Guardians of research: negotiating the strata of gatekeepers in research with vulnerable participants

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Abstract

Gatekeepers are an integral part of an ethical process of seeking authorisation for research. The number of gatekeepers, and the negotiations between researchers and gatekeepers, become more complex for research which includes children and young people (CYP) and other vulnerable groups. Ethical researchers and gatekeepers share a desire to protect CYP from harm. This paper examines the multifaceted nature of gatekeepers and the positive and negative influences upon their decision-making. The traditional view of the gatekeeper, as benevolent protector, has been challenged within literature. Indeed, gatekeepers are sometimes presented as being predisposed to take an antagonistic stance towards research proposals, owing to a heightened anxiety regarding risks of harm for CYP. This is problematic for researchers endeavouring to plan proactively for seeking permissions from gatekeepers. This paper offers a novel contribution to these debates with a model of the strata of gatekeepers, designed to support researchers with those proactive preparations. This paper focuses on the educational context, but nevertheless contributes to the debates across wider fields of study, working to mitigate vulnerable participants becoming marginalised on topics which are salient to them.

Key words: gatekeepers research ethics reflexive ethical framework
vulnerable participants consent access

Introduction

This paper investigates the function of the gatekeeper within research, undertaken in the UK, which proposes to include participants who may be classified as vulnerable. It presents the case that gatekeepers exist in various strata within a research project, serve an important role in testing the applications of the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence within the proposed research, and that they may have both positive and negative influences upon the research. A model of the potential strata of gatekeepers is proposed to support the planning of a reflexive ethical framework for research. This paper adds to the debates regarding the tensions evident in balancing both protection and CYPs' entitlement to have a voice. The proposed

model and its application makes a novel contribution in support of seeking solutions to ease this tension, including those arguing for a reflexive situational approach rather than the application of rigid ethical codes.

Research in educational contexts in the UK has experienced increased attention and encouragement within government policy and from practitioner-based groups in recent years (Bryan and Burstow, 2018; Campbell and Groundwater-Smith, 2007). In my professional experience as a senior lecturer teaching postgraduate courses, I have observed from dialogue about research involving CYP, planned to be enacted within an education setting, that there are differences in perceptions held by academics and by practitioners in respect of how the ethical considerations should be addressed. Nevertheless, all share the keenness to protect children and young people (CYP) from harm. My observations regarding this disparity of viewpoints regarding the application of ethical principles have also been echoed within literature (for example, Bryan and Burstow, 2018). Ethics is concerned with the quality of the outcomes of the research as well as with the ways in which participants are handled (Brooks, te Riel, and Maguire, 2014). Bryan and Burstow (2018) note the requirements that have been made by the Department for Education upon Headteachers and Teaching Schools to develop research and that the attention upon research-informed practice also has international interest. Thus, the differences in perceptions regarding how ethical issues should be responded to suggests that investigations of ethical principles, and their application, is pertinent for both academics and practitioners engaging in research. Furthermore, this notion is highly relevant across fields such as health and social sciences in which researchers are keen to involve vulnerable participants and / or are investigating a sensitive topic.

A principles-based approach to ethical research design and implementation is explored to identify potential ethical issues and tensions, and plan strategies for proactively tackling those issues (O'Reilly *et al.,* 2013). This may reduce the opportunities for difficult issues to arise. Such an approach is underpinned by the belief that all views and opinions of participants are to be equally valued as potentially significant; this facilitates the researcher's understanding of the need to have a holistic and unbiased approach, not merely viewing people as data or types (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2013). This suggests that for research involving CYP ethical planning needs to be an ongoing reflexive decision-making process throughout the research, rather than working to apply a rigid code bolted on to the research design (Brooks *et al*., 2014; McAreavey and Das, 2013; Powell *et al.*, 2012).

The classification of CYP as vulnerable, owing to their chronological age, requires a researcher to seek permissions for the involvement of CYP in any proposed research. The term 'age of majority' refers to the age at which CYP may assume legal control over making decisions; the stated chronological age at which this is attained varies across different countries. Within the UK, adulthood or age of majority is reached at 18 years of age. The UK legal framework requires that consent must sought from the person with parental responsibility for ages 0-18 years. However, there are some exceptions within this, such as those 16 -17 year olds who are deemed to have mental capacity to make decisions, may provide their own consent for medical procedures and being a participant in research (General Medical Council, 2018; NSPCC, 2018). The apprehension of those approached to sanction the research regarding fulfilling safeguarding obligations, and any potential negative consequences of the research, provides both negative and positive influences upon their scrutiny of any research proposal (Groundwater-Smith *et al.*, 2015; Coyne, 2010). Academics, and practitioners may perceive the necessity to request authorisation for any proposed research differently. For this reason, an interrogation of the key players and processes potentially involved, and the rationale for their involvement, is highly pertinent to support developing a deeper understanding of the questions surrounding who, what and why within the sanctioning of research. Some of these key players within research involving CYP are frequently referred to as gatekeepers. The following section will present an exploration of different perceptions of gatekeepers and their functions.

