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Digital storytelling using co-production with vulnerable young people

Abstract

Summary

The importance of listening to young people is enshrined in legislative and policy frameworks and is integral to a children's rights agenda. However, social work has often struggled to give a voice to vulnerable young people, especially when their views conflict with adult perspectives. This project pioneers the use of digital storytelling using a co-productive approach to address an ongoing deficit in the way accommodated young people express their views at key decision making forums. A four-day residential retreat was used as the venue for co-constructing a digital story and collecting data about young people's experiences of the process. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes emerging from participants' accounts of their experiences.

Findings

The findings suggest that child care meetings should be re-conceptualized as a process in which young people undertake the role of educator, rather than their current positioning as passive information giver. The shift from a passive provider of information to educator is theorised by linking the concepts of scaffolding and Zone of Proximal Development to co-production.

Applications

This study expands current conceptualisations of coproduction as an approach to digital storytelling that holds transformative potential for genuine inclusion of children's voices in decision-making forums. Whilst the study focused on accommodated young people, the findings are relevant to other service user groups. New technology presents exciting opportunities for practitioners and policy makers to involve those most excluded in society, and at a time when key decisions are made about their lives.

Keywords: Social work, children, children's panel, children's rights, empowerment, narrative approaches

Introduction

Irrespective of a country's child welfare system and related policy and legal frameworks, the importance of listening to young people is recognized internationally as an integral dimension of social work practice. The voice of service users in social work practice and in social work research was initially developed in the 1970's (e.g. Mayer and Timm 1970) and burgeoned in the 1980's (see Corden and Preston-Shoot 1987). Nellis (2002) identifies three

strands to this emergent tradition of listening to the views of service users in social work: as source material for professional diagnosis; as consumer feedback on service provision; and as a means of empowering those whose voices have heretofore remained unheard. This project aligns with the latter tradition and explores the extent to which a co-productive approach to digital storytelling might better assist young people to express their views at child care meetings, with a view to contribute to ways of supporting children in all key decision-making forums internationally.

Campbell and Vanderhaven (2016) argue that co-production has the potential to enable closer working relationships between academics and non-academics when the coproduced knowledge is intended for both academia and wider public benefit. This is not to suggest that coproduction is the only approach; however, the authors believed, at least intuitively, that it might be a good fit with the participatory potential of storytelling. Thus, the sample size of the project was small in order to ensure sufficient support for a group of vulnerable young people whilst exploring new ways of hearing their voices. While this precluded the generalisation of findings in relation to other young people or different service user groups, the study instead offered a basis for professional dialogue, practice development and further research. It is towards these ends that this article is offered.

What is absent from discussions about listening to young people is the effectiveness of their participation with adults in building capacity in the process leading up to the decision making forums. The project is interested in the way young people are heard (or not heard) in formal meetings, which can include highly emotive issues, tensions and conflict between the young person, family, social worker and other relevant professionals. The originality of this study is in applying a co-productive approach to digital storytelling in order to illuminate the learning and collaboration between young people and adults on a key area of social work practice.

Decision making forums and accommodated young people

Regardless of a country's decision making forums, related policy and legal frameworks, the importance of listening to young people is recognised internationally as an integral dimension of child welfare. Article 12 of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that children have the right for their opinions to be taken into account when adults are making decisions that affect them. Young people who are accommodated away from their families of origin are amongst the most vulnerable individuals in society and have often experienced emotional and physical neglect, abuse, rejection and trauma (Audit Scotland, 2010). These experiences can diminish

trust in adults and interfere with an ability to express their views. Children not being heard, whether because of absence from meetings or an inability to fully articulate their opinions in those meetings, compromise our compliance with a children's rights agenda. This serves to further exacerbate the already existing tensions related to power and control within relationships between children and professionals. Children frequently come into these relationships having already experienced adult misuse of power, and as will be illustrated further, continue to experience disempowerment and alienation once they enter the care system. At the same time and often despite the best efforts and intentions of those involved, professionals are frequently required to make decisions that are deeply contrary to children's wishes. While these tensions are inevitable, the processes through which adults and children navigate them are not – particularly, in the context of facilitating more meaningful participation in decision-making forums.

