators with a clear point of reference from which to hold ourselves and others accountable. The summative written feedback from learners also invited them to indicate whether I had treated them with respect (80% Strongly Agree, 20% Agree) and whether the participants had treated one another with respect (50% Strongly Agree, 45% Agree, 5% Neutral). Their

feedback indicates that the expectations I had of myself broadly aligned with learners' experiences.

In my communication with school leaders and staff, we did not explicitly address their expectations around what respect should look like, but I included prompts in the final written feedback surveys they completed to explicitly ask them whether from their perspective and to their knowledge I had treated them, their colleagues, and learners with respect. All the respondents confirmed that I had done so and thus my expectations of myself aligned with the experiences of my collaborators.

Flexibility and shared ownership

I expected myself to be flexible in adapting to the pertinent needs, priorities, capacity, and constraints of collaborators in each school context. On some level I hoped that there might be some reciprocation of this flexibility in terms of, for example, finding solutions to catch up sessions that were missed due last-minute timetable changes, competing events, or unplanned disruptions but simultaneously I was reticent about clearly articulating these hopes as expectations because I assumed that the school leaders and staff had far less flexibility than I did. While some of the respondents among the school leaders and staff expressed a wish that I work with all learners in a Grade group, making more progress towards fulfilling this expectation would have required greater flexibility on their part – a fact which I did not communicate clearly enough.

In analysing my fieldwork notes I observed a disappointment, and even frustration, at what I at times perceived as a lack of ownership of the collaborative process on the part of some of my collaborators – particularly school leaders and staff, but it was in some instances also directed at learners. As mentioned above I often internalised these disconnects because I did not want to make demands of collaborators that might disrupt or jeopardise the collaborations. However, the analysis of written feedback from the different collaborators highlighted that my assumptions about their capacity were more likely than not a limiting factor in the overall collaboration. In analysing the interplay between the expectations I brought to the RPCs and the experiences of working with the four schools, I had to concede that my hesitance to clearly articulate some of my own expectations may have meant that opportunities for greater shared ownership were missed. This learning runs throughout the narrative like a scarlet thread and highlights the importance of having clear conversations from the outset, and throughout a process that allow collaborators to articulate their assumptions, expectations and priorities so that these do not develop into

unnecessary barriers or fault lines in CKD&S. The heuristic that is presented in the concluding sections of the next chapter is anchored in this learning and was conceptualised as a visual, dialogic tool to structure and support clearer conversations about CKD&S endeavours (See 6.7).

Professionalism and order

Another central expectation I brought to the work was professionalism. I expected this of myself as well as the school leaders and staff I collaborated with. The feedback I received from school leaders and staff, indicated that they shared this expectation and from their perspective it was met. In analysing my fieldwork notes, I observed that my expectations around professionalism were interwoven with notions of order and an orderly or well-organised collaborative context. My conceptualisation of order had social, cultural, and organisational dimensions whereby I expected the school environment to be orderly without necessarily directing this expectation at a specific collaborator or group of collaborators. It also had a clear technological dimension, whereby I expected tools - notably the timetable - to be employed in an orderly manner and specific processes or workflows to be clearly planned out in advance and communicated as part of the collaborative process. It is important to highlight that all four schools I worked with are comparatively well organised (Christie, 1998; Jansen, 2019), but there were nevertheless timetable changes and what seemed like last-minute changes that created a sense of disconnect between my expectations, which in hindsight were unrealistic, and my experiences.

I relied on tools such as the timetable to plan my engagement in each school. When there were disruptions to the timetable I often - particularly in the earlier stages of the collaborative process - found it very difficult to maintain the standards of professionalism I had set for myself in terms of punctuality; ensuring that every group of learners had the best possible experience regardless of when they contributed to the process; remaining calm and clear-headed, and so forth. I noticed a dogged insistence on my part that the tools, workflows, and processes should work as planned or outlined on paper, but with time I had to challenge my own magical thinking and start working around the very real dynamism in each school context rather than trying to fight or deny it (Jansen, 2020c). At certain points I experienced some of the situations I encountered in schools as chaotic and very challenging to work around but insisting that it should not be that way or wishing that it was not the case were not helpful responses and certainly did not support the collaborative process. As the RPCs progressed, I saw ways in which this dynamism could

strengthen collaboration if I stopped insisting on trying to control it or navigate it based on its stated rather than revealed mechanics (Bloch, 2009b; Jansen, 2020c).

Maximising benefits for the collaborators

Literature on ethical practice in social research generally emphasises the importance of not only minimising harm for participants but considering how the benefits they draw from participating in, or contributing to, a research project are maximised (See 4.4.4). This was a central priority in the design and implementation of this study and I expected myself to explore and harness every possible opportunity to do so. For the learners I collaborated with the benefits they drew from the process were clearer and more immediate as each of them participated in the developmental intervention which afforded them some time and space to reflect on questions of identity, purpose, and their interplay with learning. While the collaborative prototyping effort meant that experiences varied from one group to the next, the feedback I received – even from the earliest groups – confirmed that the intervention programme had been a good use of their time.

With the school leaders and staff, the benefits they drew from the process for themselves were less clear. Their priority was to collaborate on a process that would have benefits for learners, and they were positive in their assessment of the RPCs' success in achieving this shared objective, but it would have been worth exploring how developmental opportunities may be facilitated for these collaborators as well. Across all four schools, I initiated conversations about potentially hosting workshops for staff to explore how the intervention toolkit might be used in their classroom practice or to consider how the themes related to how learners in their schools were grappling with questions of identity, purpose and their interplay with learning might be relevant to their work, but the many competing demands on school leaders and staff meant that we were not able to bring these to fruition. As outlined elsewhere (See 4.7), even closer collaboration with school leaders and staff could have many potential benefits for these collaborators as well as the schools in terms of ensuring that the knowledge that is discovered through collaborative efforts can be stewarded more sustainably in context (Hopkins, 2008; S. Van Der Berg et al., 2016).

5.1.4 Ongoing navigation of needs, priorities, capacity and constraints

As mentioned above throughout the collaborative embedding and prototyping of the intervention, I made every effort to adapt the process to the needs, priorities, capacity, and constraints of the four collaborating schools (McGeown, 2023a; Norbury, 2023). The

prototyping of the intervention was a flexible, adaptive process to, for example, accommodate timetable changes, the impact of public holidays on scheduling as well as weeks in both terms where attendance of the sessions could be affected by exam preparation or other big sport or cultural events. In this section I will unpack this process of navigating needs, priorities, capacities, and constraints from the perspectives of each of the collaborator groups, discussing recurring themes that were highlighted by each group. The needs, priorities, capacities, and constraints that were shared and/or observed are intertwined and the discussion reflects this. I will conclude by considering some contextual constraints that impacted all four schools.

Why needs *and* priorities?

In my analysis of the qualitative feedback and reflective data I collected, I observed an interplay between the emotional, cognitive, epistemological, and socio-organisational facets of how I and other collaborators engaged with the overall process (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b, 2014a). For example, while the need I felt for acceptance and trust in each of the school context had clear emotional and social facets, it was also intertwined with a priority I brought to the project around negotiating and sustaining buy-in from the four schools and the different collaborator groups. Although one might argue that needs and priorities overlap significantly, I nevertheless posit that it is useful to disentangle them wherever possible particularly as this process nudges us to keep the emotional and embodied dimensions of the CKD&S process in focus (Cox, 2018; Jackson, 2018; May, 1993; Nathan, 2022).

Capacity (not capability) *and* constraints

Similarly, the focus on capacity and constraints also illuminates further discrete facets of the collaborative process. The capacity of individual collaborators to engage with the process is not conflated with assertions about their capability (Barker Scott and Manning, 2024). I would assert their capability to engage with the collaborative process at times exceeded my capacity (and possibly my capability) to fully steward and facilitate, but for each individual as well as the different groups, I needed to develop a clearer understanding of the capacity they could bring to the collaboration (Weber et al., 2007). The concept of constraints has augmented this usefully, as it was apparent from early in the process that each collaborator, as well as each school as collaborative context, necessarily operated within a range of constraints, several of which were externally imposed. Similar to needs and priorities an individual's capacity and the constraints they work within, and sometimes

around, are necessarily intertwined but in exploring their engagement with a collaborative process we run the risk of blotting out aspects of the story if we conflate these dimensions.

Learners

The learners, or participant-collaborators, expressed a range of **needs** in their verbal and written feedback. Chief among these were a clear purpose ("What is the point of this?" and "What's in it for us?" were questions I heard more than once), sufficient time to reflect on the questions they were presented with without being rushed or given the sense that they needed to come up with answers under pressure as well as a light touch with elements of play and fun (One learner's feedback: *"It's good but you need to lighten up"*).

Another area of need confronted me directly with the embodied nature of CKD&S as a number of learners mentioned being hungry and this was echoed in written feedback with several saying that one way the process could be improved was by providing some food or snacks. When this was mentioned verbally it was often done jokingly, but after a couple of sessions it became clear that it was in fact a real area of need that was also being addressed in some of the schools through feeding schemes (Schirmer and Visser, 2023b). Beyond the provision of some snacks or treats, I was not in a position to provide meals but in the planning of future research I would, based on this learning, raise this in conversations with school leaders and staff to see whether it would make sense to factor this area of need into the planning of developmental work with learners and/or other collaborators (Fintel et al., 2020; Masa et al., 2020).

The provision of food may be viewed critically by some as a way of incentivising participation and in so doing overriding informed consent, but I also observed the value of creating different types of incentives for learners, in some ways this was linked to the need for a clear purpose and structure for the work together but it also extended to offering small incentives on an ongoing basis to sustain their engagement. This was particularly acute in cases where I worked with groups with significantly more than ten participants (School 3). However, beyond serving as incentives or opportunities for positive reinforcement the provision of snacks or treats also provided an opportunity for me to extend hospitality to the learners and staff within an emergent, enabling space for CKD&S even as they extended hospitality to me (See 2.3.2).

I also observed a need for connection and reciprocity with me as the facilitator of the intervention sessions. In all three schools, when I opened the floor for questions many of the ones that were raised by learners were about my biography (where I was from, why I

was doing this etc.). At first, I was concerned that these lines of conversation would distract us from the process, from getting through the activities and ticking all the boxes I had lined up in my mind at the beginning of each session. However, as with so many aspects of this unfolding process I had to acknowledge a glaring blind spot on my part. I was inviting these learners to consider the three guiding questions as well as the overarching question: What's my story? It was not unreasonable for them to turn to me with similar questions.

Upon reflection, I could have made a great deal more time for these types of conversations as they also allowed me to build relationships and trust with the learners. This is learning I take from the process to enrich future youth-championing collaborative research: The relationships are not a "nice-to-have" extra, they are integral to CKD&S. While there will certainly and necessarily be differentiation in terms of the depth of relationship that can be built across a RPC, engaging the process with a positionality that seeks to build relationship rather than merely engage on the level of the operational is invaluable (Metz *et al.,* 2022). What I have described here requires a delicate balancing act to avoid shifting the centre of gravity to the point where the researcher's experiences and perspectives become a dominant point of reference. By prioritising clear conversations that support relationship-building and establishing rapport, collaborators are better positioned to jointly consider where the boundary lines need to fall in each collaborative context based on a shared understanding of the socio-organisational culture and other relevant dynamics (See 6.7).

The key **priority** for learners across the three schools was clear connections between the developmental intervention and their interests and/or goals. This varied in each school context and across the two grade groups as well. The Grade 9 learners emphasised connections with their decision-making process around subject choices as well as considerations about how this relates to their career goals and ambitions. Among the Grade 7 learners the expressed interests and goals were more heterogenous but generally anchored in social, cultural, sporting, or other extracurricular interests that were in some cases then linked back to the curriculum and/or their academic interests. A central theme across both primary schools was values and the interplay between individual and contextual value systems with learners expressing an interesting in having more space to be able to reflect on this.

When it comes to the capacity of learners as participant-collaborators, a central finding through this process has been not to underestimate their capacity to engage with "big"

questions or to engage in a CKD&S process. However, it is important to provide them with a clear structure and a set of flexible tools to tackle the focus questions or themes in a collaborative process. In one of the primary schools, I spoke to a staff member who was not directly involved in the RPC and they asked me what I was working with the students on. I mentioned the questions we were exploring and their response was that surely Grade 7 students were not capable of grappling with these questions in any meaningful way. This process has shown that they are both capable and they have the capacity. Questions of identity, purpose and how they relate to how we learn and become can be daunting to explore at any age. In keeping with Charlotte Mason's principles (1925), it is important to consider how to most effectively approach these questions at each stage of development, but it would be a missed opportunity to assume that learners either lack the capability or the capacity (Cummings, 2024; Pendlebury et al., 2011; Shamrova and Cummings, 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2022).

Learners perhaps most acutely of all collaborator groups work within **constraints** that are imposed upon them within the school context. They do not have a great deal of say in where they go when and what they do when they get there. These constraints are there for a host of very good reasons and generally maintain the structure of school days and weeks ensuring that there is sufficient time for instruction as well as other cornerstone activities and commitments (Smith, 2019; Wyse et al., 2014). However, learners consequently do not always have a lot of experience in consenting to activities in the school context and thus the engagement with this collaborative process required them to transition into a different mindset when considering whether to participate in the intervention (Yeager et al., 2016; Yeager and Dweck, 2020). The intervention itself, which involved engaging in a group context that was quite different to their usual classroom constellation to work on activities that explored questions they were not generally speaking reflecting on in other classes, also required them to shift into a different mindset. In some ways, the intervention sought to foster a space for them to step outside of some of their routine constraints while still acknowledging the collaborative value and potential of some of them (See 6.4.3).

In her twenty principles, Charlotte Mason emphasises the educability of all children and young people, and the value of effectively harnessing the great power of attention that they naturally have (Mason, 1925, 2019). I share Mason's underlying assumption and commitment. However, the observations I made during the prototyping of the intervention suggested that many competing stimuli, messages and/or demands appeared to have a diminishing effect on the capacity of the young people I worked with to harness their

inherent power of attention. Across all the schools, the young people appeared to have difficulty in listening to brief explanations of exercises and I would often be asked to explain things at least two or three times. This study has not included a systematic investigation of the attention span of young people in key transitional grades and as such the limitations of these observations are readily acknowledged, but these experiences did mean that as part of the prototyping process I needed to develop various ways of explaining and framing each of the exercises. Rather than laying all of this at the feet of my collaborators, it was also a challenge to me to critically reflect on the language I was using and consider how I may be clearer in the formulations and idiomatic I was choosing to use as well as how I could tailor it to the feedback I was getting from students about aspects they did not understand. I expand on these considerations in Section 5.3.1, where I unpack the interplay between the expectations and experiences of the learners I worked with, drawing on the analysis of the verbal and written feedback they shared.

School leaders and staff

For school leaders and staff, I observed several related **needs**, core of which were respect and trust. For the process to even get off the ground in any of the four schools, I had to respect their expertise about, and responsibility for, their context. They welcomed the fact that I started our conversations with a proposal for what the process of prototyping the developmental intervention might look like, but they needed me to be flexible and open to discussions about how it would be adapted for their context. They chose to extend trust to me from the outset, but the process also demanded that I trust their counsel about what would and would not work in their school. I mentioned flexibility above in relation to respect as it was one of the ways I also practically respected the competing demands school leaders and staff had to navigate. Another need that became apparent was the necessity of a facilitator or lead to drive the overall process forward. The school leaders and staff were engaged in the collaboration, but for them it was one of many competing priorities and as such they needed me to take the lead once we had set the collaborative parameters in place and prompt or remind them when their input or support was needed. I posit that differentiated engagement is to be expected in most processes of CKD&S and thus developing ways to identify and work around the needs that different collaborators bring to the process is paramount (Kotsonis, 2023; Vivona et al., 2023).

Across all four schools it was striking to observe an overlapping **priority** to create space to invest in young people, a focus which was perceived as particularly acute in the post-COVID context (Jansen and O'Ryan, 2020; Van der Berg, Zuze, et al., 2020). The school

leaders and staff were committed to the collaborative process because they believed it could be beneficial for their learners. The specific benefits they anticipated or hoped for varied from school to school, but a central driver was to foster an enabling space for learners to reflect on questions of identity, purpose, their interplay with learning and their experience of the school context. Additional thematic priorities included a focus on values and curricular alignment, particularly with the Life Orientation subject. It was also a key priority for the staff that we ensured that the intervention was as inclusive as possible and I was asked whether it would be possible to work with all learners not only the English medium ones. Although I agreed that it was a priority to make the process as inclusive as possible, I unfortunately did not have the time to work with entire Grade groups (See 4.7).

School leaders and staff juggle many different commitments within each school context as well as outside of work and as such the collaboration was rarely top of mind for them, but when they provided input it was invaluable. Given the many different demands on their **capacity**, as a researcher-facilitator the onus was on me to communicate proactively, to follow-up and to work around the mode of communication and timing that was most feasible for them. In the school where the RPC did not progress to the phase of working with young people, staff reported not having the capacity on top of several other academic and extra-curricular commitments to move the project forward. The staff in this school were highly engaged, asked excellent questions and provided invaluable input and feedback that enriched my overall engagement with the other schools, but ultimately they were not able to add another element into what was already an intensive juggling act.

These collaborators work within the **constraints** of their existing strategic and operational priorities and demands. In all four schools there was an ever-present sense that there is not enough time. Although school leaders and staff displayed a keen interest in the intervention, they did not have time to, for example, sit in for sessions or play an active ongoing role in prototyping through the sessions. These collaborators were also constantly navigating various other factors in their school context including changing timetables, big sporting, cultural or sporting events that involved a lot of extra tasks on top of their existing workload. In a few cases I also observed how school leaders and staff were having to work around broader systemic demands. At times they would have to reschedule conversations due to meetings they had been called into by the WCED or because they had last-minute preparation for a spot visit by staff from the department. As discussed further in the next chapter (See 6.3.4) constraints can be harnessed in service of a collaborative process, but repeated disruptions caused by external constraints make it increasingly

difficult to engage with the overall collaborative process flexibly as the margin to do so decreases.

Researcher

I have endeavoured to articulate the **needs** I observed in, and that were communicated to me by, the other collaborators across the four schools. Although, it is more challenging to pull my own needs into focus acceptance and trust were chief among them. At first I thought that the primary need was maybe respect but I had to admit to myself that it was acceptance. I needed the doors that had been opened by a choice to trust me to remain open, this was the indicator of acceptance I took hold of in my mind. Another need that became ever-clearer as the collaborations progressed was to receive feedback about whether the intervention, and our collaboration on it, was adding value or had some benefit for my collaborators and the school contexts. I wrestled with my needs throughout the process and was acutely aware of them because a part of me believed that they were a liability. As with the question of connection and reciprocity addressed above, there was the sense that if I paid too much attention to my needs they could disrupt the collaboration. To consider the needs of collaborators, including researchers, in a process of CKD&S is a central question of situated ethics (See 6.3.2).

Of the **priorities** I was guided by throughout the collaborative process, the highest ones were servant leadership, excellence, and professionalism in my engagement with all the different collaborators. As outlined in Chapter 2 (See 2.1.2), my work as a social researcher is underpinned by a commitment to an ethic of love, service, and humility which in turn is anchored in a clear, complementary understanding of human personhood (See 2.1.5). I acknowledged that given the competing demands and priorities all my collaborators were navigating, I had a responsibility and opportunity to take a leadership role in the collaboration, but it was to be one whereby I sought to be of service to the other collaborators and each of the schools I worked in. This ethic also framed the definitions of excellence and professionalism I brought to the work. I had a sustained commitment to the ongoing collaborative refinement and optimisation of the developmental intervention, but this was only possible if I was willing to engage in the process with humility: To listen to the other collaborators, to let go of my designs, ideas, and any hopes I had of controlling the process. The philosopher, Esther Meek, whose work on epistemology has centrally informed the philosophy that underpins this study, posits that we do not know something to love, appreciate, respect or honour it, but rather knowing flows out of loving, respecting, honouring or appreciating something or someone (Cadora and Meek, 2023; Meek, 2011).

The priorities I outlined above were driven by an imperative to have this process of CKD&S be built on a foundation, and flow out of, respect, honour, and appreciation I chose to extend to, and receive from, my collaborators. Other key practical priorities included ensuring that the experience collaborators had of how I facilitated the process was as consistent as possible across the schools even as the intervention itself was adapted, and, ensuring that I worked with as many English medium students in each of the Grade groups as were willing and able to participate.

For the six-month period of the fieldwork the four collaborations were a central priority in my life. As such I had **capacity** and designated headspace to keep the whole process in focus. I believed that this was not an expectation I could have of the other collaborators. This assumption on my part may have limited opportunities for further collaborative ownership in some of the schools and I am aware that a different type of conversation at the outset of the process as well as throughout it, may have unlocked these (See 6.7). I did not have capacity to work with the entire grade groups, including both Afrikaans and English medium learners, in all four schools. This extended both to the time to run the intervention with them but also to the time that would have been needed to translate all the materials, especially as the design and wording of individual exercises was being refined as we progressed. This was a point of disconnect between the needs and priorities that school leaders and staff expressed and what I was able to bring to the collaboration.

As one researcher collaborating with four schools in parallel, I navigated a number of **constraints**. Working around one school's timetable would necessarily mean I had limitations in the flexibility with which I could adapt to changes in other schools. The slightly staggered start across the three schools where the collaboration progressed to working with learners was advantageous in this respect. The decision on the part of all three of these schools to integrate the intervention in the school day had significant advantages but it did also mean that at times some creativity was required on the part of the school leaders and staff I was working with in considering where and how we might integrate certain sessions (See 6.4.3). Another constellation of constraints I encountered was relational. Although I had some existing contacts in two of the four schools, I still needed to build different types of relationships across the collaborator groups in each context. I describe this as a constraint because I came into each space as an outsider who needed to be grafted into various relational networks to effectively engage in the collaborative process. (Barker Scott and Manning, 2024; Bartunek and Rynes, 2014; Chak, 2018; Conaway, 2020; Soudien, 2016).

Contextual constraints and disruptions

In addition to the needs, priorities, capacity, and constraints highlighted above there were several contextual constraints and disruptions that were relevant across some or all of the collaborating schools. I completed the fieldwork for this study over the first two school terms of the 2023 school year. The first term is particularly busy in most schools and there is significant pressure to have sufficient teaching time while also hosting several sporting and cultural activities. Some of these activities and events were planned in advance and thus I could work with school leaders and/or staff to structure the overall project plan for their context around them, but several events also popped up at shorter notice. At times I would arrive at a school only to be informed that there was a social, cultural, or sporting event happening during the session where I was supposed to be working with learners. On a few occasions I tried to run the sessions despite these clashes, but most of the learners would – understandably – opt to rather participate in the other activity with their friends and peers.

Other events that disrupted planned sessions included spot visits to one of the schools by the Police to search the premises for drugs. During these spot visits learners would all be escorted by staff to different classrooms or venues in the school, while the police with sniffer dogs checked the evacuated classrooms. These checks were unannounced to ensure the element of surprise, but also meant that the entire timetable for the school day would then be adapted. This generally meant that individual periods were shortened significantly and at times it was no longer feasible to run a session with a group in the remaining time or the timetable shifts would create clashes with commitments in other schools. The first time I experienced one of these police visits I was shocked at what to me seemed like an invasion of learners' and staff's privacy. I mentioned this to one of the learners the following day and her response was a striking corrective to my ignorance of the context: *"No, miss, it's not scary. It helps us feel safe. We don't want drugs in our school."* Her words reminded me of a passing comment the school leader had made when we were arranging our very first conversation about the collaboration: "It's been a rough day. The gangs have been swarming around the school again and everyone is quite agitated." Nothing I had experienced up to that point equipped me to understand what this school community navigated on a routine basis, but the opportunity to collaborate with them allowed to me interrogate several of my own assumptions and grow a little bit in understanding some of their experiences better (See 3.4.2).

More than once during the fieldwork period, the schools were also affected by large-scale transport strikes that made it very difficult for a large proportion of learners – particularly in the two quintile four schools – to get to school as they were dependent on minibus taxis or other forms of public transport for their commute (Statistics South Africa, 2021, 2022). On these days or weeks – depending on the strike – the school leaders and staff would explore other avenues to help learners get to school but the inevitable delays to the start of the school day would also affect the timetable.

Another daily occurrence my collaborators and I navigated were the routine electricity blackouts that were a factor most South Africans worked around on an almost daily basis at the time I was working with the schools. The developmental intervention itself was completely analogue and as such it was not affected by the blackouts but what was more challenging was gathering the groups of learners to work with when the power was out. During these time windows the school bells would not work and alternatives would be used to signal the transitions between periods to staff and learners. In one school one of the administrative staff would walk to a relatively central spot in the school courtyard and ring a handheld bell, but as the sound would not necessarily carry there would be significant delays in transitions between classes and at times this could reduce the length of sessions by a half or even a bit more. It was challenging to not feel rushed under these circumstances and at times I really struggled not to race through activities. During the second term there was also a stretch of extreme rain in the Western Cape with flooding that led to extended electricity black outs and disproportionately impacted learners who lived in informal settlements (Kriel, 2023; C. le Roux, 2023).

5.2 Fostering an enabling space for collaborative knowledge discovery for, and by, young people

In this section the **Research question 1B (RQ1B)** is explored:

- How can the developmental intervention at the core of these RPCs be harnessed to work with young people in key transitional grades (Grade 7 and 9) to explore their lived definitions of identity and purpose as well as their interplay with the school as a key learning space?

Although this thesis does not extend to a detailed analysis of the qualitative data that was collected through the developmental intervention about how the learners I worked with make sense of questions of identity, purpose and their interplay with learning, this section allows us to consider learning that has emerged through the collaborative process about

how a developmental intervention may be used as a vehicle of collaborative knowledge discovery, as well as some of the findings about the process of collaborating with young people to explore questions of identity, purpose and their interplay with learning. The section concludes with some observations about engaging in collaborative knowledge discovery with young people in, and about, the school context.

5.2.1 A developmental intervention as vehicle of collaborative knowledge discovery

The developmental intervention was initially developed as a vehicle for data collection. However, it was not merely an extractive mechanism but was rather designed to serve as an end in itself for the schools that opened their doors to it as well as the learners who participated in, and contributed to the ongoing refining of it. In addition to the data that is analysed in narrating and interpreting the collaboration, the intervention was a vehicle for collaborative knowledge discovery about the learners' experience of their school as well as individual knowledge discovery about questions of identity, purpose, and their interplay with learning, particularly in the school environment.

The learners were each able to participate in the intervention's series of exercises but they are described in this thesis as collaborators because they were informed from the outset that what they were part of was also a prototyping process and that their verbal and written feedback would directly shape the ongoing optimisation of the intervention programme. They were repeatedly encouraged to share their feedback throughout the process. The limitations of this collaborative process must be acknowledged, and are discussed above (See 4.7), as the sheer number of students meant that they could each only participate in the intervention programme once and further value could certainly be drawn from also getting their feedback on optimised versions of the key exercises.

