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# Co-creating youth justice practice with young people: Tackling power dynamics and enabling transformative action

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## Abstract

This paper provides an account of an innovative research project that enabled the co-creation with justice-involved young people of a transformative framework of practice, termed Participatory Youth Practice (PYP). We present a description of our participatory research processes and reflect on our attempts to rebalance inherent power dynamics when working with marginalised young people. We demonstrate how young people's meaningful participation in research can strengthen their participation in service design and delivery. The embedding of the PYP framework in youth justice practice across a large region in England is a formative step in understanding the importance of young people's participation.

## KEYWORDS

co-creation, participation, power, transformative practice, youth justice

## INTRODUCTION

A focus on young people's participation in decision-making in youth justice systems is gaining traction. For instance, the Child First Offender Second (CFOS) model based on the belief that 'children are part of the solution, not part of the problem' (Haines & Case, 2015:45), inherently advocates for the participation of justice-involved young people in youth justice service design and delivery. CFOS principles have been adopted within the English and Welsh youth justice system, evidenced in the Youth Justice Board's Participation Strategy (2016), its Business Plan (2020) and the HMIP's framework for youth

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justice services (HMIP, 2017). However, as we have discussed elsewhere (Smithson et al., 2020), it is our belief that co-production and child-led research is an underdeveloped aspect of models such as CFOS. This paper intends to address this gap. We provide an account of a research project that enabled the co-creation with young people of a transformative framework of practice, termed Participatory Youth Practice (PYP). The unique co-productive element advances other participatory models and facilitates young people's meaningful participation in decision-making. It is a formative step in the translation of participatory philosophies into a comprehensive framework of practice.

Co-produced over 2 years with 28 justice-involved young people in the North West of England, the PYP framework is predicated on six principles that emerged through the life of the project. The principles are as follows: *let them (young people) participate (in decision-making)*; *always unpick why (their offending behaviour)*; *acknowledge their limited life chances*; *help them to problem solve*; *help them to find better options*; and *develop their ambitions*. Through the training of youth justice practitioners, the making of an explainer film and the production of practitioner resources, the PYP framework has been embedded in everyday practice in the local region in which we were working.

The first aim of this paper is to provide a description of the participative processes in our project that resulted in the creation of the PYP framework. We seek to enrich critical debate about young people's meaningful participation in research by reflecting on our attempts to rebalance the power dynamics inherent in research processes involving marginalised young people. We draw on Cahill and Dadvand's (2018:248) *P7 model* of participatory research, proposed as a way of conceptualising and planning for youth participation in research programmes. Their model is based on the *inter-connectedness of: purpose, positioning, perspective, power relations, protection, place and process*. Our second aim is to demonstrate that just as the inclusion of *insider voices* (Johnson et al., 2018:60) strengthens research, it also has the potential to strengthen participation in decision-making, service provision and delivery. Our project resulted in *transformative action in context* (Vaughan, 2014:1). We influenced 'powerful' others to support the transformation of youth justice provision through the embedding of the PYP framework in practice.

## **PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES IN YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEMS**

By way of context, youth justice systems create an environment whereby youth justice is *done* to young people rather than *with* young people (Case & Haines, 2014). In theory, young people in conflict with the law have the legal right to have their opinions taken into account, and are entitled to be able to contribute to a criminal justice system's response to their own behaviour (see UNCRC, 2007; UNCRC, 2008). Indeed, the UNCRC General Comment No 24 (2019) on young people's rights in the justice system replaces general comment No. 10 (2007), reflecting developments that have occurred since 2007. Effective participation in justice proceedings (art. 40 (2) (b) (iv)) now states that, *a child who is above the minimum age of criminal responsibility should be considered competent to participate throughout the child justice process*. However, systemic neglect of young people's views and participation pervades contemporary youth justice practices, typically leaving those in conflict with the justice system largely voiceless and powerless in key decision-making processes (see Bateman, 2020). Unlike in other contexts, such as health care, which has a more established track record of service user co-production and participation (see Beckett et al., 2018), young people in justice contexts are rarely given the opportunity to shape policy and service provision. Their status as 'young offenders' results in a lack of equity of access to participate (see Byrne & Lundy, 2019). It is generally accepted that there is a lack of research in the area of young people's participation in youth justice systems (see Creaney, 2020).