Gatekeepers

CYP are surrounded by gatekeepers across the different spheres of the world they inhabit (Campbell, 2008; Stalker *et al.*, 2004). These gatekeepers hold a variety of roles and are tasked with a protective role amongst the other functions they fulfil. Examples of these roles within an educational context include parents and carers, social workers (for children in care), headteachers, teachers, administrators who manage data and school governors. This is explored further within the next section. Gatekeepers' protective roles are underpinned by legal regulations which can be used against them to prosecute, such as in circumstances which are judged to have harmed or risked CYPs' well-being (Masson, 2002).

There is a risk that consideration of the gatekeeper, and their role within the ethical framework for research, may be applied within a simplistic one-dimensional conceptualisation of another box to be ticked within the process. Farrimond (2013, p.169) proposes the notion of gatekeepers as providing an 'ethical chain of command' with whom the researcher needs to

consult in response to ethical issues. This perception intimates that gatekeepers and the role they fulfil may be multifaceted, requiring investigation to support planning for the proposed research. Further support for this proposal may be drawn from studies which indicate that positive relationships between gatekeepers and researchers provide a vital ingredient for success [for example, Crowhurst (2013), Clark (2010)]. The following sections will set out an exploration of some personal and wider contextual influences upon Gatekeepers' decision making. This is important to explore owing to the problematic nature of a negative outcome for researcher of a request for authorisation for research, such as significant delays in commencement (from prolonged negotiations) or the abandonment of the research study owing to the barriers arising within attempts to secure consent.

Gatekeeping: a political process

Within the literature reviewed, the terms 'access' and 'safeguarding' were most frequently aligned with the explanations of gatekeepers and their function. The gatekeeper's role is frequently outlined as being to protect individuals within the group for whom they are responsible, and to adjudicate upon requests for research to be undertaken within their context (Greig *et al.*, 2013; O'Reilly *et al.*, 2013). This suggests a position of power as they hold the power to grant or deny access to participants (Clark, 2010). Insight into a deeper understanding of gatekeepers is provided by Collyer *et al.* (2017, p.97) who propose that gatekeepers be considered not merely as a protagonist with a specific function, but rather as a 'process which produces the possibilities for action'. Further perspective on the notion of gatekeeping as a process is provided by Bryman (2016, p.142), who contends that this is a 'political process' because it involves arbitration and mediation, owing to a gatekeeper's desire to shape how their organisation may be represented or modify the methods used by the researcher. Additional support for this view may be drawn from reflection upon the potential motivations of gatekeepers in their authorisation of research. This may be owing to a desire to have their own work and values corroborated and presented more widely (Crowhurst, 2013; Clark, 2010), the research focus fitting local priorities or to support facilitating change to policy or practice (Clark, 2010). The framing of the gatekeeper's role as being part of a principled public responsibility within some gatekeepers' perception of their role also adds weight to the notion of gatekeeping as part of a political process (Clark, 2010).

Stalker *et al.* (2004) provide valuable observations from their analysis of research with CYP in health contexts upon the influences of processes involved in seeking authorisation from gatekeepers. They noted the influence of anxieties resulting from high profile cases receiving

negative reports in the media, and of concerns about meeting requirements of data protection legislation, which delayed decision making from gatekeepers. Although this article was published some time ago, the arguments made still hold currency in 2018, owing to the heightened emotions arising from negative publicity about breaches of data legislation and poor or negligent practice, not just within traditional media sources but also from the speed in which such news is transmitted by social media and internet sources. The delays in decision-making or efforts to thwart access by gatekeepers has also been noted in more recent literature (for example, Turner and Almack [2017]).

All of these reflections provide support to the notion of gatekeeping as a process which is political in its nature, owing to the power gatekeepers hold within relationships or organisations and of their key involvement and motivations within making decisions for others. This will be amplified further within this paper.