CKD&S was observed at different levels of the RPCs. As collaborators we were discovering how to embed the intervention most effectively in each school context and stewarding this knowledge by optimising the intervention for accessibility, efficacy, and participant benefit. At this level the prototyping of the intervention thus served as a vehicle for CKD&S.

As individuals learners discovered insights about themselves by engaging with the four overarching questions that informed the intervention (Who am I? Why am I here? What do I need for my life journey? What's my story?). In developing the design of the intervention, I assumed that there would be more collaborative knowledge discovery in the

groups of learners as their reflections on the overarching questions were discussed with their peers but this did not transpire in practice.

The learners actively engaged with the exercises but were generally reticent about sharing their reflections with their peers. The only exception was seen during the warm-up exercises where collaboration agreements were articulated and in the discussions, we had about their experiences of the school environment. A number of learners clearly articulated their preference not to have to share their reflections in the group and a few also pointed to the fact that I was not someone they knew well and thus they did not necessarily want to share their reflections with me verbally (See 6.3.3). The use of worksheets that allowed for individual written and visual reflections thus proved an effective format for facilitating and scaffolding reflection on questions of identity, purpose, and their interplay with learning. The overwhelmingly positive feedback from learners, suggests that this approach created a fruitful space for them to engage in knowledge discovery and stewardship.

As researcher-facilitator the process of collaborating with four schools on prototyping the developmental intervention has also been a personal process of knowledge discovery and stewardship in my development and apprenticeship as a social researcher. I have learned through collaboration, and from my collaborators, about the value and challenges of embedding knowledge discovery and stewardship processes in socio-organisational contexts like schools. Although an intensive review of salient literature has been an invaluable dimension of my socialisation and apprenticeship, the messy, dynamic and fruitful process of collaborating with school leaders, staff and learners has at certain points challenged and at others strikingly illuminated what I encountered in the literature. This itself has been a critical aspect of my knowledge discovery and stewardship journey.

5.2.2 Exploring identity, purpose and their interplay with learning

The questions that were explored with learners are expansive and the intervention programme that ran in the schools was not able, or designed, to provide a space for their exhaustive exploration but rather to provoke reflection around the set of questions and to encourage learners that the discipline of grappling with questions like these is part of a life-long process of learning (De Ruyter and Conroy, 2002). The exercises that were designed to explore each question also presented an opportunity for the learners to practice various transferable skills in their own process of knowledge discovery and stewardship. These skills included listening, reading, reflection, dialogue, feedback, as well as written, visual and verbal expression of their reflections (Hopkins, 2024). The nature of the questions that

framed the developmental intervention meant that reflections were often very private and sharing them would require a great deal of vulnerability on the part of the learners. The majority of the learners opted not to share their reflections with the whole group.

As discussed in the next chapter (See 6.3.3), trust and trust-building are an integral aspect of CKD&S, and although a great deal of trust was extended to me by school leaders, staff and learners, there are limits to what can be fostered in a six-month period. This observation also highlights the potential of involving school staff more actively in the delivery of the developmental intervention as they may already have trusted relationships with some learners. Although, learners generally did not share or discuss their reflections with the entire peer group during the sessions, they were highly engaged in the process, expressing their reflections in written form and verbally in pairs. They willingly consented to sharing these worksheets with their reflections on their identity, purpose and what they need for their envisaged life journey for analysis as part of the research process, but as mentioned above the qualitative data that was collected through those worksheets is not analysed in this thesis beyond the brief discussion in this section. Their lively discussions during the clarification of collaboration agreements or around their experience of the school as learning space, indicate that their willingness and readiness to engage in collaborative knowledge discovery depends on the themes a process focuses on. Such a process could, for example, be developed with learners to centre questions or themes they may be more comfortable exploring with their peers, teachers and/or researchers.

In Mason's principles, the importance of teaching young people not to "lean (too confidently) on their own understanding" but rather to acknowledge the functions and limits of reasoning, is emphasised (Cadora and Meek, 2023; Van Pelt and Spencer, 2023). Learners were encouraged to discuss their reflections on their identity with trusted friends or family members to augment their necessarily limited view and understanding with those of other people who care about them. These prompts were also included to sensitise them to the fact that every individual needs to appreciate the functions and limits of their perspective and reasoning, but that this acknowledgement need not curtail growth and learning (Webb, Whitlow and Venter, 2017). If anything drawing on a broader range of perspective and sources enriches it (Adams and Soudien, 2022).

Verbal and written feedback from learners highlighted the value of having access to a space to reflect on questions of identity, purpose, and their interplay with learning, but the temporary nature of the intervention meant that the scaffolding of their knowledge

discovery process lacked continuity and broader integration in their learning journeys in the school context. In future collaborations, it would be of central importance to consider how developmental activities could be prototyped and embedded in the collaborative context more sustainably (See 4.7). This would require a more expansive collaboration with school staff as co-researchers (Hopkins, 2008), while – where advisable - still exploring ways to centrally involve learners in the process. In the next sub-section I discuss some of the observed dynamics around engaging in this type of collaborative knowledge discovery with young people in the school context (See 2.3 and 3.4).

5.2.3 Working with young people in, and about, the school context

Across the board, every effort was made to anchor reflections on the questions in the learners' immediate experiences and context rather than getting lost in more abstract or long-term goals and visions that are very challenging to connect to their day-to-day life, which involves spending a lot of time at school. The question, "Why am I here?" prompted two key, interconnected streams of reflection: On the one hand zooming out and beginning to think about the question of what learners see as their purpose in life (i.e. Why am I here on planet earth?), but then zooming in to consider how the time they are spending at school contributes to the bigger goals or vision they have for their life (i.e. Why am I here at school?). In the response to the latter question a common response was, "Because I have to be" or "Because my parents make me come to school." These responses were catalysts for broader reflection on the necessary and helpful constraints that any individual navigates in learning and becoming but also presented an opportunity to challenge learners to think what their "why" might be beyond the compulsory nature of schooling and how this could relate to their goals for the short-, medium- and longer-term.

In reflecting on the question of what they need for their life journey, learners were encouraged to focus on the next leg of their journey. In the case of the Grade 7s, to think about where they want to be by the end of the school year as they prepare for the transition to secondary school and what they will need to get there in terms of support and resources. For the Grade 9s, the example of the subject choices they would need to make towards the end of the school year provided a concrete example for them to think about how the decisions they were making in the present may open up or limit opportunities for them as they continue on their learning journey both within and beyond the school context.

In one school learners expressed an interest in one-on-one coaching to further explore the questions we had started discussing in the group sessions (School 2). While they were not

necessarily comfortable discussing these in front of their peers, they saw the value of doing so. We were able to trial this model in the school and I hosted a series of coaching sessions with learners who signed up (Bungay Stanier, 2016; Whitmore, 2017). They were highly engaged in these coaching spaces and this experience also highlighted how a process of RPC can contribute to fostering an enabling space for CKD&S that goes beyond a singular project focus. In another school, I worked with the school leader to develop an additional workshop format for student leaders (School 3). This was similarly an opportunity to build on the prototyping of the developmental intervention and explore further opportunities to engage in CKD&S. The workshop had a central focus on values and how values inform the student leadership team's work within the school. A piece of feedback I received repeatedly from learners, as well as school leaders and staff, is that they need more space for this kind of reflection in their schools that is not just once-off or project-based.

As will be discussed in further detail below and in the next chapter, time is a rare resource in any school environment (Smith, 2019; Wiggins and Smith, 2015) and the four schools that I collaborated with as part of this study were no exception. School leaders and staff are often run off their feet with competing demands and the fact that all four schools invested time in engaging with me in conversation and/or active prototyping of the intervention indicates their openness to exploring opportunities to create space for activities that will benefit the learners they serve. The emergent RPCs harnessed the time and capacity of a group of participant-collaborators – learners – that I posit is often under-utilised (and appreciated) in school contexts (K. Hall, 2022; Kleintjes et al., 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2022). The findings in this study indicate that learners have both the interest and capacity to engage in developmental processes that require their active engagement and input. Schools provide ideal contexts for this type of collaboration as young people are already enrolled their and, for the most part, in attendance five days a week.

5.3 Collaboration in context: Observations at the school level

In this section the following research questions are addressed:

- **Research question 1 (RQ1):** How can enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S be fostered through emergent, youth-championing RPCs with four public, fee-paying schools in the Metro East District (Western Cape, South Africa)?

- **Research question 1A (RQ1A)** How can these RPCs, and the developmental intervention at their core, be adapted and optimised for each school context based on their needs, priorities, capacity, and constraints?

The collaborative engagement at school level was interpreted and summarised through the lens of the following concepts or constructs as defined in previous chapters (See Sections 2.6 and 4.3.5):

- Openness
- Readiness
- Alignment
- Intentionality
- Integration
- Capacity
- Cooperation

The schools as collaborative contexts are not considered as homogenous entities and the RPCs only had touchpoints with aspects of each school's socio-organisational culture and landscape. These descriptions thus serve to provide a more concrete insight into collaborative dynamics at the individual school level and highlight concrete, context-specific learning from each. However, no claims can be made here about comprehensively mapping these collaborative contexts and any attempt to do so would go beyond the scope of this study and thesis.

5.3.1 School 1: Open, ready and cooperative

The first school, the primary I commenced my fieldwork in, is described as *Open, Ready and Cooperative*:

- **Open** because they were willing and able to engage with the collaborative process. The school leaders, staff and learners chose to continue engaging with the RPC through the collaborative prototyping effort. Individual and organisational resources were combined in our shared objective to temporarily embed the developmental intervention in their school day. The collaborators were also open in relation to the knowledge discovery process with learners actively engaging with the activities as part of the developmental intervention, and school leaders and staff showing a genuine and sustained interest in learning about students' reflections and

the implications these may have for their practice (Fontana et al., 2006; Laage-Hellman et al., 2021; Moilanen et al., 2015; S. Thomson, 2021; Tsai et al., 2020).

- **Ready** because the collaborators, particularly the school leader and staff, were also prepared and equipped to engage with the RPC in terms of harnessing time, expertise, and other organisational resources as part of the collaborative process. In the absence of previous experiences of collaborating (Patel et al., 2012), I surmise that the readiness that was observed in this school and others was anchored in a choice to trust me as well as the other collaborators (See 6.3.1, Rosas and Camarinha-Matos, 2009; Also see: Romero et al., 2009; Rosas and Camarinha-Matos, 2008).

- **Cooperative** because the many competing demands and opportunities collaborators were navigating in this context appeared to inhibit the extent of their engagement. There was no external pressure on this school to get involved with the RPC and as such I am confident that they did so of their own volition (Castañer and Oliveira, 2020). As such the more cooperative, rather than self-directed, nature of their engagement was, based on my observation, a product of an abundance of existing activity rather than a lack of interest in, or commitment to, the RPC.

Although, the school leader and staff saw the value of the intervention and collaboration, they were navigating many other commitments limiting the time they could invest in exploring further opportunities to build on the collaborative prototyping. I observed a similar dynamic with the learners in this context. On several occasions, some of the learners needed to choose between participating in the developmental intervention or attending another – often social, sporting, or cultural – activity and in these cases, they communicated that although they were very interested in participating, they were choosing the other option. This was itself a positive indicator that they understood they could choose whether they wanted to participate or not. In some instances, the other option was a social event with their peers and in others there were specific cultural or sport clubs running sessions at the same time, and they wanted to honour those ongoing commitments. Most of the students who opted out asked whether they could be reassigned to a later group but given the commitment to offering every English-medium learner the opportunity to participate at least once I was not always able to offer this degree of flexibility.

Working across four schools allowed for rich learning and cross-pollination (See 5.4.) but it also meant that there were limits to the flexibility I could offer each school. Although, I saw the value of being able to work with relative flexibility, I would also posit based on the

learning from these RPCs that too much flexibility can lead to a situation where less is achieved through the collaborative process because it devolves into a habit of postponement when disruptions occur. Towards the end of the second term, I observed this dynamic unfolding in School 1 where there were two more groups due to participate in the intervention. The first session for the first of these groups was cancelled and because of this I needed to restructure the approach as there would only be one session with the group. The sessions for the other group were similarly disrupted and although we attempted to reschedule them the proximity to the end of term meant we were not able to do so. Upon reflection, I also noticed that by that point my collaborative stamina (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Vivona et al., 2023) had significantly dwindled and our failure to find a fitting solution for the last group may have been due to that as well (See 2.7).

5.3.2 School 2: Open, ready, aligned, and integrative
The second school, a secondary, is described as *Open, Ready, Aligned and Integrative*:

- **Open** because from the outset the school leader and staff were willing to engage in conversations about how the developmental intervention could be run in their context. Although they were clear in outlining the parameters we needed to work within, they displayed an ongoing ability to explore opportunities to achieve as much as possible together within and around those constraints. From the outset the school leader and staff saw the relevance of the developmental intervention for the Life Orientation curriculum and framed it as an opportunity to complement and reinforce themes and topics that were being covered there. At the same time, they were open to the intervention functioning as an explicitly extra-curricular activity, which allowed us to adapt flexibly and maintain a space for learners that could function differently to their usual classes. The learners in School 2 were also open to engaging with collaborative prototyping process. This group of collaborators shared very frank and open feedback verbally during group sessions that strengthened the collaboration in their school and highlighted insights for the other three RPCs.

- **Ready** because the collaborators were prepared and able to invest individual and organisational resources in getting the collaborative prototyping process of the ground and sustaining it over two terms. The school leader and staff in School 2 were, for example, very quick to provide input on how the intervention could be integrated in the school day and when we found that we needed more possible slots due to scheduling clashes they were resourceful in exploring opportunities to work

with learners during Arts and Culture periods as well as Life Orientation ones. They were also proactive in identifying a couple of different rooms that could be used for the sessions with learners and considering with me which ones would be best suited to the intervention. The learners in School 2 also displayed a heightened readiness to engage with the developmental intervention and often when I was collecting one group to work with other learners in the class would approach me and ask when they could have a turn to participate. As I did not have any past experience of collaborating with this school or existing relational networks to draw on, the readiness displayed by collaborators is - among other things - a reflection of their drive to pursue a developmental opportunity for themselves (learners) or the young people entrusted to them (school leaders and staff). This collaborative readiness also aligned this context with key characteristics of "schools that work"(See 3.4.3).

- **Aligned** because in my work with school leaders, staff and learners we were – broadly speaking – able to align our objectives for the collaborative prototyping process, and to translate this alignment into a jointly aligned programme of activity for the collaborative prototyping of the developmental intervention. The feedback I received from the different collaborators also suggests that we managed to foster a greater measure of cognitive alignment whereby our views and perceptions of the process were also increasingly calibrated (Corsaro and Snehota, 2011; Ingstrup et al., 2021; Kragh and Andersen, 2009; Skålén et al., 2015). I would add that this alignment was also seen in the in-practice investment of individual (time, energy) and organisational resources in support of the collaboration.

- **Integrative** because the collaborative prototyping process was embedded in the school timetable across several days of each week for the two terms I was working with them. My presence in the school on several days a week also meant that I became more integrated in this school community than I did in any of the others. In School 1, I worked with learners on one day each week and in School 3, I had a shorter more intense burst of activity whereby I was working with learners – also on one set day of the week – over several weeks in the second term. In School 2, I was able to get a sense of what it might look like as a researcher to be continually embedded in a collaborative context and this was an important catalyst for reflection and learning about the potential value of a more intensive, sustained engagement with collaborating schools/organisations. A challenge related to

integration that I, however, observed in School 2 as well as the others was around drawing together the different epistemic communities within the school contexts more effectively. One potential strategy to remedy this could be to consider how school leaders and staff may be involved more directly in the developmental and research dimensions of the RPCs (Hopkins, 2008, 2020; Joyce et al., 2014).

In the case of School 2 there was strong alignment between the school leader and I as well as the key staff liaison, but with a stronger emphasis on the developmental intervention and a very proactive articulation of expectations around aligning the intervention with the curriculum. Another hallmark of this school was the opportunities I was afforded to integrate myself in the community which significantly bolstered relationship- and trust-building. I posit that the stronger relationships I had with staff and learners in this school, provided a foundation for the exploration and piloting of an additional developmental opportunity for learners. Upon the suggestion and request of the learners, I offered one-on-one coaching for learners who wanted to explore some of the questions we had unpacked as part of the developmental intervention in greater depth. Although I only ran a handful of these sessions at the end of the second term, the openness and readiness of learners and staff to explore further collaborative opportunities serves as a helpful example of flexible, distributed leadership – a concept I unpack further in the concluding section of the next chapter (See 6.7).

The work with School 2 highlighted the value of having more time in the collaborative context to observe and learn about different aspects of the lived and felt experience of your collaborators (Brunner, 1951; Lau, 2022). The timetable disruptions I frequently experienced in School 2 were a source of frustration as I would arrive there only to find that I was not going to be able to run a session as the timetable had changed, but over time the value of being there and having informal conversations with the school leader, staff and/or learners became ever clearer. Related to the comments about flexibility above, I would not infer from this that a researcher should necessarily maintain a full-time presence in a school context throughout an entire collaborative process but it may be helpful to have the opportunity to dedicate some time to this level of availability earlier in a RPCs trajectory as it also allows the researcher to better understand the inevitable disconnects between expectations and reality when it comes to certain tools (e.g. timetable) and workflows or processes (e.g. transitions between classes).

5.3.3 School 3: Open, ready, aligned and intentional

The third school I collaborated with, another primary, is described as *Open, Ready, Aligned and Intentional*:

- **Open** because, although, the initial conversations with the school leader and staff were drawn out over a few months due to competing demands these collaborators were facing, they remained engaged with the process. In School 3, the school leader took a very active role in liaising with me and coordinating the collaborative process, as such the other staff I worked with were a bit more removed from the process but nevertheless very open when it came to sharing their expertise and ideas about how we could most effectively set up the collaboration in their context. The learners in School 3 were markedly open in their engagement with me and the process, setting a tone of openness and honesty that greatly bolstered trust- and relationship-building in this context.

- **Ready** because when it came to the point where we started actively planning the intervention sessions with learners, the school leader and staff swiftly rallied around the process to ensure that we had suitable timeslots, feasible group sizes, a conducive space to work in with all the required equipment, furniture etc. and clear workflows. Staff members helped me to set the room up before each session and the school leader and class teachers struck a very helpful balance between being present and available in case I had any questions or needed any support, without disrupting sessions or creating a situation where learners may have felt they were being observed by staff – a dynamic that had proven counterproductive in other contexts. Given the far larger group sizes in School 3, it was at times more challenging to establish the same level of readiness with learners to channel their personal resources of attention and self-discipline into the collaboration.

- **Aligned** because the school leader's vision for the CKD&S process aligned very productively with the RPC approach that had emerged in the other schools by that point. In this school context I directly experienced how cognitive alignment – views, perceptions, expectations, values, mindsets – can be a key enabler of CKD&S by bolstering trust-building and strengthening communication (Corsaro and Snehota, 2011). Having this alignment with a strategic leader within the school was also an instrumental factor in driving the collaborative prototyping process forward in a relatively short time window and then even exploring opportunities to build on that by developing a workshop for the school's student leaders team. This

alignment was also observed in the in-practice calibration of organisational resources in support of the collaborative process, as outlined in the bullet point above. The learners in this school also displayed a strong alignment with, and interest in, the thematic questions the developmental intervention focused on.

- **Intentional** because beyond merely engaging with the process of collaboratively prototyping and embedding the developmental intervention, the school leader in this context outlined ideas for further collaborative opportunities and then actively worked with me to implement those ideas. Across the four schools I had discussed a number of potential opportunities to build on the core of the RPCs through further developmental activities, but School 3 was one of only two where an idea was realised and in this context it was down to the driving role of the school leader. I would also describe the learners in this school as intentional in the effort that they made to establish a relational rapport with me. As I had structured the intervention around a set of questions, they took the opportunity to ask me similar questions about myself and get to know me better. Initially I was hesitant to spend too much time talking about myself, but after discussing this with a staff member they reflected back to me that the students were doing this to build relationship – a perspective which reframed my initially more mechanistic/procedural view that saw it as a potential distraction from the intervention's main foci.

In the case of School 3 there was strong alignment of expectations between myself and the school leader on several different levels encompassing the research and developmental strands of the work. The school leader was also very intentional in their leadership role within the collaboration. This meant that beyond the developmental intervention, we were able to develop other formats for students based on specific needs and priorities in this context. Of all four schools, my active involvement in School 3 in terms of time spent on campus was the shortest, but due the intentionality of the school leader and staff we were able to collaborate intensively, further adapting the delivery format of the developmental intervention to ensure that I was able to work with all English-medium Grade 7 students despite restricted time horizons and to implement a bespoke developmental workshop for the Grade 7 student leaders upon the request of the school leader and other staff who work closely with the student leadership team.

Leadership was a key factor in all four RPCs (See 6.6). Without clear and decisive leadership on the part of school leaders the work would most likely not have been able to start at all or to progress beyond a certain point as was seen with School 4. In School 3,

however, the school leader brought a leadership to the process that went beyond the clear and decisive to what I would describe as visionary (Hopkins, 2015b, 2017; Lingard et al., 2003). As mentioned above there was cognitive and practical alignment with the school leader, but beyond this they also took ownership of the process in a way that went beyond what was observed in the other three schools and articulated concrete ideas and proposals for further collaboration.

In School 3 there was an emphasis on values and value alignment that informed the adaptation of the developmental intervention as well as the design of the additional workshop I facilitated for student leaders. Another area where I observed value alignment was around the value for the knowledge that could be discovered and stewarded in different ways at different junctures in the process. The school leader had a very well balanced respect for the research and developmental strands of the RPC that I posit significantly bolstered collaborative working in this context.

5.3.4 School 4: Open but at capacity

The fourth school, the other secondary, is described as *Open but at Capacity*:

- **Open** because the school leaders and staff I had conversations with about the developmental intervention signalled a great interest in embedding it in their context. Although the collaboration did not progress to working with learners, the interactions I had with school leaders and staff presented valuable collaborative opportunities and learning from these conversations enriched my collaboration with the other schools. In addition to their interest in the developmental intervention, the school leaders also tabled the option of working with staff from the first conversation we had. The openness I encountered in this school ultimately did not translate into the mobilisation of resources in pursuit of the objective to embed the developmental intervention and/or pursue other ideas that were highlighted by the staff. Leadership was a key factor as the school leaders in this context did not give staff members a specific mandate to engage with the process and thus it appeared to be up to them whether they were willing or able to engage with the RPC.

- **At capacity** because similar to school 1, the school leaders, staff and – as far as I was able to ascertain – learners were navigating a host of competing commitments and activities. Despite the openness and interest the school leaders and staff had in the developmental intervention they did not seem to have sufficient capacity to mobilise individual and organisational resources to translate their openness into a

practical collaborative readiness. I kept checking back in with them throughout the time I spent in SA to see whether we might, for example, be able to make a start a bit later than originally planned, but in the time window where I was there they did not have staff capacity to invest in collaborating on embedding, running and prototyping the intervention in their school. In their feedback, the respondent from this school thanked me for trying to include them in the process and indicated that in future projects it would be a helpful strategy to explore how the collaborative work can be embedded in the curriculum. This learning was echoed in other places and highlights the importance of carefully considering both the feasibility and sustainability of these types of RPCs. This approach would likely require a longer lead-in time for discussions and the capacity on the part of the researcher or research team to work intensively with the school in question. As has been mentioned above with the other schools, I am aware that the collaboration with School 4 may have unfolded differently if I was only working with them and directing all my energy towards exploring how we might progress the RPC in their context.

One surprising learning from School 4, as well as School 1, was that existing relational networks will not necessarily make a difference in a collaboration's progress, depth, or strength. Although relationships and relationship-building are necessary aspects of any CKD&S endeavour, they are not sufficient to get, or keep, it off the ground. The nature and quality of existing relationships need to be considered, as well as the extent to which they have been forged, tested and/or refined through collaborative working and the accrual of collaborative experience (See 6.3.2).

As with School 3, I observed the importance of leadership in my collaboration with School 4. Two members of the school's senior leadership team were involved in conversations about the approaches we might take to embedding the developmental intervention in their context. I was invited to present the proposed prototyping process and draft toolkit to the entire staff team and had a number of constructive conversations with teaching staff after that presentation where they outlined their ideas for how we might best adapt the developmental intervention in their context. Their emphasis on anchoring the intervention in the practical challenge and opportunity Grade 9 learners face around subject choices informed and strengthened my work in School 2. However, the question of who would be driving or facilitating the collaborative process from the school's side was – as far as I was able to ascertain – never answered and thus there was a lack of the minimum required

ownership to progress beyond the point we had reached. The fact that we did not progress to collaborating with learners is not necessarily a negative. As posited in Chapter 2, conversations that allow partners to carefully assess the cost of collaboration allow for a clear shared understanding of whether individual and collective objectives can best be pursued collaboratively, whether partners are able to prioritise the required investment of time and so forth.

5.4 Mobilising collaborative learning: Cross-cutting themes and cross-pollination

In this section the following research questions are addressed:

- **Research question 1A (RQ1A):** How can these RPCs, and the developmental intervention at their core, be adapted and optimised for each school context based on their needs, priorities, capacity, and constraints?
- **Research question 1C (RQ1C):** How can the value and transferability of this emergent model of youth-championing RPC be interpreted drawing on qualitative data collected across the four collaboration sites?

A key opportunity that I was afforded due to the concurrent nature of the collaborations with the four schools, was mobilising insights and observations across the collaborations throughout the process. In this section I highlight a selection of cross-cutting themes that emerged through the collaborations as well as key points of collaborative cross-pollination.

5.4.1 Cross-cutting themes

The selection of **cross-cutting themes** outlined below foreground key coordinates of the next chapter's critical discussion of this study's findings:

- Although I have framed my engagement with the four schools through the lens of emergent, youth-championing RPC, the extent to which collaborators within each school and across the four sites took ownership of the process varied. This is in no way an evaluative statement in relation to these collaborators, rather it serves to highlight the importance of acknowledging and embracing differentiated engagement with any collaborative process (Sanders, 2015; Keller and Bender, 2020; Sjölund et al., 2022a). It also provides a concrete example of the interplay of collaborator expectations and experiences discussed above (See 5.1). I was heavily invested in collaborating with the four schools and had an acute sense of ownership of, and responsibility for, the process. It is understandable and valuable to work with collaborators who have more critical distance – a quality which, for example,

proved useful when it came to trimming the intervention down to the essential as they were looking at it with fresh eyes and could focus in on the useful elements without being precious or overly invested in others.