Within a Scottish context, the Children's Hearing system is often considered one of the more progressive decision making forums for vulnerable children. Prior to the hearing, the young person is asked to fill in a short form stating their views. The value of this approach, however, is questionable. A study by ScotCen Social Research (2014) highlighted an ongoing failure of the system to ascertain young people's views and the written forms were rarely received or completed by young people. Such difficulties have been evident across social services in Britain (e.g. Ellis, 2016). Concerns about the lack of children's voice and the tensions inherent in meaningful participation extends beyond both social services and Britain (Appell, 2006; Hogeveen, 2006; Smith, Taylor, and Tapp, 2003; Taft, 2015). UNICEF's OneMinutesJr project (2008), one of the largest initiatives to use digital media to empower the voices of young people in counties across Europe, Africa, The Middle East, Asia and North America, is an excellent example that exemplifies the wide geographical and contextual range of concern. Addressing such concerns in an attempt to strengthen the voice of young people in contemporary social work organisations is, however, less than straightforward.

The increasing standardized and bureaucratic practices that shape many features of child care social work in Britain (e.g. Broadhurst et al., 2010) can marginalize the voice of children. The organization, scheduling and format of formal child care meetings is a product of standardized and procedural working practices, over which young people have little or no control. Even with the provision of support (e.g. advocacy services), it can be difficult for young people to speak at or even attend child care meetings. Asking accommodated young people to complete a written form prior to an important meeting might therefore, be more of a bureaucratic imperative than a genuine attempt to hear their voice. Lundy (2007) is critical of tokenistic practices and policies intended to give voice to young people and identifies three related, longstanding barriers:

adult scepticism of young people's capacity; the fear that increasing children's control will undermine adult authority; and, the processes necessary in giving children a meaningful voice detracts effort and attention from the task of educating children. The presence of one of more barriers can leave accommodated young people more isolated, less valued and with a further diminished sense of agency in their present and future.

Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling combines one of the oldest methods of sharing experiences with the most recent advances in technology. 'Storytelling is the individual account of an event to create a memorable picture in the mind of the listener' (Kirkpatrick et al., 2007 p. 38). Digital storytelling is a recorded account of an individual or group experience using, for example, video, photographs, music and text. The therapeutic aspect of storytelling is well documented and has been used across a range of settings with service users and professionals (see edited text by Cox and Albert, 2003). Similarly, storytelling can be particularly beneficial in giving a voice to marginalized individuals and groups where a 'counter narrative' can challenge stereotypes that exist within the dominant group (Kerstetter, 2015). Storytelling has also been effective in helping individuals to reorganise personal thoughts and self-evaluations. For example, a study of parents by To et al (2014) found that the sharing of stories is empowering and helps to re-affirm the necessary commitment and strength to overcome difficult experiences.

Although there are benefits from the process of constructing and telling a story, the actual impact on social work practice is less clear. A review by Drum (2013, p. 3) highlights the value and potential of storytelling for social work, but notes that 'there is less documented evaluation of how storytelling impacts on practice and the individual'. A recent study of social work students by Roets et al. (2016) concluded that making report writing on child protection issues more about 'storytelling' than 'truth-telling' would serve to enhance students' reflexivity, interpretations and perceptions of complex situations. Establishing a link between student learning and storytelling is important; the influence on practice, however, is unknown. Similarly, storytelling might have an entertaining and therapeutic benefit for some accommodated young people, but it is less clear how it might influence essential life choices or strengthen experiences of agency when key decisions are made about their lives. Within a social work context Lenette et al. (2015, p. 998) believe:

the process of DST [Digital Storytelling] is precisely why it constitutes a good fit with participatory approaches in social work practice: the

dialogic, iterative nature of the DST process is as critical to the narrative nature of DST as the ‘final product’.

The relevance of digital storytelling extends beyond wealthy or ‘developed countries’. As will be discussed in the findings section below, the young people in this study strongly preferred the use of smart phones or tablets over other technologies. In 2013 the International Telecommunications Union (2013, p.19) referred to the ‘ubiquitous availability of mobile-phone services’ globally, while also highlighting the significant challenges of identifying those people without access. Their 2017 report estimates close to 100 mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in developing countries and 70 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in least developed countries (International Telecommunications Union, 2017). This is not to say that all children or even households have access to mobile phones, but that access globally to them is steadily rising.