Gatekeepers: the influence of their construct of childhood upon decision-making

While Gatekeepers' safeguarding or protective role is of a positive nature, this role does mean that they adjudicate over both the researcher's access to CYP and the opportunities for CYP to express their views, both about their potential involvement and about the topic being investigated (Coyne, 2010; Kirk, 2007; Masson, 2002). The demands influencing a gatekeeper's analysis of any request to authorise research, involves the problematic nature of balancing safeguarding, United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) entitlements, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (2018) and other contextual factors (Collyer *et al.,* 2017; Coyne, 2010). Another component within this complex interplay of influential factors upon gatekeepers' sense making in relation to the proposed research (and hence their decision making) is their understanding of research ethics.

One influence upon the individual gatekeeper's decision-making regarding research involving CYP, may be their conceptualisation of childhood (Campbell, 2008; Sargeant and Harcourt, 2012; Fraser *et al.,* 2014). This view is supported by O'Reilly and Dogra (2017, p.140) who propose three key lenses through which adults may scrutinise a research proposal: 'Libertarian' (CYP have rights to freely voice views), 'Protectionist' (adults ought to intercede to safeguard CYP) and 'Parentalist' (adults should make decisions for CYP until they attain adulthood). Consequently, there is a dichotomy within the gatekeeper's role in that whilst they are tasked with protecting CYP in their care, the construct they hold of childhood and of agency of CYP may result in an outcome in which CYP's voice is inhibited or that CYP are compelled to

participate (Kirk, 2007). This feeds into the complexity of process of gatekeeping in that the agency of the gatekeeper may act in accord, or in conflict, with the principles within the UNCRC (1989).

The role which is accorded to the gatekeeper does not necessarily resonate harmoniously with the conceptualisation of children as having competences with understanding and communicating their thoughts, feelings and experiences (Sargeant and Harcourt, 2012; Balen *et al.*, 2006; Danby and Farrell, 2005). In some of the literature reviewed by this author, the gatekeeper appeared to be presented as an agency of covert operations, monitoring and constraining CYPs' freedoms to opportunities to articulate their perceptions of their life experiences. This notion highlights the tension between two perceptions of the gatekeeper both personified as a growling guard dog: safeguarding CYP on one end of the spectrum, or confining them on the other end. Indeed, Turner and Almack (2017) note that the gatekeeper is often aligned to being the researcher's nemesis within literature. In order to redress the balance to this negative construct of gatekeepers, Turner and Almack (2017) offer a reminder that the gatekeeper's protective role is vital. Moreover, gatekeepers serve an important purpose in fulfilling the non-maleficence principle as they will examine the proposed research to ensure that there is no risk to CYP and may help identify resources or ways to enhance the research (Turner and Almack, 2017). The researcher will need to be confident of their own conceptualisation of childhood, and explore other perceptions, in order to be ready to have an empathetic stance from which to offer a persuasive argument.

Gatekeepers: sense-making whilst balancing many responsibilities

The Gatekeeper does not make their decision in isolation; indeed, they are balancing many priorities in addition to their legal and protective responsibilities. The burdens of their workload together with anxieties about further burdens or negative findings which may damage the school's reputation, may trigger apprehension about the proposed research (Turner and Almack, 2017; Coyne, 2010; Walsh, 2005). A lack of knowledge of research methodology and research ethics (Clark, 2010) may add to these factors which could negatively influence a gatekeeper's decision. Proactive preparation by the researcher may help to secure authorisation from the gatekeeper. This could include reflection upon the style of communication and nature of interaction to build a positive relationship, a succinct explanation of the proposed research, ethical planning and how this may benefit the organisation (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2017; O'Reilly *et al.*, 2013). Turner and Almack (2017) offer further advice to support careful

preparation for approaching gatekeepers in their notion of reflecting upon the key terms the researcher plans to use and the variety of ways in which these terms may be interpreted and defined.

Thus far this paper has explored a traditional conception of the gatekeeper as an adult making their decisions with regard to authorising research involving CYP in an educational setting. The personal and wider contextual influences upon a gatekeeper's sense-making of childhood, vulnerability, risk and the specific research project are complex and nuanced. This can be problematic for researchers to identify in order to plan ahead for their negotiations to seek consent for access to vulnerable participants. The next part of this paper offers a different conceptualisation of gatekeepers in order to address this difficulty.