Within research contexts, participation is viewed as an approach that can be both *inspiring and daunting* (Smith et al., 2010:407). Inspiring because of the meaningful collaboration it fosters with community co-researchers, and daunting due to its many challenges, from ethical to relational (see Lenette et al. (2019)).

As an approach foregrounded in democratising the research process, valuing lived expertise and challenging power dynamics and social injustices (see Kim, 2016), we concur with Johnson et al. (2018) assertion that participatory research can empower communities that are dis-empowered, and therefore has significant potential for social change in a youth justice setting. In their reflective paper on the evolution and use of participatory action research, Kidd et al. (2018) advocate for its greater use with marginalised youth populations. Justice-involved young people are some of the most marginalised in society. We know that they are more likely to come from ethnic minority backgrounds; to describe themselves as having mental health problems and/or substance use issues; and have spent time in local authority care (see Bateman, 2020; Fitzpatrick & Williams, 2017; Gyateng et al., 2013).

Academics have developed various models of participation with the aim of supporting and directing those embarking on participatory research projects with young people. Hart's (1992) *Ladder of Participation* was one of the first models to provide a structure of participation—the different levels of participation represented as rungs of a ladder. The bottom rungs represent non-participation, while the higher rungs represent youth-initiated and youth-directed participation. More recently, Cahill and Dadvand (2018) propose the *P7 model* as a response to the critique of earlier models that reflect cultural hierarchical power norms and accept, without question, that participation in research is always a good thing for young people. The *P7 model* (Cahill and Dadvand *ibid*:248) is based on an acknowledgement of the *inter-connectedness of: purpose, positioning, perspective, power relations, protection, place and process*. The model stresses the importance of fluidity within participatory approaches in relation to power dynamics, context and circumstance. Recognition of relational power dynamics is particularly relevant when undertaking participatory work with young people in a criminal justice context. The most significant challenge to address is the inherent power dynamics already in play. Dynamics between those inside the system (young people convicted of an offence), those inside the system as a result of their profession (police, courts workers, youth justice workers) and those outside of the system (researchers).

Lohmeyer (2020:40) posits that we may have to accept that *some of the problems of youth participation might be unsolvable*. For instance, within a youth justice context, there are social and institutional barriers to young people's full participation in decision-making processes. These barriers are rooted in power differentials; not only are young people struggling against their social and legal status, in a youth justice context they are contesting their master status as 'offenders' (Becker, 1963). They are deemed by society to have forfeited their right to have a say (Hart & Thompson, 2009). Indeed, it is telling that over a decade on from Hart and Thompson's (2009) report for the National Children's Bureau (NCB), and the National Youth Agency's (2011) report on participation in youth justice; a coherent model for young people's participation in youth justice practice does not exist (Case & Hampson, 2019).

Research undertaken by academics in a Welsh context has set the tone for the UK's development of 'child friendly' engagement, policy and practice (see Case et al., 2020 and Charles & Haines, 2019). Johns et al. (2017) write about their research with a group of young men in Wales, labelled as prolific offenders. The research explored a 'child-friendly' approach to the understanding of persistent offending. Their findings suggest that a supportive relationship between young people and youth justice professionals is of paramount importance when identifying and developing a young person's skills and ambitions, and tailoring interventions to meet the young people's needs.