By focussing on the process of storytelling, its potential impact on practice might be better understood. The importance of process and participation in storytelling influenced the decision to use a co-productive approach. It was hoped that a co-productive approach would provide an insight into: the way in which young people create meaning from the interactions with each other; the learning that occurs from constructing the digital story; and, the nature of collaboration among young people and adults.

Despite the increasing interest in co-production across the social services in Britain and internationally (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2013), there is debate about its meaning and extent to which it represents something new and original, or how the process actually improves outcomes. Whilst recognizing the potential benefits of co-production in health and social care, Realpe and Wallace (2010, p. 14) claim, ‘Not only is there the difficulty of clearly showing the connection between the communication and a specific outcome but there are also limited tools to measure this connection’. Identifying distinct similarities and differences between, for example, peer learning and co-production within a group of young people and the role of adults in providing and supporting leadership is further complicated with service users who are often disempowered. Weaver (2011) highlights the complexities of service user influence on service provision when control is a fundamentally defining characteristic of, in the case of her argument, criminal justice social work. Insofar as young people in alternative care are so often involuntarily removed from their families of origin, there are similar complexities in terms of power and control. Experiences of abuse, neglect, chronic stress and other forms of

trauma, and related interruptions to their cognitive, emotional and social development (Barton et al., 2012) pose further, significant considerations that must be addressed for young people to meaningfully participate in a co-production process. Campbell and Vanderhaven (2016) list a range of challenges to co-production, including time constraints, organisational barriers, ethical matters, financial implications and non-standardised working practices, however, developmental considerations such as the impact of adversity on co-producers' capacity to meaningfully participate were lacking. Despite such complexities D'Cruz and Gillingham (2017) argue that social work must strive to be inclusive of participatory approaches with service users whilst critically examining the impact on practice. This study illuminates these vital considerations by using a co-productive approach to digital storytelling.

Methodology

Unlike more traditional research with a focus on precise research questions and methodology, the emphasis of co-production is on supporting the skills and capabilities of those involved. Mutual learning is, from this perspective, integral to the process and outcome of any co-production. Co-production, according to Campbell and Vanderhaven (2016, p11/12) is:

closely associated with, and builds on, traditions of participatory action research and co-operative inquiry ... assumes mutual respect, no hierarchy of knowledge forms, fluid and permeable disciplinary and professional boundaries, and a normative concern with action, not simply a focus on systematic analysis.

In an attempt to have findings with academic value and public benefit, especially in relation to enhancing the voice of young people in decision making forums, co-production was used as a method of developing a prototype for preparing and presenting young people's views. Through this process, a focus emerged around finding a possible solution to a specific problem identified by the young people; one typically addressed in these decision-making forums but often without the input of the relevant young person. The research questions were as follows.

1. Does a co-productive approach to storytelling enable young people and adults to collaborate in the creation of new knowledge?
2. How do adults guide and support a collaborative learning process without unduly influencing young people's contribution to the digital story.

Bovaird (2007) describes a fully co-production approach in which tasks of planning, designing and delivering services are shared by service users and professionals. These ideas influenced the design and structure of the current project. Rather than planning timetables or working formats, the adults brought a range of possible activities and resources and all planning and decision-making was done collaboratively with the young people. The only specification (agreed as part of being involved in the project) was that the young people were to create at least one digital story by the end of the retreat and that the adults would be available to support this goal. Guidance focussed on helping the young people to explore their ideas and associated activities without the adults knowingly or intentionally imposing their views about the perceived problem or solution. Direct technical support was given in editing the video, although all of the decisions about content and format remained with the young people. There are hierarchies of power and knowledge within any group and scope exists for subtle and unintended guidance to occur. Nevertheless, the intention was to create a safe space where differences between the young people were negotiated without influence from adults. This form of collaboration means that priorities, schedules, abilities and interactions between the young people and adults is unique; hence replicating this project with other groups might give different findings. The young people volunteered to join the project following a request by the researchers to an advocacy and support service. Six young people showed an interest in the project, however, one was unable to attend the retreat.

