



Lessons Learned in Meaningful Collaboration with Justice Involved Young Adults

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BRIEF REPORTS

Lessons Learned in Meaningful Collaboration With Justice Involved Young Adults

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Justice-involved young adults represent the most excluded, stigmatized, and traumatized group amongst their peers and are considered an especially hard-to-reach and hidden population (Case & Haines, 2015; Skinner-Osei et al., 2019). Beresford (2013) highlights how those who face barriers to their involvement in wider society are also more likely to be excluded from participatory arrangements in society. This brief report shares key lessons from a collaborative project between justice-involved young adults and undergraduate social work students, culminating in them collectively producing a learning resource (DVD) articulating the justice-involved young adults' experiences and needs from professional services.

Introduction

Co-design and control are presented as the apex in meaningful and transformative user involvement for service planning and delivery. Projects engaging “vulnerable,” “hidden,” or “hard to reach” individuals about their experiences and needs with mandated organizations often espouse a narrative of collaboration, even control, on the part of those being co-opted (Godrie, 2017, as cited in Osinski, 2021). Yet numerous barriers coalesce in precluding those most excluded and ignored: particularly stigma and the idea that their voice is not wanted (Beresford, 2013) or they are too “vulnerable.” Young adulthood represents a unique developmental stage: while neuroscientific research indicates brain development is not fully complete until an individual's mid-20s (The Howard League for Penal Reform, 2019), 18 years legally demarcates adulthood, and the attendant responsibilities of this life stage, in the UK. For justice-involved young adults, statistics suggest up to 45% prevalence of ADHD (Harpin & Young, 2012), compared to a 4% prevalence in the overall UK adult population (NICE, 2021). Furthermore, the evidence clearly indicates a higher prevalence of mental health and neurodevelopmental disorders (Chitsabesan & Hughes, 2016) in addition to often complex biographies and multiple adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs (Baidawi & Piquero, 2021; Case, 2018; Liddle et al., 2016). Justice-involved young adults are typically the recipients of many professional services, yet there is extremely limited evidence of what *they* say they need from justice, health, and social care professionals to support, advocate, and achieve positive outcomes.

Our action learning project involved a group of undergraduate social work students and a group of justice-involved young adults (see O'Shea & McGinnis (2020) for a detailed discussion of the project). Students self-selected into the project from the second-year undergraduate cohort, the young adults were

recruited through criminal justice/voluntary agencies and the prison service. The only criteria for the young adults' involvement were that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they previously resided in the Greater Derry area of Northern Ireland. We initially hoped this would facilitate ongoing contact with the media facility for those in the community and following release for the custody group. The project took place over three months and involved two concurrent strands: one strand in a community-based project where five Ulster University students (hereafter students) and six justice-involved young adults (hereafter young adults) participated, and the other strand in a "young offenders" institution (custodial setting) with five students and eight young adults. Where the term "project participants" is used hereafter, it refers to both groups, i.e., the students and young adults. A group facilitator (the current authors) oversaw each strand with a youth media trainer working separately with each group across both the community and custody settings to facilitate the production of a DVD learning resource which would then be available to social work programs in higher education institutions across Ireland. Through carefully negotiated processes and methods, we aimed to enable the young adults to "tell their story" and articulate their experiences of professional services as well as their needs. We recognize concerns regarding the exploitative potential of such activity, which is well-documented in the relevant literature (Janes, 2016; Rowell et al., 2017; Van Acker et al., 2021), but meticulous attention to our underpinning principles, meaningful engagement, and peer identification, (most students being similar in age to the young adults (Banks et al., 2013)) worked to mitigate against such factors. Multiple methods of qualitative data collection were employed to capture the young adults' experiences, including group-care tasks, joint activities, students' reflective logs, focus groups, and interviews. All project participants were involved in data collection. This report aims to share the key learnings, including practical and ethical strategies when planning and undertaking similar participatory projects.

