Guest editorial

Sean Creaney, Samantha Burns and Anne-Marie Day

Theory and practice of co-production and co-creation in youth justice

Approaches to practice should be rights-based and seek to ensure the active participation of justice-involved children. It is necessary for practitioners to be explicit that children's participatory rights will be respected and promoted throughout their contact with the Youth Justice System (Brown, 2020; Creaney and Case, 2021). Indeed, involving children in discussions regarding their needs and access to bespoke forms of support, and taking account of their perspectives, is a central tenet of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Arthur *et al.*, 2019; CYCJ, 2022, p. 3; Lundy, 2007; UNICEF, 1989; Weaver *et al.*, 2019). Notions of partnership and reciprocity are considered core elements of effective participatory practices (Creaney *et al.*, 2023). Promoting children's participation is a key part of the evidence-based Child First approach (Case and Hazel, 2023) and aligns to the third principle of the Youth Justice Board's definition of Child First, which states: "Encourage children's active participation, engagement, and wider social inclusion. All work is a meaningful collaboration with children and their carers" (YJB, 2021, p. 11).

Peer Power (2021) produced a report [1] on the enablers and barriers to children's participation in shared decision-making and designed resources around creative approaches to participatory practice, which includes recommended strategies to facilitate children's involvement in the design, delivery and evaluation of services. This evidence-based report, together with the co-produced resources, can help managers and practitioners to embed participation and co-creation across the sector, assisting in efforts to enact positive approaches to practice and ensure the views of children are systemically taken into account. The empathy-led charity co-created a principled and progressive *Voice and Influence Charter [2]* that can be used for benchmarking and to create or nurture a reflective approach to youth justice practice and policy development. The Charter can be drawn upon to ignite or provoke discussions on how to navigate dynamics of power within relationships or used to inspire conversations around how to advance a strengths-based culture within settings that views children as equal partners or co-creators within decision-making processes (Peer Power, 2021). Promoting principles of inclusion and social justice is key to embedding a collaborative power-sharing process between justice-involved children and practitioners (Smithson *et al.*, 2022).

In the opening section of the editorial to Part One of this Special Issue, the barriers to operationalizing the principle of co-production were reflected upon, and the benefits of using creative methods of engagement were discussed (Creaney *et al.*, 2023). When working with children who are subject to court orders, practitioners and case managers wield disproportionate power over responses and agenda-setting (Creaney and Burns, 2023). Furthermore, certain risk management processes remain "steadfastly punitive" (Deakin *et al.*, 2022, p. 101), which prioritises professional power and prevents partnership and reciprocity working with children. Powerholders (practitioners) may continue to monopolise agenda-setting and, at times, initiate tokenistic participation practices to secure a child's compliance and satisfy public protection agendas. Any commitment to co-production has to balance prioritising concerns around the "risks" children pose to society. It also must be

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Thank you to David Porteous, Tim Bateman and Timi Osidipe for commissioning this special edition. The Guest Editors would like to take this opportunity to thank all the authors for contributing to this special edition and the peer reviewers for providing helpful, insightful comments and constructive feedback, which helped to shape the focus of manuscripts. The Guest Editors are grateful to Lucy Threadgold, Sally Martin, Danielle Crow, Rimalee Pillay, Catherine McAteer and Omkar Ganji for answering many questions and providing expert guidance throughout the process.

acknowledged that practitioners are working within considerable constraints, which limit time, space and ability to initiate bespoke participatory approaches (Creaney and Burns, 2023). Moreover, heightened concerns around public safety limits professional interest in co-production, wherein interventions become professional-led and power holders remain wedded to mechanisms of control and surveillance in response to a preoccupation with identifying and managing the "harms" children pose to others (Burns and Creaney, 2023). Children are therefore seen as posing a risk rather than being vulnerable and at risk. Such methods include a continued use of a neo-liberal lexicon amongst the workforce, punitive discourse and risk management processes to satisfy public protection agendas, which tend to reflect "an unequal social order and an asymmetrical distribution of power" (Garrett, 2018, p. 132). Children can be relatively powerless within relationships due to surveillance of their behaviours and attitudes being a key aspect of supervision (Creaney and Burns, 2023). The appeal of co-production within youth justice may lie in its apparent challenge to institutional power and control (Burns, 2023; Johns *et al.*, 2022). Co-production, as an organising principle, provides the scope to think through ways to transform the balance of power between children and practitioners. To address power inequalities and consequently enhance provision, it is vital that practitioners proactively seek to equip children with a sense of freedom to impart ideas (exercise agency/choice) (Article 12 of the UNCRC 1989) throughout all stages of system contact (Creaney and Case, 2021).