Factors relating to the nature of the proposed research and the organisation, such as the information the researcher wishes to be allowed access to and the size of the setting, may lead to the identification of several strata of gatekeeper which may be need to be navigated by the researcher (Brooks *et al.*, 2014; Miller and Bell, 2012*;* Coyne, 2010; Langston *et al.*, 2005). The following section will offer a scrutiny of the potential strata, or levels, at which the researcher needs to negotiate authorisation for the research.

Strata of Gatekeepers: a model to support the identification of gatekeepers

The strata of gatekeepers will involve external and internal agents of the proposed context for research, negotiating authorisation may therefore be an ongoing process (Bryman, 2016). Figure 1 proposes a strata of gatekeepers which may be situated within research proposed to be enacted within an educational context:

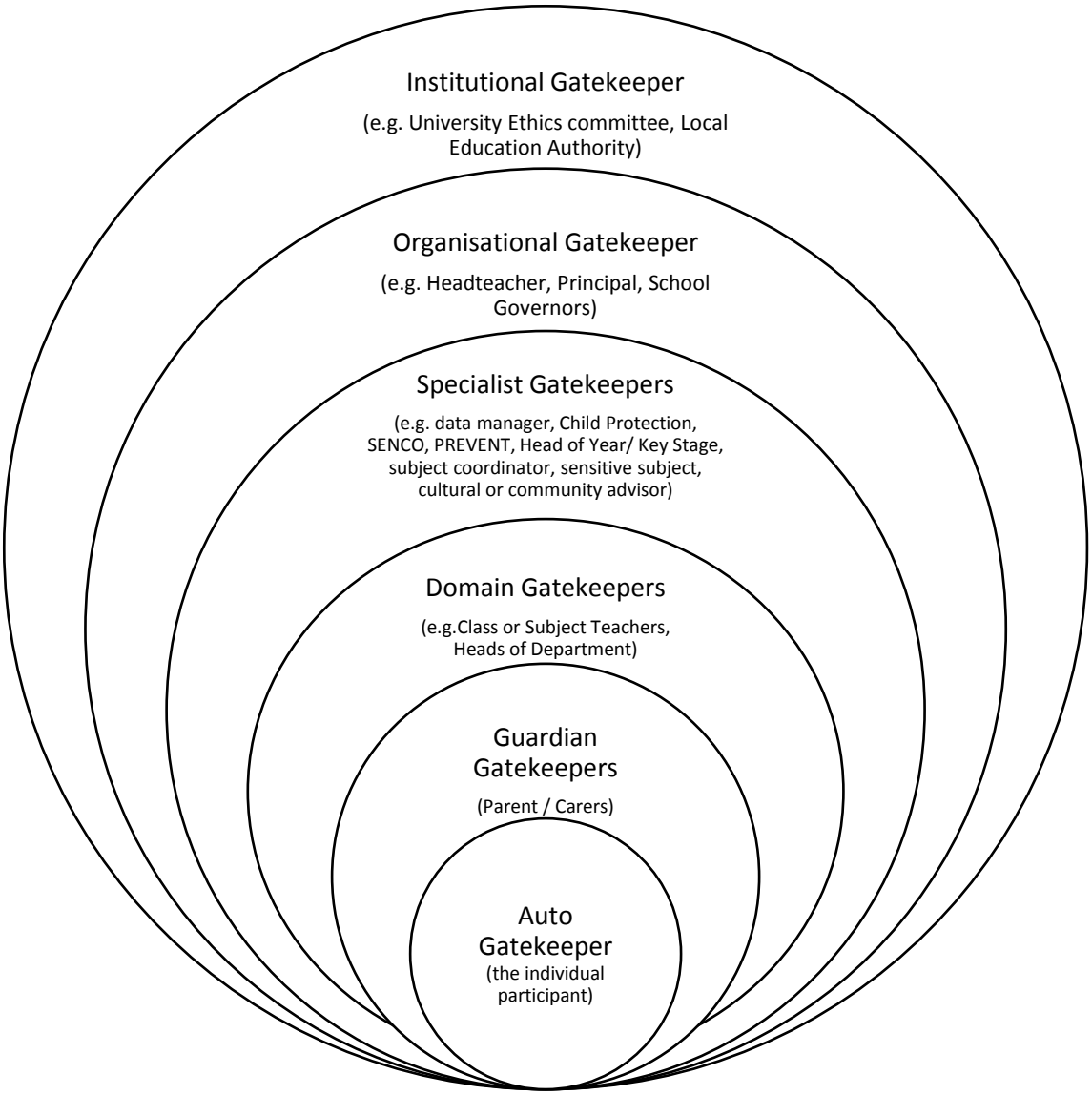

Figure 1: Potential strata of gatekeepers within an educational context

This model has been drawn as a nested system to reflect the nature of strata of gatekeeper. Not every gatekeeper included in the model is likely to be relevant to all research projects; hence the notion of potential strata in the title above. This form of organisation of the model was chosen because, within research involving participants identified as vulnerable, the most usual process will be to negotiate consent with each of the strata before seeking informed consent from the individual. The nested system presents a logical sequence for the negotiation of consent. There may, however, be occasions when the researcher may not start negotiations with the institutional gatekeeper, dependent upon the nature and focus of the research.