Making Core Principles Real; More *Give* Than *Take*

Several core principles rooted in social justice and emancipatory practice were important in guiding our approach. Practically, this meant communicating with the young adults that their stories, needs, and experiences were important and should be heard. This initially proved demoralizing as they genuinely struggled with the notion that they had anything worthwhile to give. Implementing the concept of "dynamic reciprocity" (Diver & Higgins, 2014), the idea of democratic decision-making, and that mutual benefit should determine the "exchange" in action learning and research (Lac & Fine, 2018), was fundamental to this goal. Positioning the young adults as expert educators on their lived experience with the range of professionals they were required to engage with over their lifespan (Lester et al., 2020) allowed us to achieve respect, care, and curiosity. Examples include disrupting conventional practices in privileging their knowledge, being genuine and curious in achieving trust, and placing a "worth" on what they encountered and often continued to endure from professionals. Making the experience meaningful in ensuring that

the young adults also “got something back” was a key aim. In practice, this meant providing choice over how they participated, where this occurred (as far as possible), and if they preferred to contribute on an individual basis, instead of in a group. Adaptability and flexibility in approach are what Thomas-Hughes (2018) understands as foundational if young people are to feel that they are included and have influence. The young adults and students edited and agreed upon DVD content by working together in the community project space, logging time spent on production to accrue the necessary hours for accreditation. The young adults in prison also had weekly opportunities to create, view, and agree on DVD content. Both groups had award ceremonies with an individual Certificate of Achievement signed by the university faculty dean. Separate, end-of-project celebratory meals were held in custody and in the community with the media trainer creating a comic book for the custody group as an additional memento. All involved were assured their DVD would be used in the training of all social work students at Ulster University and distributed to social work educators across universities in Ireland, at an annual all Ireland social work educators forum which includes all social work degree programmes in Ireland. All participating students and young adults received a multi-media vocational qualification. Shafi (2020) contends that “what happens next” is critical and should be built in to avoid tokenism. To achieve this, we supported the relationship with the community media training center and engaged the media trainer with the young adults at every stage as this facility provided drop-in support and further training opportunities. This vocational qualification also offers the young adults a new skill set to further their potential employability if they so choose.

In summary, we learned that giving back and “adding to” are relative and project-specific. The biggest “give” we could achieve was in validating their stories, their achievement in collaborating to articulate the stories, and our promise to share them. To support the young adults, we worked hard to build trust—in reality, this meant taking time to genuinely connect with care, being prepared to share power in key decision making or “choice points” (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020), and consulting them throughout every aspect of the process (Teixeira et al., 2021).

Responding To Needs and Unique Dynamics at Each Stage

Application processes for funding and gaining access to young adults through formal gatekeeping agencies often require complete project plans with pre-determined aims, objectives, evaluation measurements, and expected outcomes. Banks et al. (2013) suggest that such regulatory approaches to ethics are not well suited to participatory inquiry. However, character- and relationship-based approaches are key where a strong value commitment to social justice exists. Our task as project facilitators involved *pushing back* on assumed predictability and “risk-averse” prescriptive methods while allowing flexibility in the process (Banks et al., 2013) and navigating a (re-)negotiated approach (Bussu et al., 2021), remaining faithful to the overarching project aim.

Indeed, the learning for us as facilitators in the early phase of the project was to prioritize lots of downtime to support participants in getting to know each other and enabling them to meaningfully plan what kind of a project they wished to run. For example, in the prison, it was initially assumed that the young adults would return to their cells over the extended lunch period while students would eat separately in a staff café. At the students' request, and despite the stringent gatekeeping in the locked custodial setting (Shafi, 2020), this was renegotiated to allow all project participants to stay together for the full project day. Sharing a meal together at lunchtime was an important leveler and had a transformative impact on relations, with one student commenting, "*That's when you really felt like we are equal.*"

Funders and gatekeepers required an approximate timescale for the project. We soon realized we had underestimated the time and space required to establish trust given the unique contexts we were operating in. Our determination to not allow bureaucracies to shorten this important phase necessitated revisiting funders for additional support, then renegotiating the project timescale with formal gatekeepers. This enabled us to postpone formal sessions such as interviews or focus groups to the end of the project, when all participants felt at ease with one another.