- In all four schools, one staff member was appointed by the school leader as a liaison for the collaboration and in one the school leader took on this role. These key contacts were engaged throughout the process providing clear parameters for embedding the intervention and supporting with the overarching logistics, but I was aware that they were taking the collaboration on in addition to their other professional commitments. The effective resourcing of any CKD&S initiative is an important consideration and there needs to be an acknowledgement of the challenge it poses for any collaborator to effectively engage when they are already de facto at capacity. As mentioned above, in one of the four schools we were not able to progress the collaboration to working with learners and this was due to the competing demands both the school leadership team and staff were navigating at that time. As I unpack further in the following chapter, I have also had to grapple with the ethical ramifications of staff being assigned to work on a collaborative process where all other collaborators have the option to consider whether they wish to consent to engaging (Boser, 2006).

- Considerations about the human resources that are invested in a collaboration also have ramifications for the organisational integration of such a process and opportunities for knowledge mobilisation and stewardship. By having only one or two staff members involved in, and or cited on, a collaborative process there is the risk of creating an effective, but disconnected silo of collaboration within an organisation. Although it will often only be feasible to have a few team members involved in an RPC, this cross-cutting theme has highlighted the importance of considering with other collaborator groups what steps might be taken to ensure that learning from a collaborative process is effectively mobilised or whether there would, for example, be scope to extend an open call to staff to get involved on a voluntary basis. The efficacy of such a call will most likely vary depending on different organisational cultures, but one could also discuss different options for opening up a collaboration with school leaders and other staff, drawing on their contextual understanding and expertise (Henry and Tait, 2016; Jensen et al., 2022).

- Although school leaders, staff and learners were overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of the developmental intervention and the collaborative process, I am

acutely aware that the work that was done through this study did not fully embed the intervention in the schools beyond the time I spent there. The sustainability of this type of collaborative knowledge discovery process is a critical consideration and a relevant theme across all four schools. Learners and staff expressed the importance of having enabling spaces for CKD&S as a fixture in schools that is accessible to all students, not only the English-medium ones. To realise this, closer collaboration with larger groups of staff would be beneficial to consider how activities and tools that are developed could be embedded sustainably in schools by, for example, integrating them in classroom practice (Goodrich, 2024; Hopkins, 2008; Joyce et al., 2014).

- In the four RPCs that are narrated and interpreted in this thesis, a central emphasis is placed on clarifying and maximising benefit for the young people who were the biggest group of collaborators, but the importance of carefully considering and maximising benefit for all collaborators and contributors was emphasised through the work with all four schools. These considerations are particularly important as we consider how we might encourage the greater involvement of school leaders and staff in such collaborative processes. If these collaborators are expected to invest time in an additional project, thought needs to be given to how it can add value to their other areas of work, contribute to any professional development objectives they may have or other ways in which it could align with their needs and priorities (Silbert and Bitso, 2015). The value of co-designing developmental interventions with staff based on challenges or opportunities they have identified through their work with learners also cannot be understated (Jensen et al., 2022; McDonald et al., 2021).

- In the design of the prototype intervention, I envisaged it as a format that would create space for reflection on specific, substantive questions related to identity, purpose and their interplay with learning, and that the process of doing so would give the learners I was collaborating with, as well as myself, opportunity to practice and foster key transferable skills – a number of which are also important cognitive enablers (Blignaut, 2011; Claxton, 2012; Grisold and Peschl, 2017; Nel, 2021; Hopkins, 2024). Chief among these were listening, observation, abstract and creative thinking as well as verbal and written reflection (Eisner, 2002; Soudien and Harvey, 2021a; Thiessen, 2023). Other transferable skills that were foregrounded through the collaborative process were giving and receiving feedback

as well as the capacity to provide dynamic, informed consent (Duncan et al., 2009; Skelton, 2008). Many of these skills are essential in any learning process and yet the process of collaboration with these schools made it apparent that learners are not often explicitly given the opportunity to practice them in lower stakes environments (i.e. not linked to academic grading) or there may be a fixed mindset assumption that these are things that an individual either can or cannot do (Haimovitz and Dweck, 2017; Yeager and Dweck, 2020). Across the four schools the potential to support the development of these skills through a process of collaborative knowledge discovery was observed. One could also argue that the intentional design of a collaborative process to integrate this type of skills development is an additional investment in the potential of all collaborators to amplify both their knowledge discovery and stewardship efforts as they can potentially become more confident in their capacity to harness these different cognitive enablers in service of individual or collective goals and priorities (Hopkins, 2007, 2017).

- The immense potential and capacity of young people as collaborators was apparent in all three schools where the collaboration progressed to working with them. Learners account for most people in a school community and the decision to collaborate with them presented them with an opportunity to engage with a developmental process that was clearly structured, yet nevertheless created opportunities for them to take ownership of, and responsibility for, their engagement. Especially in schools, where the sheer number of students is at times framed as a challenge for school leaders and staff, collaborative modes of working with researchers or other practitioners may present opportunities to explore approaches to champion and harness young people's energy and capacity in service of their development as well as the school community (Collier, 2019; Skelton, 2008).

5.4.2 Opportunities for collaborative cross-pollination

Throughout the process, the four RPCs were mutually enhancing in various ways. I have outlined a few key areas of collaborative cross-pollination below:

- My conversations with school leaders, staff and learners strongly emphasised the value of anchoring the developmental intervention in a practical challenge or priority in each context. Before I started speaking to my collaborators, I

acknowledged this in principle. As the collaboration commenced and we were navigating various constraints and logistical challenges the vital importance of actively operationalising this commitment became ever clearer. The prototype intervention was sufficiently flexible in its modular design to be adapted to contextual challenges, priorities and constraints, and the learning from one school context about how it could be optimised most effectively strengthened collaborative working in the others and vice versa. There were also thematic synergies that emerged across the schools, for example an emphasis on supporting students to navigate decisions related to key transitions in their school career with greater intentionality. Although the period of engagement with each of the schools varied, there was rich learning from all four contexts that in turn informed my engagement in the others.

- Linked to the first point another area of surprising cross-pollination across the four schools was in finding ways to work around, and keeping working around, the contextual constraints with solutions from the individual schools expediting ongoing adaptation in others. In the initial design of the toolkit for the developmental intervention, I conceived of a programme that would run over several days with multiple sessions. This was a completely unrealistic prospect in all four schools and forced me to engage creatively and dynamically with both the constraints my collaborators brought to the table as well as their ideas for how the initial prototype I had created could be further moulded to best fit in, and enrich, their context. Working within these constraints with my collaborators arguably strengthened all the collaborations. I expand on the collaborative value of constraints in the next chapter (See 6.4.3).

- In all four schools the formal collaborative process was augmented by informal strands of collaboration and contribution. The conversations I had in passing with staff who were not directly involved in the collaborative process helped me to better understand each socio-organisational context better. Similarly, the conversations I had with learners in the spaces between sessions often provided me with helpful input and keys to make sense of some the experiences I was having in each school. In some of the schools, learners also extended invitations to me to come along and observe other social or cultural activities. From a relationship-building perspective, these opportunities were invaluable and as a researcher-facilitator the importance of having margin to engage in the in-between

conversations and make use of spontaneous invitations has become ever-clearer as I have interpreted and narrated the RPCs.

- Another area of thematic synergy across the four schools was what I would describe as an emerging emphasis on a value-centred and value–driven approach both in the content of the developmental intervention as well as the prototyping process. The head teacher from School 3 explicitly foregrounded values in our conversations and the workshop I developed for their student leadership team had a central focus on finding points of alignment between their personal value system and the school's set of values, but even before this point in the overarching collaborative process values had increasingly been coming to the foreground in my collaboration with learners at School 1 and 2. The importance of focusing in on values was, for example, also seen when each group of learners articulated their collaboration agreements (See 4.2.1).

- Although I had reviewed literature on play-based approaches (Barab et al., 2010; Zosh et al., 2017) before commencing my fieldwork and broadly acknowledged the value and potential of play in the initial design of the intervention toolkit, this still proved to be a blind spot once I was in the field. Particularly in the earlier stages of the RPCs my concerns with being professional, efficient, ready to answer any and all questions from my collaborators and get as much as possible done in time windows that were often significantly shorter than I could even have anticipated, meant that I allowed the lines between taking the process and myself too seriously to start blurring. A commitment to professionalism and excellence is paramount as a researcher, but not at the expense of creating space for play, fun and joy for all the collaborators – myself included (Barab et al., 2010; Zosh et al., 2017). As the collaborative prototyping progressed, I tested different ways to bring more playfulness into the work with learners. Similarly, as I became more resilient in navigating inevitable changes or disruptions in each school context, I was able to take a more relaxed approach to developing work-arounds and back-up plans with school staff. In future work, it would be interesting to consider how play and fun could be integrated in the work with all collaborators, including school leaders and staff.

- As outlined above it is helpful to understand the interplay of expectations and experiences in a CKD&S process, related to this I was also challenged to pull some of the assumptions I brought to the work into focus. I highlight a few incidents

where my assumptions about values, practice or boundaries were shown to be out of touch with the priorities of my collaborators (Dixon, 2023). These experiences were humbling, and they strengthened the overall collaborative process, because every time one of my blind spots were pulled into focus, it sensitised me to my engagement with all the other schools and contributed to my ongoing development and formation as a researcher-facilitator (Welsh, 2021; Sjölund et al., 2022a; McGeown, 2023a; Sjölund and Lindvall, 2023). The heuristic that is outlined in the final sections of the next chapter, among other things, provides a framework for clearer conversations about the assumptions and expectations different groups bring to a collaborative process and how these may best be navigated and/or reconciled (See 6.7).

5.5 Reflections on the "data" that wasn't collected

This section responds to the following research question:

- **Research question 1C (RQ1C):** How can the value and transferability of this emergent model of youth-championing RPC be interpreted drawing on qualitative data collected across the four collaboration sites?

Given the emergent nature of the RPCs, the hindsight of an analytic, interpretive process has highlighted opportunities for data collection that were not harnessed in this study. The necessary limitations imposed by the ethical review and approval of the study meant that I worked within agreed upon boundary lines in collecting data (McGeown, 2023b). One strategy may have been to apply for an amendment to the initial application that granted additional approvals, but my full-time engagement in the field, coupled with the emergent lens of RPC, left little time or capacity for this process while I was collaborating with the four schools.

When I embarked on the fieldwork, I knew that, wherever possible, I would seek to engage school leaders and staff in the prototyping of the developmental intervention. The plan was to do so via interviews, focus groups and/or feedback surveys – either in-person or via online platforms. Once I was in the field it became apparent that the many competing demands on the time of these collaborators meant that beyond the practical planning conversations we had and ongoing informal check-ins in passing, they often did not appear to have time to take me up on the invitation to have more in-depth reflective interviews or focus groups about the intervention itself. I could have been more persistent in pursuing these opportunities, but there was also a growing awareness that the youth-championing

nature of the process meant that the staff were not best placed to speak to the details of the prototyping process beyond the invaluable input they provided in terms of establishing the overarching constraints and opportunities for embedding it in each school context.

Although we found sufficient time to discuss the practicalities of embedding and refining the intervention, proposals to run workshops or focus groups with staff were not taken up by the primary and secondary schools I first started the work in and given the brief and intense collaborative window with the other primary school – and their interest in prioritising a workshop for the student leaders – it was no longer feasible at that point to host an additional workshop for their staff as well. The school leader at the other secondary, where we did not progress to prototyping the intervention with learners, initially expressed greater interest in having me run a developmental workshop for staff as that was a more immediate priority for him. I offered to integrate this in the collaboration and did have the opportunity to address the whole team at a staff meeting, but we were not able to pursue this further.

The emergent collaborative lens also meant that any interview, focus group or workshop with school leaders and staff would no longer centrally be focused on the intervention itself but rather on the process of collaboration, a realisation that I can also only fully articulate from my current vantage point. The school leaders and staff, I collaborated with had a clear understanding of what the intervention was about but as they allowed me to work independently with the learners and did not sit in on any sessions, they did not have the same first-hand, experiential insights about the intervention that the learners had. However, in future collaborations one could consider having a staff member co-facilitate and/or collect verbal feedback from the learners as they may feel more comfortable sharing negative feedback with a third party than with the facilitator and this would also present an opportunity for staff to maintain an ongoing insight into the prototyping process. Having said that, this would be an additional time commitment for staff and there would need to be a shared understanding of how it might add value to the process and the collaborative context.

In this study, I came to the table with a prototype developmental intervention and in many respects having a concrete but malleable programme to collaborate with schools on was an advantage. The process has, however, pointed to the potential value of rather bringing a developmental and research toolkit and skill set to schools and then developing interventions tailored to their specific priorities and/or challenges collaboratively. This

would be a more time-intensive process and would require even stronger buy-in from school leaders, staff and/or learners depending on the focus of the work, but it would also mean that there is a clearer shared ownership of the project or intervention that the collaboration focuses on. Furthermore, it would also have the potential to mitigate some of the issues around sustainability that are addressed in this thesis (See 4.7).

The collaborative process needs to be designed to include ongoing feedback loops that are themselves captured as data (McGeown, 2023a; Snowling, 2023). Depending on the nature of the collaboration - for example single- or multi-site - careful consideration needs to be given to confidentiality and anonymity, but these issues also need to be discussed with collaborators. Whether the researcher goes into the field with ethical approval and the understanding that applications for amendments may be necessary – an approach that could be advantageous as data collection could commence from the outset of a collaborative process – or starts by outlining the scope of work with the key collaborator groups and then applies for comprehensive ethical approval based on the nature of the specific collaboration and the preferences of collaborators around key ethical questions, the entire process needs to be seen as a collaborative one. The former option would seem more sensible, given the delays that an ethical review process could create if it occurred mid-project, but with schools as collaborators this could be planned for effectively by, for example, working around the breaks between terms and/or school years.

In future RPCs, I will be careful to consider every conversation along the way as an opportunity for data collection – provided collaborators consent to this. In this study I captured key points from formal and informal planning conversations with school leaders and staff thematically in my own fieldwork notes, but I recognise the limitations of the degree of separation between the conversations and my summative reflections. Seeing every interaction as a source of data would also mean that tailored topic guides with reflective prompts could be developed to ensure that feedback is gathered systematically throughout the process in ways that do not make unrealistic demands on different collaborators. The mechanisms for feedback will need to be adapted for context. In the initial design of this study I, for example, assumed that interviews or focus groups would be an effective way to engage school leaders and staff, but a written feedback survey proved more feasible for them. This, however, may not be the case in other collaborations. The value of a brief informal conversation in passing cannot be underestimated and if all collaborator groups are made aware of the potential to capture such conversations as qualitative data and, more importantly, are given the opportunity to take any conversation

off the record before, during or after it takes place, then robust ethical practice can be maintained even as a richer pool of data is collected. These considerations are questions of design but also habitual practice, with the onus on the researcher to foster a discipline of harnessing every opportunity (He *et al.,* 2020).

A school-level RPC such as the ones that were implemented as part of this study would be well served by an ethnographic toolkit (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Liamputtong, 2020, 2022). I was invited into these four schools and given the opportunity to integrate to varying degrees. The fieldwork notes that I captured throughout the process reflected my observations as an insider-outsider participant in these environments, but the study was not overtly designed as an ethnography. In future RPCs, I would consider actively drawing on ethnographic methodology and tools in the development of the research design and strategy to further enrich the type of data that is collected and generated by the researcher and other collaborators.

5.6 Collaborative enablers in the South African context

In conclusion two features of schools in the South African context are highlighted by the emergent RPCs that I would characterise as potential enablers of CKD&S warranting further investigation:

- *The autonomy of schools* within SA's tripartite governance structure means that schools, led by school governing bodies (SGBs) are empowered to engage in the development and execution of CKD&S initiatives (Jansen and Blank, 2015; Jansen, 2020c; Veriava, 2024). Although this study was reviewed and approved by the Western Cape Education Department, the decision about whether to engage in the collaboration was still up to each school. This is particularly valuable as it avoids situations where schools engage with a process merely to comply with an external directive from another authority in the education system (Ashkenas, 2015; Castañer and Oliveira, 2020). It also means that schools have the scope to engage in collaborative knowledge discovery that is most relevant to their context rather than being drawn into initiatives that may have merit, but do not align with the school's most pressing priorities. The much-debated BELA bill , which has implications for the degree of autonomy SGBs have in relation to the national and provincial governance structures , has been signed into law since I completed the fieldwork for this study but based on its key stipulations schools should still have the

authority and autonomy to decide whether to pursue collaborative projects with researchers or other epistemic communities (Maja, 2024; Veriava, 2024).

- *The significant human capital of young people* in South African schools is a valuable resource for the young people themselves as well as the school communities they are part of, but it needs to be harnessed and stewarded well. As Bloch (2009b), Jansen (2012), Jansen and Blank (2015), Ramphele (2012) and many others have highlighted SA has seen a significant neglect and degradation of this capital in recent decades, a dynamic that can arguably still be traced back to the Apartheid education system (Christie, 1998, 2016, 2020; Soudien, 2006, 2007b, 2007a, 2019a). The first priority needs to be ensuring that children and young people are equipped in terms of their core subjects and learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy. (Bloch, 2009; Schirmer and Visser, 2023a, 2023c; Pretorius and Morris, 2024). But in addition to this there is an opportunity to reframe how they are seen in school communities so that they can be engaged as active contributors in those spaces rather than customers or work-in-progress outputs (Hunt, 2014; Mkonto, 2018; Nthontho, 2017; Pendlebury et al., 2011; Tomlinson et al., 2022). This second characteristic is not unique to the South African context, but given the reality for many public schools of large classes and grade groups that can begin to feel like barriers to effective teaching (Bergman, 2013; Christie, 1998; Motseke, 2020; Msila, 2011), I posit that a reframing of the role and place of young people in schools, as has been explored elsewhere in the literature (Archard, 2013; Brennan et al., 2022; Harber and Trafford, 1999; Hunt, 2014; Pendlebury et al., 2011; Rubbi Nunan and Ntombela, 2019; Sonn et al., 2011; Soudien, 1998; Tomlinson et al., 2022) can be particularly fruitful in this context.

In highlighting these two features, the intention is not to gloss over or obscure other valuable characteristics of schools in the South African context, but rather to present two areas of potentiality that may be explored further through future research.

Chapter summary

In this chapter the findings that emerged from the narrative analysis of qualitative data collected across the four schools were presented in relation to the study's research questions. Learning that emerged through the collaborative prototyping of the developmental intervention was outlined along with findings that specifically relate to fostering an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S for, and by, young people. The interplay of expectations and experiences in an emergent collaboration was unpacked

based on a triangulation of collaborator perspectives, and the process was also narrated and interpreted at the level of each of the four schools. Dynamics around mobilising collaborative learning in terms of cross-cutting themes and collaborative cross-pollination were outlined. The chapter concluded with reflections on the data that was not collected due to the emergent nature of the RPCs and two collaborative opportunities that are specific to the SA context were highlighted.

CHAPTER 6 | DISCUSSION: TOWARDS a POLYMORPHIC READING of the ENABLING, HOSPITABLE SPACES for CKD&S

The study presented in this thesis explores the potential of youth-championing research-practice collaboration (RPC) to create enabling, hospitable spaces for collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship (CKD&S), drawing on insights from interconnected emergent RPCs with four public schools in the Western Cape, SA. In this chapter, a selection of the key findings are critically discussed in relation to the study's four research questions as well as extant literature (See Chapters 2 and 3).

I contend that the employed narrative configuration enables integrated yet polymorphic explorations of space-time (Polkinghorne, 1995; Massey, 1999; Jessop, Brenner and Jones, 2008; Robertson, 2018). The critical discussion of the study's findings is broadly structured around key elements of story grammar (McAdams, 1993). Within the narration and interpretation of the RPCs, the decision to collaborate on prototyping the developmental intervention is framed as a central **initiating event** across the four schools. In the first section of the chapter the observation-led process of formulating concepts to capture aspects of collaborative engagement is critically unpacked and I reflect on some of the limitations of how this unfolded and the opportunities they highlight for future research.

The articulated experiences of the **characters**, or collaborators, inform the discussions throughout the chapter, but are explicitly pulled into focus in sections 6.2, where interconnected dimensions of the positionality, expectations and experiences of different collaborators are considered, and 6.3, where some of the ethical ramifications of this type of research are discussed from the systemic to the collaborator-specific and framed with reflections on the importance of building collaborative experience and trust. In section 6.4, the discussion focuses on **setting**, specifically questions of materialising CKD&S in space-time. A case is made for augmenting the theory of enabling spaces' six dimensions to include embodiment as a further facet of an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b, 2014a, 2016, 2017). The section concludes with an exploration of the collaborative value of constraints.

Building on these elements of story grammar, I endeavour to present a polymorphic reading of the space-time that was fostered for CKD&S through the four RPCs. Rather than unpacking specific findings by each of the dimensions of the theoretical triangulation

framework in turn (See 4.3.5), I draw on different aspects of each theoretical framework, along with foundational concepts such as hospitality, as single points of entry to a multi-dimensional discussion that draws on aspects of the theory of enabling spaces, the overarching factors of collaborative working and Charlotte Mason's principles to highlight how they enrich our understanding of what enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S might look like (Mason, 1925, 2019; Patel et al., 2012). However, in section 6.5, I illustrate some of the pitfalls of one-dimensionalism in fostering and navigating a shared space for CKD&S, drawing on the example of how I conceived of time during the four RPCs. In section 6.6, I unpack the central importance of leadership in the RPCs, discuss aspects of the leadership roles and styles of the different collaborators, and critically reflect on the necessity and centrality of flexible, distributed leadership in CKD&S.

Throughout the discussion different aspects of the **attempts** to achieve the shared objective of embedding and refining the developmental intervention are critically unpacked, drawing on the previously outlined theoretical triangulation to provide paradigmatic windows into the presented narrative's dynamic, polymorphic exploration of space-time. Some of the **consequences** of these attempts, including learning, and **reactions** to those consequences are highlighted.

The chapter concludes with a first outline of a multi-dimensional, dialogic heuristic to support conversations around CKD&S. The proposal of this first prototype heuristic serves as a *denouement* or **resolution** of sorts for this thesis' narrative and proof of principle for the potential of RPCs in fostering enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S (Kendig, 2016). Simultaneously is framed as an initiating event for further social inquiry to test and refine its efficacy and utility as well as the potential of framing collaborative inquiry in terms of CKD&S. The narration and interpretation of the RPCs has drawn on narrative and paradigmatic modes of understanding (See 2.1.5 and 4.3.6), as is seen in this chapter's fusion of story grammar with a polymorphic reading of space-time informed by key coordinates of the study's theoretical triangulation.

6.1 Observation-led conceptualisation of collaborative engagement: Limitations and opportunities

In this section I critically discuss the approach I took to conceptualising and describing the collaborative engagement I observed in the schools. During the RPCs, I drew on my observations, experiences, and conversations with different collaborators to conceptualise shared, as well as specific markers, that characterised the schools' engagement with the

collaborative process. In the previous chapter, I organised findings that were relevant to each of the schools and outlined what informed the observations around collaborative engagement. The following concepts are foregrounded in the descriptions of the four schools' collaborative engagement (See 2.6 and 5.4):

Table 7: Summary overview of observed collaborative engagement in schools

School 1 (Primary)	School 2 (Secondary)
Open, Ready and Cooperative	Open, Ready, Aligned and Integrative
School 3 (Primary)	School 4 (Secondary)
Open, Ready, Aligned and Intentional	Open but at capacity

As part of the interpretive process, these empirical observations were anchored in salient literature on collaboration which informed the theoretical triangulation that was employed to bolster the narrative, thematic analysis. As mentioned in Chapters 2 and 4, this selection of concepts is not exhaustive. It reflects insights, experiences and observations drawn from the four RPCs. In critically unpacking the findings presented in this thesis in narrative form, I have augmented these concepts with the theory of enabling spaces (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b, 2014a) as well as a set of overarching factors in collaborative working (Patel et al., 2012). Insights from a relevant selection of the twenty principles that are at the core of Charlotte Mason's educational philosophy are also referenced throughout the discussion (Mason, 1925, 2019). The observation-led conceptualisation of collaborative engagement can also be visualised as a variation of the adapted hermeneutic circle I employed in this study (See 4.3.6):
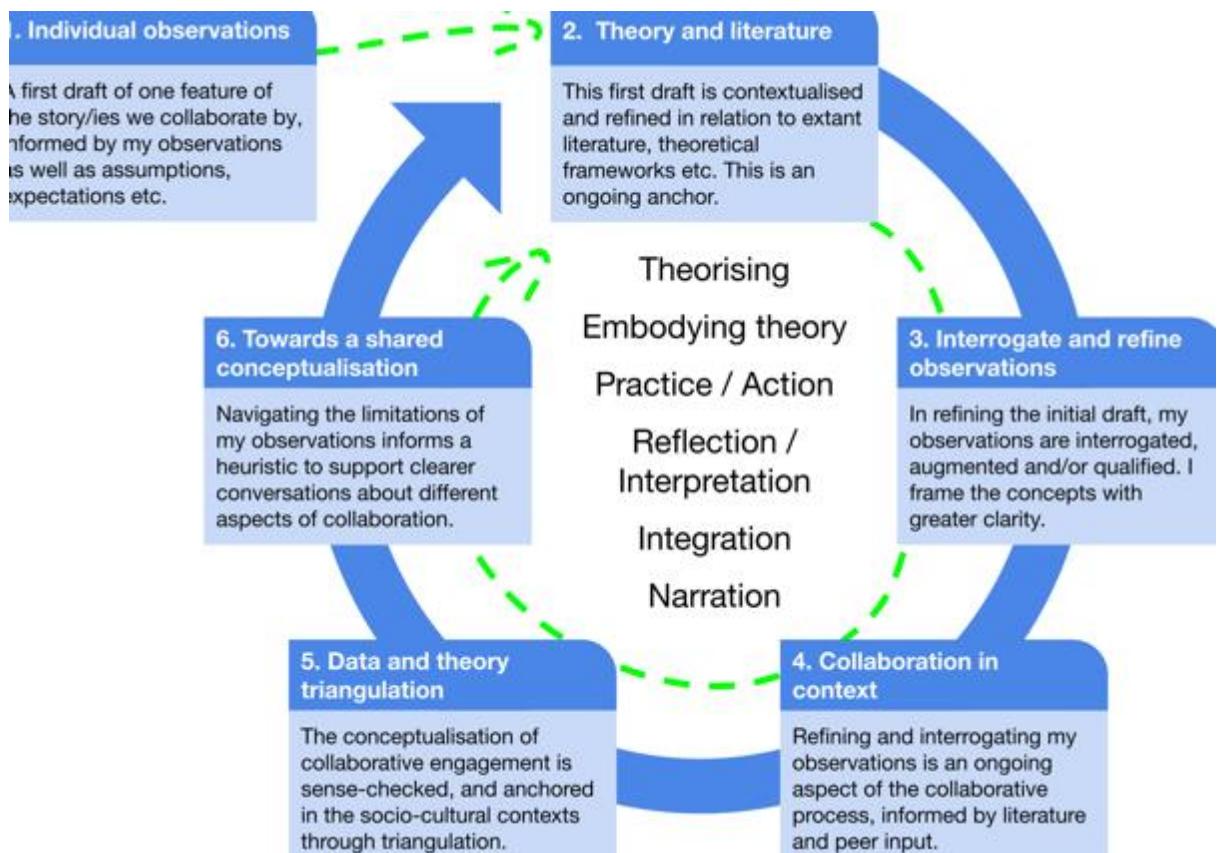
Figure 20: Visualising observation-led conceptualisation of collaborative engagement as an adapted hermeneutic circle

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen

The concepts that were employed to describe collaborative engagement are one aspect of the narrative presented in this thesis. Given the emergent nature of the RPCs, it has notable limitations. However, the learning from this process may inform more considered approaches to collaboratively conceptualising what engagement might look like in different CKD&S endeavours. In narrating the collaborative process in each school, one area I initially thought I was attempting to articulate pertained to the kind of **setting** the school presented for the collaborative process. This was part of what I was capturing, but the framing of collaborative engagement also extended to the interplay between the **characters** (or collaborators) and the settings in terms of how **attempts** were made to embed the developmental intervention in each school as well as the **consequences** of these attempts and **reactions** to those consequences. In attempting to conceptualise collaborative engagement I was thus primarily considering the social, cultural and organisational as one dimension that is necessarily related to a range of others in a multi-dimensional space for CKD&S (See 6.4).