Table 1 sets out each gatekeeper's function, maps the evidence of approval and provides further reading:

Gatekeeper	Function and possible roles	Evidence of approval	Suggested Reading
Institutional	• Formally review research proposal • Examples: University research committee, NHS Research Committee, Local authority research governance approval	University / institution approval	• O'Reilly and Dogra (2017) • Grieg *et al.*(2013)
Organisational	• Safeguarding population within an organisation. • Regulates who may undertake research within that organisation. • Examples: Headteacher, Principle, School Governor(s)	Organisation's approval document	• O'Reilly *et al.* (2013) • Homan (2002; 1991)
Specialist	• Hold specific responsibilities within an organisation or related community • Have specialist knowledge on specific subjects • Examples: data manager, Child Protection, SENCO, PREVENT, Head of Year/ Key Stage, subject coordinator, sensitive subject, cultural or community advisor	Signed consent form	• Collings *et al.* (2016) • Edwards (2012) • Oakley (2002) • Nesbitt (2002) • Homan (1991)
Domain	• Leader within the specific domain proposed to be context of the research (e.g. classroom) • Examples: Class or Subject Teachers, Heads of Department	Signed consent form	• Turner and Almack (2017) • Powell *et al.* (2012)
Guardian	• Adult with legal parental responsibilities for the participant classified as vulnerable (e.g. parent, carer)	Consent form signed by person with parental responsibility	• O'Reilly *et al.* (2013) • BERA (2018)
Auto	• The individual acts as gatekeeper to their own personal thoughts, feelings and experiences.	• For adults: signed consent form • For CYP: Consent / Assent tailored to developmental level of participant, signed by individual (with name or symbol)	• Danby and Farrell (2005) • Homan (2002; 1991)

Table 1: Applying the proposed strata of gatekeepers to an ethical framework for research

The development of this model has been informed from an investigation of literature discussing the application of ethical principles to research with CYP, and other groups who are classified as vulnerable. The majority of the literature analysed was drawn from the field of health and social care and was examined through the lens of research within an education setting. Within the literature reviewed, there appears to be a gap in the research investigating gatekeepers within educational contexts. This model and its application is highly relevant to research involving CYP (or other vulnerable groups) across a variety of fields, owing to the shared values of beneficence, non-maleficence and the keenness to offer opportunities for all participants to be able to articulate their life experiences. The following section will provide an explanation of each of the strata within the model and evidence for this perspective.

***Institutional Gatekeepers*:** This is likely to involve formal methods of reviewing the proposed research, such as University Ethics Committees, in order to decide whether it will be sanctioned (Grieg *et al.*, 2013). Ethical codes from institutions often set out clear guidelines about the circumstances in which these gatekeepers should be consulted for permission (Homan, 1991). Seeking authorisation from the institutional gatekeeper is the initial ethical step in a process which should permeate the whole of the research (Farrimond, 2013). Scrutiny of the procedures set out by the institution for ethical reviews may identify positive and negative factors within this process. However, it is important to acknowledge that institutional gatekeepers play an important role in scrutinising the beneficial, and potential harmful, aspects of the proposed research (Farrimond, 2013; Gorman, 2007; Hill, 2005).

***Organisational Gatekeeper*:** Those who regulate permission to undertake research, or any other activity, within a specific context (Homan, 2002) is an organisational gatekeeper. In an educational context, this is likely to be the Headteacher or Principal of the setting. Within this part of the process of negotiation, there is a potential risk that the organisational gatekeeper's purpose may negate the opportunity for parents and participant to have the right to refuse consent or assent (Brooks *et al.*, 2014). An example of this is a circumstance in which the Headteacher states that there is no need to contact parents or CYP as the work may be part of normal school work or there may be a high risk of upsetting parents.