In summary, adopting principles of participatory inquiry—such as allow sufficient time for all project participants to build trust slowly (Liamputtong, 2006, as cited in Shafi, 2020), spend time together to negotiate a contract, and collaborate in solving problems (Banks et al., 2013)—were fundamental to the success of the project. This was especially relevant in a secure custodial setting where the autonomy of the participant is deliberately restricted (Bartlett & Canvin, 2003). Ultimately, this made it possible to elicit rich and credible data for the DVD representing the young adults' views as authentically as possible.

Promoting Equity in Relationships in Achieving Best Outcomes

While we recognized the inherent power imbalance and pre-existing inequalities in our different circumstances and opportunities, ongoing and concerted efforts were made to reduce the power differentials and aspire to the principle of equity rather than equality (Minkler, 2004, in Kwan & Walsh, 2018) in our daily interactions together. As discussed above, "turning the tables" in assigning the role of educators to the young adults, with the facilitators and students as learners in their environment, was a case in point. Young adults relished this role with one commenting, "*It was nice to be the teacher for a change*" in the overall project evaluation.

From the beginning, we committed to not asking the young adults about the reasons for their involvement with the justice system. This ground rule avoided further labeling (James, 2013) and focused our collaboration on their experiences with social work and their needs from professional services. This proved an important factor in developing relationships based on trust and unconditional positive regard.

In attempts to mitigate the power differential and give ownership to the young adults, we invited them to interview the students first, allowing control on their part and upending traditional processes. As the students and young adults were similar in age, this approach also enabled them to identify and explore common interests, which proved to be important building blocks in developing their friendships. These early opportunities encouraged genuine rapport (Bussu et al., 2021), and it was often in these moments, rather than formal interviews or focus group situations that participants told their stories, offering rich insights. One student remarked, "*We sometimes heard far more about what it was like living there while chatting over lunch or playing football than we did in the sessions.*" Finally, we agreed upon buddy systems where one young person and one or two students "buddied-up" and worked together each week, whether as part of a team for quiz time, sports, or "speed dating." This approach was effective and carried through to the formal interviews towards the end of the project, by which stage the basis of trust and acceptance were established.

In summary, Muhammad et al. (2015) encourage reflection on researchers' positionality and identity if we are to avoid further appropriating and oppressing in our efforts to co-construct new knowledge. There are no fool-proof mechanisms in the process of participatory research that can transcend the dilemmas of power (Nygren, 2009, as cited in Kwan & Walsh, 2018), issues need to be acknowledged and addressed as far as possible. We contend that our efforts at the micro-level contributed to the young adults being able to articulate their views and trust us with their stories. As Shafi (2020) confirms, empowerment does not need to be grandiose. Rather, it can be modest and involve being able to express one's emotions or opinions within one's immediate context.

Being Responsive, Reflexive, and Embracing the Messiness

Both facilitators of this complex project came from practice backgrounds with young adults and therefore had some understanding of how challenging things can be for this age group. For example, on one occasion the community-based facilitator arrived at a family home to collect a young adult just as a full-scale argument was occurring between him and his distressed father. Taking him for food and talking through things overreached any traditional inquiry paradigm. However, this instinctive reaction felt right and might be seen as indicative of the "ethical mess" Cook (2009) advocates for in participatory endeavors; being "viscerally engaged in the '*messy realities*' of other people's lives" (Thomas-Hughes, 2018, p. 233). While respecting the personal agency of the participating young adults was a key value, engaging in "everyday ethics" (Banks et al., 2013, p. 266) meant real-time ethical decision-making to support such vulnerabilities in enabling the young adults' potential to participate. Being ethical in projects with potentially vulnerable or hidden populations is increasingly conceived as an ongoing negotiation, challenging the traditional institutional governance process of knowledge production (Allen & Israel, 2018; James, 2013; Shafi, 2020). Ultimately, this young adult needed the

facilitator to be honest, show care in the “assumed” things (food and a safe space), and simply listen. James (2013) reflects on the personal and nuanced nature of meaningful participation with *young offenders*, and how the need for an *ethics in action* responsive approach challenges conventional ethics orthodoxy. The young adults defied constructions of themselves as volatile, dangerous, sofa-surfing, a threat to their community, or hostile. Consistently they evidenced how mental health and substance issues can co-exist with agency, consent, hope, humor, wisdom, and wanting to be included.