In some respects, this process started before the collaborative prototyping officially kicked off. I sought to anticipate – in more general, abstract terms – how the different

collaborators might engage with the process and what collaboration might look like in each socio-organisational context. I was inadvertently outlining the first draft of a narrative, zooming in on questions of openness, readiness, alignment, intentionality, integration, and cooperation. I was wondering how much capacity my collaborators would have to engage and as outlined elsewhere I was at key junctures operating on assumptions about perceived resource constraints that may have inhibited aspects of the collaborations (See 5.1.3).

As visualised above, my observations were sense-checked in relation to a multi-disciplinary body of literature on collaborative research approaches as well as the study's context (See Chapters 2 and 3). The cycle that is represented through this hermeneutic circle is not a static, once-and-done process. Rather it was an ongoing feature of the collaborative process as well as the interpretation and narration of the RPCs whereby I refined my understanding of the collaborative engagement in each school context through ongoing observation, active collaboration as well as anchoring what I was seeing and experiencing in extant literature. Although the formative and summative input and feedback from my collaborators informed this process, there is scope to involve collaborators more explicitly in articulating a shared understanding of collaborative engagement (Fishman *et al.*, 2013; Kali *et al.*, 2023).

The concepts I opted to employ likely mean different things to different people (See 5.1). Thus taking the time to have a conversation about what openness or readiness means in a specific context, for specific collaborators is vital. In the RPCs presented here this did not happen in a clearly, structured, or systematic manner. While my collaborators and I touched on these concepts an opportunity was missed to have a clear conversation about how they could be harnessed as fuel for CKD&S. In the concluding section of this chapter, I outline a heuristic to facilitate conversations about different aspects of CKD&S (See 6.7). Given time constraints that collaborators will generally need to navigate, the objective would not necessarily be to discuss every single concept. As mentioned above the list presented here is not exhaustive. Rather, these conversations would present an opportunity to draw on a broader range of perspectives in considering what might fuel and sustain a collaborative process in a specific context as well as where additional investments and/or decisive leadership could bolster efforts. For example, an organisation may have a high level of openness to a collaborative process but lack the capacity and/or readiness to engage. In these instances, one approach may be for leaders to decide to stop investing time and resources in certain activities so that they are able to engage in the collaborative process. These types of decisions and investments are not always possible, but having a

clear conversation at the outset can ensure that there is a shared understanding about why a collaboration was not pursued (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Vivona et al., 2023).

Clear conversations about collaborative engagement also allow different collaborators to provide input on how the process may be assessed over time (Enyedy and Stevens, 2014; Norris-Tirrell, 2012; Thomson et al., 2009). If a high value is placed on openness, readiness and intentionality collaborators can contribute to defining the indicators they would like to see these dimensions measured by. As highlighted in Chapters 4 and 5, I am acutely aware that a richer mix of data could have been collected to inform the narration and interpretation of the collaborative process (See 4.7 and 5.6). Facilitating conversations about what CKD&S efforts should look like in a specific context, among other things, presents an opportunity to discuss how performance or success should be measured and how this might feasibly be done (Chesbrough et al., 2018; Enyedy and Stevens, 2014; Gardner, 2005; Norris-Tirrell, 2012; Patel et al., 2012; Thomson et al., 2009).

Narratives, such as the one presented in this thesis, are a starting point rather than a comprehensive account of a series of collaborations. The process of interpreting and narrating the RPCs is part of the story, and it has highlighted various considerations for how we might articulate clearer stories to collaborate by (Lewis, 2001, 2011). In this section I have zoomed in on one aspect of the narrative process, whereby I attempted to describe aspects of what I was observing and experiencing in the four schools. I have opted to refer to it as collaborative engagement, but one could also conceive of it as collaborative fuel – shared characteristics that can be catalytic in both initiating and sustaining CKD&S.

6.2 Personed, personal and relational: The interplay of positionality and relationality in emergent collaboration

This section builds on the findings outlined in the previous chapter (See 5.1) related to the interplay of collaborator expectations and experiences, and critically explores selected aspects of how the different collaborators have been conceptualised and positioned as characters within the narrative presented in this thesis in relation to the social, cultural and organisational landscapes the collaborations unfolded in. The understanding of personhood (See 2.1.4) that underpins the study is central to this discussion. In considering the roles or positionality of different collaborators in the RPCs, I conceive of them as moral, believing, narrating, purposed, agentic, relating creatures who comprise a complex, mysterious interplay of body, soul, and spirit, as well as the capacity for purpose-driven rational thought, creativity, and imagination (Holmes, 1983; Holmes and Lindsay, 2018; Poythress,

2023; Smith, 2011). Another core presupposition is that every collaborator has inherent dignity, worth and agency, which cannot be divorced from an engagement with the world that is moral, believing, narrating, purposed, agentic and relating. Personhood and the notion of "the individual" (Siedentop, 2015) are related but distinct concepts (Evans, 1979; Jarvis, 2018; Rist, 2020; Smith, 2011; Van Pelt and Spencer, 2023). While there are significant areas of overlap between them, the former is foregrounded in this thesis as it more effectively encompasses the relational aspect of our being as humans than the latter (Smith, 2011, 2015; Van Pelt and Spencer, 2023).

Despite an underlying commitment to personhood, the narration and interpretation of the RPCs has highlighted areas where the process defaulted to championing individualism rather than personhood, a few examples are discussed below. In seeking to collaborate with other moral, believing, narrating, purposed, agentic, relating creatures I endeavoured to better understand the expectations they brought to the process in order to pursue ways to foster alignment across the collaboration. I made some incremental progress in this pursuit, but the analysis has also highlighted the importance of proactively facilitating conversations that allow collaborators to reflect on and more clearly articulate the assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and values as well as interests, skills, and resources they bring to a collaboration. A great deal of what is presented in this thesis, is based on a process of narrative configuration that has privileged one perspective – mine (Camacho, 2016; Lewis, 2001; Zeni, 2014).

Below, I critically consider how the tension inherent in the motivational duality between agency and communion may contribute to clearer initial, as well as ongoing, conversations about the priorities, needs, motivations, or goals that collaborators bring to a collaborative process (McAdams, 1993). I also unpack the value of harnessing narratives as a collaborative technology in enacting a commitment to a relational epistemology and the section concludes with a few critical reflections on the relational nature of our knowing, learning and stewardship.

6.2.1 Beyond individual autonomy: Harnessing the collaborative tension between agency and communion

In clarifying the definition of hospitality that underpins this study, I drew on discussions about the limits of tolerance that highlight how this alternative concept is predicated on an assumption of the primacy of individual autonomy (See 2.3.2). During this study, I observed that in attempting to foster enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S there can be a

strong pull towards tolerance, particularly when you are navigating access to social, cultural, organisational spaces where you are an outsider needing to establish a relational foothold. In the short-term, tolerance can appear like a lower cost form of engagement, whereby some of the more challenging aspects of delineating and inhabiting a shared, enabling space can be side stepped by operating from an assumption of your own individual autonomy – as well as that of your collaborators – being of absolute importance (Bretherton, 2004; Dasli, 2017).

While the proposed conceptualisation of an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S is predicated on a clear understanding of personhood, which acknowledges the inherent dignity of each individual person who engages in it as well as their relationality, I agree with Dasli (2017) that "the one-sided attention that individual autonomy pays to human life" is ultimately antithetical to CKD&S as it "requires all agents to divorce themselves from their particular communities in order to operate as independent and rational beings" (p. 680).

Skipper and Pepler (2021) contend that "[t]he success of co-creation depends on the academic shifting from being self-focussed and independent to being other-focussed and interdependent" (p. 1). While I broadly agree with their emphasis on the potential benefits of making more room for an interdependent approach in research that prioritises relationships and collaboration with others, I maintain that there can also be value in acknowledging the merit – and at times appropriateness - of both these approaches or broad orientations, and that clear conversations are needed to ascertain when collaboration makes sense (See 2.7 and 6.7). MacIntyre (1999) helpfully frames the distinction in terms of the virtues we need to flourish as social creatures: "In order to flourish, we need both those virtues that enable us to function as independent and accountable practical reasoners and those virtues that enable us to acknowledge the nature and extent of our dependence on others" (pp. 155–56). Our navigation of the tensions between agency and communion, as well as independence and interdependence, need to be anchored in an enabling, hospitable space-time "whose common good takes account of human vulnerability and inter-dependence" (Bretherton, 2004, p. 88).

In this collaborative process, narrative was key. The developmental intervention converged on the question: What is my story? And I observed the value of personal fables, myths and stories, in the ongoing clarification of being and becoming (Bochner, 2001; McAdams, 1993). When I initially considered the transferable skills learners would potentially have

the opportunity to practice and foster through the developmental intervention, critical thinking, listening skills, observation, written and verbal reflection, as well as giving and receiving feedback, were top of mind. The process, however, highlighted the value of narration as a key transferable skill (Whiteside, 2023; Woike, 2008) and prompted further reflection on the importance of unearthing the stories we live, learn *and* collaborate by (McAdams, 1993, 2013; McAdams and McLean, 2013). These considerations were pertinent not only in my collaboration with learners but crucially extended to how I worked with school leaders and staff.

McAdams (1993), drawing on psychologist David Bakan's work, highlights a motivational duality in human existence between agency and communion as two "fundamental modalities in the existence of living forms", that organise a whole host of "human wants, needs, desires, and goals" (p. 71):

- *Agency* refers to the individual's attempts to distinguish themselves from others, to achieve mastery, to protect, expand and assert the self. A central objective is to become an *independent*, autonomous, powerful agent.
- *Communion* endeavours to qualify or augment one's individuality by becoming part of something that is larger than the self, relating to – and/or merging with others in *interdependent*, close, intimate, loving and warm ways (Bullet points paraphrased from McAdams, 1993).

In the previous chapter I highlighted the value of identifying and navigating the needs, priorities, capacity, and constraints of different collaborators throughout the process. The complementary lenses of independence and interdependence as well as agency and communion, prompt us to consider how to most effectively navigate the motivational dualities we bring to CKD&S. Rather than insisting on a wholesale orientation towards the interdependence or communion 'side,' I posit that an essential first step is to ascertain *how* individuals (and potentially teams or organisations) are approaching a collaborative process and to seek to understand *why* that is the case. Addressing these dynamics directly may enable clearer conversations about whether collaboration should be pursued (See 2.7). It allows a multi-disciplinary or multi-agency team to clarify their individual foundations and what those might mean for how they work together. It is also – crucially – an ethical imperative to set up collaborative working up in a way that allows every individual to understand that although an invitation is extended to become part of something that is bigger than what they could achieve individually, they are still empowered to navigate the tension between independence and interdependence, as well as agency and communion, in

that context. I will explore this further below, as part of a discussion of the ethics of emergent RPC. As outlined in Chapter 2, collaboration is broadly distinguished from cooperation by the self-directed or voluntary nature of someone's involvement. We start fostering an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S by intentionally pursuing a better understanding of the motivations and positionality of different collaborators. The heuristic that is presented in the concluding section of this chapter was designed with this in mind.

6.2.2 The relational nature of our knowing, learning and stewardship

Schools are often key hubs in communities in the South African context (Bloch, 2009b; Jansen and Blank, 2015), not merely because they offer physical space for teaching, learning as well as other developmental activities for children, young people and community members, but because they are multi-facetted social, cultural and organisational places (P. J. du Plessis, 2019; Hofmeyr, 2020; Köhler, 2020; Prew, 2009). The social, cultural, and organisational dimension of an enabling space highlights the importance of embedding knowledge discovery and stewardship processes in an institution's organisational structures, social processes and cultures (Hargreaves, 1995; Ivaniushina and Alexandrov, 2018; Stoll, 2000; Van Der Westhuizen et al., 2005; Van Wyk, 1997; Weick, 1976). Organisational culture includes the values, ethics, assumptions, mindsets and behavioural patterns that influence decision-making, problem-solving and other key activities within an organisation. These are passed on over time - often implicitly - and can be identified by looking at norms, shared language and the stories people or groups in the organisation live and work by (Huyghe and Knockaert, 2015; Sporn, 1996). The interplay between socio-organisational structures, processes and cultures is dynamic with structures, for example, incentivising or prompting behaviours that shape social processes like relationship- and trust-building (or erosion). Over time these behaviours become habitual or even taken for granted: When you hear phrases like, 'That's just how we do things here' or 'That's how it's always been done' an individual is often highlighting an aspect of at least one of the cultures that are pervasive in their context (Ivaniushina and Alexandrov, 2018; Jansen and Blank, 2015; Murphy et al., 2015; Van Der Westhuizen et al., 2005).

The process of collaborating with different groups (school leaders, staff, learners) in four schools, highlighted that it is rarely as simple as mapping one organisational culture although there is also value in doing so (For example see: Hargreaves, 1995; Stoll, 2000). Rather the process requires a cognisance of cultural dynamics at different organisational levels or dimensions without losing sight of other cultures or sub-cultures that may be

particularly relevant to the broader CKD&S process. A key example of this was the interplay between official organisational values – the ones that many South African schools have painted on the side of their main building or somewhere else on the premises (Western Cape Education Department, 2019b) – and the values that are lived and thus reinforced by school leaders, staff and/or learners on a day-to-day basis. The collaborative process highlighted that perceived disconnects are often rooted in a lack of clarity about what is meant by a specific value and what it looks like for that value to be lived in a range of different interactions in a particular context (Abreu et al., 2009; Filipe et al., 2017; Seale, 2017).

As knowledge discovery and stewardship are embedded in social processes, Peschl and Fundneider highlight the importance of intentionally building or fostering a social atmosphere or container as a "holding space for a generative social process" (Scharmer, 2018, p. 13) in which knowledge or value-discovery and stewardship dynamics can gain momentum. A social container, which can also be understood in terms of "the quality of relationships that give rise to patterns of thinking, conversing and organising, which in turn produce practical results" (Scharmer, 2018, p. 14), needs to be characterised by trust, shared objectives, vocabulary/language, boundaries, will and mindset, as well as ethics and values.

Although relationships can be built, and collaboration pursued, even if some of these aspects are missing or weak, when they are shared or broadly aligned a generative space is created (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b, 2014a; Scharmer, 2018). In the context of the four RPCs, I contend that a relatively robust social container was fostered situationally – during the period of intensive collaboration between January and June 2023 – but that the relationships that were established and enabled the collaborations were not sustained to the same degree beyond this period. If one takes a mid- to long-term view of the investments that were made by the different collaborators in the process, it is worth considering if and how this limitation could be addressed in future collaborative research. It may not always be a priority to think and invest relationally beyond an individual project, but in cases where there may be potential to pursue longer-term collaboration or partnership, it would be advisable to prioritise sustained investments in relationships and to consider how this commitment could be shared across collaborator groups, i.e. to avoid a single point of failure by making it reliant on an individual or one group's capacity to stay engaged in sustaining collaboration (Alonzo et al., 2022; Kinnaman and Bleich, 2004; Scott and Boyd, 2023).

In considering the social, cultural and organisational, I am reminded that the enabling, hospitable space that is created for moral, believing, narrating, purposed, agentic, relating creatures to engage in collaborative knowledge discovery is not some abstract entity that exists apart from myself or any of the other collaborators who contributed to this process (Harvey, 2006; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005). The question of the social, cultural and organisational prompts us to consider how we come together as human persons to discover and steward knowledge whether at the level of the interpersonal, the organisational or the systemic (San Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2005) and to design CKD&S processes with an awareness of the interpersoned, relational nature of our knowing and learning (See 2.1.3).

San Martín-Rodríguez et al. (2005) identify and discuss three overarching determinants of successful collaboration: interactional, organisational, and systemic. They also underline the importance of understanding the varying relationships between these determinants, echoing and augmenting Peschl and Fundneider's emphasis on integration by highlighting the importance of considering broader systemic determinants in addition to what may be observed at interpersonal, interactional and/or organisational dimensions. In the following section, I draw on their framing of systemic determinants in a critical discussion of some of systemic barriers to CKD&S that were encountered through the RPCs and in turn contextualised in extant literature.

6.3 The ethics of emergent, youth-championing RPC

In this section I unpack a few key considerations related to the ethics of emergent, youth-championing RPC as a vehicle for CKD&S. I start by discussing some of the systemic barriers to CKD&S in the SA context, before unpacking the complex reality of situated ethics in emergent RPCs from the perspectives of the different collaborator groups in this study. I conclude with a discussion on the importance of intentionally fostering both collaborative experience and trust as essential features of an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S that both warrants and encourages ethical engagement by all who are involved. I anchor the discussion in the ethic of love, humility and service that underpins this study, and highlight how key ethical considerations in social research are enriched by the concept of hospitality as well as Charlotte Mason's educational principles (See 2.3.1).

6.3.1 Systemic barriers to, and in, CKD&S

One of the strengths of this study - its contextual specificity and embeddedness in the schools the RPCs ran in - also presents a limitation that highlights broader systemic challenges in the SA context. With the country's transition to a democracy, a key priority

was establishing a three-tier model of cooperative, decentralised governance in the new education system predicated on meaningful engagement with the rights enshrined in the constitution as well as a shared commitment to "ensuring that the best interest of learners are furthered and the right to basic education is realised" (Sayed, 1997; Veriava, 2024, p. 170). According to the principle of cooperative governance, schools – generally represented by school governing bodies (SGBs) – provincial government and national government are the partners who run public schools together, with SGBs seen as key expressions of grassroots democracy with legally enshrined autonomy (Veriava, 2024).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the relative autonomy of schools in policymaking presents an opportunity, especially for school-level RPC/P approaches as school leaders and SGB can independently decide whether to engage and projects can be tailored to their context (See 5.6). However, the widespread dysfunction of the SA education system means that careful consideration needs to be given to where and how to invest resources in service of educational improvement for as many as possible (Bloch, 2009; Van der Berg, 2016; Schirmer and Visser, 2023a; Everatt, 2024b, 2024a; Phala and Sutherland, 2024; Pretorius and Morris, 2024). While school-level interventions and RPC/P can and - as has been shown in this study - do add value in context for the schools that have the capacity to engage (For another example, see Silbert and Bitso, 2015), some might argue that considering the systemwide dysfunction these measures are at best palliative (Pritchett, 2013). I raise this not to discredit or devalue the work my collaborators and I undertook but to underline the importance of engaging with the ethical implications of systemic challenges to CKD&S at the local or school-level.

It will not be possible to mention, much less thoroughly discuss, all the systemic challenges that are addressed in the extant literature but a few of the key ones are outlined below:

- The country's apartheid legacy of state-sanctioned and -proliferated discrimination and racialisation, whereby the majority of SA citizens were denied basic human rights – including a right to quality basic education in their first language (Williams, Davis and Soudien, 1997; Soudien, 2007b; Thobejane, 2013) – has had multi-generational effects that are still evident in key threads of the nation's social fabric.
- It has often been noted that another key feature of the SA system is its pervasive inequality, which was in many ways maintained through the terms that were

negotiated as part of the country's peaceful transition to democracy (Griffin et al., 2021; Kafka, 2019; Lumadi, 2019).

- The SA education landscape is marked by a lack of accountability at every level of the system. The country's per capita expenditure on education is comparable to that of some of the wealthiest countries in the world, yet it has some of the poorest educational outcomes in the world (Bloch, 2009b; Msila, 2011; Maarman and Lamont-Mbawuli, 2017; Patrinos and Angrist, 2019; Davids, 2022; Schirmer and Visser, 2023e).

- The system faces critical challenges around literacy and numeracy with SA students routinely underperforming in international, standardised tests (Bloch, 2009b; Soudien, 2011; Schirmer and Visser, 2023b). Although the country has seen some progress in these areas over the past three decades, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted learning and created learning losses that learners in under-resourced and dysfunctional schools may not be able to make up (Gustafsson, 2020; Gustafsson and Deliwe, 2020; Van der Berg, Wyk and Selkirk, 2020).

- It is well established that the quality of teachers and teaching is a decisive factor in health and efficacy of any education system (Hopkins, 2020). Spaull (2019b), highlighting nine critical problems facing the SA education system, writes: "There is now a large body of evidence in South Africa attesting to the fact that the majority of South African teachers do not…have the content knowledge or pedagogical skills necessary to impart the curriculum" (p.8). Furthermore, it is expected that half of all teachers who were in post in 2021 will retire by 2030 due to an aging teaching corps, which will require an increase of between 7500 and 17500 teachers per year joining the education system to maintain educational supply depending on policy decisions around class sizes (Van der Berg and Gustafsson, 2022; Schirmer and Visser, 2023c). However, recent analysis has highlighted that in 2021 only about 50 percent of university graduates who qualified as teachers were hired by provincial education departments. A phenomenon which is at least in part explained by teacher salaries "growing at a faster rate than what is being allocated to the education budget" (Ntaka, 2022).

- The accountability challenges faced by the SA education system are also reflected in its 'unionisation'. A Ministerial Task Team (Department of Basic Education, 2016), that was appointed to investigate fraud and corruption in the education sector, found that the country's largest teacher union – the South African

Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) – "was in 'de facto control' of the education departments in six of the nine provinces in the country" with the union's reach spanning across the DBE's senior leadership to the extent that the authors concluded education in SA is run by SADTU (Department of Basic Education, 2016; Spaull, 2019, p. 7). More recent analyses have argued that since SA's democratic transition, "SADTU has failed to achieve fully fledged teacher professionalism, prioritising unionism above professionalism" a concerning observation given the union's significant political and operational influence (Cooper and Gamble, 2023, p.1).

- Other challenges include, the until recently, near-daily electricity black outs that impact schooling in a myriad of ways (Matsheta and Sefoka, 2023; Yende, 2024), parental education levels, as well as the effects of pervasive poverty on the wellbeing and educational trajectories of children and young people (Van der Berg, 2016; Fintel, Burger and Von Fintel, 2020; Hofmeyr, 2020; Masa, Khan and Chowa, 2020).

These, and other systemic challenges, compound to create a sense of disconnect between a rhetoric that champions access to quality education for all children and young people, and an on-the-ground reality that for many young South Africans is seemingly worlds apart from that basic right. It has been argued that although the impact of the apartheid legacy and other broader contextual factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic is undeniable, "the responsibility of current education officials and educators for the present situation will only grow" (Schirmer and Visser, 2023c, p. 3). A sentiment that I would argue applies equally to education and social researchers working with, on or around schools in the SA context.

In considering the objects, aims, purpose, conduct, fruits, and application of our research (See 2.1.2), we have an ethical responsibility to consider not only how we minimise harm but how we maximise value, benefit, and improvement through CKD&S in the face of these broader systemic challenges and barriers (Hopkins, 2013, 2015a). To be sure no individual research project, or even RPC/P, is going to make a system-wide difference but if, as researchers, we are going to ask educational officials, school leaders, staff and learners to collaborate with us, the case for how the process will directly (or indirectly) bolster teaching, learning and/or related improvements that address key challenges or opportunities in the school context must be considered. In the context of this study, the developmental intervention arguably contributed to improving learner wellbeing and fostered a space for reflection on their relationship to the school as a key learning space.

However, in future collaborative processes I would place a far stronger emphasis on co-creating an intervention with staff and/or learners that directly supports improvements related to teaching and learning. As mentioned elsewhere, the involvement of a larger group of staff also has the potential to strengthen the sustainability of an intervention, which is another important ethical consideration given the resource constraints many schools face (See 5.1).

6.3.2 The complex reality of situated ethics

A commitment to ethical practice in collaborative social research must be materialised in space-time and the RPCs highlighted the complexity, and formative potential, of doing so. I would contend that many of the core ethical principles in social research are - among other values - rooted in a commitment to tolerance (Dasli, 2017; Fisher and Anushko, 2008). Bretherton (2004) prompts us to consider "whether there is an inherent contradiction between any programme of education (which necessarily involves the claim that a person needs to change in some way, that they are not where they can or should be) and the promotion of tolerance and respect for diversity (which involves the claim that we should refrain from seeking to change someone's mind or attitude)" (p. 82). I would not claim to have an adequate answer to this question, but it usefully frames and refracts aspects of what I encountered while situating my commitment to ethical practice in a dynamic, emergent collaborative process. Below I unpack observations related to each of the collaborator groups, highlighting learning as well as considerations for future research. I have made repeated references to "the collaborator groups" throughout this thesis but as noted elsewhere the goal is not create the illusion of simple cohesion as there was a great deal of heterogeneity and dynamism in each of these groups. However, in the interest of providing relatively clear points of entry in this unfolding narrative I endeavour to consider thematic strands that were particularly relevant to learners, school leaders and staff, as well myself, respectively.

Learners

Charlotte Mason's nineteenth principle is that children and young people should be taught, "as they become mature enough to understand such teaching", that their chief responsibility as persons is the acceptance or rejection of ideas (Cadora and Meek, 2023; Mason, 2019). They should be supported in the development of their capacity for what is elsewhere described as "critical ignoring" (Kozyreva *et al.*, 2023) by being provided with a wide range of knowledge as well as principles of conduct that foster disciplines and habits of mind and body that allow for a discerning, critical discovery and stewardship of

knowledge. The intervention's design sought to contribute to the development of such disciplines and habits by creating a space for young people to try their hand at practicing to articulate their understanding of self in relation to their unfolding learning journey. Although no claims can be made about the formation of habits or disciplines the intervention sought to remind learners that these can be developed and practiced (Haimovitz and Dweck, 2017; Yeager et al., 2016).