***Specialist Gatekeepers*:** These people may occupy differing levels of seniority within a context, but each has specific responsibilities which may relate to the research focus, information the researcher wishes to have access to, or potential participants (Bryman, 2016). Each of these specialist gatekeepers will have criteria for accountability they have to fulfil

(Langston *et al*., 2005), for example a person who has responsibility for the data gathered by the context (e.g. school data related to attendance or attainment) who is obliged to ensure that any permission given fulfils the legal obligation of the current data protection legislation (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). In the UK, the change in requirements arising from the most recent legislation, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (2018), has increased the demands in regard to how data is handled, which increased anxiety over ensuring regulations for security and access are correctly applied. Other people with whom the researcher may need to negotiate include those with responsibility for Child Protection, Special Educational Needs, the Prevent duty, Pupil Premium and a specific cohort, such as a year group or key stage. This may be a small number of people or large group, dependent upon the size of the organisation.

Some specialist gatekeepers may be consulted owing to their specialist knowledge with regard to the context or to the topic being investigated (Edwards, 2013; Oakley, 2002). Nesbitt (2002) identifies that the gamut of gatekeepers may include leaders of religious organisations and key people within the community (such as people leading within leisure activities attended by some CYP or parent governors).

***Domain Gatekeeper*:** The practitioners who take a leading role within the specific context in which the proposed research is seeking to take place are the domain gatekeepers. Examples of this are the Class Teacher in a school or Speech and Language Therapist in a health clinic. The domain gatekeeper may take on various stances within the research study, such as sanctioning the research in their domain and being a conduit or advocate for the research to parents / carers and CYP (or other vulnerable participants) (Turner and Almack, 2017; Powell *et al.,* 2012).

***Guardian Gatekeepers*:** The people who have legal parental responsibility for the CYP, usually the parents or carers are the guardian gatekeepers. The consent of parents and carers is considered essential owing to the classification of CYP as vulnerable and to respond to legal requirements (BERA, 2018; O'Reilly *et al.,* 2013). Specialist guardian gatekeepers may be needed in situations where the CYPs' natural parents are not able to consent, owing to legal or functional reasons (Balen *et al.*, 2006). An example of this specialist guardian gatekeeper is the CYP's social worker.

***Auto Gatekeeper*:** The individual acts as gatekeeper in respect of their personal confidentiality (Danby and Farrell, 2005; Homan, 2002; 1991). This notion is predicated upon the idea that each participant has jurisdiction of who may be permitted to enter into the realms of their personal thoughts, feelings and experiences and deserve to have clear information about the

researcher and the research (Homan, 1991). In relation to research in an educational context, this would refer to adults, such as teachers, headteacher and teaching assistants deciding whether they wish to be involved, but also to CYP. CYP should be offered the opportunity to assent, and be supported to understand what they are being asked to consent to. This aligns with the conceptualisation of children being, 'capable experts in their own world' (Sargeant and Harcourt, 2012, p.6).

Discussion: collision and coherence between strata

The relationships between the strata of gatekeeper may have a positive or negative influence upon the willingness or reluctance to support the research. In addition, further complexities may be added owing to CYP being classified as a vulnerable. This section examines potential collisions and coherences between gatekeepers, and how the proposed model can help researchers resolve issues arising from collisions.

The notion of vulnerability may oblige researchers to navigate their way through several strata of Gatekeepers to gain authorisation which may extend the timeframe of the research considerably (Coyne, 2010; Campbell, 2008; Stalker *et al.*, 2004). The model of potential strata will support researchers to identify the number and range of gatekeepers they need to negotiate with and plan an apposite time contingency within the timeline for their research.

The process of negotiation may be negatively influenced from relationships and power imbalances between gatekeepers. Collyer *et al*. (2017) drew upon Bordieu's sociological concepts of capital, habitus and field to inform their analysis of the role of the gatekeeper and the influences of their professional relationships, contextual situations and resources they may draw upon to inform their decision making within health care contexts. Their analysis is helpful to the educational context in that it alerts the researcher to consider each gatekeeper's cultural capital and relationships to help them prepare the nature of their approach to request permission for their research.