In Scotland, a report by the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice (Lightowler, 2020) illustrates a number of initiatives to support young people's participation in the youth justice system. For example, *Article 12* is a young-person led network working to promote the participation of young people and an adherence to Article 12 of the UNCRC on the Rights of the Child. *Our Hearings, Our Voice*, is a young people's board operating independently of but involving young people in strategic decision-making within the Children's Hearings System and feeding into the Children's Hearing Improvement Partnership (CHIP). Lightowler and Cook (2015) focussed on understanding how young people could become active participants in shaping improvements to youth justice policy, practice and research. Working with young people in Scotland who had differing levels of experience with youth justice services, a number of ideas were developed. These included an annual engagement event with young people and service providers, the development of peer support programmes and the establishment of youth advisory groups within youth justice services. Tangible benefits to come out of this piece of research included a group of young people contributing to the Scottish government's, 2015 *Youth Justice Strategy*.

In an English setting, the *Promoting Inclusive Youth Justice Programme* (Creaney, 2020) explored young people's involvement in the design and delivery of youth justice services. The research found that young people's knowledge and lived experience were not valued by youth justice professionals. Young people were hesitant about taking control of decision-making in an adult-led, disempowering system.

International research has demonstrated that where participatory research processes have been used, they have proved effective in developing meaningful relationships between practitioners and young people, promoting dialogue and developing transformative youth-led ways of working. The *San Francisco Juvenile Justice Evaluation Project* (London et al., 2003), for example, involved a team of adult researchers supporting a team of 20 youth researchers (all with experience of the justice system) to evaluate the effects of the project. The young people were supported to open up a dialogue with other young people in the justice system about their needs and experiences, to develop indicators to measure the success of the project and to present the findings and recommendations to policy-makers. The project improved meaningful relationships between practitioners and young people, promoted effective dialogue and developed transformative youth-led ways of working.

Yet notwithstanding the positive outcomes that can result from supporting and letting justice-involved young people participate in research and decision-making, youth justice initiatives such as some of those described above, are invariably limited to highlighting the need for young people's participation. In contrast, the project we describe in this paper identified this need and set out to address it through the co-creation of a tangible framework of youth justice practice—*Participatory Youth Practice*.

## OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

Our project was a partnership between a university and 10 youth justice services across the North West region of England. While there are a small number of other partnerships between youth justice services and UK universities (e.g. the formative work of the Swansea Bureau in Wales, Haines et al., 2013), the project is the first funded Knowledge Transfer Project (KTP) of its kind in the field of youth justice.<sup>1</sup> The project was approved by Manchester Metropolitan University's, Faculty of Arts and Humanities ethics committee.

As funded KTPs require the bidirectional transfer of knowledge between academia and business, Anna Jones, the second author of this paper was seconded (transferred) from the university to the

regional youth justice service for the period of the project. This is a unique requirement of a KTP and something which other university–youth justice partnerships do not include. For 2 years, she was able to fully immerse herself in the youth justice environment; familiarising herself with policies, procedures and systems, but more importantly, spending time with professionals and observing first-hand the work they carry out with young people. The secondment significantly influenced the direction of the project and as a result, it focused its lens on (a) redressing the balance of youth justice practice, with an emphasis on the participation of young people, and (b) exploring a new model of working with a focus on the transfer of knowledge between young people and the research team.

## **Methods: Our approach**

The purpose of this section is to provide a description of the participative processes in the project. We explain how the PYP framework emerged iteratively during the course of the project, and the role the young people played. We reflect on our attempts to rebalance the research power dynamics by co-creating with young people the project's approach, the construction of knowledge, the dissemination of knowledge and the transformative action of embedding the framework in practice. The methodological approach is presented as three phases, each of which is described in full below.

### **Phase 1: Engagement of young people**

Participatory research is based on iterative principles, and as such, we could not provide categorical instructions and explanations to youth justice professionals of the processes to be followed, or what the project ‘would look like’. Therefore, the criteria for involvement in the project were very loose— young people had to be aged between 15 and 18 with experience of involvement with the regional youth justice services.