One transferable skill, that's relevance I did not anticipate while designing the prototype intervention, is the ability to give informed consent, particularly in school contexts where much of what learners experience on a daily basis is compulsory (Enslin, 1992; Gwandure and Mayekiso, 2013; Hunt, 2014; Wiggins and Smith, 2015). The decision to garner dynamic, informed consent from the young people who collaborated with me was not merely a matter of ethical or legal compliance. The school leaders consented to the collaboration on behalf of the school as legal entity, drawing on the authority that is delegated to it by parents in the South African education system (*in locus parentis*) (Maja, 2024). In terms of fundamental legal and ethical compliance this would be sufficient to proceed with the research project and intervention but the decision to also have every young person give their explicit consent, was an acknowledgement of their personhood coupled with an awareness that the integrity of the collaborative process depended on their willing, self-directed engagement in an environment where they are not routinely encouraged to have a say in how their day unfolds (Sendra Ramos et al., 2022; Van Pelt and Spencer, 2023).

Part of this process also involved communicating a value of dynamic informed consent, whereby learners understood that their decision to consent could be revisited throughout the process, without creating the impression that their involvement was inconsequential (le Grange, 2019; Spindel Bassett and Geron, 2020). I found it particularly challenging to strike this balance between assuring them that they were free to choose, while also ensuring they understood that their contributions were valuable and once they withdrew their consent it would most likely not be possible to join a future group as the priority was to give every learner an opportunity to participate.

This was an important dimension of my communication with the learners as it conveyed that while they were encouraged to choose whether they wanted to participate, they would also be responsible for the decision they made (Evans, 2007; Skelton, 2008). In a few cases I had learners who opted out because they did not feel like participating, only to ask

whether they could join back in at the next session. In these instances, I faced a dilemma as I was committed to collaborating with as many of the English medium learners as possible, but I also observed a dynamic whereby a very small handful of learners would opt back in to joining sessions if they did not feel like attending another class or commitment. The process of navigating ongoing, dynamic informed consent with learners was itself a complex, learning-rich aspect of the RPCs. It highlighted the importance of clear conversations with collaborators at the outset, that lay a foundation for ongoing (re)alignment (van der Voet and Steijn, 2021).

I contend that hospitality, as "a move [to] actively…welcome those with the least status" (Bretherton, 2004, p.100), – notably learners in many school contexts – is integral to an ethic of love, humility and service expressed through youth-championing RPC. As a value – and a central ethical principle – hospitality goes beyond tolerance or compliance and demands more of those who engage with, and co-create, spaces for CKD&S (Smith, 2023a, 2023b, 2024) while still encompassing – and arguably enriching – the essential ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, minimising harm as well as acknowledging dynamics around vulnerability (See 4.4). In future research it would be important to consider how tailored, hospitable conversations could be facilitated with different collaborator groups. The heuristic, which is outlined in the final section of this chapter, seeks to provide a range of entry points for conversations to allow for differentiated dialogic strategies in exploring potential CKD&S activities.

School leaders and staff

These two groups are interconnected but when it comes to the ethics of the RPCs there are differences: The school leaders consented on behalf of their organisation and then, in three out of the four schools, delegated the task of ongoing liaison to staff. Thus, I was aware that for these individuals their involvement with the process was initially likely more a case of cooperation. However, as noted elsewhere the staff I worked with were all highly engaged throughout the process, and I would not hesitate to describe them as collaborators. It is, nevertheless, important to consider organisational hierarchies when engaging in CKD&S and accept that some individuals may become, and remain, involved due to professional obligation. I would maintain that even in such instances there is still scope to explore with them how a process may be beneficial to them and how they are best placed to contribute to a collaboration (Farrell et al., 2023; Henry and Tait, 2016).

Throughout the RPCs I was aware that for school leaders and staff engaging the process both was and was not their job as the work involved in embedding the intervention came on top of their core responsibilities around teaching and school leadership (Grant, 2006; Mokoena and Machaisa, 2018; Msila, 2011; Robinson and Soudien, 2014). I saw it as an ethical, as well as practical, responsibility to better understand and work around their constraints and made every effort to make the process as accessible and sustainable as possible for them. For example, I adapted ongoing engagement and communication to the individual preferences of school leaders and staff by using the communication media that suited them. This was an example of manageable and sustainable adaptive practice that allowed us to collaborate more effectively.

This approach to communication was also reflected in how I navigated data sharing and management. Rather than imposing a standardised workflow on the four schools, I invited them to decide how they wanted to share data (e.g. class lists, staff contact details) with me and had clear, but differentiated, conversations in each context about how I would steward that data during the collaborative process (See 4.4.3). This avoided a situation where compliance with a workflow that is completely different to how things are done in a school context becomes an unreasonable transaction cost in a collaborative process (Vivona et al., 2023). This flexibility and differentiation becomes more challenging as a RPC/P expands (Duxbury et al., 2020; McCabe et al., 2023), but in instances where it is feasible it can allow for a differentiated engagement that both acknowledges and integrates the needs, priorities, capacity and constraints of collaborators.

In my engagement with school leaders and staff I observed how the value of hospitality "fosters both the general and concrete respect necessary to allow the validity of one's own tradition to stand while at the same time attending to the otherness of the other and the ways in which the other is the same as me" (Bretherton, 2004, p. 103). This growing awareness prompted and challenged me to more carefully consider the experiences of school leaders and staff in the school context including their associations with the school as relational space-time, the varying roles and responsibilities they navigate, as well as the emotional, cognitive and social demands they are contending with or juggling, both as part of their core professional portfolio and the plethora of additional tasks and themes that are routinely added to it (Balie and Sayed, 2020; Mentz and Van Der Walt, 2007; Nel, 2021; A. le Roux and Marais, 2013). Although I was able to learn more about some of these dimensions through the collaboration with school leaders and staff, I maintain that intentionally facilitating conversations from the outset of a collaborative process - where

collaborators are invited to share their expectations, assumptions, motivations and/or constraints - are an essential foundational and ongoing aspect of CKD&S (Dixon, 2023; Vardy, 2023).

Researcher

While it is of paramount importance to consider the ethics of my engagement with school leaders, staff and learners through the RPCs, the process also highlighted the necessity of considering how as researchers we might extend more ethical care to ourselves in this type of work given its emotional, cognitive and physical intensity, the significant investment of energy that relationship- and trust-building requires, as well as the demands of navigating unfamiliar socio-organisational and –cultural contexts (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Lowney, 2017b; Dickson-Swift, 2019).

One specific example I was struck by as I analysed my fieldwork notes was how intensely I wrestled with the belief that I had failed to meet the expectations I had of myself, or I believed others had of me (See 5.1.3). Listening back to recordings of notes from the very start of my work in the schools, I was alarmed at the levels of distress I expressed at the time even though I had lived through it. I had to concede that I had not prioritised minimising emotional distress for myself, particularly as a lone researcher (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2008).

Revisiting these notes as part of the narrative, thematic analysis confirmed the importance of having a sounding board who is well positioned to call out your blind spots as well as sense check your perceptions (Camacho, 2016; Dadds, 2014). While I was working my way through the earliest batch of fieldwork notes and re-encountering these moments of distress and concern, I reviewed the feedback from the groups I was working with at the time in parallel. I wondered whether I would find that they gave more critical feedback – particularly as I firmly believed I was failing them – but it was striking to note that their feedback was overwhelmingly positive and largely corresponded with the overall sentiment of the learner feedback throughout the collaborative process. I had inadvertently isolated myself in a manner that warped my perception of the unfolding process, this too highlights the value of collaborative working which benefits from multiple perspectives (Farrell et al., 2023; Jensen et al., 2022).

As discussed elsewhere, researchers and practitioners need to be equipped to engage in approaches like RPC/P (See 2.4). Beyond the development of listening skills and relational competence, I maintain there is value in supporting researchers and practitioners to foster

their emotional agility (S. David, 2016) and stamina for collaborative working (Maccallum and Naccarato, 2019). Beyond training and capacity building it is also important to consider what other support structures can be established around researchers and practitioners that provide supervisory or pastoral support along with a measure of accountability. Depending on the specific project or process, some of these structures could be established within a collaborative team, although it will likely take some time for trust to be established where collaborators are working together for the first time. The optimal constellation will depend on the nature of the project as well as the roles of different collaborators and their corresponding needs (Liu and Watson, 2023; Mat Noor and Shafee, 2021; Sanders, 2015; Sjölund et al., 2022a).

A few general reflections

Beyond navigating dynamic, informed consent with the different collaborators, I observed the challenge of fostering a culture within the collaboration where staff acknowledged the right of learners to choose whether they wished to participate. School leaders and staff were generally eager for as many learners as possible to engage with the developmental intervention and I observed in their communication with learners that they framed learner participation and contribution in terms of established hierarchies, whereby learners were expected to behave and do as they are told (Enslin, 1992; Nthontho, 2017).

This framing often placed me in the category of a teacher who was there to tell learners what to do (Mathikithela and Wood, 2019). In navigating dynamic, informed consent collaboratively with school leaders, staff and learners, allowing for an approach that is ethically sound but also honours the processes, rules and norms different groups value requires a careful balance. If the objective is to foster an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S where young people can, among other things, develop their capacity for informed consent, certain organisational norms around obedience or compliance may need to be reframed in the context of the RPC (Collier, 2019).

This challenge also presents an opportunity as it highlights the value of developing a shared philosophy of ethical practice in CKD&S, which draws on and synthesises the key ethical principles that underpin the work of practitioners and researchers to enrich the overall approach in service of all collaborators as well as the collaborative context (Boser, 2006). The very process of articulating a shared philosophy of ethical practice, as part of foundational conversations among collaborators, has the potential to strengthen shared ownership of a collaborative process (Jensen *et al.*, 2022). It also fosters a shared

foundation for a culture of accountability that is not solely anchored in one disciplinary context but takes the principles and priorities of all collaborators into account (Henry and Tait, 2016).

While I am confident that the collaborative process of prototyping the intervention was beneficial from the perspective of other collaborators, I have simultaneously wrestled with the awareness that more could be done to further amplify benefits around CKD&S by, for example, exploring ways to sustainably embed the developmental toolkit in classroom practice or exploring further opportunities for collaboration that are learner- and/or staff-led (Alonzo et al., 2022; Myende, 2019). This would allow the emphasis on stewardship to be realised at an organisational- and individual-level. As highlighted in Chapter 4, these and other limitations are key framing considerations for future research (See 4.7).

6.3.3 "No offence, but we don't know you:" Building collaborative experience and trust

In materialising a commitment to situated ethics, two factors of collaborative working that also cut across the dimensions of an enabling, hospitable space were particularly pertinent:

Collaborative experience

In the case of all four schools collaborative experience needed to be established as the intervention was being prototyped (See 5.1 and 5.3.). Although I had some relational connections in the two schools I had attended as a child and young person, I was re-engaging in these spaces in a very new way and thus experience that was relevant to the collaborative task (prototyping the intervention) needed to be fostered (Murphy et al., 2015). During the course of the six months, collaborative experience was developed to varying degrees across and within the schools and I would posit that this initial investment could serve as a valuable foundation for further collaboration should the opportunity present itself. However, it is also important to recognise the limitations of what can be achieved during a relatively short period of time as well as the variation between the collaborative experience that could be built with the staff who engaged with the process over six months and individual students who in comparison may only have had two to four sessions to build collaborative experience with the researcher. These differentiated dynamics across a youth-championing collaboration demand careful engagement and as the quote from one learner in the title of this section highlights, the necessary limitations of any collaborative endeavour need to be recognised (Vivona, Demircioglu and Audretsch, 2023).

Although collaborative experience needed to be fostered in all four schools, each collaborator brought personal collaborative and/or task-/context-related experience to the process (Hokkanen, 2017; Murphy et al., 2015). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the human capital in schools should not be underestimated and one of the advantages of a flexible, collaborative research design is that the adaptation of work in context can be tailored to the capacity, competences, and experience of the collaborators in that space-time. Respecting the experience that collaborators bring to a process can also bolster trust-building as there is an acknowledgement of the logic they approach the work with (Frei and Morriss, 2021).

Through the process of collaborating, I got to know each of the organisational contexts, as well as the individuals I was working with, better (Dixon, 2023). This allowed me to work more effectively within or around organisational processes and technologies so these could, wherever possible, support rather than constrain the shared task of prototyping the intervention. A growing understanding of my collaborators different working and communication styles meant that I could endeavour to tailor my approaches to their preferences. As I grew more experienced in collaborating in each school context and developed a clearer understanding of the organisational rhythms, I was able to serve the different collaborator groups more effectively (Metz *et al.*, 2022). Upon reflection, I could have invested more time at the outset to better understand the skills, knowledge and collaborative preferences of the different collaborator groups (Sjölund *et al.*, 2022a). With the learners this would have presented a significant challenge due to the sheer number of them but with the staff and school leaders this could have been done with greater consistency across the schools (See 5.1.2).

Investments in building collaborative experience through initiatives such as the four RPCs that are presented in this thesis can strengthen ongoing collaborative work and bolster future collaborations by contributing to greater openness and readiness. (Barker Scott and Manning, 2024; Bartunek and Rynes, 2014; Chak, 2018). However, this requires a sustained commitment. Although the collaborations narrated here arguably fostered some collaborative experience, it was project specific and the limitations around sustainability that have been addressed elsewhere are also relevant in this respect (See 4.7). While a successful collaboration increases the likelihood that these schools would be willing to engage in future collaborative working, a great deal more work would need to be done to consider how individual collaborations could contribute to the development of transferable collaborative experience (Brunese et al., 2024; McCabe et al., 2023).

Trust

Across the four schools, trust was a key factor in establishing and maintaining effective collaborative relationships. Although, trust is often built, strengthened and maintained over time with sustained effort and investment (Denner et al., 2019; Frei and Morriss, 2021; Lezotte et al., 2022; Seashore Louis et al., 2009), these collaborations highlighted that another key dimension of this factor is the decisions that are made by different collaborator groups to trust one another even when they do not yet have an established relationship.

This often plays out at the personal or informal level (Burke and Hadley, 2018; Frei and Morriss, 2021) but is sustained by impersonal or institutionalised trust through an official approval and/or a decision by the leadership team to make room in a timetable for an intervention to be prototyped (Metz et al., 2022; Patel et al., 2012). Impersonal or institutionalised trust, however, is not only extended at the senior leadership level. It is seen in the decision of a teacher to align their classroom policymaking with the collaboration by creating space at the beginning of a period for the researcher to collect a group of participants as well as in the dynamics whereby groups of students made room for the researcher to access, and learn about, their individual and collective experiences. These and other similar experiences, arguably went beyond the personal or informal level as I was given varying degrees of access to specific sub-cultures or domains within the schools as demarcated by delegated remits of authority as well as affiliations around friendship, sports or cultural activities.

The ongoing decision among the other collaborators and I to trust one another was also expressed in our reliance on one another. I trusted that the staff and I were working towards a shared goal of embedding and prototyping the developmental intervention and that I could count on their support. They trusted that I would show up every day and work with the students, delivering a programme of activities that was of a high quality even as it was being prototyped. I trusted that the learners would engage with the process voluntarily and they chose to trust me with their reflections. Once I started working with a group of students, they needed to be able to rely on me when I said I would see them at the next session on a specific day and time. This was regrettably not always possible due to last-minute timetable changes or other unforeseen circumstances. This sense that I had not honoured my commitment to them, which felt like a setback in terms of trust-building every time it happened, most challenged my emotional agility and resilience as a researcher. It was very challenging listening to my audio fieldnotes and hearing myself break down in tears as I recounted these situations. As I progressed in the fieldwork and

became used to the timetable turbulence in the schools, I became more resilient in processing situations where I was not able to show up for the students when I said I would and working with other collaborators to find solutions .

Although I was able to present my credentials, qualifications, experience as well as the approval that I had from the WCED and the university as initial proofs of competence, these would all be meaningless in terms of practical trust-building if I did not show myself to be competent and professional in my ongoing collaboration with school leaders, staff and students (Tsai et al., 2020). One of the biggest challenges I faced in this regard was not second-guessing myself and projecting that onto the other collaborators (See 5.1 and 5.3). Trust was thus also a very important factor in how I related to myself in the field as I had to be able to trust that my experience, skill set and preparation would be enough to ensure that I facilitated the collaborative process and developmental intervention well – even as we were prototyping it – and that I would liaise with the staff well and remain attuned to any shifting priorities or challenges they were navigating (Metz *et al.*, 2022; Simpson, 2023).

A climate of trust was encountered in all four schools in different ways. Each socio-cultural organisational context highlighted the importance of resisting the urge to expect trust to look the same in every school or even at every "level" within each of the schools (Gara and La Porte, 2020; Hancock et al., 2023; Pendlebury and Enslin, 2001). A willingness to communicate and share perspectives and experiences was expressed in different ways across the collaborator groups. For example, it was seen in the willingness of learners to share their personal reflections on questions of identity, purpose and their interplay with learning, but also in the ways they clearly communicated certain boundaries around how they were ready and willing to engage in the collaborative knowledge discovery process. School leaders and staff generously shared their professional insights and experiences to support the process of embedding the intervention.

The value of face-to-face communication and being in place in the schools in trust-building cannot be overstated (Catungal, 2017). Being present in the schools weekly or a couple of times each week ensured that I had a frequency of social interaction with staff and learners that allowed me to become part of the school communities to varying degrees. Sustaining this engagement was a significant challenge after I left the field and travelled back to the United Kingdom. There were no indicators that the trust that I established, particularly with school leaders and staff, had diminished or been adversely affected by the distance

but the active engagement understandably waned and it became increasingly challenging to garner input on certain questions. Presence is thus an important consideration in this type of work particularly with organisations like schools where leaders, staff and learners are pulled in many different directions during term time and thus do not have the margin to engage with requests that are divorced from everyday school commitments(Dixon, 2023; W. R. Penuel, 2023). This is a key consideration in terms of the sustainability of this type of work as well as in the development of approaches that can be fully embedded in organisational workflows and carried forward by staff and/or learners without the active, present involvement of a researcher (Friesen and Brown, 2023; Snowling et al., 2022).

6.4 Emergent; enabling; hospitable: Anchoring CKD&S in space-time

Harvey (2006) underlines the importance of asserting a material presence in the conceptualisation and navigation of space-time: "We can…debate interminably all manner of ideas and designs expressive of the relationality [of CKD&S] but at some point something has to be materialised in absolute space and time" adding that "…there is a serious danger of dwelling only upon the relational and lived as if the material and absolute did not matter" (p. 292). Below, I critically discuss how selected aspects of the materialisation of CKD&S was navigated across the schools, highlight the value of augmenting a polymorphic engagement with space-time with a focus on embodiment, and consider the collaborative value of constraints.

6.4.1 Materialising CKD&S

The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily disconnected learners, staff and school leaders around SA – and the world - from their familiar physical, architectural dimension of teaching and learning, but rather than render this dimension obsolete this shared global experience underlined the importance of schools as shared absolute, material spaces for teaching, learning and broader socialisation (Shepherd and Mohohlwane, 2021; Statistics South Africa, 2022; Stats SA, 2024; Van der Berg, Wyk, et al., 2020; Wills and Van der Berg, 2024). Although some learners benefitted from the opportunity to anchor learning in their home environment in new ways, many young South Africans who, for example, live in overcrowded homes and neighbourhoods experienced learning from home very differently and reported missing the space and enabling infrastructure for learning they had in the school environment (Jansen and O'Ryan, 2020; Tanjga, 2021; Statistics South Africa, 2022; Stats SA, 2024).

Schools as places and spaces evoke a range of associations among learners, staff and school leaders (Ebersöhn, 2015; Edwards and Miller, 2007; Robertson, 2018). The central importance of place and space in learning and development is widely acknowledged and predates the pandemic (Christie, 2013; Khurana, 2022; Kokko and Hirsto, 2021; Lund et al., 2022; Reinius et al., 2021; Riley, 2013; Shirrell and Spillane, 2020) and as such it is a central consideration in fostering an enabling space for CKD&S. The prototyping of the developmental intervention was embedded in each school's physical environment: I met with school leaders and staff in their offices or meeting rooms. I worked with learners in classrooms, meeting spaces and school halls. We engaged in a process of CKD&S that had thematic links with their everyday experiences in these spaces and places, while inviting them to consider these experiences from different perspectives.

Flexibility in the use of architectural and physical space, particularly classrooms, was not a standard feature of the schools I worked in. Garrett (2022) notes that despite schools "being essentially 'bodied spaces' where the management of bodies is paramount to organisation and discipline, schools generally discourage movement in classroom learning. This legacy stems from Western educational practices that have traditionally privileged the mind over the body and where bodies are often considered in need of 'taming'" (p.3). Across all four schools, the spaces that were made available to me for the sessions with learners were for the most part[25] ones they did not have any of their normal classes in. This allowed for greater flexibility in how we used each space, because these venues were often not set up like standard classrooms and students did not necessarily have existing habits about how the space should be used. As part of our collaboration, learners could test out different ways of being in these spaces - for example, by inhabiting the space differently or as part of different group constellations - to reflect, among other themes, on their experiences of the school environment more broadly (Edwards and Usher, 2000; Vandeyar, 2021).

The 'low tech' or analogue nature of the intervention allowed for greater flexibility around the spaces that could be used with my only requirement being that learners could sit down at some kind of table while working on their individual reflections. The spaces were thus varied within and across the schools, and wherever necessary I could adapt and move to

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[25] In School 1, most of the sessions ran in the art classroom or the library, but during the second term a few sessions ran in a group's register classroom (home room). In the other two schools all the sessions were hosted in what I would describe as third spaces, i.e. not a register classroom or a classroom that was routinely used for any of the participant-collaborators' classes.

different venues depending on what was available on a specific day. I did not request that only rooms be used that were not official teaching spaces or classrooms, but for practical reasons this ended up being the case and I would assess it as one of the strengths of the collaborative process. However, even when working in 'third spaces' within schools, it was nevertheless important to reclaim and reframe the space for the collaborative knowledge discovery process at hand (Chouinard, 1999; Robertson, 2018). Activities such as the articulation of collaboration agreements (See 4.2.1.4) were invaluable in this respect as they allow you to get learners on their feet and out from behind desks or tables. In this way you can also encourage more dynamic ways of being and discovering knowledge in each space. There is scope to expand this with even greater intentionality by incorporating more elements of play and movement that harness the embodied dimension of CKD&S (Barab et al., 2010; Garrett, 2022; Horn and Wilburn, 2005; Nathan, 2022; Zosh et al., 2017).

6.4.2 More than just 'children in buildings': The embodiment of knowledge discovery and learning

In the first of a recent series of working papers on the state of the SA education system, Schirmer and Visser (2023b) note the seemingly obvious: "simply placing a child inside a school building does not equate to giving them a decent education" (p. 1). The right to basic education is constitutionally enshrined in SA (Veriava, 2024; Vondip and Agai, 2024), but as Harvey (2006) points out "[r]ights…mean nothing without the ability to concretise them in absolute space and time" (Harvey, 2006, p. 293). Although the DBE has made notable progress since SA's democratic transition in increasing the percentage of school-age children and young people who have access to school – i.e. "children in buildings" (Roodt, 2023; Schirmer and Visser, 2023b) - the question of whether they experience these places as spaces of embodied, enriching learning and knowledge discovery is another (Van der Berg, 2015; Gustafsson, 2020; Hofmeyr, 2020; Statistics South Africa, 2022).

In considering how to foster space for CKD&S, there is the risk – highlighted by Harvey (2006), Jessop et al. (2008), and others – of diminishing the importance of asserting a material, embodied presence (Bloch, 2009b; Schirmer and Visser, 2023d, 2023b; Pretorius and Morris, 2024). Sertillanges (1998) reminds us that "[m]inds can only communicate through the body. Similarly, the mind of each one of us can only communicate with truth and with itself through the body. So much so, that the change by which we pass from ignorance to knowledge must be attributed…directly to the body and only accidentally to

the intellectual part of us" (pp. 34-35). In any process of knowledge discovery or learning, as Smith (2012) points out, we are engaged "not simply as rational minds, but as embodied creatures with an affective relationship to reality; sensory images are needed, for…we know through our bodies" (p. 30). A focus on embodiment is key in conceptualising what enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S might look like. I posit that a polymorphic reading of, and engagement with, space-time would be enriched by including this facet in its dialectic to equip us to "situate [learning and collaboration] in the integrated and interstitial spaces where human bodies meet other objects in intra-active ways" (Ashton, Mah and Rivers, 2020, p. 180).

Drawing on Munro (2018), embodiment is defined as a non-linear, relational process whereby our multimodal sense of self interacts with, and relates to, our inner and outer environment through the body. Embodied learning and knowledge discovery is "the active process through which changes and shifts are experienced in, through, with, and because of the body. It is the mindful attention to, and retention of, this aforementioned process that determines the continuous emergence of self and that facilitates learning and cognition" (p. 6). The framing of embodiment and embodied learning is congruent with an active posture of discovery in relation to the world, which also embraces the rich complexity of personhood. Learning and knowledge discovery is conceived of "as an embedded embodiment capable of preserving the possibility for ourselves and the world in ways that makes it continually novel and reliably familiar, a world that is in us as we are in the world. In many ways, it is a natural philosophy that respects the unfinished mystery of living" (Horn and Wilburn, 2005, p. 758).

To highlight embodiment, is not to diminish the other important facets of an enabling space (See 2.3.3). If anything, it reinforces the importance of considering the physical and architectural dimension (Cox, 2018), of asking whether a space is cognitively enabling (Clughen, 2024), of carefully looking at the interplay of emotional (Garrett, 2022), epistemological (Abrahamson and Lindgren, 2014), social, cultural and organisational facets (Nathan, 2022), of reflecting on how different types of technology could be employed to bolster an enabling, hospitable shared space-time (Jonassen, 2013; Niederhauser, 2013; Olson, 2013; Postman, 1993). It nudges us to consider how collaborative engagement can be fuelled (or stifled) if the embodied dimension of CKD&S is ignored. The question of embodiment also enriches how we unpack and harness the factors of collaborative working (Patel et al., 2012), by, for example, considering how a collaborative culture can be fostered that acknowledges the somatic dimension of

navigating interpersonal or task-related conflict; or how damages to trust effect the embodied experience of re-engaging with a shared space for collaboration or learning (Chak, 2018). The invitation to foster, or engage with, an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S is necessarily an embodied one (Smith, 2024), and the value of hospitality – which opens possibilities for abundant generosity and reciprocity – usefully foregrounds the relationality of embodiment and tempers any overreach of individual autonomy in how this concept is deployed (Bretherton, 2016; Dasli, 2017). Embodiment also serves as a reminder of our finitude as individual persons as well as collectives, and prompts us to carefully consider the cost of engaging in CKD&S (See 2.7). In the next sub-section we consider the collaborative value of constraints.