When a "professional as the only expert" discourse takes precedence, this can stifle capacity to co-create practice. Children may feel discouraged from expressing agency or exercising "freedom of thought" unless they have received sufficient guidance and reassurance from practitioners (Deakin *et al.*, 2022). If they do input into the process, they may be reticent to challenge professional authority and unsettle the elite due to perceived consequences of "talking truth to power" and thus they may – involuntarily at least - self-censure, feel compelled to withhold or suppress their honest thoughts when presented with the opportunity to interact with adults (Creaney and Burns, 2023; Creaney, 2020). As Hart (2022, p. 3) notes, "trust", an important ingredient of co-creative practice, "is necessary to coax agency and voice from people who have been systematically controlled and silenced". Subsequently, power can be more balanced when professionals demonstrate they trust children's voices (Case *et al.*, 2020) and value their expertise by experience. At this point, it is important to invoke Lundy's thesis, which has clarified that, it is both possible and necessary to create a culture that fosters a participatory democracy and guarantees children access to safe spaces where they feel entitled to exercise their right to a voice, be listened to throughout the process, be treated fairly and be periodically reassured by power holders (youth justice practitioners) that they can "express their views without fear of rebuke or reprisal" (Lundy, 2007, p. 934).

As Hampson (2023, p. 317) notes, "The importance of giving the child a voice, listening to their views and actively collaborating with them is a central aspect of Child First (Tenet 3)". While research into the application of co-production in youth justice is scarce, the papers included in this special issue provide important new insights into the power of creativity in collaborations with children. This special edition includes a range of papers, connecting with the themes of identity, creativity and relationship-building within participatory-type practices. Each theme is either empirically grounded or theorized, providing insights into the utility of "collaboration" as a fundamental principle (and key objective of professionals) when commissioning, designing, delivering and evaluating the efficacy of participatory approaches in youth justice. This special issue of Safer Communities covers the centrality of lived experience, framed around the practices and principles of a Positive Youth Justice (Case and Haines, 2018). Myles (2022), who is a mentor co-ordinator and works directly with justice-involved children, has argued persuasively that children on court orders need to have access to lived experienced professionals or mentors to whom they can relate on an experiential level [3]. Practitioners have the power to facilitate or deny opportunities for children to input into service design and delivery. Crucially, it is also vital for them to

recognise the necessity of devolving power to young people and embrace their role as capable co-producers.

The papers in this issue

Creative methods of engagement, such as artistic approaches and drama-based programmes, can be useful mechanisms to enable children to express themselves and voice their needs in a way most suited to them, rather than adult-dominated ways of engagement. The research paper by Sarah Page explores participatory approaches of World Café and Forum Theatre, illustrating a commitment to inclusivity and a democratic process of co-learning. The case study examples demonstrate the importance of enabling pathways to educative learning that are delivered in participatory ways to engage young people and sustain their interest. In this practice-based paper, the author presents four independent case studies to showcase the power of adopting a participatory methodological approach and offers a reflection on the efficacy of this creative educative research tool as a vehicle or "hook" to engage young people in collaborative discussions. These creative approaches provide young people with the space to acquire or enhance knowledge and skills, explore issues and share perspectives on sensitive topics that may be of interest or relevant to their current circumstances or future. The importance of ensuring access to safe spaces for young people to share their lived and learned experiences was viewed as key to effective implementation of participatory education and learning opportunities.

The research paper by David Porteous and Anthony Goodman is timely in the light of the Youth Justice Board's commitment to seek evidence on the use of lived experience as a tool or mechanism to help prevent reoffending (YJB, 2021). This paper reports on the findings from an ongoing evaluation of a lived-experienced charity who work in partnership with a Youth Justice Service in London. The paper offers novel insights into how lived experience is valued and can be used through peer support practices. The charity aims to facilitate participatory practices through involving peers in the development of interventions, in advisor or co-producer roles, to enable pathways to desistance. According to Porteous and Goodman, the charity offers many types of peer support from individual to group, including a peer-led conversation hub. Peer navigators, with experience of using justice services, support young people to live productive lives by involving them as partners in the process when co-producing interventions.