Fifty young people were nominated by youth justice colleagues, and of the 50, 28 young men expressed an interest in the research. Their average age was 17, and a third was from ethnic minority backgrounds. Over two-thirds were exposed to at least one adverse childhood experience growing up including bereavement or significant loss, physical abuse and/or neglect, emotional abuse and/or neglect and familial substance use. In addition, more than half were, or had previously been in local authority care. We carried out semi-structured interviews with them focussing on their experiences of the youth justice system, including how they felt the justice system could better understand their experiences and their needs, the sorts of interests they had and how these interests could be used by the research team to develop (with them) the next stages of the project.<sup>2</sup>

### **Phase 2: Co-development of research activities**

We recognise that participatory research should promote active youth engagement, with activities reflecting the interests of young people (Iwasaki et al., 2014). Through interviews and informal meet ups, Anna gradually built a consensus around activities that were popular amongst the young people. A number expressed an interest in physical activities such as football and boxing. Others mentioned grime music and street artists. A priority list began to emerge, which was shared amongst them.

They made suggestions for the content of a series of creative, one-day workshops around boxing, grime lyric writing and urban art. As power sharing is a theoretically central dimension of any

participatory research approach (see Driskell, 2002), the process of co-developing a series of workshops enabled the young people to guide the research. Using the participatory principle of the adult facilitator acting in a '*support role*' (Ozer, 2016:264), we identified professional facilitators for these workshops. Each of the workshops was held at appropriate venues across the region. The boxing and grime lyric writing workshops were held at a youth centre, which has both its own boxing ring and a music studio, while the urban art workshop was held at a university arts and community outreach building.

### Phase 3—The participatory workshops

It is not the purpose of this paper to provide a detailed account of the relative merits of each creative activity. However, a brief description of each of the co-developed workshops and the ways in which the workshop activities produced the initial themes that resulted in the PYP framework is necessary. We demonstrate how the young people's meaningful participation in the workshops created a safe space in which they were supported to contribute their ideas and experiences.

#### The boxing workshop

Various scholars have written about how the boxing gym can act as a site for both change and accrual of positive elements to offending lifestyles (see Jump, 2020). There seems to be an existing assumption that boxing participation correlates with criminal desistance, and boxing has long been viewed as a successful 'hook for change' (Giordano et al., 2002). Working with the suggestions made by the young people, and with guidance from a boxing coach who helped facilitate the session, the day-long workshop included boxing exercises interspersed with a discussion of the nature and culture of boxing, young people's experiences of the justice system and attitudes to criminal behaviour. (For a full review of the boxing workshop, see Jump & Smithson, 2020).

Fifteen young people attended the workshop, which commenced with a discussion around their understanding of boxing and perceived attributes of a boxer. Through the workshop, we attempted to explore their attitudes, values and decision-making in their everyday lives. Discussion was had about levels of exposure to violence, a lack of trust in authority and a lack of trust in family and peer groups, which contributed to a lack of self-esteem and confidence.

In reflexive discussions with the young people at the end of the workshop, a number of themes emerged that underpinned their offending histories: (a) lack of confidence, (b) wanting respect, (c) lack of discipline, (d) lack of trust, (e) lack of routine, (f) experience of defeatism and (g) experience of loss (Figure 1).

#### The Grime lyric writing workshop

The writing of poetry and prose, and the subsequent performance of this writing, has shown to be an effective engagement approach for young people in criminal justice settings (see Winn, 2010). Each of the young people expressed an interest in the genres of street rap and grime music (grime is a British style of rap, developed in early 2000s East London, see Drummond, 2018). Interestingly, grime is described as participatory in nature (Drummond, *ibid.*) with many grime artists part of 'crews' (collectives of artists). Through our interviews and conversations with the young men in the



**FIGURE 1** Boxing workshop, young men taking part in the activities

planning stages of the work, it became evident that grime was a significant part of their lives. They frequently showed us clips of artists on YouTube, and extracts of lyrics they had written themselves, which they had posted on their own YouTube channels. This *DIY approach* (Drummond *ibid*) is part of grime's history.