Another significant influence upon gatekeepers' decisions are the lenses and knowledge through which each gatekeeper will examine requests made to them for access for research (Collyer *et al.*, 2017). This may elicit opposing views upon what they are willing, or not willing, to sanction. This view of the existence of a variety of concerns and priorities against which gatekeepers may analyse proposed research is drawn from reviews of research undertaken in educational and health contexts (Collyer *et al.*, 2017; Wanat, 2008; Langston *et al.*, 2005). In light of this potential dynamic, adopting a reflexive approach to gatekeepers in

addition to the rest of ethical framework for the proposed research will be essential (Crowhurst, 2013). Further support for this notion may be drawn from Miller and Bell (2012, p.68) who propose that it is important to have ongoing reflection throughout the research upon '*who* is actually giving consent and to what' so that the researcher can identify this. This may be important for the researcher to reflect upon in relation to the nature of the gatekeeper(s) to be consulted, what they will be asked to consent to. The proposed model of strata will support identification of the gatekeepers. This will facilitate reflection upon what the gatekeeper will be asked to authorise and inform research upon the influences and knowledge gatekeepers will draw upon in their adjudication of the proposed research. Furthermore, this will inform planning the researcher's approach and explanations to each gatekeeper.

In consideration of the explanation set out above, it is apparent that a positive trustful relationship between the researcher and the domain gatekeeper is essential to support negotiations (Carey and Griffiths, 2017; McAreavey and Das, 2013; Wanat, 2008). The preparations described above need to encompass careful planning and allocation of time resources by the researcher to develop trust. This may prove beneficial to support a good working relationship, the permissions to research within the context and recruitment of participants (Carey and Griffiths, 2017; McAreavey and Das, 2013). Approval from more senior members of the setting does not guarantee that other gatekeepers may sanction the research or access to the data or subjects they guard (Crowhurst, 2013; Wanat, 2008).

One practical approach to facilitate this is for the researcher to engage in careful listening to the views of gatekeepers to help develop a good comprehension of those views; this may also inform critical reflection by the researcher of their own viewpoints and their research design, ensuring a rigorous methodology (McAreavey and Das, 2013). An important element within the construction of a trusting relationship is for the researcher to work not to be intrusive to the work of the context. This is part of working to avoid harmful actions to participants (Carey and Griffiths, 2017). This approach will support sensitive planning of approaches for negotiations if these circumstances arise.

Gatekeepers across all strata share a keenness, and a responsibility, to protect CYP and other vulnerable groups. This notion offers a coherent strand across the strata of gatekeepers. However, the enactment of this protective role may lead to collisions between gatekeepers, or between researcher and gatekeeper, within the negotiations and the decisions reached. One example of this may be drawn from Balen *et al.*'s (2006) analysis of the responses of ethics committees (institutional gatekeepers) across a range of research in the field of health from

several different countries. They note the committees often appear to take a rigid stance towards the application of their ethical code. Additionally, Balen *et al.* (2006) identify contradictions in the age at which CYP can consent to medical procedures themselves (16 years) and to research (18 years). Furthermore, they argue that the instances in which exceptions are made to ethical codes, highlights how ethics committees apply rules without necessarily considering the wider context of CYPs' lives. This may be interpreted as being related to greater weighting being accorded to committee members' anxieties about safeguarding CYP and about parental views, than to the opportunity for CYP to express their views within their final decision (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2017).

These conclusions, drawn from the field of health, may be applied to educational research owing to the high levels of accountability for safeguarding CYP within education policy. One potential approach to mitigate the risk of imbalance between safeguarding and right to express views may be to invite external expertise, such as people who are experienced in working with CYP, and possibly CYP, to participate in ethics committees so that they could advocate for CYP (Stalker *et al.*, 2004). This external expertise is beneficial to support holistic ethical decision-making and inform self-scrutiny of the institutional gatekeeper's procedures (Gorman, 2007).

Gatekeepers across all strata may decide to place boundaries around their sanction of research, which may add barriers and limitations to the investigation (Cohen *et al.*, 2018; Bryman, 2016). Indeed, gatekeepers may select the sample, based on their views of who may be co-operative, make positive comments about the setting or who they feel may not be competent, owing to reasons of vulnerability, age or SEN (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2013). The researcher may be provided with some valuable advice from Nesbitt (2002) who counsels that any constraints placed upon the researcher should be included within the research report in order to ensure that the research works to be reliable, valid and authentic.

Although the requirement for consent from adults be sought, stems from an important principle of protecting CYP, it does also make CYPs' rights a more reduced priority (Collings *et al.*, 2016). This is likely to be an inadvertent outcome and is a complex issue for which there are no easy answers.