A four-day residential retreat was used as the venue for constructing a digital story and collecting data about young people's experiences of the process. The decision to opt for a residential retreat rather than, for example, meeting with young people on a weekly basis over a longer period, was that it provided a short and intensive period where adults and young people could work co-productively to explore optimal ways of expressing their view at their child care meetings. The residential aspect also allowed for a more rapid development of relationships by working together on the task, sharing meals and participating in recreational activities. It was hoped that time shared in this way would enhance opportunities for mutual learning as well as allowing for flexibility in achieving the goals.

Five young people and four adults attended the retreat. The young people were between 16 and 17 years of age, with four females and one male in the group. All of the children in the project were white and experienced a range of poverty, disadvantage and exclusion typical of the wider looked after population in the UK. The adverse experiences of the young people in the project included cognitive impairments, low educational attainment, unemployment, homelessness and experience of foster care, residential care and secure care.

They had no previous experience of using technical and video equipment, although all of the young people were avid users of mobile phones, primarily in relation to accessing social media. The adults were comprised of: the two researchers leading the project who are employed as university lecturers in a school of social work and social policy; a storyteller who is also a qualified social worker; and an information technology expert. A panel member from Scotland's Children's Hearing System came on the afternoon of the last day to participate in a mock hearing in which the digital story was presented. All of the adults had professional experience working with vulnerable young people. The young people were recruited by an advocacy organisation and were informed about the purpose of the project. The adults and young people were white and had English as a first language.

The young people and adults were interviewed about their experiences of constructing the digital story. A semi-structured interview, devised by the researchers, was used in order to elicit specific information whilst allowing interviewees to generate additional information which they considered important. A focus group interview was also carried out which involved all the young people and adults. Interviews and the focus group were audio recorded, recordings transcribed verbatim, and a thematic analysis (Denscombe, 2010) was employed to identify key themes emerging from participants' accounts of their experiences.

Ethical issues in relation to digital recording and storytelling were discussed with the young people. Particular attention was given to ensuring confidentiality in the design and storage of a digital story, as well as ensuring written consent from young people and parents/carers. The project adhered to internationally accepted ethical guidelines and was approved via the University of Strathclyde's ethics committee. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Findings

The findings show that the process of co-production shaped the outcome, which in the case of this project was a story constructed by all of the young people. In order to convey what was actually co-produced (i.e. the digital story), a description and analysis of the story construction, digital features and the component parts is provided. This is followed by an analysis of the co-productive process and discernible outcomes of the process.

The digital story

The young people created a video about a fictional, 14-year-old female character, 'Abbie'. Abbie's story was based on a range of life experiences of the young people and one of the young women 'played' the role of Abbie in some of the different 'scenes' in the digital story. Use of a fictional character enabled the young people to practise the storytelling and begin by sharing smaller pieces of personal information. Focussing on Abbie encouraged self-reflection where young people were able to project their experiences onto this character:

I kind of became Abbie, which was kind of weird. I remembered thinking about her story and thinking, 'what would she say at this point, how did she feel at this point?', that sort of stuff. That was quite helpful as well (Kristina, young person).

This outcome indicates that using a proxy character might be a useful starting point for some young people to practise sharing feelings and past experiences before constructing their own story. This would allow for a greater sense of control over a self-disclosure and feelings of vulnerability. There were five discrete parts to the story, which had a total duration of 5 minutes and 37 seconds (5:37). An analysis of each part serves to illustrate the content and structure of the story.

Setting the context: The main issues affecting Abbie's life are presented (1:36) using drawings (e.g. school, bedroom, family) and a synchronised voiceover. Greater emphasis was given to context (e.g. life in the residential home, family relationships, hobbies and even carefully chosen background music). For the young people, being able to set a context appeared to be an important part of providing an account that could serve to challenge stereotypes about young people in the care system.

Examining a dilemma: Limited contact with family and boyfriend has created a dilemma for Abbie and is the main focus (1:07) of the story. This is portrayed by Abbie conveying a rather hurt, vulnerable and moody teenager through her body-language, with a concurrent voiceover that offers an insightful and confident account of personal experiences.

Dealing with emotions: A black screen is used (0:44) where individual words (e.g. anxiety, frustrated, disempowered, freedom, risk) appear in different colours, emerging in synch with the voiceover. There are twelve words in total and a voiceover gives a narrative of Abbie's emotions and feelings and how the existing arrangement for contact are not meeting her needs.

