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Children and young peoples' lyrics and voices capturing their experiences within Youth Justice Services

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ABSTRACT:

The research aimed to explore young peoples' authentic experiences of YJS during the covid-19 pandemic. By adopting the creative arts-based method of lyric writing, the research team sought to empower participants through collaboration and participation and to facilitate them leading the narrative (Deakin, Fox and Matos, 2020).

This research adopted a creative arts-based method in which participants worked alongside an artist to generate lyrics that captured their experiences within YJS. Such an approach demonstrated a commitment to participatory, child-first approaches.

Two main themes were identified: identity and relationships. The young people vocalised resistance to frequent labelling and their ambitions to move away from past criminal identity and behaviour. Relationships with practitioners could be source of frustration within this but were also highlighted as valuable and supportive.

As data collection was remote, owing to the covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, the opportunity to develop relationships with young people within the YJS prior to conducting the research was restricted. This approach may have also impacted upon recruitment of participants. The sessions presented short-term interventions and whilst follow-up sessions were offered, many did not take them up. Although the research sample is small and cannot be considered representative, it allows for a valuable insight into the experiences of young people at a particularly challenging time.

Upon receiving our findings and recommendations, the first YJS research site has sought to further embed a relationship-based practice model and greater creative/participatory socially prescribed psychosocial therapeutic interventions, including music groups, and spoken word artists to work with children and young people.

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This research adds to the growing literature base surrounding creative arts-based research with children and young people for their value towards communication, pro-social identity and development.

Children and young peoples' lyrics and voices capturing their experiences within Youth Justice Services

Abstract

This research explored the perceptions of young people within two Youth Justice Services (YJS) during the covid-19 pandemic, captured using arts-based methods: lyric writing with an artist. This approach allowed participants to lead and voice their experiences in a more creative and participatory way than traditional methods. Through their lyrics, the young people articulated their perceptions of self which differed from how they felt others saw them. The value of relationships with practitioners and those outside the service were also explored. The benefits of the methods, to participants pro-social identity, and how they might be further employed across YJS are also discussed.

Purpose

The research aimed to explore young peoples' authentic experiences of YJS during the covid-19 pandemic. By adopting the creative arts-based method of lyric writing, the research team sought to empower participants through collaboration and participation and to facilitate them leading the narrative (Deakin, Fox and Matos, 2020).

Design/methodology/approach

This research adopted a creative arts-based method in which participants worked alongside an artist to generate lyrics that captured their experiences within YJS'. Such an approach demonstrated a commitment to participatory, child-first approaches.

Findings

Two main themes were identified: identity and relationships. The young people vocalised resistance to frequent labelling and their ambitions to move away from past criminal identity and behaviour. Relationships with practitioners could be source of frustration within this but were also highlighted as valuable and supportive.

Originality

This research adds to the growing literature base surrounding creative arts-based research with children and young people for their value towards communication, pro-social identity and development.

Research limitations

As data collection was remote, owing to the covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, the opportunity to develop relationships with young people within the YJS' prior to conducting the research was restricted. This approach may have also impacted upon recruitment of participants. The sessions presented short-term interventions and whilst follow-up sessions were offered, many did not take them up. Although the research sample is small and cannot be considered representative, it allows for a valuable insight into the experiences of young people at a particularly challenging time.

Practical implications

Upon receiving our findings and recommendations, the first YJS research site has sought to further embed a relationship-based practice model and greater creative/participatory socially prescribed psychosocial therapeutic interventions, including music groups, and spoken word artists to work with children and young people.

Context

In England and Wales, over 150 local authority Youth Justice Services (YJS) have autonomy for the localised design of services and are overseen by the non-departmental Youth Justice Board (YJB). YJS' take a multi-agency approach of support for children and young people within the service who have a range of "important, interdependent and interrelated needs" (YJB, 2020: 2). Haines and Case (2018: 132) suggest there is no 'central narrative' to address the variations in youth justice delivery across the country which has been described as 'messy' (Smith, 2007) and a 'hotchpotch of punitive and welfarist approaches' (Case et al., 2015: 100). Prior to the pandemic, Haines and Case (2018: 131) indicated the YJS was at a point of crisis with the expectation of increased effectiveness and efficiency, despite less staff and resources leading to 'less time and larger caseloads'.

The YJB (2019) outline key operational standards for YJS service delivery, this includes the assessment of children and young peoples' risks and needs to provide interventions which are intended to focus on their best outcomes and reduce reoffending. This reflects the YJB (2021: 9) 'central guiding principle' of 'child-first' which seeks to promote their "individual strengths and capacity to develop their pro-social identity". Historically there has been limited focus on their views in planning, intervention and assessment and there is now an increased focus upon children and young peoples' participation and diversion (Case et al., 2015). YJS' are expected to establish positive relationships with the child/young person, their families/carers, and support their desistance (YJB, 2019). Attempts are being made to centre the voice of children and young people in policy and practice (Smithson and Jones, 2021), aligned with the 'child first' rhetoric, however further research and evidence of this is required.