Collective planning was key to this partnership working. Ensuring that those in prison were kept informed of project days was sometimes difficult. We were working in an environment where access could be delayed for hours or staff who opposed the project could place various obstacles in our paths. James (2013) attests to the realities of the custody regime, but ongoing communication with senior management and those prison staff supporting the project helped overcome such obstacles. Fundamentally, it was our promise to the young adults that we would show up unless we informed them otherwise, which proved decisive in cementing that trust. Holt & Pamment (2011) reflect how tough it can be to gain the trust of young adults in custody. One of the most challenging project days was when prison staff refused to open prison landings to allow the young adults to attend the project due to the tragic killing of a prison officer in a bomb attack. After many hours, this was eventually negotiated through senior management, and one of the young adults commented, “*I knew ye’d come cos ye said ye would,*” confirming to us the criticality of that trusting relationship based on reliability and showing up.

In summary, it was often difficult to “find our place” in coproduction/participatory literature. Horner (2016) observes the extent to which the sphere has grown, yet the paucity of literature on justice-involved young adults’ access to participation is glaring (Creaney, 2020). Looking back, we initially struggled and felt a huge responsibility to all participants. We quickly realized our limitations, but with time the energy, warmth, honesty, humor, and sincerity of the young adults genuinely humbled and inspired us at every turn, as did the passion of those students involved. We learned that relationship-based, reciprocal participatory practices can be consuming, uncomfortable, and imperfect (Diver & Higgins, 2014), yet rich, interrupting, and provoking.

Recognizing All Project Participants as Agentic and Consenting Adults

A key to the success of the project was, as Aldridge (2016) advises, recognizing the importance and significance of choice, control, and safety in the space where engagement happens. Although our efforts in this regard were mostly successful, we were confronted with a significant dilemma early in the project. Our sensitivity to some of the traumatic experiences the young adults revealed, coupled with their ongoing involvement with the justice system, required careful consideration of confidentiality and anonymity when planning the DVD content. Consistent with sound ethical practice, anonymization, the use of pseudonyms, still images, and voiceover technology were all considered appropriate to protect and conceal the identity of all project

participants. However, we were challenged to recognize that these traditional concepts of ethics can be problematic in participatory inquiry as it espouses to work *with*, rather than *on*, participants (Bussu et al., 2021). The young adults and students persistently questioned these paternalistic and predetermined assumptions of their vulnerability (Von Benzon & Van Blerk, 2017) early in the planning phase, demanding to be identifiable in “their” project. Young adults highlighted the irony of a situation where they had felt exposed and shamed in a public court when being sentenced, and in the media thereafter, yet we aimed to protect them “*when they did something good.*”

Despite our intention to treat the young adults as partners and include their voices in the project, we allowed our duty to protect those we perceived as vulnerable to undermine the young adults’ autonomy and authority (Morgan et al., 2014). The dilemma prompted us, reluctantly, to reflect on our preoccupation with anonymity (Bussu et al., 2021) and the fact that we had overlooked the authentic power of the young adults (Wahab, 2003, as cited in Kwan & Walsh, 2018). Our assumptions about them, irrespective of multiple adversities and challenges such as literacy issues, had prevented us from accepting them as agentic adults with capacity who were fully entitled to give or withhold their informed consent.

The onus was then on us to explore unconventional means to establish fully-informed consent by adopting a dialogical approach (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) recognizing informed consent as an iterative ongoing process (Balakrishnan & Cornforth, 2013) rather than a point in time. We subsequently spent significant periods of time in the group and one-on-one, using such methods as the buddy system outlined above, role plays, and Q & A sessions to explore and regularly revisit the pros and cons of identification. In these interactions, we were particularly mindful of the potential negative consequences (Kwan & Walsh, 2018) for the young adults. Ultimately, they remained adamant that they did not want to be hidden; therefore, written consent was obtained, and this process was agreed upon with formal gatekeepers. The format of the DVD was subsequently changed to allow the young adults to be identified by their images and first names. This was a critical point, or choice point (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020), for all project participants in taking ownership and pride in the success of the project they were creating.