We identified a local grime artist and MC to facilitate a session of music and lyric writing. Eight young people attended the workshop (two of whom had also attended the boxing workshop). During the session, they were encouraged to listen to grime tracks selected by the MC and discuss what they liked, and disliked about them, and what they thought the music told them about the artist. They almost always favoured local artists from neighbourhoods they knew and identified with over any famous grime artists. Many pointed to the pertinence and depth of the lyrics, and their ability to tell the artist's life story. Others admired the willingness of the artist to 'tell it straight' in a world that they see as being characterised by falsehoods and disappointments.

The MC guided the young people through some of the basics of writing powerful rhymes and lyrics. During the course of the day, they each produced their own tracks.

At the end of the day, when reflecting on the workshop with the young people, there was a consensus amongst the group that they lacked 'voice' in social situations such as at school/college and in youth justice settings and beyond. The main themes to emerge from the workshop were (a) the importance of legitimacy and authenticity and (b) frustration of their lack of voice.

## Urban art workshop

The third and final workshop involved arts-based methodologies. A number of young people expressed an interest in graffiti or street art. They appreciated the idea of reclaiming disused areas for their communities, others liked the idea of stamping their mark through graffiti tagging. Many saw graffiti art as a way of expressing themselves and their identity, but also as a means of telling a story about their lives and/or social commentary. For the purposes of the workshop, we refer to urban art as a combination of street art and graffiti (Young, 2012). Arts-based approaches are regularly utilised in research with marginalised groups. They have the transformative potential of developing artistic skills while providing an alternative platform for expressing thoughts and experiences (see Nunn, 2010).

We identified a graphic designer and a street artist to deliver the session. Most of the young people had a keen eye for branded items and felt that these material items encouraged respect and helped reinforce their identities and self-worth. Six young people attended the workshop (two of whom had attended previous workshops). They were supported to describe themselves, and how they felt others perceived them. Working with the artists, they developed a concept that expressed their identity and they were supported to sketch out a design or logo representing it. Once sketched out, they were given the option of creating a screen print or acrylic painting.

Similar to the two previous workshops, at the end of the day, they were given an opportunity to reflect on the session, and discussions were had about the difficulties of others seeing beyond their offending identity. The main themes to emerge were (a) the need for second chances, (b) for others to understand the reasons behind their behaviours and (c) to work through these behaviours with them

## Analysis and findings: The creation of knowledge

Discussions from each workshop were audio recorded and transcribed. Written documentation in the form of flip chart exercises, and the art and lyrics produced by the young people were collated to assist with the analysis process, and the artwork was photographed. Due to the volume of the data, and the challenges of arranging to meet with the young people, the initial stage of data analysis was completed by the research team. In the initial stage of analysis these materials, alongside the transcripts from the original 28 interviews and Anna's field notes were coded. Coding began by balancing inductive and deductive theorising (see Thew et al., 2020), and broad search terms such as youth offending teams, police, mental health, voice, power and risk were developed as topics for inquiry.

We have provided a detailed account of the findings from the interviews and workshops with young people elsewhere (see Smithson et al., 2020). As the aims of this paper are to provide an account of our participatory research processes and to demonstrate that through these we achieved '*transformative action in context*' (Vaughan, 2014:1), rather than providing in-depth accounts here, we give concise examples of the findings that led to the development of the PYP framework.

The second stage of the analysis took place approximately 3 months after the final workshop. During this time, where possible, Anna remained in touch with the 15 young people (who had attended at least one of the workshops). Foster-Fishman et al. (2005) view data analysis as crucial in providing co-researchers in participatory research with an opportunity to critically reflect on their lives. As explained earlier, due to their complex and constantly evolving circumstances, the majority of young people were unable to participate in this stage of the project; we worked with three young people who had co-designed and attended the workshops.

This stage of the analysis took the form of a two-part workshop. In the first part, the preliminary analysis was presented to the young people for them to discuss and revise. The initial themes were

explained to them as our summary of what young people, including themselves, had said about their experiences of the youth justice system during the workshops and interviews. It was heavily emphasised that these themes were just for consolidation, and open to challenge. Each of the themes were supported by direct quotes, which the young people could refer to, enabling them to access the raw data without needing to participate directly in the first phase of analysis.