A conversation: A conversation (1:45) between Abbie and a residential worker (role played by another young person) takes place in which Abbie explains how she might cope with potential scenarios and options relating to contact. This

allows her to demonstrate a personal assessment of risk and strengthen the case for her proposal in relation to contact.

Recommendation: A recommendation is given by Abbie, using drawings sketched on a tablet coinciding with a voiceover, in relation to contact (:25).

Process of co-production

The discrete parts of the digital story emerged from the co-productive process, which unfolded in the following stages: problem exploration, experimentation, story construction and formal data collection. Aside from formal data collection, these stages did not occur linearly and the group oscillated between the other three throughout the process.

Problem exploration revolved around young people agreeing that they did not feel heard and were seldom asked about their feelings and emotions in children's hearings. The discussion focussed on trying to agree on the precise nature of the problem and possible solutions. This was what young people seemed to want to focus on, and there appeared a strong need to feel heard about not feeling heard before they were ready to work on a digital story. This interaction between young people suggests that their empowerment is essential to the activity of story construction. Importantly, the exploration of specific views about which the young people did not feel heard enabled the identification of a central dilemma (i.e. family contact) which subsequently became the organising focus of their digital story.

The co-productive process was challenging both for adults and young people during this phase, with an apparent difficulty envisioning what a digital story might look like (i.e. content and structure of a story) and how a non-directive approach could be used to address the problems. This was experienced by young people as lacking direction and a 'struggle' which was very 'frustrating'.

It was confusing, no one has ever done it before and you didn't know how to work' (Fiona, young person).

There were periods where everyone struggled with the groundlessness of the unknown. Young people sometimes appeared to experience a sense of paralysis, with adults also floundering as they resisted the temptation to take charge. Essentially, the adults were uncertain about achieving the most suitable levels of guidance and support which would allow for collaboration and participatory learning, rather than a dominance or undue influence of an adult perspective. Whilst the ideas of co-production had been explained to the young people previously and at the beginning of the retreat, it perhaps had to be experienced before it became more meaningful for young people and adults, who were

inexperienced with the approach. It is from this point of shared experience in unfamiliar roles that potential solutions or alternatives to current ways of working were explored in relation to digital storytelling.

Experimentation with different technology, software and story content was an integral part of the co-productive process. The young people were introduced to storytelling and listened to several stories each day (relayed by the professional storyteller). Smart phones and tablets were preferred over other equipment (e.g. cameras, video recorders) mainly because young people were most familiar with this type of technology. This was a particularly frustrating phase as the young people often assumed the adults knew the ‘answer’. Emphasising the collaborative nature of learning rather than offering an adult solution or answer is necessary if new learning is to occur. Despite the anxieties and frustrations, by the end the young people also appeared to enjoy the co-productive approach and its impact:

I think it makes you a stronger person (Samantha, young person).

Co-production enabled a mutuality of respect that allowed for individuals to work alone and together within the group:

...what went well was, all the young people got on, so that helped. It was good to go and do things individually and then come back with our own ideas and it was good that we had different ideas and it still flowed as a story. It was quite good (Kristina, young person).

Adults supported exploratory dialogue and struggled to resist the temptation to give explicit direction to the young people. Of course, more subtle or unintentional direction might have been given and this reflects some of the tensions inherent in co-production, especially when there are no prescriptively defined outcomes, either amongst young people or between young people and adults. Despite the frustrations and uncertainties, all of the young people reported enjoying the experience of creating the digital story:

I didn't know what to expect and I had no idea what I was doing. It was more fun than expected. I didn't think it was going to be boring, but it was such a good way to do it (Kristina, young person).

Allowing young people to experiment is likely to align with greater creativity, yet there may be a period in co-productive processes where they want more direction from adults. Determining whether and how much direction is necessary or counter-productive will shape the control that young people have over peer learning.

Story construction involved personal information reframed in terms of a dilemma rather than a problem. When listening to the storyteller, it was often

the dilemmas in stories that held young people's interest and elicited their views. The dilemma might, therefore, provide a useful link between storytelling and practice. The incorporation of a dilemma – even framing it as such – provides an important platform for young people to demonstrate their reasoning for their preferred course of action. This provides adults not only with information about the young person's views, but also their cognitive functioning and social competencies. This information is enhanced when the audience can see the young person:

...trying to get sense of somebody from reports written on paper is very two dimensional, whereas the digital story telling could be three dimensional ... You don't want loads, but even seeing them on the digital piece. They might smile, but if they sit in a Review [child care meeting], they may feel really intimidated and never smile. Just something as simple as that gives you a different view of them. (Tracy, adult)

Using a dilemma as the focus of information sharing can reposition young people as active participants possessing agency, creativity and insight rather than the passive subject of others' pronouncements (often of their problems and deficits).