Peer support, a diverse practice, can serve to instil and embed equal relationships and foster co-creative practice, especially when lived experience "capital" is recognised and valued as legitimate and co-production is drawn upon as a guiding framework. As the authors assert, this approach can encourage desistance through nurturing behavioural and attitude change to enhance self-efficacy of both those undergoing court orders and those in mentor or helper roles. Mentors can act as positive role models and help to nurture self-belief and confidence in children that they can adopt decision maker roles and co-produce elements of the process. This is one particular approach which embeds principles of partnership working and reciprocity and which challenges punitive attitudes within the youth justice context. As the research paper illustrates, mentors can act in helpful ways to make a difference to children's lives. Their contributions can effect positive change in others, achieved through valuing their lived experience and creating mechanisms that allow them the ability to influence outcomes. Moreover, youth charities and third sector organisations may be viewed by children as less punitive than criminal justice agencies (CYCJ, 2022). Thus, other youth justice services may seek to partner with such organisations to create projects that involve young people undertaking peer support roles.

Through using the method of lyric writing, the research paper by Jayne Price, Dean Wilkinson and Charlene Crossley captures and presents young people's experiences within youth justice services during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors offer a rich account of how the practice of lyric writing can be used to engage children and young people to nurture their

interests and present authentic accounts of their lifestyles, circumstances and events to which they have been exposed. Building trust, through developing a supportive relationship, was described as a key ingredient of creative participatory practice. Through facilitating lyric writing sessions, young people's narratives and accounts centre around identity development and relationship building. Within these sessions, there was space for justice-involved children to reflect on their experiences and engage in discussions around their interests in a relaxed and informal environment. There was a strong focus on building rapport within this pro-social approach.

The research team worked with an artist who was able to develop trusted and empathic relationships, and this enabled children's participation. Young people confirmed the value and importance of lyric writing opportunities. The authors embraced the principle of Child First, specifically the need to ensure that creative approaches to practice are rights-compliant and in accordance with the child's best interests. Trust and listening skills were key. Here, both the artist and the young person were seen as equal partners, and this helped to facilitate engagement and transitions into desistance and positive outcomes. The authors identified that the findings have informed the development of socially prescribed interventions within one Youth Justice Service. These prosocial pursuits can be worthwhile opportunities for children who have frequently been bereft of legitimise opportunities for self-expression.

The importance of creating comfortable environments and a culture of inclusion was also referred to in the research paper by Naomi Thompson and Meghan Spacey. The authors set out to explore how peer support, as an empathy-led approach, can contribute to a Child First, trauma informed and reparative model for Youth Justice. The authors recommend the technique of co-production (equal partnerships); a shared decision-making process that is focused on the needs, interests and perspectives of stakeholders. The barriers to operationalizing this practice are reflected upon, not least practitioners remaining wedded to the rhetoric of managing risk through a deficit-based lens, resource constraints that may hinder apprenticeship schemes from being developed, challenges activating the principle of "do no harm" and anxieties around managing safeguarding concerns.

In reflecting on the role of empathy, importance and value of lived experience in youth justice services, Thompson and Spacey explore the application of the peer support principle, which is a key feature of trauma-informed practice. Through a mixed-methods research design, which collected data from young people and parents/carers, key findings illustrate the importance of creating opportunities for young people to take on roles as peer representatives within youth justice services. As the authors assert, peer advocates can work collaboratively and constructively with children and young people by demonstrating empathy and the ability to connect with those in similar situations. Peer advocates can facilitate the healing/recovery process through fostering non-hierarchical partnerships, and in so doing, (re) build trust and confidence in youth justice service systems. These relationships, based on principles of mutual trust and respect, can also nurture self-confidence and personal growth. Indeed, appropriate praise and rewards can result in young people's self-esteem increasing and potentially the adoption of more positive pro-social identities. This and the other contributions to this edited collection show that creative approaches and strengths-based practices can be implemented in various ways to facilitate positive child outcomes. Further research is needed into the extent and nature of co-production and co-creation in youth justice, especially with larger numbers and diverse cohorts of children (i.e. particularly children from marginalised groups, children who are neurodiverse and children in care) subject to various disposals. Nevertheless, arguably, these approaches to practice are more likely to develop and flourish within an institutional culture that values reciprocal and productive relationships and embraces children's voices. Therefore, it is time to move beyond the unilateral thinking of risk management and punitivity towards children, to fully embrace their human rights and their lived experience and to recognise them as capable co-producers who are able to contribute to the processes of decision-making within youth justice interventions.

Notes

1. Peer Power's (2021) co-produced report and set of resources have been included in the latest evidence-based materials from HM Inspectorate of Probation (2023) and in the Youth Justice Board's (2022) Case Management Guidance.
2. According to Peer Power (2021), five key principles underpin eective participatory practice. These are as follows: Rights and readiness, Resources, Strengths and positivity, Power and inclusion, and Relate and respect.
3. See also (Margriet Lenkens *et al*. 2023).

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