The themes and relevant quotes are as follows:

- (i) Young people having little say in their lives. *They really should start listening to you, ... but they just go through what they've got to do. That's their procedure. That's their job.* (Ant, aged 15)
- (ii) The need from others to recognise that they have experienced hardships in their lives. *They've got to understand that there are ... reasons why you do shit.* (Jay, aged 16)
- (iii) A desire to change their lives but not having the social capital to do so. *People say ... that you can be whatever the fuck you want. But ... you can't just do whatever the fuck you want. That's a lie. ... You need money behind you and stuff like that. ... It's just how it is.* (Ste, aged 17)
- (iv) People not understanding their lives. *They [youth justice professionals] have sorted me out a lot, but it doesn't get sorted out on its own, does it? It's not quick. Everything just takes time.* (Tommy, aged 17)
- (v) Not been given a second chance. *People just see the old me. I want people to see ... I'm not like that now. I've changed.* (Jermaine, aged 16)
- (vi) Their strengths and skills ignored. *I'd have a job any day. ... They call it the American dream don't they? Family, house, kids, pets. Just being able to relax. ... I would ditch all this and have an easy life.* (Ty, aged 17)

Their role as the experts in explaining the significance of these themes was stressed, and they embraced the process of critiquing them. Each theme was discussed in turn, and although each resonated with them, they changed the language and re-explained certain things based on their experiences. This led to a more expansive discussion of things that were pertinent to them. Some themes were expanded and others were collapsed until they eventually agreed on six principles.

The six principles became the Participatory Youth Practice (PYP) framework. These are as follows: *let them (young people) participate (in decision-making); always unpick why (their offending behaviour); acknowledge their limited life chances; help them to problem solve; help them to find better options; and develop their ambitions.*

We took the principles to a series of regional professional working groups where they were presented to youth justice colleagues and discussed in detail. A series of guides were designed to support professionals to embed the principles of PYP into their practice. (They were made available through the research team's website and each one can be downloaded from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/mcys/gmyjup/pyp/>).

In the second data analysis workshop, the grime artist and MC who had supported the earlier workshop returned to assist the young people with a process of lyric writing. We had asked them how they would like the principles disseminating. They unanimously decided that they wanted to create some lyrics. The young people engaged enthusiastically in a process of lyric writing, supporting each other to create powerful and pertinent lyrics that captured the essence of what they intended each principle to mean. They created an individual song each and the grime artist took lines from each song and, with the three young people sat down and wrote a verse for each principle. Supported by the MC, they fine-tuned their lyrics, performing them at the end of the session.

Similar to the positive outcomes of using methods such as photovoice (Catalani & Minkler, 2010), the lyric writing provided the young people with an opportunity to personalise their stories and

experiences. To ensure that the lyrics developed into something tangible that could be heard by other young people, professionals and policy makers, with the permission of the young people, we had a local film-maker set the lyrics to a short film. The young people's lyrics, performed by the MC, provided compelling audio for the film. It is utilised as an explainer film to introduce the PYP framework (it can be watched here [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIjXXpOxi5Q&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIjXXpOxi5Q&feature=emb_logo).) In line with the experiences of health researchers (see Heaton et al., 2016), the creation of the film better expressed the young people's views and experiences when compared with more traditional academic outputs, such as research reports.

## DISCUSSION AND REFLECTIONS

The first aim of this paper is to provide a description of the participatory research processes in our project that resulted in the co-creation of the PYP framework. We now reflect on these processes and on our attempts to rebalance the power dynamics inherent in research projects involving marginalised young people. We recognised early on in the project that the young people we were working with had exceptionally complex lives and had experienced or were experiencing traumatic events. As well as acknowledging inherent power dynamics, we had to accept that their full participation in the project was unobtainable. The opting in and out of the different stages of the project took account of the young people's complex circumstances. We were quick to shed the pursuit of any ideals we may have initially had about their participation, that is, that we would have full participation at each stage of the research process. Rather than viewing this as a reason not to pursue a participatory research approach, we suggest that by documenting the challenges we had to navigate, we have augmented the debate on the tensions of undertaking participatory research with marginalised groups (see Lohmeyer, 2020). While not all 28 young people participated in the workshops (a total of 15 participated, five of whom attended more than one), they each influenced the development of the research through their participation in the earlier stages (interviews and informal conversations); thereby developing participative ownership of specific elements of the project; Franks refers to this as *pockets of participation* (2011:22).