Formal data collection of participants' experiences of the overall project was important both for understanding the co-productive process as well as what was produced, the output (the story) and the outcomes (discussed below). Whilst the project was predicated upon the principles of co-production, the more formal data collection process at the end was not. The researchers interviewed the young people and adults about their experiences of creating and delivering the digital story, using an interview schedule designed prior to the residential retreat commencing. This study limitation was mainly due to time constraints and a regrettable lack of foresight by the researchers.

Outcomes: deconstruction and making connections

Co-producing a digital story enabled the young people to make connections with individual life events, which is important if they are to prepare effectively for a formal meeting. The most obvious connections occurred between the young people in terms of how to approach the task. That young people chose to work together to create a single story, rather than work alone with their own individual stories, shows the value attributed to peer learning when dealing with personal and sensitive issues. Conditions that allow peer learning and support to flourish were welcomed:

I thought it was going to be staff sitting with you all the time and that is not what happened. Staff took a step back ... it has been quite good the way you have done it (Samantha, young person).

The support and guidance from adults varied and was dependent on the different capacities of group members, as well as fluctuations in group functioning.

Engaging young people in a co-productive process was effective because they enjoyed storytelling and were interested in co-creating a story as a means of conveying personal information. The young people reported that the most enjoyable aspect of the project was listening to the storyteller, especially the emotive nature of the stories and potential for reflection.

I think it was because she was so good at it and goes deep right into it. It makes you think about a lot of things, it's very touching (Samantha, young person).

On a tacit level, the young people and adults were all experiencing the power of stories and the importance of language to capture attention and sustain interest. Whilst it was a relatively passive experience, it enabled the young people to recognise how storytelling might give a similar experience to 'their' audience at a formal meeting. Importantly, the value of storytelling in terms of structure and purpose for sharing information at formal meetings was recognised by some of the young people.

When we hear a story you need structure, you need a beginning, a middle and an end ... but with our story we don't really have an end. In a way the end is the panel [adults]... it is us showing and giving them our story and they have got to finish it in a way (Kristina, young person).

Storytelling provided a framework which created opportunities for young people to make connections between past, present and future life experiences as well as shaping the content, structure and presentation of information to construct a personal story.

The ability to separate the visual and auditory features of the video, and to rehearse and edit each section allowed for a complex task to be deconstructed. Young people were self-conscious about speaking directly to the camera, and they did not like having to memorise what to say or read from cue cards. These problems were easily overcome with the use of visual aids (e.g. prompt-sheets behind the camera, words appearing on screen and digital drawings using a tablet). The voiceover enabled information to be read verbatim 'off camera' and edited to ensure it aligned with information on the screen.

If you are not confident and you don't like writing words, it is easier to say it and record the voices (Fiona, young person).

Communicating emotions was often complex and the young people believed that images were more meaningful in this regard than a written or purely oral narrative. The use of relatively simple text and music to convey emotion is not commonplace in adult-centred decision-making forums, but is consistent with young people's daily experiences of mobile phones, social media and youth culture. Such visual and auditory features may be particularly useful in overcoming some of the barriers experienced by young people with disabilities or where English is not a first language. A young person with Asperger's syndrome stated:

Sometimes it's the tone of voice, sometimes people think I am angry when I am trying to make a joke. It's the Asperger's syndrome. I think it will help people like myself [...] who are nervous in a meeting [...] I got really worked up at meetings and I was not able to get my point across at times, but if it was with pictures or music or whatever, that would help. (James, young person).

The process of co-constructing and editing the digital story gave valuable feedback and learning opportunities about the 'self' in terms of cognitive and emotional development. For some young people this might have been information about how they present to camera or more complex matters such as how they understand and remember traumatic events.