It is important to acknowledge that the individual may be influenced by power imbalance (Wanat, 2008). Consequently, they may feel compelled to consent because another gatekeeper has already provided consent (such as a senior leader in the case of teachers or parent/ carer for

CYP) (Hill, 2005). Additionally, this power imbalance may influence whether the individual think they can articulate their true feelings of their life experiences (Kirk, 2007). Anxieties of any potential consequences of expressing negative views, or a keenness to provide the perceived correct answers, may lead to an individual not fully articulating their views. Indeed, CYP may express dissent in order to maintain some control, for example not rushing to talk about their experiences and feelings. Additionally, they may consent to be involved, but may be selective in what they are willing to discuss or how it is communicated (Brooks *et al.*, 2014). The proposed model of strata of gatekeepers may support analysis of possible power-imbalances which may arise within the research context. This analysis can inform the approach made to participants and the analysis of data generated.

Gatekeepers may act as a conduit for the researcher to parents and carers and CYP in that they may translate the information about the research into simpler language, or another language, in order to explain the research and seek consent for the researcher (Homan, 1991). This person may be able to mediate on behalf of the research owing to their social relationship with the parent or carer (Homan, 1991; Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert, 2008; Collings *et al.*, 2016). The proposed model may support identification of these people. The researcher will need to be sensitive to the possibility of power imbalance with the relationship between mediator and parents and carers and work to mitigate this so that this does not negatively impact upon their findings.

This political process of negotiation with gatekeepers may also have a positive influence. The challenges to, and defence of, the research design will encourage the researcher to reflect upon their methodological choices. This may result in positive changes enhancing the credibility of the research design (McAreavey and Das, 2013). These negotiations may also be supportive of the building of trust and mutual respect between researcher and gatekeeper, which may have positive influence upon accessing participants and the successful completion of field work (Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013).

Conclusion

Much of the focus upon research ethics within a research design frequently is focused upon consent and confidentiality (McAreavey and Das, 2013). This risks a rigidity of approach which may not fully prepare the researcher for managing all ethical issues as they arise. This exploration of gatekeepers has identified that the inclusion of CYP within the range of participants intensifies the layers of complication and widens the opportunities for discord (Christenson and Prout, 2002). The process of negotiation with gatekeepers requires much

preparation by the researcher in order to support achieving a positive outcome. This may be a positive process in that an important part of testing whether the proposed research fulfils the non-maleficence principle as gatekeepers will examine the proposed research to ensure there is no risk to CYP (Powell *et al.*, 2012; Coyne, 2010). Gatekeepers may also provide support in that they may identify resources or approaches which may aid or enhance the research, they may become patrons for the research in that having granted permission, they support with access to the group the researcher wishes to focus upon or provide contacts (Cohen *et al.*, 2018; Bryman, 2016; Cree *et al.*, 2002).

Hence the process of gatekeeping embodies both positive and negative functions in respect of safeguarding and facilitating opportunities for CYP to be involved. The weighting which each of these is assigned may depend upon the lens through which the proposed research is being scrutinised. Other influences appear to be contextual (such as burdens on gatekeepers from their professional roles and responsibilities) and related to the attributions given to language used, most noticeably the term 'vulnerable'. Gatekeepers may provide authorisation for research but place limitations or constraints upon the research (Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert, 2008); these will need to be incorporated within the final report so that the research is reliable, valid and authentic (Nesbitt, 2002).

One vital tool a researcher may draw upon is building a trustful relationship with each of the strata of gatekeepers as this will be key to securing a positive decision regarding authorising the research (Crowhurst, 2013). This is likely to include providing clear information to explain and show the value of the proposed research for the CYP involved, the context and the wider world, in addition to the competence of the researcher (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2017). The notion of a reflexive situational framework for ethics may suggest a role for the gatekeeper process to provide ethical supervision for the researcher in their journey of research with CYP.

The model of strata of gatekeepers and its application, proposed within this paper, will support academic and practitioner researchers with planning reflexive ethical approaches to research. It will facilitate identification of gatekeepers who should be approached to sanction the research. This is important to support researchers and gatekeepers to engage in discourse which seeks to ensure that CYP (and other vulnerable groups) are both protected and able to articulate their views and experiences, working to reduce any heightened anxieties from gatekeeper or researcher (Balen *et al.*, 2006). This may mitigate the risk of marginalisation of participants classified as vulnerable (Balen *et al.*, 2006). My intention is to undertake some empirical research to investigate the application of the proposed model in research.

Most importantly, this model supports the notion that CYP (and other vulnerable participants) act as their own gatekeepers and thus seeking their consent or assent is vital within ethical research. *(5962 words)*

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