Adopting a participatory research approach allowed us be responsive to the needs and the interests of the young people. The workshops far exceeded our expectations and, as we have described above, they generated a pool of rich data and insights that we simply did not anticipate when we embarked on their planning. In each of the workshops, the young people were the experts. Researchers have struggled to cultivate equitable relationships when young people feel they do not have the necessary skills to contribute (see Nygreen et al., 2006). The workshops reversed the usual power dynamics. For instance, the research team had no experience of boxing, rapping or urban art, whereas the young people were confident in these spaces and flourished when provided with the opportunity to teach us about their worlds.

We do not underestimate the impact of the participatory activities we were able to utilise and the discussions and insights they elicited. Having the opportunity to co-create the workshops with the young people around activities they were interested in was an invaluable approach. The trust built amongst the group coupled with their position as the experts in the workshops helped to break down some of the hierarchical power dynamics. We did not put young people in uncomfortable positions lacking the skills to undertake the activities asked of them. The co-created activities became a source of camaraderie amongst the young people; we witnessed their confidence grow, and the forging of new friendships. The opportunity for the young people to choose their own activities rather than the imposition of activities was key to the sharing and generation of knowledge.

Gaining the young people's trust was crucial (see Perkins et al., 2007 for an overview on the importance of trust). Having spent a considerable amount of time with the young people developing the project, we gained their trust and created a safe space, which encouraged interactive and iterative exchanges amongst them about their own experiences and future trajectories. That said, the work was still extremely challenging. There were instances when they did not attend pre-arranged workshops, or if they did, they were unwilling to fully engage. On these occasions, we went ahead with the planned activities and kept in touch with those who did not show up. At each workshop, we supported young people who were reluctant to get involved. They were not pressured to take part in the activities and were encouraged to 'dip in and out' depending on their levels of enthusiasm and confidence. However, their shared experiences of the youth justice system built trust and empathy amongst the group and consequently provided a source of individual social recognition and social capital. For example, statements from them such as, *kids like us don't usually get these opportunities* and *people don't usually bother asking us what we think* highlight the value of participation for marginalised young people.

When reflecting on the research process and the challenges faced, we are mindful that throughout the process, relational power dynamics between the researchers, youth justice professionals and young people were evident, and heightened by the unique power relations already in play when working with *hyper-governed* young people (Lohmeyer, 2020:40). This could explain the tendency of some professionals to question the young people's ability to participate in the project. Some were pessimistic about the chances of young people engaging with us. Responses included, 'He [young person] won't be able to talk to you'; 'You won't get him [young person] to stay in the room'; and 'They [young people] won't have anything to say'. We therefore recognise that the process remained, to a certain extent, hierarchical. However, the *pockets of participation* (Franks, 2011:19) approach we organically adopted did help challenge these dynamics.