Young people strongly argued that the digital story should be watched by adults several days in advance of the meeting and also at the start of the meeting (interestingly, all indicated that they always spoke last at their meetings). Preparing the adults in this way was an attempt to increase the attention and time given to listening to the young person.

What I hate about panels, is that the 'have your say form' is at the back [of the social worker's report] and you only have a couple of minutes to speak and you are always the one to come last. I don't find that very fair (Kristina, young person).

A video of approximately five minutes was deemed to be practical in terms of viewing time and ensuring a focussed story.

Discussion

The digital story created by the young people incorporated two of Fitch's (2002) story types: family and personal. These story types suggest that when given the appropriate means, young people are able to communicate personal information that will be of value for child care meetings. Using co-production with digital storytelling as a potential way of preparing a young person for a decision making forum reveals two dominant themes: the young people choose to work together and they wanted to learn. The impact of storytelling on practice is to a

large extent dependent on whether or not professionals listen and act upon a young person's story. The process of storytelling using a co-production approach gives young people an opportunity to prepare and present information about their lives in a way that is quite different from the existing method of completing a paper-based or online feedback form. The role of adults as collaborators in this process is central if young people are to be empowered to become educators in decision making forums.

Repositioning the young person as an active educator

A theoretical framework which incorporates the concepts of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding, from the social constructivist tradition, can illuminate the way a co-productive approach to storytelling can reposition the young person from information-giver to active educator of adults. It may also offer conceptual direction in addressing some of the previously mentioned tensions inherent in co-production with young service users (e.g. role confusion, low confidence, power imbalance between young people and adults). Vygotsky (1978) refers to the ZPD as the change brought about in a learner when supported by a more experienced or knowledgeable individual(s). Scaffolding is a related term developed by Wood et al., (1976) and refers to the individual's role in guiding or directing the learner. There is a general consensus that the ZPD is linked to scaffolding, however, these concepts have been interpreted and applied to educational settings in a variety of ways (Verenikina, 2003). Traditionally, scaffolding assists in helping the child to gain knowledge which the adult already possesses, whereas a co-productive approach uses scaffolding to create a new and shared understanding. This requires adults to support the process and recognise their knowledge is incomplete in terms of solving the problem.

Co-production in storytelling emphasises scaffolding in a symmetrical interaction. That is, the adults used exploratory dialogue rather than relying on giving direction, the latter being asymmetrical scaffolding. Symmetrical scaffolding enables the young people to develop an understanding of storytelling which is not defined or conceptualised by the adults. Achieving the new knowledge within the peer group enhances understanding of the self via the storytelling. This reflects Bruner's (1978) 'vicarious consciousness' which, according to Fernandez et al. (2001), does not require a prior understanding of the problem and solution. This will be particularly useful in freeing up young people to engage in storytelling without feeling they first have to know the nature of the problem or its resolution and might also explain why the story was constructed around a dilemma. The findings in this project suggest that co-

production in storytelling can enhance peer learning without a reliance on adult direction.

Using co-production for storytelling can incorporate the solution to a problem which young people previously struggled to identify. This represents a measurable influence of the ZPD in the collective learning of a symmetrically interacting group. The role of peer learning in co-production suggests that cultivating a ZPD can be particularly important in preparing young people for child care meetings. Yet, none of the young people had ever experienced any formally supported peer learning when preparing for their child care meetings. Constructing a story gives peer learning a sense of purpose because there is a tangible outcome for the young person as an individual and as part of a group, which is very different from the arguably adult-centric written forms often used in meetings. This is reflected in the findings of Lenette et al. (2105) in that the process of interaction and creativity of digital storytelling is just as important as the final product or outcome. Decision making forums might have to give more credence to the process of support leading up to a young person's attendance at a meeting, especially when the young person is to convey a potential solution to a specific problem.

Storytelling has a particular value in collaborative learning because the scaffolding comes from both the storyteller and the elements of the story. The storyteller was highly effective in engaging with the young people, but once individuals began to develop an understanding of the elements of the story (e.g. protagonist, dilemma), they were able to co-construct their own story with increasingly less support. It was young people's interpretation of the stories that enabled key elements to be identified and used in their own story. For Mercer (2000) it is the ability of the child to carry out a task in a competent way, not possible prior to the collaborative support, which qualifies as scaffolding- and this is what young people experienced in the co-productive process.