6.4.3 Constraints: The collaborative value of limitations

Even before I started engaging the four schools in conversation about integrating and prototyping the intervention in each of their contexts, I assumed that the other collaborators and I would need to navigate a host of constraints at different levels from the organisational to the individual (Bettencourt, 2020; Klein, 2023; McCabe et al., 2023; Ross et al., 2010). Although these constraints presented challenges, they were also immensely valuable in prompting greater creativity around how the collaboration could be facilitated within, and around, what may have looked like limitations or stumbling blocks. In the previous chapter, I outlined some of the learning from the RPCs about navigating contextual constraints, as well as those that are specific to different collaborator groups, as part of the collaborative prototyping process (See 4.2.4). In this section I build on that and critically unpack the value of constraints and limitations in galvanising collaboration.

As an external collaborator who was given an opportunity to work with four schools over six months, I observed the organisational cultures, dynamics, and landscapes as an outsider. While this can have certain advantages in making things that are taken for granted strange, at times what I was perceiving as a constraint or barrier was an important guardrail or boundary for my collaborators (Ingstrup et al., 2021). A central example of this, as discussed in the next section, was the timetable. At times I found the dissonance between what the timetable looked like in theory versus practice to be a barrier to effective collaboration, but for my collaborators it presented an essential set of guardrails that understandably was not up for discussion (Smith, 2019). The onus was on me to develop a clearer understanding of each organisational culture as well as, where applicable, sub-cultures to better navigate the constraints that were considered non-negotiable in each

context (Hargreaves, 1995; Stoll, 2000). Through this process I was also continually challenged to interrogate my assumptions and perceptions of these constraints.

A central insight that was cemented through the RPCs, and echoed findings from the salient literature (Goessling, 2020; Mathikithela and Wood, 2019; Nthontho, 2017; D. M. Polk, 2017; Unterhalter, 2012), was that the process of navigating constraints from the individual to the organisational had the potential to catalyse greater resourcefulness and creativity in CKD&S. Here the overall conceptualisation of constraints is also relevant, if a collaborator primarily sees them as barriers to effective collaborative working that need to be eliminated, then valuable opportunities for innovation or adaptation could be missed. I also observed how the maintenance of certain constraints in the collaborative process, e.g. the commitment to keeping the group sizes under ten for the developmental intervention; maintaining buffer around planned sessions in schools, and, limiting the number of questions we explored through the developmental intervention, were enablers of more effective collaboration. In cases where these constraints were overridden other key aspects of the collaborations were stress-tested. Although these developments were not detrimental to the overall process they emphasised the value of maintaining enabling constraints.

As I facilitated, narrated, and interpreted the RPCs, I was also confronted with cases where I had assumed that certain constraints were insurmountable and thus did not even interrogate whether they could or should be eliminated, mitigated or harnessed. A key example of this related to the capacity of my collaborators to take ownership of the collaborative process. I assumed that, given their other professional or academic commitments, they would not have capacity to take on a more active role in the collaboration than they already were. In some cases, my assumptions were confirmed by the feedback I received from individual collaborators, but to take these constraints as a given likely inhibited potential for the more active involvement of certain collaborators. The main learning here is not to assume that all constraints I perceive are real and - particularly in considerations related to the capacity of collaborators - to take every opportunity to sense-check and course correct my assumptions.

The heuristic that is outlined in the concluding sections of this chapter, among other things, is designed to support conversations about the constraints that CKD&S activities need to work within and/or around. Given the relative complexity of collaborative working, the heuristic can also be employed to consider whether it makes sense to pursue specific objectives through collaboration or whether it would be advisable for an organisation, team

or individual to proceed alone (Vivona et al., 2023). As the literature on collaborative advantage has highlighted (Huxham and Macdonald, 1992; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Doberstein, 2016; Bömelburg and Gassmann, 2024), it is important to carefully consider the demands of working collaboratively – including time investments - in relation to the anticipated added value of this approach within or between collaborators.

6.5 Considering the *time* in space-time

Time is one of the overarching factors of collaborative working highlighted by Patel et al. (2012). Although a great deal could be written about the RPCs through the lens of each of the factors they identify, I will focus on time as another helpful point of entry for a polymorphic reading of the space that was fostered through the RPCs. While such a single point of entry can be a valuable starting point, Jessop et al. (2008) alert us to the limitations of a one-dimensional engagement with space-time. In this section I reflect on the pitfalls of my own one-dimensionalism in relation to time while I was engaged in the RPCs and highlight a few observations around this factor of collaborative working in relation to the theory of enabling spaces (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b, 2014a, 2016; Peschl, 2019a), as well as the concepts that were articulated around collaborative engagement.

6.5.1 Time: The rarest resource and enabler

It is fair to say that a shared assumption in many branches of educational practice and research is that time is in short supply. McGeown (2023a), for example, writes that "time is a very limited resource and ultimately can impede RPPs from being initiated or sustained even with sufficient willing, infrastructure, training etc. in place" (p. 58), a sentiment that is echoed by Macpherson (2023), Norbury (2023) and Vardy (2023) to mention a few (Wiggins and Smith, 2015). After having spent six months in schools I feel a moment of guilt as I frame this assertion as an assumption, but it is (Brunner, 1951; Lau, 2022; Lyon, 1985; Smith, 2019). It establishes a specific paradigm in relation to time in which there is a scarcity of it. Time becomes something to manage, wrangle or exploit with technologies such as the timetable taking on a life, status and ordering power of their own (Brunner, 1951; Lau, 2022).

Throughout the four RPCs I observed that my collaborators - particularly school leaders and staff - and I generally framed and approached time as a scarce commodity or resource (Hinds *et al.*, 2011; Wiggins and Smith, 2015; Smith, 2019; Lau, 2022). There was never enough time in the day and to embed the developmental intervention it needed to be trimmed down to work within each school's time constraints. As discussed above

constraints can have significant collaborative value and the same applies to time, which - while essential - is also not to be sacralised to the point where a failure to control it becomes a counter-collaborative point of tension (Lyon, 1984, 1985; Lau, 2022) or it is altogether detached from space. In the sections below I build on earlier considerations of constraints, to critically unpack some of the dynamics around time, including the diminishing returns on controlling time, changes that were observed over time in this study, as well as selected reflections on the value of giving collaborators, including myself, permission to take their time in a process of CKD&S.

6.5.2 Relationships to, and in, time

Although I observed a slight shift in my relationship to time over the course of the RPCs, I more often than not grappled with the sense that there was not enough time for the work to be done. My sense of time was reinforced in the conversations I had with school leaders and staff, with our initial conversations around embedding the intervention highlighting the restricted time windows it would need to work within and the actual prototyping process involving a constant navigation of school timetables where the time available on paper was almost always significantly reduced in practice.

While the school leaders, staff and I were prone to relate to time as an evasive, yet essential, resource, I observed that the learners I worked with did not share these concerns. The roles they played in the collaborations did not encompass an imperative to manage time and as such they generally appeared to relate to it with greater freedom or indifference and tended to view it as a constraint only to the extent that it stretched between the moment they were in and another place or experience (e.g Break) they would prefer to it (See 6.4.). Their very different relationship to time was the strongest influence on how my mode of relating to it shifted throughout the collaborations. As they questioned why we were rushing or why I was so tense, I was forced to interrogate the relationship to time that I was taking for granted and to consider whether it was supporting or hindering our collaboration (Lau, 2022; Lyon, 1985; Watkin, 2022).

Building relationships with the different collaborators was also challenging when time was limited. For example, having the time with individual groups broken up over multiple days and weeks had an impact on the collaborative dynamic as we needed to reset or re-establish a collaborative space each time we met (Peschl and Fundneider, 2016). Activities such as the collaboration agreements and other icebreakers were invaluable in drawing the group together and also provided useful prompts for relationship-building, particularly as I

was getting to know the learners. With school leaders and staff, I experienced the value of having margin between sessions to engage in informal conversations on my way to or from working with learners. These conversations at the margins, which are so easily rendered invisible, were invaluable in strengthening my contextual understanding, presented opportunities for these collaborators to share ongoing input, and also contributed to relationship- and trust-building (Barker Scott and Manning, 2024; Çoban and Atasoy, 2020). I discuss the value of slowing down in order to prioritise relationship-building further below.

6.5.3 From control to considered, creative care

To explore how an enabling space could be fostered for CKD&S, the RPCs were embedded in each school's context with an awareness of the necessity to understand the different technologies that were used in each environment (Olson, 2013; Shume, 2013). Chief among these technologies was the timetable: A fixture in each school that was broadly speaking managed in the same way, but with variations in structure and consistency (Jansen, 2020c; Spaull, 2015). As with any piece of technology, tensions and opportunities often emerge in the gap between its design and its everyday use in practice where the impacts of contextual dynamics and disruptions are seen and felt. One conceptualisation of a timetable is as a mechanism of control in the school context (Wiggins and Smith, 2015), which allows school leaders, staff and learners to work within arbitrary, yet shared, parameters (Botha, 2013; Pendlebury, 1998).

On the one hand the responsibility to complete the collaborations within the six-month period was an important consideration, but as I reflected on my experiences and analysed my fieldwork notes I was struck by the intense frustration, and at times emotional distress, I felt in response to my inability to properly control the time we had at our disposal if, for example, sessions were cut short due to last-minute timetable changes, delays in collecting groups of learners or venue changes mid-session. In the midst of these disruptions, I grappled with how to best create an enabling, hospitable space for my collaborators to think and reflect when I was acutely aware that the planned time, which was already limited, had been significantly reduced. I realised that I was relying on the "ideal world" timetable too heavily in my planning and facilitation of the sessions and that, in addition to the feedback I received from school leaders, staff and learners about the prototyping process, I needed to course correct my understanding of the timetable based on the practical experience of navigating it (Murphy et al., 2015).

This shift also signalled a move away from trying to control the time at our disposal to engaging in considered, creative care in the stewardship of whatever time I happened to have with each group (Hernandez, 2008). As I made this shift, it became easier to harness aspects of the intervention toolkit that allowed my participant-collaborators and I to make best use of the sometimes very limited time at our disposal. For example, the collaboration agreements supported trust-building and the relatively swift articulation of a shared collaborative vocabulary, the shift to an emphasis on individual reflection meant that – especially in smaller groups – I was able to facilitate overall sessions with greater flexibility and support individual learners to move on to exercises if certain peers were taking more time on others.

The in-principle commitment to flexibility I initially brought to the collaborations was stress-tested and refined through navigating the realities of carefully stewarding rather than controlling time in complex organisations like schools (Jansen, 2020c; Riley, 2013; Vandeyar, 2021). I paid lip service to the importance of creativity and flexibility as foundational values in the process, but in practice it was far too easy to allow an imperative to be in control override these (Boser, 2006; Collier, 2019).

An overall shift from an emphasis on control to one of care or stewardship also allowed me to see the collaborative value of time constraints in the prototyping of the intervention. Having to work within various constraints necessitated a greater focusing of the developmental activities, which ultimately resulted in a condensed toolkit of activities that explore the three overarching questions (Who am I? Why am I here? What do I need for my life journey?) and could be further united under the banner of one overarching question (What's my story?).

After completing the fieldwork in the four schools, these refined activities were further aligned with GET curriculum as part of a toolkit for Life Orientation teachers. The development of a resource for use in classroom practice was also informed by the experiences my collaborators and I had of navigating significant time constraints in schools and an acknowledgement of the importance of, where possible, embedding developmental activities in classroom settings where relationships are already established and a sustained investment can be made in practicing different transferable skills including creativity, feedback, observation, reflection and written/verbal/visual communication (Claxton, 2006; Bandura, 2008; Burke and Hadley, 2018; Mathikithela and Wood, 2019).

6.5.4 Change over time

I have already cited one key example of change over time above in describing the changes I observed in my own relationship to time as a key factor in the collaborative process. Over the course of the two school terms, I became increasingly familiar with each of the school contexts and observed positive changes in terms of my capacity to anticipate and navigate certain disruptions related to timetabling, special events or venues. As my collaborators and I accrued more collaborative experience, clearer routines combined with a gradually increasing capacity on my part to work around constraints and disruptions meant that I generally had more time to work with groups and in cases where time was reduced due to contextual changes, I had experience of how to make the most of the time we had at our disposal.

On balance these routines added value, but I also observed that some of the dynamism that had characterised the collaborations at the outset diminished and I was no longer as attuned to the details as I had been when I was still finding my feet in each collaborative context. From this perspective, the fact that change was a constant throughout the collaborations was a challenging but positive aspect of the process as it provided an antidote to complacency and prompted me to remain attuned to my collaborators and each of the school contexts (S. David, 2016).

Another change I observed related to my collaborative stamina in the two schools where I had a presence over the two school terms. Contextual factors that were specific to each school – in one a perceived sense of apathy among several learners and in the other perpetual chaos around the timetable – significantly challenged my emotional state (See 6.3.2) and I found it difficult to manage my energy well (S. David, 2016; Dickson-Swift, 2019; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). This dimension of my experience of these contexts cannot be disentangled from the expectations I brought to the collaborations and highlighted the importance of ongoing reflexive practice while engaging in intensive collaborative knowledge discovery (Finlay, 2002; von Unger *et al.*, 2022). Supporting and sustaining collaborative stamina over time is a key consideration in any CKD&S work. It requires clear conversations about the values, expectations and capacity collaborators can bring to the process, how these may be integrated in a collaborative effort in ways that allow for differentiated engagement over time based on shared ongoing reflection about the CKD&S process' trajectory (See 6.7).

6.5.5 The value of taking your time

When time is primarily seen as a perpetually scarce resource it is challenging to give yourself permission to slow down, and yet in a CKD&S process where you are necessarily encountering unknowns and unexpected learning it is essential to resist the urge to frantically rush in the name of progress or milestones that on balance may not serve the project's core and emerging objectives (Nhlapo and Hlalele, 2023; Scott and Boyd, 2023). The priority was to facilitate the process excellently but that does not translate into controlling what every minute of the work looks like. This is an easy observation to highlight with all the benefits of hindsight, but in practice it was at times immensely challenging to follow the advice of one of my participant-collaborators and "loosen up" (See 5.1.1). I can remember the moment where I read that piece of feedback, it was exactly the mirror that I needed someone to hold up to me. As discussed above (See 5.1.3), I was so focused on facilitating an enabling space for the other collaborators that I thought it was legitimate, or even a sign I was working really hard, if I was in a state of heightened tension trying to make sure every aspect of the process ran like clockwork. I far too easily forgot that I was there to collaborate on refining a prototype not to offer a fully refined service or product (Lewrick, Link and Leifer, 2018; Ashton, Mah and Rivers, 2020).

The decision to take six months for the fieldwork meant that in some respects I could allow myself and the other collaborators to take our time. Being available to the schools over two terms, combined with a staggered start in different schools, meant that when disruptions or changes came our way we could often make up for lost time, having buffer to catch up sessions and still offer the intervention to all English-medium students. In short, we had time to take our time. As mentioned above, I observed a shift in my relationship to time during the fieldwork. Although I had allowed for ample time for the work, I was often still gripped by a fear that the time would run out before we had managed to "finish" the work (Hinds et al., 2011; Lau, 2022; Smith, 2019).

As a key facilitator within the RPCs I arguably missed an opportunity to make different decisions about how I was conceptualising and relating to time. For example, I had the option to reframe my perspective to focus on the additional time I was bringing to the schools, rather than fixating on the many competing demands on the time of my collaborators. One critical reflection that emerged through the narrative, thematic analysis is that if I failed to manage how I was engaging in these contexts, I was missing opportunities to optimally harness the different dimensions of an emergent hospitable, enabling space with, and for, my collaborators (Akingbola and Brunt, 2023; Canosa et al.,

2018; von Unger et al., 2022). In my myopic focus on a perceived lack of time I was getting stuck in one-dimensionalism (Jessop et al., 2008). It was the leadership on the part of the learners I worked with, who commented on my relationship to time, that sensitised me to this. In gradually pursuing a shift to a polymorphic engagement with our shared collaborative space, I was following *their lead* (Archard, 2013; M. Brennan et al., 2022; Nthontho, 2017). In the following section, I critically unpack the centrality of leadership – particularly flexible, distributed, servant leadership – in CKD&S.

6.6 Leadership: A core factor in CKD&S

In this section I start by unpacking the importance of leadership in the RPCs and discuss aspects of the leadership roles and styles of the different collaborators. I also consider to what extent examples of collaborative leadership emerged during the RPCs and how learning from this study could inform a more intentional engagement of leadership capacity across different collaborator groups. I then critically reflect on the necessity and centrality of flexible, distributed, servant leadership in CKD&S.

6.6.1 Navigating and harnessing different leadership styles across the collaborations
Leadership is arguably a core factor in CKD&S. A lens in a polymorphic reading of space-time that shapes and steers the different dimensions of an enabling, hospitable space for this type of work. Patel et al. (2012) note that "[g]ood leaders can inspire others to work collaboratively and bridge disciplinary boundaries and can overcome organisational and process weaknesses" (p. 14), an insight that the four RPCs confirmed. In this section, I discuss the ways in which different collaborators took leadership roles – often informally and/or in self-directed ways – in the RPCs.

Learners

Although school leaders and staff were the primary gatekeepers of the overall collaborative process in each school, learners were the gatekeepers of their individual engagement with the process. I would argue that to the extent they decided whether to contribute to the process as collaborators they were engaging in self-leadership (Archard, 2013; Cummings, 2024). As discussed elsewhere (See 4.4.1 and 6.3.2), I am aware of the challenges around garnering informed consent from learners in a school context but I would posit that the collaborative process presented an opportunity for them to practice some of the skills involved in exercising their agency in consenting to engage in such a process (Skelton, 2008).

There were examples of learners who skipped sessions because they needed to prioritise academic work and the fact that they did so was an indicator that they understood they had a choice along with the responsibility that came with that right to choose. In some instances, learners disengaged at the outset because they did not feel like participating only to ask whether they could join again later. Due to the time constraints, I navigated in giving all learners in the English-medium classes an opportunity to participate I was not always able to accommodate these requests. This too, was a learning opportunity as they needed to understand the consequences of the decision they made not to participate when the opportunity was presented. In the small handful of instances where this occurred, I took a moment to explain to the learners why it would not be possible to accommodate them and, where feasible, offered to have them join a later group if any were smaller due to absenteeism.

I benefitted immensely from the trust that was extended to me by school leaders and staff and I in turn chose to trust learners when they said that they were missing a session to prioritise academic work or another pre-existing commitment they had (Frei and Morriss, 2021). I did not check up on them in these instances to see whether they had done the schoolwork they said they would but in keeping with the overall commitment to their agentic, informed consent, trust was a more important value than control. At the same time, it was important to maintain certain boundaries around the opportunities to engage with the collaborative process. If I made it completely inconsequential whether a learner participated it would be very challenging to undertake any meaningful reflective work with the groups. This was a challenging balance to strike, and I found the most effective approach to sustaining it lay in not undervaluing the opportunity I was offering learners to be part of a collaborative, developmental process, while also supporting their right and capacity to consider whether they a) wanted to, and b) practically could commit to that process (Collier, 2019).

The intensive collaborative work I undertook with learners highlighted their leadership potential and the importance of facilitating opportunities for them to develop and steward it. Youth-championing interventions or initiatives that offer young people developmental opportunities but also expect them to actively engage and take responsibility for their commitment to do so (Cummings, 2024; Thomoson and Gunter, 2014), are potentially valuable vehicles to actively steward and harness their leadership potential in ways that go beyond the small student leadership teams that are elected or appointed in schools (Archard, 2013; Gwandure and Mayekiso, 2013; Hunt, 2014; Nthontho, 2017). The

intervention that was at the core of the RPCs did not have an explicit focus on leadership development, but in future work it would be worth exploring how an enabling space for CKD&S could intentionally harness and develop the leadership capacity of all collaborators. The heuristic that is presented in the concluding sections of this chapter further explores how this could be scaffolded (Aubrey and Riley, 2019).

School leaders and staff

Clear, decisive support from the school leader or leadership team was an essential enabler of each of the RPCs. As was discussed in the previous chapter (See 5.3), the collaborative dynamics varied across the four schools, but the active involvement of school leaders and staff was decisive in ensuring that the collaborative prototyping could be embedded in each context (Chikoko et al., 2015; du Plessis and Heystek, 2020; Zulu et al., 2021; Zuze and Juan, 2020). I surmise that if I had tried to lead the process without the active support of these collaborators the organisational constraints would most likely have stopped the process in its tracks before it could gain any traction (Mogadime et al., 2010; Mokoena and Machaisa, 2018; Smit, 2005). The degree of proactive engagement by these collaborators also impacted the extent to which further opportunities for collaboration could be explored over the course of the six months.

In each context the school leaders and staff brought different leadership styles to the collaboration that were necessarily interwoven with the organisational cultures (See 6.1.2). In each of these contexts collaborators were navigating different challenges, demands and opportunities. As a researcher I was not always privy to these, but I worked with them in an awareness that the project we were collaborating on was one of many ever-shifting priorities they had at any given moment (Dixon, 2023). This also applies to the learners I worked with, but I was more acutely aware of it in my interactions with the school leaders and staff.

I personally experienced the value of trusting leaders who did not insist on micro-managing a process but rather gave me space to collaborate with them and learners on a dynamic, prototyping endeavour. At the same time the school leaders and staff were not indifferent to the process and in my ongoing conversations with them it was clear that they were having conversations around the collaborative process to maintain a clear sense of how things were progressing, this was a valuable aspect of their ongoing leadership in the process as it meant that they could hold me accountable. In these relationships, the trust

that was extended by these key leaders within the collaboration was invaluable in fostering an enabling space for CKD&S.

Researcher

As researcher-facilitator, I navigated several different roles in the collaborations with the four schools only two of which are foregrounded in the label I have assigned to myself. A scarlet thread that connected these roles was the leadership function I had as a key facilitator within the RPCs (E. J. Sanders, 2015; Sjölund et al., 2022a). In this capacity I wanted to engage all the other collaborators proactively and consistently as leaders in their own right, but at times I regressed into a more transactional or managerial role especially when it came to navigating significant disruptions including last-minute timetable changes, the need to relocate mid-session, absenteeism and electricity blackouts.

Another key pressure I buckled under as a leader was self-induced. I told myself that I needed to do everything right, that I needed to have the whole process under control and make sure it was running as planned and when this was not the case due to unavoidable contextual shifts the sense of failure I felt was overwhelming (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). In these moments it was difficult not to become defensive, transactional and to grasp at any sense of control I could find. As the collaborations progressed, I had to confront fault lines I had around poor energy management as well as a lack of emotional agility that was not a fundamental state but rather a situational response catalysed by my own distorted view of the collaborative process (S. David, 2016).

I was very concerned with the wellbeing and convenience of my collaborators, making every effort to ensure that they understood their rights as well as the fact that the process was flexible and could be adapted as necessary, but I excluded myself from these considerations. It was as if I did not believe these rights applied to me as a researcher. I had to recognise that this type of behaviour does not contribute to fostering a hospitable or enabling space for CKD&S, it is also irresponsible and antithetical to sustainable, collaborative leadership (Çoban and Atasoy, 2020; Smith and Thorley, 2023). By allowing myself to view the process this way I implicitly took myself out of the role of a collaborator into one of a service provider (Sanders, 2015; Sjölund et al., 2022a). In a high-paced, ever-evolving collaborative process it can be, and in hindsight was, easy to miss this shift in positionality but I would argue that it is essential to consider strategies to keep this in focus. These subtle shifts can also inhibit or even hinder collaboration because they

reinforce counterproductive assumptions about the interest, capacity and/or investment of other collaborators in the process (See 5.1.3).

6.6.2 On the necessity and potential of flexible, distributed, servant leadership

In a synthesis of several definitions of collaborative leadership, a core element Lawrence (2017) identifies is that "the responsibility for leadership is shared among the group" rather than falling on one person (p. 89). If we take this definition as a starting point, the narration and interpretation of the four RPCs has highlighted several examples where responsibility was clearly shared among collaborators as well as instances where the leadership and initiative of my collaborators strengthened the overall process of CKD&S and enriched my formation as a social researcher. Drawing on Engeström's (2015) cultural-historical activity theory, Wei and Huang (2022) map three broad categories of RPPs on axes of *flexibility* and *collectivity*, highlighting the importance of these complementary 'poles' in collaborative working. I posit that flexibility and collectivity also present fruitful vantage points in conceptualising collaborative leadership as they nudge us to consider how leadership may be optimally and adaptively harnessed in service of CKD&S. If we accept differentiated engagement trajectories as an inevitable aspect of this type of complex collaborative work (Hopkins et al., 1999; Neto et al., 2022; Phillips et al., 2021), then it is arguably important to also consider how space can be created for a differentiated collaborative leadership ethos *or* a flexible, distributed, servant leadership ethos as it is conceptualised and discussed in this section. Each of these three dimensions are presented and discussed as perspectives on leadership rather than discrete approaches or blueprints to be followed in specific ways (Khan et al., 2022; Liu and Watson, 2023; Spillane, 2005; Spillane et al., 2004).

Flexible

In considering leadership through a lens of flexibility, I draw on Edwards and Clarke (2002) critical engagement with "the notion of flexibility," particularly the potential implication therein that processes of teaching, learning and collaboration "can be liberated from the constraints of time and place." While this liberatory bent could be characterised as "the hallmark of flexibility" careful "attention also needs to be given to the spatial aspects of flexibility" as well as "the precise forms of liberation and constraint that different strategies for flexibility might produce" (p. 154). I agree with Edwards and Clarke (2002) that flexibility can open opportunities for individuals or groups who have been (or are) excluded by existing managerial or leadership hierarchies to engage their leadership capacity or potential. It also allows for "a reconfiguration of space-time and

with that the range of networks within which [collaborators] are interconnected" (p. 159). Rather than liberating CKD&S from the constraints of space-time, I contend that a flexible approach to leadership would allow for a richer process of CKD&S that is anchored in relational space-time by inviting collaborators to draw on their leadership capacity and styles in the thematic areas or specific junctures they are best positioned to take the lead (McGeown, 2023b, 2023a; Sjölund et al., 2022a).

This is not to imply that a CKD&S process does not need clear, consistent, facilitative leadership throughout, but that it would be a missed opportunity not to extend an invitation to different collaborators to take a leadership role as and when they are well placed to do so. A flexible approach to leadership also allows a collaborative team to harness emergent leadership as a CKD&S process unfolds, as was the case in School 2 where learners took the initiative in proposing further one-on-one developmental coaching, as well as School 3 where the school leader approached me about building on the core collaborative programme of work with a dedicated workshop for student leaders. In each of these instances I was presented with a choice to either engage with and harness these emergent forms of leadership or to insist that we work within the parameters that had been established up to that point. These examples also highlight that collaborative leadership is not a matter of official titles or positions, the school leader had authority within the school context, but I posit that in approaching me with a further idea he was engaging in an emergent, enabling space for CKD&S in which his title - while not wholly irrelevant - was not decisive. Similar to the schools that engaged with the RPCs, I was working with them on a voluntary basis and as such all ideas for further collaboration were expressed as invitations rather than instructions (Denner *et al.*, 2019).