In terms of methodological advances, our co-productive approach including data analysis and the dissemination of the findings enacted Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) P7 model. Our *purpose* was to contribute to the discourse around the lack of young people's involvement in decision-making in justice settings and this anchored the project. By *positioning* young people as co-producers of knowledge, we challenged conventional views of the capabilities and rights of justice-involved young people. Including young people in each stage of the research supported *perspectives*, through the collective generation of knowledge. We recognise that young people's participation in participatory research presents risks and we had to navigate these risks in our project. For instance, our aim is to transform youth justice practice and policy and there will be some youth justice professionals who view the participation of young people in this endeavour as a *threat to the status quo* (Cahill and Dadvand, *ibid*:250). If subsequent participation in practice and policy is not prioritised or is done badly, it could lead to both individual and collective risks for young people. Our commitment to working with youth justice colleagues and providing them with participation training provided an element of *protection* for them and the young people they work with. Consideration of *place* is of particular importance when undertaking research with young people. By working with the young people in our project to identify physical spaces that they were familiar with and felt safe in, we were able to host the activities in spaces far removed from youth justice offices. Our project *process* was iterative and when embarking on the work we were not entirely sure where it would take us. However, this iterative process facilitated meaningful participation with young people, with the co-production of the PYP framework being the end result.

Our second aim of this paper is to demonstrate that just as participatory approaches strengthen research, they also have the potential to strengthen participation in service provision and delivery. The approach we took and the methods we used led to *transformative action in context* (Vaughan, 2014:1). The project bridged the gap between the creation of a safe space for young people to tell their stories,

and the development of tangible outcomes to support the transformation of youth justice policy and practice. This is something rarely achieved by participatory research, and our continued work on the development and use of the PYP framework in practice will concentrate on its longer term transformative potential for youth justice professionals and young people. For instance, two youth justice practitioners from each of the 10 regional teams were nominated to become ‘Participation Champions’—responsible for supporting and developing participatory practice across the region and embedding the PYP framework in their teams. The inclusion of practitioners in the latter stages of the research *motivated the powerful* (Vaughan, 2014:19) to commit to implementing PYP in their practice.

Through our continued follow-up work with the 10 regional teams involved in the project, we are seeing some concrete examples of PYP embedded in practice. (It should be noted that the co-production of PYP was never intended to replace English and Welsh national youth justice assessment processes such as Asset Plus). Initial follow-up interviews with youth justice colleagues have identified that for example, when overseeing young people's cases, one of the teams has replaced a set of questions addressing the risk of young people with the PYP principles, while another has integrated the principles into their supervision sessions with young people. Through the creation of working groups with young people, one of the teams has facilitated the participation of young people in decision-making about the development and delivery of new initiatives and programmes. A Head of Youth Justice Service for one of the regional teams explained, *Because of the work we've done around participation in youth justice, young people are being worked with in a different way and that is a direct result of this project. We acknowledge that the pursuit of 'transformative action' (Vaughan, 2014:1) should include supporting young people to achieve broader change. The young people in our project accomplished this. Through the embedding of the PYP framework in their practice, youth justice professionals have accepted that young people have both the right to be heard and taken seriously (Byrne & Lundy, 2019).*

## CONCLUSION

The ideological underpinnings of participatory research approaches including power sharing and valuing authentic understandings and lived expertise, underline the need for youth justice systems to be underpinned by an ideology of respecting young people's rights, responding appropriately and enabling them to contribute to the decision-making around their own lives and the system's response to their offending behaviour (see Smithson et al., 2020). The co-creation of the PYP framework is a formative step in advancing a tangible model of young people's participation in justice systems. Its unique co-productive approach advances other youth justice participatory models (such as CFOS) and facilitates young people's meaningful participation in decision-making. We have drawn attention to the challenges of, and enhanced the debate around the power dynamics in research processes involving young people in youth justice systems. We contend that although extremely challenging, it can and should be done. Our research led to transformative action, something rarely achieved by participatory research projects. It is our hope that this work will go some way to advancing youth justice systems and their understanding of the importance of young people's participation.

## DATA SHARING NOTICE

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> (The KTP scheme is a UK-wide government funded programme that enables a business to bring in new skills and the latest academic thinking to deliver a specific, strategic innovation project through a knowledge-based partnership. (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/knowledge-transfer-partnerships-what-they-are-and-how-to-apply>).
- <sup>2</sup> While we actively attempted to engage young women into the project, it was not possible. At the time of the research, there were low numbers of young females involved with the regional youth justice services across, and those that were, were not subject to statutory orders that mandated engagement with the justice service.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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