Children and young people within YJS' are likely to have experienced negative social conditions such as oppression and are in a process of navigating and developing their identity (Baker and Homan, 2007). They are frequently drawn from challenging circumstances (Bilby, Caulfield, and Ridley, 2013) impacting upon their personal, social and emotional needs (Creaney, 2020a). This population require emotional and practical support along with supportive relationships to pursue positive social outcomes (HMI Probation, 2016). Deakin, Fox and Matos (2020) suggest increasing numbers of children and young people are being categorised as risky. The connection between stigmatising policies and practice results in those within YJS' becoming further marginalised and disadvantaged. The social experiences of stigmatisation can be limiting and overlook their potential (Deakin, Fox and Matos, 2020).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, local YJS' had to move away from face-to-face working to remote/socially distanced engagement. When face-to-face working was gradually re-introduced, this was subject to national and local restrictions and children and young people deemed 'high risk' were prioritised. Alternative methods of communication, case management and support were required and impacted upon the service delivered. For those involved within the criminal justice system (CJS), the pandemic has had wide ranging implications upon health, welfare needs and social interactions (Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorates, 2021; HMI Probation, 2020). The distinct inequalities of vulnerable and marginalised children and young people heightened during the pandemic due to access to safe spaces (Woodrow and Moore, 2021) and channels of support (Gabriel et al., 2020).

Design/methodology/approach

Approach

Marginalised groups within the CJS are rarely afforded the social capital to reflect and discuss their experiences of punishment within it (Sutherland, 2009). Those specifically within YJS' have reported feeling that they lack a voice (Smithson and Jones, 2021). Many children and young people within YJS'

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3 present with speech and language communication needs that have not been identified. Assessment
4 and support for this can also vary across locations and services (Simak, 2018). Traditional methods for
5 engaging participants in hard to access services have limitations particularly as they may make
6 participants feel disempowered (Creaney, 2020b). Creative methods are tools that can be used in
7 qualitative research, providing a flexible approach that draws on inventive and imaginative processes
8 (Veale, 2005). There has been an 'acceleration' of creative approaches to research with children and
9 young people, challenging traditional forms of knowledge production (Robinson and Gillies, 2012).
10 This enables voices that are frequently neglected to lead the narrative (Wilkinson, Price and Crossley,
11 2022; Caulfield, Jolly, Simpson and Devi-McGleish, 2020) through engaging approaches that respond
12 to diverse needs (Veale, 2005).
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17 Creative methods offer an opportunity to examine the experiences of those in hard to access services,
18 in new ways that situate them as key stakeholders in the research in an active rather than passive role
19 (Hogan and Kaiser, 2005). A collaborative approach to data collection has the potential to recognise
20 and capture the needs of children and young people (Creaney, 2020b) and promote social change
21 within the services they are engaged with (Smithson and Jones, 2021). Harding (2020: 2) argues that
22 'co-production of research presents an opportunity to flatten power hierarchies often felt within
23 traditional research, by offering the potential to re-situate those residing in the margins; bringing
24 them into the centre of knowledge produced about (by) them'. Operationalising creative methods
25 within this research invites participants to be engaged within the research process and have their
26 voices heard.
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31 Within an environment of wider support and provision, arts-based methods have many psychosocial
32 benefits (Parker et al., 2018). They have been recommended for facilitating greater engagement and
33 communication with children and young people and those within the CJS (Payne, Hobson and Lynch,
34 2020; Wilkinson, Price and Crossley, 2022). Music-based approaches in particular have also been
35 recognised for allowing young people to construct identity and build self-esteem (Baker and Homan,
36 2007). Prior research has highlighted how particularly grime music (a British style of rap (Drummond,
37 2018 as cited in Smithson and Jones, 2021)) is already significant in young peoples' lives and they can
38 identify with artists (Smithson and Jones, 2021). These methods and activities have been met with
39 enthusiasm and the creation of powerful lyrics whilst reducing or even reversing power dynamics
40 evident within criminal justice settings (Smithson and Jones, 2021). Within this collaborative activity
41 they can 'tell it like it is' (Baker and Homan, 2007: 473). Further research has identified how lyric
42 writing can allow young people to process, regulate and communicate emotions (Youth Music, 2021)
43 and improve relationships and behaviours within services (Parker et al., 2018). There is evidence of
44 this approach being mutually beneficial also for criminal justice agencies by breaking down barriers
45 and allowing for preconceptions and negative bias to be challenged (Payne, Hobson and Lynch, 2020).
46 Lyric-writing can also be transformative for young peoples' writing skills (Parker et al., 2018).
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50 51 Design