In summary, by rejecting the codified ethical rules of the regulatory approach to ethics, we acted as moral agents (Banks et al., 2013) in tackling conflicts between ethical principles (non-maleficence versus respecting autonomy) and accepting how the label of “vulnerability” of certain marginalized groups is a social construct (Von Benzon & Van Blerk, 2017). We learned to relinquish our paternalistic approach in favor of a rights-based one relying on an ethics of care, rooted in the relationship of caring and being cared for, by working as much as possible in an open and transparent manner with all participants throughout the project. This proved to be of much greater use in facilitating a reflexive process that was cognizant of the inherent power and interests of all involved.

Upholding the Values of Participation in All Aspects of Project Development

Planning was informed by participatory action learning and we were determined that the students participated as learners and the justice-involved young adults as expert educators. While children and young people engaged with health, education, and social services will often be co-opted in service planning, Smithson and Jones (2021) note how “young offenders” do not experience such participation. Indeed, denying them opportunity arguably further blames and demonizes them for the harms and multiple structural oppressions they have experienced (Crook, 2012; Liddle et al., 2016). Custody is arguably the antithesis of inclusion, so challenging accepted modes of participation and co-production and negotiating breaks from the prison regime became the norm each week. Overcoming the absolute ban on the use of multi-media in the custodial environment required persistence and complex negotiation with prison officials. It was essential for us to adhere to security requirements and be open to ongoing negotiation around processes without compromising our underpinning values, including that imprisoned young adults would have the opportunity to participate fully in the project.

From the outset, we were clear with students about the commitment required in achieving agreed aims and were determined to avoid adding to the young adults’ experience of being let down. Banks et al. (2013) observe the importance of trustworthiness in participatory projects. We structured regular, protected time for critical reflection on the planning and process. Students were required to maintain a reflective log of their experience along with attending the support sessions and we made ourselves available to the students “as and when” they needed our support. These mechanisms proved vital as students were sometimes deeply impacted by the young adults’ stories and experiences and needed a safe space to process their reactions. As facilitators, we were acutely aware of our “duty of care” to all participants (Aldridge, 2016), along with being pragmatic in adhering to governance requirements. We needed to look after relationships with funders and gatekeepers, regularly updating and communicating the ethos of the project and its progress.

In summary, realizing participation meant that everyone involved had to commit to a process in order to achieve the outcome they wanted to be part of creating. But we also had to be explicit in acknowledging that “participation” meant different things to each individual, particularly those in custody. The struggle was in how we achieved this; as in similar projects, we grappled with our privilege, power, and positionality (Muhammad et al., 2015). In practice, this meant being honest, open, and realistic at each micro-stage of the process and ritually reflecting, member checking (Jumarali et al., 2021), and accessing feedback on our efforts from all those involved in producing the DVD.

Conclusion

We have aimed to distill key learning relevant to participatory research from our engagement in this project. Most important was our commitment to staying true to the core principles of participatory inquiry, by empowering

marginalized young adults to tell their stories and express their opinions on professional services. We learned the need to be continually responsive and flexible in the most challenging of environments to achieve these aims. This required us to acknowledge and address the power differentials while striving to work on an equitable basis as much as possible. We soon realized that processes can be daunting and unnerving and recognized that roles are not fixed but need to be agile and intuitive. Furthermore, we needed to be open to challenge and ultimately reflect upon how we, as facilitators, have been complicit in colonized constructions within academia (Hall & Tandon, 2017) of justice-involved young adults as *vulnerable/dangerous* as opposed to agentic adults. We fundamentally came to value that participation depends on real choice, opportunity, and meaning to the individual.

The examples presented here demonstrate that even in the most unlikely of circumstances aims, objectives, and methods of inquiry can be agreed upon together through careful project planning and design. Our experience taught us to hold steadfast and have courage in following through on the innate principles—in this case, the value and inherent right of the young adults to have their voices heard. Regardless of the commitment and innate challenges, we could not have imagined how enriching and impactful the experience would be—and continues to be—as critical knowledge for social work education.

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