Storytelling is therefore, not simply a means of relaying information, but rather a lever which shifts the young people to a new level of understanding. This new level followed a process involving problem exploration, experimentation and story construction with varied support from adults. Whilst it did not happen in this project, a co-productive approach to the data collection of participants' experiences might contribute further to the young people's new level of understanding for all involved. The scaffolding of adult influence should be aimed at enhancing the autonomy and independence of the young people in the co-production process. Any temptation by adults to dominate or provide solutions, should be tempered by the realisation that engaging with the frustrations inherent to co-production within a context of storytelling is likely to equip young people cognitively and emotionally to prepare more fully for a child care meeting.

Limitations to the study

As with any small-scale exploratory study, some caution is necessary when interpreting the findings given the number of participants involved. Whilst the perceptions and experiences of participants in relation to being heard in formal decision-making forums aligns with findings from other studies (e.g. ScotCen Social Research, 2014) it is not clear if the storytelling content, structure and process might be replicated by other groups of young people. The young people were self-nominated via a national advocacy and support service, hence their enthusiasm and pro-activeness might be less apparent in the wider population of accommodated young people. Indeed, the approach examined in this article would not be suitable for those young people who genuinely want to opt out of decision-making forums entirely; however, the use of digital methods provides a greater fit with young people's everyday experience and therefore will more likely appeal to at least some who would otherwise be disinterested. Fundamentally, the relational context within which young people are encouraged and (where relevant) supported to engage in a digital storytelling approach is central. The myriad ways this element can and should be incorporated should be part of the co-productive process and will warrant further consideration in subsequent research.

With regards to storytelling the interpretation of personal experiences by young people and adults make it a subjective activity and it is difficult to know if young people understand the full complexity of their experiences and the extent to which they might tell adults what they want to hear rather than their own story. Similarly, whilst the adults in this study tried not to influence the co-production process in relation to storytelling, there may be unintentional bias and pressure exerted upon young people that distorts the findings. Finally, the use of co-production might be well-intentioned, but considered from a broader perspective, its focus is at the individual level and is less likely to significantly impact the wider structural disadvantage and stigma associated with young people's accommodated status.

Policy and practice implications and conclusion

Despite national and international variations in welfare systems and support for accommodated young people, children's rights and storytelling are recognised within many cultures and countries. The value of listening to service users in social work as a means of empowerment is also well documented (e.g. Nellis, 2002) and it is a central tenet of digital storytelling using co-production with young people. Co-production remains subject to debate and future research that

includes a comparison with other approaches to digital storytelling with young people will be particularly useful. An appreciation of 'local contexts and existing inequalities' will be necessary in harnessing the positive potential of digital technologies for children, both in the UK and globally (Livingstone et al., 2017, p.137).

Co-production does appear to be particularly effective in allowing young people to reflect. Experiential learning theory (e.g. Kolb, 1984) suggests that it's not enough for people to simply have an experience, because the learning will not develop unless time is also spent reflecting on the experience. Young people's experience of preparation and support prior to attending a child care meeting should be viewed as a measure of the quality of care, and prioritised to the same level as the more objective indicator of 'attendance' at meetings. It is disingenuous for adults to expect accommodated young people to share personal information without sufficient support, and existing policy and practice might be inadvertently silencing many young people at the meetings where key decisions are made about their future. If Lundy's (2007) concerns over tokenism in child care are to be avoided, policy and practice has to reposition young people from information-givers to active educators. This will require additional resources within a strengths-based approach (e.g. Saleebey, 2002) where young people's rights are integral to the process leading up to a formal meeting. Digital storytelling might also be useful in other social work settings. Within criminal justice, for example, it could support prisoners' contributions at parole meetings. Similarly, in the field of community care, digital storytelling could allow vulnerable adults to be heard at meetings- attended only by professionals- where decisions are made about resource allocation and individual service provision. Some of the ethical and organisational barriers, as noted by Campbell and Vanderhaven (2016), might be particularly prominent when attempting to implement co-production within the highly regulated fields of child care and criminal justice. Nevertheless, emerging technology presents exciting opportunities for policy makers and practitioners to overcome certain barriers and offer a co-productive approach to digital storytelling as a means of involving those most excluded in society, and at a time when key decisions are made about their lives.

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Ethics

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