Distributed

Harris (2013) highlights some of the challenges that have flowed out of diverging uses of the term distributed leadership, including its conflation with concepts such as shared, collaborative, or extended leadership. She describes distributed leadership as the active brokering, facilitation, and support of leadership capacity and practice across an organisation or team, which however does not mean that "everyone leads or that everyone is a leader" (p. 547). Spillane (2005) explicitly frames distributed leadership as a perspective or lens on leadership or "a conceptual or diagnostic tool for thinking about school leadership" (p. 149) rather than pre-defined approach, blueprint, or style. From this perspective, "leadership is a system of practice comprised of a collection of interacting components: leaders, followers, and situation. These interacting components must be

understood together because the system is more than the sum of the component parts or practices" (p. 150). The focus on practice comprised by the interactions of leaders, followers and situations reinforces the value of a polymorphic engagement with the space-time that is fostered for CKD&S. Distributed leadership is both an enabling factor and feature of such a space whereby "teamwork as opposed to individual power and authority" is valued and "collective ability, skill, and dispositions to maximize outcomes" are acknowledged and intentionally harnessed (Liu and Watson, 2023, p. 1087).

As with flexibility, the distributed lens on leadership is employed in service of CKD&S that adds demonstrable value and/or contributes to improvement. To take a flexible or distributed lens to leadership does not reduce it to either formal or informal leadership arrangements but instead acknowledges the potentiality of allowing for a broader range of expressions of leadership. These ways of looking at leadership cannot become ends in themselves. 'Unchanneled' leadership is also not an end, nor is building leadership capacity or 'distributing' leadership through an organisation (Spillane, 2005; Spillane et al., 2004). While I posit that leadership is a central and catalytic factor in CKD&S, it is important to remember that it serves the discovery and stewardship of knowledge and value. There may be a temptation, particularly in youth-championing work, to 'distribute' leadership to young people for the sake of being able to say you did it and veering into tokenism (Enslin, 1992; Hunt, 2014; Pendlebury et al., 2011). This is a disservice to their leadership potential as well as the process. As with every other collaborator – whether school leader, staff member or researcher - they should lead when they are best placed to do so. A distributed perspective on leadership keeps our focus on optimally harnessing the interactions between leaders, followers, and situations in service of organisations and the people that constitute them, while also nudging us to constructively interrogate assumptions about who is best placed to lead, i.e. just because someone has an official leadership position they may not have readiness, capacity etc. to play a leadership role in a specific CKD&S process.

Servant

Robert K. Greenleaf is credited with coining the term *servant leadership* in a 1970 essay, 'The Servant as Leader'. A central premise in his conceptualisation of it is that "the servant-leader is one who is a servant first and a leader second" (Roberts, 2023, p. viii). As with the distributed leadership perspective, this concept evades clear definition, operationalisation, and measurement as it has stimulated a rich breadth and depth of debate and inquiry since it was first employed (For example, van Dierendonck, 2011; van

Dierendonck et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2020; Liao et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2022). Drawing on key aspects of Greenleaf's definition, I will outline a few ways servant leadership may be harnessed as a perspective - rather than a specific style or strategy - to further enrich how we conceive of leadership as a central, catalytic factor in CKD&S.

Servant leadership is characterised by an imperative to go beyond one's self-interest and be of service through leadership (van Dierendonck, 2011). It is a person- and relationship-oriented understanding of leadership that is particularly fitting in educational and developmental settings as it actively seeks to create opportunities within organisations for followers to develop, grow and learn (Roberts, 2023). As an orientation it starts from the assumption that improvement is possible for the individual as well as the organisation, and that as followers become wiser, healthier, and freer the likelihood that they too become servant leaders increases (Hopkins, 2017, 2024). The servant leadership perspective is also compatible with an emphasis on stewardship. Within the conceptualisation, leaders are stewards who are entrusted with this responsibility by the organisation or team they serve (van Dierendonck, 2011).

Drawing on the ethic of love, service and humility that underpins this study, I posit that an explicit emphasis on a servant leadership perspective provides an important ethical guardrail in CKD&S (Hoch *et al.*, 2018). Rather than a mere means or end, service is a key practical consideration throughout the entire collaborative process in considering the objects, aims, purpose, conduct, fruits, and application of CKD&S (Holmes and Lindsay, 2018). Within this ethic, power or influence are not used to enforce action or change, but rather to persuade or convince collaborators. In contrast to an ethic of violence, power is harnessed in terms of the possibilities it creates to serve others (Watkin, 2022). "Being a servant allows a person to lead; being a leader implies a person serves" and there is, furthermore, an emphasis on intentionally serving and benefitting the least privileged, the vulnerable and/or the marginalised – an orientation that is particularly fitting in youth-championing approaches (Van Dierendonck, 2011, p. 1231).

In considering leadership as a central and catalytic factor in CKD&S, I contend that looking at it through the lenses of flexibility, distributed leadership as well as servant leadership allows for a dynamic engagement with leadership without getting stuck at a single point of entry (Jessop et al., 2008). In the following section, I build on this framing of leadership to consider how it could be embedded in a multi-dimensional, dialogic heuristic that supports clearer conversations about CKD&S.

6.7 A multi-dimensional heuristic to facilitate conversations about CKD&S

In this section, I present a heuristic to facilitate conversations about CKD&S. This multi-dimensional prototype was developed based on the findings presented and discussed in this thesis. It is to be read and assessed as a first proposal that will require further testing and refining through collaborative research. I start by outlining a brief rationale for such a heuristic, focusing on the need for intentionally facilitating context-specific alignment in CKD&S (Sjölund, 2023b), and how anchoring conversations about collaboration in a value of hospitality allows for a move beyond mere conformity (Smith, 2023a, 2023b, 2024). I then look at how structured, yet dynamic conversations can be harnessed to carefully consider the cost of collaboration and - provided it makes sense to pursue it - foster alignment around how collaborators can come together to foster an enabling, hospitable space to do so. I conclude with a high-level outline of the heuristic and walk through a concrete example, based on my engagement with School 4, of how starting at a single point of entry collaborators could progress to considering how that dimension relates to others and what implications that may have for CKD&S. As with most prototypes, I anticipate that it will be refined and streamlined through testing and use in 'real life' settings (Ashton et al., 2020; Lewrick et al., 2018).

Snowling (2023) reminds us that "researchers and practitioners may have very different interests or priorities when asked about key outcomes of interest from a specific intervention" or collaboration (p. 54; Macpherson, 2023; McGeown, 2023b). McGeown (2023a) cautions against one-size-fits-all approaches to RPC/Ps and notes while these approaches will necessarily "differ in structure and features, they are likely to be underpinned by common principles, values, and ways of working" (p. 58). This shift in emphasis highlights the importance of facilitating a shared understanding and alignment from the foundational (assumptions, beliefs, values) to the operational to allow for differentiated, context-specific engagement that positions "practitioners to do what they are good at and…researchers to do what they are good at" (Sjölund et al., 2022b, p. 17).

Given the complexity of multi-agency and -disciplinary collaboration it can be challenging to have clear conversations about how different organisations and individuals can and should most effectively join forces, especially as the different organisational and/or disciplinary cultures they operate in are often characterised by specific uses of language, understandings of time, and notions of success, to mention just a few areas of divergence (Caplan, 1979; Newman, 2014; Newman et al., 2016).

The simple acknowledgement that partners need to find a shared vocabulary and foster aligned perspectives through conversation can present an invaluable starting point in establishing foundations for CKD&S. Rather than assuming that everyone is 'on the same page' or means the same thing when they refer to certain facets of an enabling space or factors of collaborative working (Ingstrup et al., 2021; McCabe et al., 2023), this posture sets collaborators up to be learning by drawing their own assumptions into focus and carefully considering how they can better understand the positionality of their fellow collaborators (Jessop et al., 2008; Sheppard, 2002). In purely practical terms, early investments in alignment allow "issues of implementation [to] be aired much earlier…when this is done, some of the challenges can be addressed and any obstacles…avoided" (McGeown, 2023b; Snowling, 2023, p. 25).

Anchored in a foundational commitment to an ethic of hospitality, the objective of these conversations is greater alignment of perspectives, objectives, and operational strategies, not necessarily conformity with one collaborator's established approaches (Smith, 2024). While there may be instances where collaborators establish - through open, unfolding conversation - that the strategies one party brings to a process are likely to best serve their shared purposes, this conclusion is ideally shared among collaborators and there is an acknowledgement that their combined resources may still augment or adapt it. This approach allows collaborators to remain anchored in their disciplinary, professional or sectoral tradition while exploring ways to learn with, and from, collaborators from different traditions. In addition to establishing greater clarity and alignment, I contend that taking the time for these types of conversation at the outset, as well as throughout, CKD&S processes crafts collaborative "communities that embrace both rootedness and openness" that invite people to "*feel* 'at home'" in a shared space-time that is fostered for collaborative working – a dynamic, which also has the potential to strengthen their sense of ownership of the process (Alexander, 2019, p. 670).

Throughout this thesis I have explored the potential of conceptualising the space-time we foster for CKD&S as enabling and hospitable. The process of fostering these types of spaces requires intentional, concerted effort. As Smith (2024) notes, "If our need is to develop a capacity to practice hospitality even when it is tempting to substitute indifference or hostility, then we need more information, discussion, or procedural strategies. We need ways of working on the interpersonal skills, attitudes toward others, and shared ethical commitments that can sustain hospitality as a communal practice" (p. 3). These observations focus on the value and practice of hospitality, but I contend that the

emphasis on information gathering and discussion as well as the development of procedural strategies, interpersonal skills and shared ethical commitments are key to developing capacity and collaborative infrastructure for CKD&S (Crane, 2023; Norbury, 2023; Penuel, 2023; Sjölund, 2023b).

Based on the process of engaging in the RPCs as well as the narrative, thematic analysis of different perspectives on the collaborations, I have outlined a prototype for a tool that can support conversations about CKD&S, allowing collaborators to assess whether and/or how it should be pursued. The 'five Fs' - Fuel, Factors, Facets, Foundations as well as Flexible, distributed, servant leadership – provide multiple points of entry in conversations to allow for a polymorphic, adaptable engagement with emergent, relational space-time. In Figure 20, I outline the Fs along with the concepts that each encompasses. However, it is important to keep in mind that these dimensions are interconnected and a conversation that starts by looking at one aspect will necessarily expand into other areas. At the same time, this tool provides conversational prompts rather than standardised procedure. Most conversations will not cover all the Fs much less each of their associated concepts – they serve as a reminder that a single point of entry is useful only insofar as it allows collaborators to consider other relevant dimensions of a shared space for CKD&S. These conversations also allow collaborators to start articulating a shared narrative to collaborate by (McAdams, 1993, 2013).

Rather than seeing these conversations as something that is done at the outset of a collaborative process before everyone gets on with the 'real work,' I contend that they are a valuable feature of CKD&S that allow for ongoing assessment and (re)alignment of the collaborative process and infrastructure (Duxbury et al., 2020; McCabe et al., 2023; McDonald et al., 2021). In some instances, clear conversations at the outset will lead to shared awareness that it does not make sense to pursue collaborative working (Vivona et al., 2023). This, I would argue, is a successful outcome both in terms of the stewardship of human and organisational resources as well as relationship- and trust-building as collaborators will come away with a better understanding of their counterparts' expertise and capacity, as well as their key priorities and needs (Barker Scott and Manning, 2024; Chak, 2018; Conaway, 2020). Investments in a clearer shared understanding of what different collaborators could bring to collaborative working is part of a longer-term process of fostering the collaborative infrastructure needed to support and sustain CKD&S so that different epistemic communities can work together in the design, development,

implementation, and mobilisation of educational and social research that is anchored in practice.
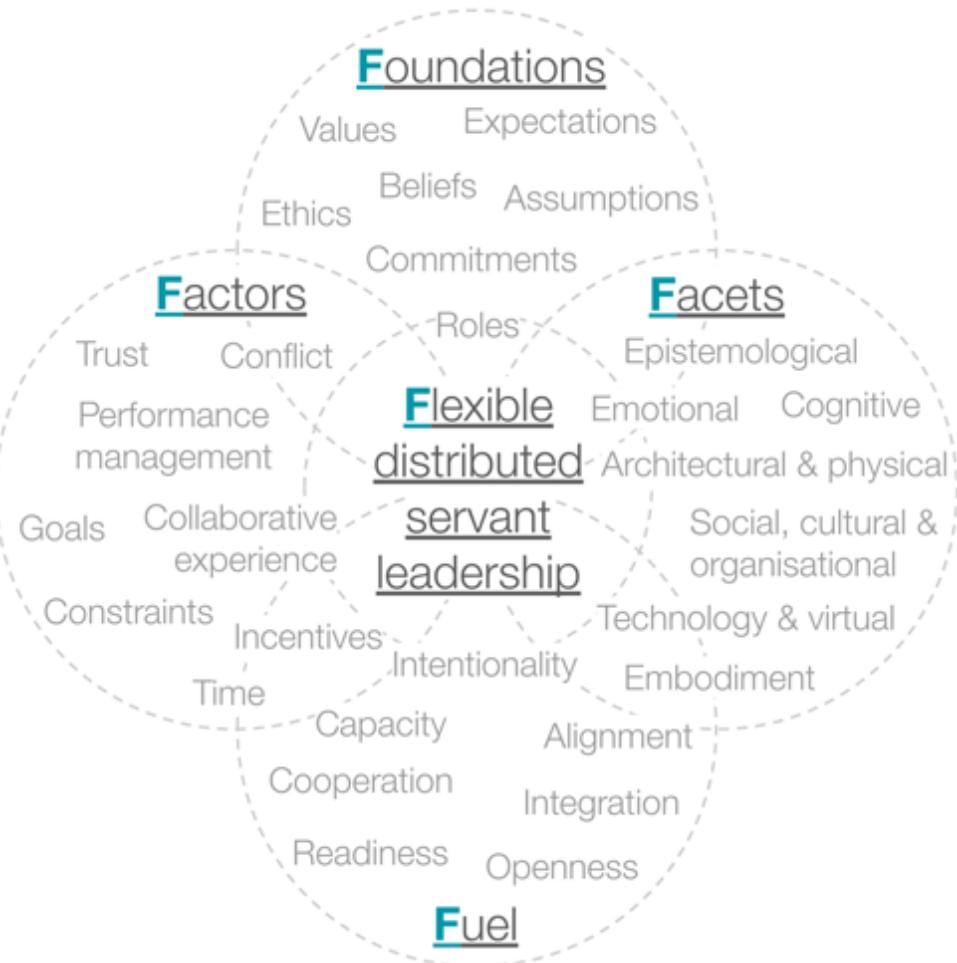
Figure 21: The five "Fs"

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen

Below, I briefly describe each of the 'Fs' and outline how a conversation could be focused and anchored via these different points of entry. The framing of conversations is predicated on the assumption that partners have come together with an idea or proposal for a collaborative process. The heuristic is intended to support conversations based on an initial idea for collaborative working rather than scaffolding conversations for concept development although the different dimensions it prompts collaborators to consider may contribute to refining ideas or proposals. I conclude this section by presenting a brief use case for the heuristic based on my engagement with School 4, considering how I may have approached the conversations with school leaders and staff differently if I had the heuristic as a reference point.

One overarching question to consider is what 'fuel' you have, or need, to catalyse and sustain the CKD&S process you envisage. The concepts that have been highlighted in this thesis are not exhaustive but provide a starting point for potential collaborators to consider what they might bring to kick-starting and/or sustaining a collaborative process:

- Alignment
- Capacity
- Cooperation
- Integration
- Intentionality
- Openness
- Readiness

In pursuing clear(er) conversations about proposed or ongoing collaboration each of these concepts provide a single point of entry to begin considering what an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S might look like from the perspective of different collaborators. For example, collaborators may identify a strong openness among them to working collaboratively and then by looking beyond that initial dimension find that as they consider their respective goals and constraints, the types of knowledge they value (epistemology) or their assumptions/expectations about how the process should unfold that further conversation is required to clarify how they would practically (and philosophically) align as part of a collaborative process.

A conversation may start from a shared concern about the demands a CKD&S process will make on the capacity of different collaborators. Here too it can be helpful to look beyond what is initially perceived as a barrier and unpack the specific capacity-related concerns of different collaborators by, for example, discussing assumptions, expectations, conceptions of time and constraints, as well as the type of leadership that will be needed should a process unfold. Leadership, although included among the overarching factors of collaborative working (Patel et al., 2012), is foregrounded as an 'F' in its own right as I contend it cuts across all the other areas of focus (Lawrence, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2020; van der Voet and Steijn, 2021).

Factors

In addition to considering the 'fuel' different collaborators may bring to a CKD&S process it is often valuable to proactively address and discuss a few of the overarching factors of collaborative working (Patel et al., 2012):

- Collaborative experience
- Conflict
- Constraints
- Goals
- Incentives
- Performance management
- Time
- Trust

These interconnected factors serve as prompts for potential collaborators to unpack considerations that are intuitively top of mind, while also considering other critically relevant areas. For example, in early discussions there may be a central focus on the goals that different collaborators bring to the process, but it may not occur to partners to explicitly address and discuss their conceptions of time e.g. how long things should take and what feasible milestones may be in the process of working towards the outlined goals. It is important to align goals and, where possible, articulate shared goals that are congruent with the value systems of different collaborators, but it is important to also extend these discussions to consider the different incentive structures and performance management cultures that converge in a collaboration.

In exploring the constraints that need to be navigated as part of CKD&S there are often points of connection with questions of collaborator capacity or readiness, as well as the more practical features of a shared space in which to materialise CKD&S such as the architectural and physical dimension or needs and priorities around technology. However, as outlined above constraints can also be reframed in terms of their potential to galvanise collaboration by creating opportunities for partners to coalesce around how to work within existing parameters most effectively (See 6.4.3). These types of considerations require partners to step back and consider the core assumptions, beliefs, and values they bring to a collaborative process, if their organisational culture has for example evolved to view certain constraints as insurmountable barriers or unquestionable features of their context. Open conversation with potential collaborators could be harnessed as opportunities to interrogate and reframe these views.

Collaborative experience is accrued by collaborators working together and in the case of fledgling collaborations/partnerships it can be helpful to clearly address the lack of collaborative experience so that partners are able to articulate any concerns they have in

this regard and how they might be mitigated. Trust is a closely related factor in that it also develops over time and generally involves an initial decision by collaborators to trust one another, which is then justified or challenged based on how the experience of working together unfolds. Trust and trust-building are, however, also scaffolded by the development of collaborative infrastructure. By proactively addressing trust, partners can articulate how a collaboration might be set up so that it is easier for them to trust their potential collaborators by, for example, clarifying the logic each brings to a process (Frei and Morriss, 2021) and stipulating clear, shared approaches to conflict- and performance management.

Facets

Building on the theory of enabling spaces (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b, 2014a, 2016, 2017), I have endeavoured to outline the potential value of intentionally fostering shared spaces for CKD&S. The six dimensions that are identified in the theory are augmented by embodiment to provide vocabulary for some of the key facets of an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S that enrich, and are enriched by, the other 'Fs':

- Architectural and physical
- Cognitive
- Emotional
- *Embodied*
- Epistemological
- Social, cultural and organisational
- Technology and virtual

These facets prompt potential collaborators to consider practical questions including the *where* (architectural and physical dimension), various aspects of the *how* (cognitive dimension, epistemological dimension, technology) as well as the broader "atmosphere of environment" (emotional dimension, embodiment) and how these are integrated in, and with, the broader socio-cultural landscape within and across organisations as part of a CKD&S process.

The 'five F's' heuristic is also informed by the theory of enabling spaces' emphasis on integration (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b, 2014a). Rather than reducing a collaborative process to one or two dimensions, there is an imperative to operate in an awareness of the complex interplay of different facets, factors and fuel sources. As mentioned above, the goal is not to painstakingly cover every aspect of every 'F' in each conversation before or during a collaborative process. Rather, exploring their interplay is framed as a strategy to

simultaneously open and anchor conversations between potential collaborators. The varying points of entry allow collaborators to shift gears if they are getting stuck at a particular point, with other dimensions potentially providing a clarifying perspective and/or point of access in a conversation. This is particularly relevant in collaboration across epistemic communities, sectors, and organisations where different vocabularies and mindsets can lead to misunderstandings (Duxbury et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2022; McCabe et al., 2023).

Foundations

Another key area to consider are the individual and shared foundations that individual collaborators and organisations bring to the envisaged CKD&S process. While assumptions, beliefs, commitments, ethics, expectations, roles, values, and other foundational considerations may not be an initial point of entry in strategic or practical conversations about collaborative working, there is immense value in clarifying the foundations different collaborators are operating from in order to navigate and harness divergence rather than implicitly defaulting to conformity with one party's foundations.

In exploring foundations, there is also a need to distinguish between the values that an individual brings to their work and the values of the organisation they represent. An explicit focus on values and ethics can allow potential collaborators to disentangle these and consider which are decisive for a CKD&S process. As highlighted above assumptions and beliefs often colour how individuals, for example, approach conversations about capacity and readiness (See 2.6), as well as constraints and time (See 2.5). By mindfully fostering a shared conversational space where these assumptions can be pulled into focus and discussed, collaborators would ideally be encouraged and challenged to interrogate some of their foundations as they explore the feasibility of fostering and/or sustaining a shared space for CKD&S. In addition to the heuristic's emphasis on shifting gears and trying different points of entry (when needed), the inclusion of foundations encourages potential collaborators to consider aspects of their positionality that are often taken for granted and how these may shape and colour their conceptualisation of other dimensions (See 2.1).

Flexible, distributed, servant leadership

The final 'F' nudges us to consider the centrality of leadership in CKD&S, particularly a conceptualisation of leadership as flexible, distributed and framed by an imperative to be of service. Given the complexity of CKD&S a vital consideration is how leadership capacity can be harnessed across a collaborative partnership or team to strengthen the

envisaged collaborative process. I contend that while leadership may be a single point of entry in conversations about CKD&S it also presents a central factor in collaborative working that frames how many of the other dimensions are conceptualised, discussed and operationalised or materialised in space-time. As such it is important that potential collaborators discuss their understanding of, and assumptions about, leadership as well as its interplay with factors including goals (i.e. who defines them), performance management (i.e. who decides what success looks like) and incentives (i.e. strategies that are routinely employed to sustain certain behaviours or modes of engagement) as well as the intentional valuing of a range of epistemologies and/or priorities related to a cognitively enabling space for CKD&S. The process of having clearer, proactive conversations about CKD&S also presents an opportunity to operationalise flexible, distributed, servant leadership across a collaborative team by actively inviting a range of perspectives to engage with the dynamic interplay of different dimensions of an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S.

Use case | Openness: Necessary but insufficient.
In concluding this section, I will briefly reflect on how the 'five Fs' may have enabled me to have clearer conversations with School 4 to either ascertain whether collaboration was feasible or which necessary adjustments would have made it possible for us to progress to prototyping the developmental intervention. Starting from the single point of entry of 'openness' I will outline how I could have drawn on the other Fs to focus and concretise our discussions.
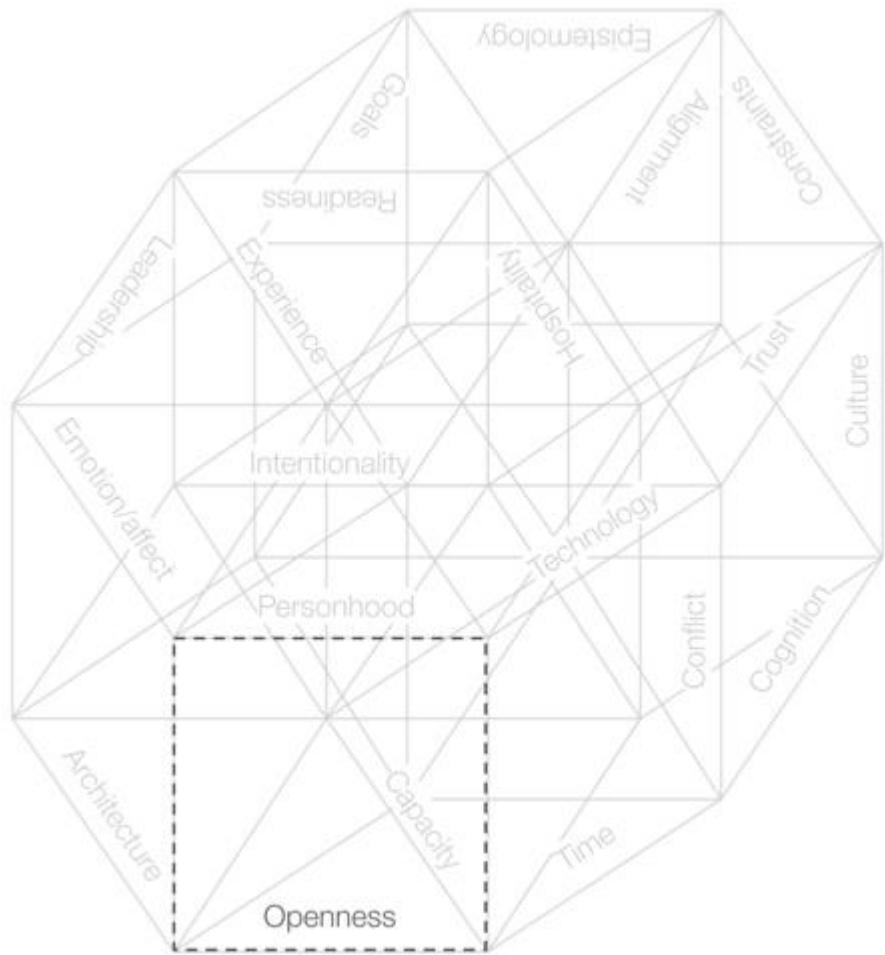
Figure 22: Moving beyond a single point of entry in conversations about potential CKD&S

Visualisation by author © MM Cruywagen

As outlined in the previous chapter (See 5.3.4), School 4 was open to the collaborative process but ultimately competing demands meant that they were not able to mobilise the required capacity to engage with progressing to the collaborative prototyping of the developmental intervention. While openness can catalyse initial collaborative engagement, this process has highlighted the limitation of this necessary but insufficient form of 'fuel'. With School 4 it would have been valuable to reinforce and harness their expressed alignment around the value the developmental intervention could add for their Grade 9 learners as they navigated decision making about subjects. My interactions with school leaders and staff highlighted that even value and goal alignment need to be materialised in context through more specific discussions about the constraints staff are navigating as well as their concerns about the envisaged collaborative process so that we can consider strategies that would allow us to, for example, integrate the developmental intervention in their classroom practice rather than creating an additional activity to coordinate when they were already at capacity.

In my engagement with School 4, it may have been helpful to invite the school leaders and staff to honestly share their assumptions about the collaborative process I was proposing, the developmental intervention and/or the prospect of collaborating with an academic so that perceived incompatibilities or issues of trust, for example based on past experiences of interacting with researchers, could be unearthed, and addressed. It may, however, have been that directly addressing factors including constraints and time, as well as questions of capacity and readiness, would have allowed us to ascertain more swiftly that it would not be possible or justifiable for them to proceed with the RPC.

Although, I engaged with the school leader, a deputy school leader as well as a few other senior staff members – all who signalled an openness as well as broad value and goal alignment – the heuristic's central focus on flexible, distributed, servant leadership would have prompted me to discuss with them whether there were any other members of their staff team who may be well positioned in terms of their openness, capacity and readiness to take the lead in actively collaborating with me on developing a proposal for how we might embed the collaborative prototyping process in their context. Rather than imposing a commitment to this perspective on leadership, it could have been framed as a suggestion as part of an open conversation to consider how we might most effectively collaborate within their social, cultural, and organisational context.

Particularly in this context, where the school leader expressed interest in developmental opportunities for staff, the suggestion to explore how more junior staff may be engaged as part of the RPC could have been aligned with this goal by considering how their involvement in the collaborative process could present opportunities for professional and leadership development. I have highlighted a few examples of how the heuristic would have enabled me to approach the potential collaboration with School 4 from different vantage points to progress our discussions beyond the initial stage of openness and in-principle alignment. I acknowledge the limitations of this hypothetical exercise, but I also maintain that further testing and refinement of this heuristic through future collaborative research could lead to a tool that allows researchers (and practitioners) to count the cost of collaboration more effectively, identify how they might co-foster an enabling space for CKD&S, as well as refine and/or course correct CKD&S activities that are underway (See 2.7).

Chapter summary

In this chapter a selection of the study's findings were critically examined through a dialectical interaction between the facets of an enabling space (Peschl and Fundneider, 2014b, 2014a, 2016, 2017), factors of collaborative working (Patel et al., 2012) as well as other foundational concepts discussed in Chapter two. In addition to engaging with the study's findings, this approach has sought to demonstrate the value of polymorphic, dynamic engagement with the productive tensions and synergies between different dimensions of space-time in considering how enabling, hospitable spaces may be fostered for CKD&S. The chapter also included a multi-dimensional heuristic that was developed based on the narrative, thematic analysis presented in this thesis to support clearer conversations about CKD&S.

CHAPTER 7 | A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS as FORMATIVE, INITIATING EVENT: WHERE to FROM HERE?

Throughout this thesis I presented aspects of the story, and stories, of a series of interconnected, emergent research-practice collaborations (RPCs) with public, fee-paying-schools in the Western Cape, SA. The emphasis on narrative is woven throughout this study's design, implementation, and analysis (Kendig, 2016). As its author, the stories I have collaborated by, and articulated in making sense of these RPCs, are privileged in this telling. I have made every effort to clarify my positionality, as well as the philosophical and theoretical foundations that underpin it, and to triangulate my perspectives with those of the key collaborators from the four schools I worked with, further augmenting this with theoretical triangulation. Given the emergent nature of the RPCs, the findings I have outlined and discussed in this thesis are best understood as a first proof of principle for the potential of RPCs in fostering enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S (Kendig, 2016).

In this chapter, I reflect on the study as a process of formation through collaboration, highlighting how my perspective as a social researcher has evolved. I draw together key elements of the thesis' narrative by briefly summarising the study's key strengths, limitations, findings, contributions, and implications, and conclude by highlighting a few opportunities for further research. This thesis is framed by the following research questions:

Research question 1 (RQ1): How can enabling, hospitable spaces for collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship (CKD&S) be fostered through emergent, youth-championing RPCs with four public, fee-paying schools in the Metro East District (Western Cape, SA)?

- **Research question 1A (RQ1A):** How can these RPCs, and the developmental intervention at their core, be adapted and optimised for each school context based on their needs, priorities, capacity, and constraints?
- **Research question 1B (RQ1B):** How can the developmental intervention be harnessed to work with young people in key transitional grades (Grade 7 and 9) to explore their lived definitions of identity and purpose as well as their interplay with learning and the school as a key learning space?

- **Research question 1C (RQ1C):** How can the value and transferability of this emergent model of youth-championing RPC be interpreted drawing on qualitative data collected across the four collaboration sites?

7.1 Formation through collaboration

Scheper-Hughes (1992) contends that a critical practice of social science implies an epistemological, rather than a practical, struggle. The first iteration of the research proposal for this study envisaged a process that would bring together representatives from different epistemic communities in the education system - teachers, policymakers, parents and researchers - to engage in collaborative knowledge creation to bolster the system's capacity for innovation and resilience in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the proposal's core commitment to collaboration has remained, I had to acknowledge a glaring blind spot in my framing of the research design and strategy and unpack why it was there.

In the initial research design, I inadvertently overlooked young people and children and rendered the contributions they make to knowledge discovery and stewardship in schools invisible (Bettencourt, 2020; Skelton, 2008). In considering how the education system might be improved through CKD&S, I did not immediately envisage a role for them in the process. This realisation triggered my own epistemological struggle, an ongoing process through which I had to interrogate my internalised views about who should have a voice and role in school-based collaboration (Gorard and See, 2011; Mathikithela and Wood, 2019; Sonn et al., 2011; Spindel Bassett and Geron, 2020; Thomoson and Gunter, 2014; Unterhalter, 2012), tracing these back to my experiences of growing up in the SA context in the 1980s and 1990s where children and young people were not routinely encouraged or supported to add their voices to those of parents, teachers and other stakeholders in shaping schools and/or the education system more broadly (Furlong, 1991; Enslin, 1992, 2003; Soudien, 2001, 2007b; Pendlebury, Henderson and Tisdall, 2011).

Through the RPCs, I had the opportunity to engage young people as key collaborators in their own right, who have invaluable contributions to make to society's body of knowledge (Anderson, 2020; Anyon et al., 2018; Bettencourt, 2020; Brennan et al., 2022; Burke and Hadley, 2018; Caraballo and Lyiscott, 2020; Conrad et al., 2017; Cummings, 2024; Pendlebury et al., 2011; Shamrova and Cummings, 2017; Spindel Bassett and Geron, 2020). As a student and researcher my socialisation has often involved the unreflexive absorption of fragments of research philosophies with varying degrees of congruence. If I am to be coherent and integrous in

my commitment to CKD&S, I learned through this study - and my apprenticeship as a social researcher - about the importance of ensuring that from the most foundational level the process acknowledges the inherent agency, dignity and positionality of every collaborator as they engage with the collaboration (Jurkowski et al., 2023; van der Voet and Steijn, 2021).

Young people have points of access to their life worlds and communities that are beyond my reach as a researcher and by working with them, there are things I have learned that would otherwise have been beyond my reach (Anderson, 2020; Burke and Hadley, 2018; Caraballo and Lyiscott, 2020; Morales et al., 2017; Shamrova and Cummings, 2017; Tuck and Habtom, 2019; Zeller-Berkman et al., 2020). Through this study I have sought to honour the capacity of young people, as well as the other collaborators in the schools, to centrally contribute to a process of knowledge discovery and stewardship, but there has also been an awareness that as a researcher I have harnessed an opportunity to access something valuable that would otherwise be off limits to me. This tension has demanded ongoing reflexivity (Finlay, 2002; Newitt and Thomas, 2022; Phillips et al., 2021), particularly in considerations related to maximising benefit for my collaborators (Clark et al., 2021; Felner, 2020; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Liamputtong, 2020, 2022; Pendlebury and Enslin, 2001).

While I commend aspects of the underlying imperative of strands of the social sciences and humanities that frame research as emancipatory, the thinking around it is at times flawed, not least in its disregard for the "proper limits that operate on the authority of science in the practical realm" (Hammersley, 2015, p.48). The notion of freeing others and/or giving them a voice is predicated on questionable assumptions, including that researchers are able to do this or required for this to happen, that are arguably at best patronising and at worst dehumanising (Holmes, 1977, 1983; Lyon, 1983). There is a real potential for contradiction and even intellectual dishonesty in paying lip service to the invaluable perspectives of young people and other collaborators while still trying to swoop in as the "professional" researcher who structures and scaffolds a process of knowledge discovery and stewardship to channel their energy in a productive manner (Burke and Hadley, 2018). This empowering perspective can also obscure or minimise the fact that young people are considered a vulnerable group and in working with them there is a need to remain sensitive to the different dimensions of vulnerability that may be relevant in a research process (Kipnis, 2003, 2004; Luna, 2009, 2019).

I see knowledge discovery and stewardship, through approaches including RPCs, as inherently valuable endeavours in which both the process and findings are ends worth pursuing. I have sought to move beyond a process of knowledge discovery and stewardship which I design, control and merely tangentially involve young people, school leaders, staff, or other epistemic communities in. The imperative to make the shift from research subjects or participants to collaborators and/or participant collaborators, is one that is inextricably bound up with questions of ethics, rigour, and responsibility (Clark et al., 2021; Fisher and Anushko, 2008; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Liamputtong, 2020; Pendlebury and Enslin, 2001). In designing and operationalising this study an ongoing challenge lay in finding practical ways to truly share the reins with my collaborators. This thesis presented and critically discussed learning about how enabling, hospitable spaces could be created for CKD&S through approaches like RPC. Rather than offering a series of definitive examples of successful practice, selected insights were translated into a multi-dimensional, dialogic heuristic to support clearer conversations about CKD&S.

7.2 Strengths and limitations

The study's key limitations are outlined in Chapter 4 and critically discussed in the Findings and Discussion chapters, below I briefly summarise the study's key strengths and limitations in terms of the research design and strategy, the developmental intervention, the implementation, as well as the analysis and presentation:

Table 8: Study's key strengths and limitations

Strengths	Limitations
Research design and strategy	
The research design and strategy were enriched by the process of collaborating with school leaders, staff, and learners from four different schools.	The research design and strategy were largely researcher-led. In CKD&S it would be optimal to explore ways to actively co-design studies with other collaborators.
The research design and strategy, while anchored in clear philosophical and conceptual foundations, was sufficiently flexible and agile to shift to a focus on the emergent RPCs.	The decision to shift the study's focus to the emergent RPCs meant that opportunities were missed for drawing on a wider range of data in systematically capturing collaborator reflections throughout the process.
The project-specific nature of the collaborations meant that the schools could contribute to a collaborative process without having to make a significant mid- or long-term partnership commitment.	The project-specific nature of the RPCs mean that no claims can be made about the establishment of mid- or long-term partnerships with any of the schools.
Some of the study's richest learning was found in the disconnects between design/strategy and the reality of emergent collaboration in context.	The disconnects between a research design and strategy and the complex reality of collaborating in dynamic, living, ever-adapting contexts, where the knowledge discovery or stewardship processes that are valued do not

Strengths	Limitations
	necessarily align with a neatly designed set of data collection methods and workflows.
The decision to only offer the intervention in English meant that it could be adapted and optimised on an ongoing basis – this would not have been feasible if we were working bilingually.	The developmental intervention was only offered to English-medium learners despite running in bilingual school contexts.
Developmental intervention	
The intervention's modular design meant it could be adapted and optimised to be offered during the school day to learners. This meant that the intervention was significantly more accessible than an out of hours format would have been for many learners.	The school as place presents challenges and limitations for a youth-championing RPC as learners may not always in the first instance be acknowledged as practitioners in this context but rather as products, participants or even consumers of a service (Davis et al., 2020).
The intervention functioned well as a vehicle for data collection and learning about learners' perspectives and experiences while also offering a space for reflection and the development of transferable skills.	There were also limitations to the commitments I could make to collaborators about the insights or reflections they share through the intervention informing practice in the school more broadly.
90% of learners agreed that the programme was a good use of their time. 90% indicated that they would recommend the programme to their friends or classmates. Based on learner feedback, I am confident that the intervention was successful in adding value for these collaborators.	Due to the individualistic focus of the intervention's core questions, the reflection it facilitated was largely individual rather than group-based or dialogic.
Although great care was taken in developing the first iteration of the developmental intervention toolkit, the ongoing adaptations that were made to it based on feedback from other collaborators significantly focused, refined and improved the programme.	Although the intervention was framed as a prototype to be refined collaboratively, I – as researcher-facilitator – often still artificially engineered a pressure to have all the answers and solutions. This self-generated pressure regarding the intervention's optimisation is unpacked in this thesis as a limiting factor in CKD&S.
Implementation	
The parallel timelines of the four RPCs created several opportunities for learning and collaborative cross-pollination across the schools.	As a lone researcher there were limitations to how much flexibility I could offer the four schools during the collaborative process.
Having an outsider collaborate with the schools meant their human and organisational resources could be augmented. Given the intervention's focus on identity, purpose, and their interplay with the school as learning space, it may have been valuable for learners to be able to discuss these topics with someone who had some distance from their everyday context.	The limitations of having an outsider come into a school context to facilitate the type of developmental work the RPCs centred on. A collaborative process that is reliant on the involvement of an external party has significant limitations in terms of its sustainability.
The input and feedback that was provided by school leaders and staff throughout the RPCs was essential to the collaborative process and their decision to trust me and engage with embedding and prototyping the developmental intervention was decisive in the work we were able to do together.	Considering how to involve staff even more intensively in the collaborative prototyping process. Related to this, existing relationships in schools could have been tapped with greater intentionality to consider how internal collaborative networks/teams could be

Strengths	Limitations
	established that continue the work beyond the timeline of an RPC.
I was embedded in the schools consistently over a six-month period, which allowed for intensive engagement, and relationship-building, with collaborators.	The nature of the implementation of this study has meant that I collaborated intensively with four schools for 6 months. Although, I have maintained relationships with school leaders and some of the staff, the same is, for example, not true of the learners.
Despite the absence of an explicit focus on defining specific leadership roles or functions for learners, they engaged in informal leadership in various ways that significantly enriched the process and contributed to my formation as a social researcher.	More could arguably have been done to consider how to create opportunities for the learners and other collaborators to take a more explicit leadership role in the collaboration.
Analysis and presentation	
The study's employment of narrative, thematic analysis as part of a polymorphic reading of the space that was fostered for CKD&S allowed me to optimally interpret the data that was collected.	The emergent nature of the RPCs has meant that in hindsight I see opportunities that were missed to gather analytical/interpretive input from other collaborators more systematically throughout the project.
The central focus on the personhood of collaborators provided an invaluable ethical guardrail in the implementation, narration and interpretation of the RPCs.	The other collaborators were not actively involved in the narrative, reflexive thematic analysis of the RPCs beyond the formative and summative input and feedback they shared.
Although the RPCs were anchored in, and optimised for, each school context the learning that emerged in each allowed for collaborative cross-pollination during the active prototyping phase as well during the interpretation of the RPCs through narrative, thematic analysis.	Some of the findings from individual schools are most pertinent in those environments and do not necessarily translate to other contexts. When it comes to insights that are specific to each of these school contexts, I cannot make any claims to the generalisability or transferability of the findings.
The process of narrating and interpreting the RPCs within the formal constraints of a thesis catalysed a more dynamic employment of the triangulated theoretical framework as part of a polymorphic reading of the enabling, hospitable space that was fostered for CKD&S through the RPCs.	This thesis is necessarily limited by the stipulated parameters of its format. A great deal more could be written about the four RPCs, but these constraints meant that I needed to make decisions about specific aspects to foreground.
The ever-present awareness of my limitations as a lone researcher, interpreter, and narrator, led to a careful unearthing and articulation of the philosophical and conceptual foundations I was collaborating and researching from, which has strengthened the overall thesis and enhanced my formation as a social researcher.	This thesis has a single author and reports on a collaborative study that had one researcher facilitating it.

7.3 Findings at a glance

In this section a few of the study's key findings are summarised in relation to the study's research questions:

An RPC requires that collaborators identify or develop a shared pursuit to work together on. The shared pursuit needs to be regarded as a worthwhile investment of time for all collaborators. In the context of this study, it was the developmental intervention we prototyped together. The process, which combined research and development activities, had varying benefits for all collaborator groups. From its design through its implementation to its interpretation and narration, this study highlighted the value and potential of a polymorphic engagement with the space-time that is fostered for CKD&S.

To more fully fathom the complexity and potential of a shared space-time for CKD&S, the perspectives and narratives of as many collaborators as possible need to be drawn on. This study made some progress in this regard and there is immense scope to expand on the polymorphic reading of time-space it has endeavoured to model.

As far as possible, clarify, acknowledge, and integrate the needs, priorities, capacity, and constraints of different collaborators on an ongoing basis throughout the process. A key aspect of fostering an enabling, hospitable space for CKD&S is intentionally navigating the interplay between the expectations collaborators bring to a process and their actual experience of engaging in it. While not every expectation can, or necessarily should, be met, there is value in creating a space in which collaborators are confident to share their perspectives and expectations as active contributors to an unfolding process.

The study highlighted the value of all collaborators holding what they bring to the collaborative process with an open hand. The draft developmental intervention needed to be trimmed down dramatically to work in the school settings. If I had insisted on running it as initially developed the entire process may have stalled or completely failed to get off the ground.

Although the RPCs were context-specific, collaborative cross-pollination allowed learning from individual schools to enrich collaboration with others.

The study highlighted the importance of harnessing the significant human capital of young people in schools by engaging them as active collaborators rather than objects of study. It also emphasised the necessity of anchoring the collaboration with young people in their priorities and/or challenges by establishing clear links with the curriculum or with other decisions or transitions they are approaching. For Grade 7s, this included thinking through their upcoming transition to high school. For Grade 9s, it centred on considering how to approach or refine their decision-making on subject choice as they transitioned into the Senior Phase of secondary school.

The collaborative prototyping process, as well as the interpretation and narration thereof, highlighted the importance of simplifying the developmental intervention to focus on fewer questions and transferable skills as I had limited time with the groups of learners I worked with. Although I boiled the intervention down to three overarching questions that could be summarised under one overarching question, the analysis further underlined the value of having a stripped-down approach and rather using time to reinforce reflection on one question and create space for a core set of transferable skills to be practiced intentionally.

This learning emerged through the prototyping process and although the toolkit still includes a number of questions and exercises, it would primarily be envisaged for use by teachers as part of the Life Orientation curriculum rather than by an external facilitator or researcher as part of an intervention-based programme. Integration in classroom practice would allow teachers and learners to cover more ground and to make a sustained investment in the development of transferable skills.

Research question 1C (RQ1C): How can the value and transferability of this emergent model of youth-centred RPC be interpreted drawing on qualitative data collected across the four collaboration sites?

The study highlighted the importance of jointly defining what type of knowledge will add value in each collaborative context as well as how it will be measured and stewarded. This is reflected in the repeated emphasis on facilitating clarifying, foundational conversations.

The limitations inherent in the emergent nature of the RPCs, emphasised the necessity of ensuring the feedback of different collaborators is captured systematically throughout a CKD&S process. In this study a notable start was made in this regard, but there is a great deal of room to build on the approaches that were taken to ensure that the expectations and experiences of different collaborators are captured throughout the process, including in the analytic phase. One concrete approach to employ would be to integrate more feedback loops with different collaborators.

The study highlighted the importance of proactively counterbalancing the likely dominance of the researcher in these types of processes and embracing the fact that different collaborators will frame the overarching narrative in different terms depending on their needs, priorities, capacity and constraints.

7.4 Practical contributions and implications

In this section I summarise this study's key practical contributions and implications for social researchers, school leaders and staff, and learners.

7.4.1 Social researchers

The study has various empirical and methodological contributions and implications for social research including:

- A preliminary case for framing collaborative inquiry and collaborative approaches such as RPC/Ps in terms of collaborative knowledge discovery and stewardship (CKD&S).
- Testing an emergent model of youth-championing, RPC through six months of intensive collaboration across four schools and providing a proof of concept for this model as a vehicle for CKD&S.
- Interpreting and narrating the RPCs by drawing on qualitative insights into the process of collaborating with four schools, highlighting school-specific and cross-cutting insights.
- Through the process of narrating and interpreting the RPCs, prompting social researchers to critically reflect on how they design and implement their work, particularly in projects where they are seeking to work collaboratively with schools and/or other similar organisations or communities. Also prompting social researchers to carefully count the cost of collaboration through proactive, clarifying conversations with potential collaborators.

- Developing a prototype for a multi-dimensional, dialogic heuristic to support clearer conversations about CKD&S.

7.4.2 School leaders and staff

The study's practical contributions and implications for school leaders and staff include:

- Prompting school leaders and staff to carefully count the cost of collaboration through proactive conversations with potential collaborators from academia or other sectors.

- Providing these stakeholders with an example of a collaborative process in which school leaders and staff worked with a social researcher to shape a developmental intervention and tailor it for their context for the benefit of the learners they serve.

- Highlighting and describing the invaluable role school leaders and staff can play in CKD&S and emphasising how key their involvement is to the sustainability of these types of processes, particularly from a stewardship perspective.

- Prototyping and refining a developmental toolkit for use with students in key transitional grades in the SA education system and aligning it with the Life Orientation curriculum for the GET phase.

- Developing a prototype for a multi-dimensional, dialogic heuristic to support clearer conversations about CKD&S. The heuristic highlights various dimensions that school leaders and staff may wish to emphasise and tease out in conversations with researchers or other potential collaborators.

7.4.3 Learners

The study's practical contributions and implications for learners include:

- Fostering an enabling, hospitable space for over 200 learners to engage in CKD&S on questions of identity, purpose, and their interplay with learning.

- Taking small groups of learners through a series of exercises designed to facilitate and scaffold reflection on questions of identity, purpose and their interplay with learning while practicing and developing transferable skills including giving their informed consent to participate, listening, observation, dialogue as well as verbal, written and visual reflection.

- Prototyping and refining a developmental toolkit for students in key transitional grades in the SA education system and aligning it with the Life Orientation curriculum for the GET phase.

- Highlighting the immense potential of young people as collaborators and potential leaders in a CKD&S process.
- Highlighting the readiness of the learners in the collaborating schools to not only participate in a developmental intervention but also develop ideas for further collaboration.

7.5 Theoretical and philosophical contributions and implications

The study's theoretical and philosophical contributions and implications include:

- Employing, and augmenting, the theory of enabling spaces both in the design of the developmental intervention and as part of a novel theoretical framework to narrate and interpret four RPCs. Expanding the understanding of space to include the value of hospitality as well as a polymorphic understanding of space-time.
- Articulating some of the key distinctions between RPPs and RPCs and highlighting how these approaches mutually reinforce and enrich one another.
- Developing a novel approach to triangulating a range of complementary theoretical frameworks to allow for a polymorphic reading and narration of the space-time that was fostered for CKD&S through the RPCs.
- Integrating key principles and instruments from Charlotte Mason's educational philosophy in the intervention design as well as the study's theoretical triangulation.
- Articulation of a Christian metaphysic's implications for a philosophy of social science and the translation thereof into a congruent research methodology.
- Explicitly centring a clearly articulated understanding of personhood in the study's design, implementation, and analysis. Presenting a case for a stronger emphasis on personhood in social inquiry.
- Outlining the importance of greater transparency and accountability about the philosophy that underpins social researchers' work in ways that also ensure the varying philosophies that collaborators bring to the collaborative process are harnessed rather than ignored.
- Reflecting on the complexity of navigating situated ethics in emergent RPCs. Highlighting the importance and potential of involving collaborators in practical and ethical deliberations from the outset to ensure a process is designed with their contextual needs, priorities, capacity, and constraints in mind.

7.6 Policy contributions and implications

The study's policy contributions and implications include:

- Underlining the collaborative potential of the legal autonomy of schools within the SA educational governance infrastructure.

- Highlighting the importance of fostering sectoral infrastructure – from the national to the school-level – to incentivise collaborative approaches that contribute to (school) improvement.

- Emphasising the value of fostering a policy environment that allows leaders at every level of a system to take initiative in pursuing collaborative projects or interventions that contribute to (school) improvement.

- Prompting policymakers to consider the potential of young people, not merely as a resource to be developed through teaching and learning, but as a key contributors in schools as spaces for CKD&S who can augment the expertise and capacity of school leaders and staff.

- Prompting policymakers to consider how the policies they develop can contribute to fostering enabling, hospitable spaces for CKD&S in schools.

7.7 Where to from here? Opportunities for further research

The process of designing, preparing, implementing, interpreting, and narrating the RPCs has been personally and professionally formative. Although valuable findings and insights have emerged through this process, the unfolding and articulation of a field of study to explore through further research in the years and decades ahead has been equally important. In this section, I briefly highlight a few examples of opportunities for further research based on this study:

- Further explore the potential of RPCs as potential precursors to longer-term collaborative and partnership arrangements like RPPs. Set research projects up as RPCs from the outset and intentionally facilitate conversations with different collaborators from day one to jointly articulate what kind of space is to be fostered for CKD&S.

- Build on this thesis' articulation of, and emphasis on, CKD&S by designing collaborative, developmental research projects that intentionally integrate strategies to bolster the sustainable stewardship of knowledge in collaborative contexts. To make any claims about a CKD&S process that goes beyond the stewardship of the intervention itself by the different collaborator groups, a clearer system of ongoing

feedback loops would need to be designed into a process. If a process was designed as an RPC from the outset, then one would ideally also consider how the knowledge that was discovered and/or created could be fed back into the school or collaborative context on an ongoing basis in ways that are feasible and sustainable for different collaborators.

- Expand on the notion of a youth-championing RPC by taking a conversation-led approach that draws young people into the design of developmental interventions for their context. Explore opportunities, through collaborative research strategies or other approaches, to harness the human capital of students in schools to develop sustainable developmental interventions that are youth-championing and/or youth-led.

- Further explore the formative potential of RPC/P in the apprenticeship of social researchers, particularly the ways in which these approaches present an opportunity for early career researchers to develop a practice- and/or policy-embedded understanding of pertinent questions and themes in their field of study through collaboration with practitioners and/or policymakers.

- Work more actively with staff through RPC/Ps to develop interventions that they want to embed in their classroom practice to address a specific need, challenge, or priority they have related to the improvement of teaching and learning. Explore ways to facilitate a leading role for staff in these collaborations or partnerships.

- Expand the collaborator groups to involve parents, as well as a broader range of staff (administrative, support and other) in schools. The identification of potential collaborator groups will depend on the thematic priorities of a CKD&S process. In the SA context, where the role of School Governing Bodies is both championed and contested, RPC/Ps could, for example, be harnessed to consider how capacity might be built within these governance structures to strengthen schools' engagement with regional and national governance structures.

- Explore opportunities to go beyond interconnected, yet distinct, collaborations with individual schools to facilitate greater collaboration both within and across schools. Explore the feasibility of involving staff from the Education Department, whether at the District or Provincial level, as well as other relevant third or voluntary sector organisations that interface with schools.

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APPENDICES

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