52 The research question explored young peoples' authentic experiences of YJS' during the covid-19
53 pandemic to consider current and future implications. The research team sought to adopt a
54 methodological design that engaged young people and avoided scrutiny that those within YJS' are
55 frequently subject to. Data collection offered an opportunity for creative data production and took
56 the form of lyric writing sessions with an artist which intended to elicit more authentic responses than
57 traditional methods. The artist had experience of successfully running similar sessions in both
58 community and custodial criminal justice settings previously. The research team discussed the aims
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3 of the project with the artist who designed the sessions: initially building a rapport with each
4 participant in conversation; engaging them with 'the real me' activity and writing the lyrics. Within the
5 activity, the artist had devised a worksheet with the outline of a person 'the real me'; they then asked
6 the young people about how they perceive themselves, how others perceive them and their
7 experiences of the YJS. Their responses were populated by the artist on the worksheet and then used
8 by the artist to guide the young people through the lyric writing process. The artist utilised the young
9 persons' slang and language, supporting them to find words that rhymed with what they had said to
10 write the lyrics. The artist used their skills to facilitate authentic discussion at each stage of the
11 process. Therefore, no formal moderator guide was created.
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15 Ethics

16 Ethical approval was received from [anonymised]. There are ethical tensions when conducting
17 research with children and young people aged under 18 years (Price, 2021). Initially the research was
18 aimed at those aged 16 years and over, an age in which young people are viewed in society to
19 be responsible for their decision making. This was later reduced to from age 15 years to better reflect
20 the population within the YJS. Whilst those aged under 18 years are legally 'children', participants are
21 referred to as 'young people' here to reflect their self-identification.
22
23

24 Age is an arbitrary measure and does not necessarily indicate an inability to provide consent. The
25 research sought respect participants autonomy in decision making (Goredema-Braid, 2010).
26 Gatekeepers within the YJS' worked closely with the young people and were able to make a judgement
27 about potential participants suitability to be involved within the research and their ability to give
28 informed consent. Involving those aged under 16 years without parental consent was justified as The
29 National Children's Bureau (Shaw, Brady and Davey, 2010) state that it may not be necessary for
30 parental consent to be sought if the research is integral to the service that parents, or carers have
31 already consented to. Gatekeepers shared the participant information sheets and consent forms with
32 participants and the opportunity to discuss the research with the research team was offered to all
33 potential participants. The information sheets also provided advice for who the young people could
34 contact should any further support be required. All participants were given a £20 voucher as a 'thank
35 you' for their participation. The research findings and recommendations were disseminated to feed
36 into YJS' annual and recovery plans.
37
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40 The participants were not asked to share any information on sensitive or upsetting topics. Their
41 participation was confidential with all identifiable information anonymised. The research team and
42 artist were subject to DBS¹ checks. All participants were informed that should any child protection,
43 safeguarding issues or illegal issues become apparent the research team would share the information
44 with the relevant body. Although this did not occur, the research team understand that this led to one
45 young person refusing to participate, perceiving the research team to have an association with the
46 police.
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50 Process

51 Initially, it was intended that young people would attend two sessions, the first to familiarise
52 themselves with the artist and the nature of the research and the second to begin co-constructing
53 their lyrics. Recruitment was slow and gatekeepers informed the research team that young people
54 were not too interested in taking part. This may be reflective of this population being frequently
55 disempowered and disengaged (Creaney, 2020a). It is recognised that the gatekeepers may have
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58 ¹ The disclosure and barring service reviews an applicant's criminal convictions prior to volunteer work,
59 employment or research.
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3 represented another institutional structure surrounding the lives of young people, deterring their
4 participation (Price, 2021). They may have perceived the research as an additional aspect of their
5 orders and therefore further deprivation of their liberty and punishment (Sutherland, 2009).
6 Challenges recruiting participants were exacerbated during the pandemic and remote means of
7 contact (Woodrow and Moore, 2021). Whilst the research method sought to reduce power
8 imbalances, the approach to recruitment may have presented a barrier. However, the research team
9 were unable to access the participants through alternative means. The research team were not
10 informed of how many young people were approached for the research. The process was therefore
11 reduced to one session to facilitate recruitment.
12
13

14 Lyric writing sessions (one per participant) were conducted within the first YJS (n=4) between October
15 2020 and March 2021 using Microsoft Teams through secure University accounts. Despite
16 researchers' and practitioners' best efforts, no further young people from the first YJS were recruited.
17 A second YJS was identified to take part in the research from August 2020 (n=13). Due to the artist
18 working relationship with this YJS and locality, more young people were identified, albeit slowly. When
19 sessions could be resumed face to face from early 2021, they were within a studio in-person with the
20 artist, gatekeeper and music equipment. A research team member was always present via Microsoft
21 Teams in a passive capacity (following introduction; the young people were aware of their presence)
22 to document fieldnotes as the artist led each session. Where there were issues such as the digital
23 divide, YJS' offered support by providing participants with WIFI. This was no longer an issue when
24 young people in the second YJS could access the studio (8 of the 13 participants within this YJS'). This
25 was felt to provide the environment for the sessions to flow more effectively although this opportunity
26 only came at the later stages of the research for the second YJS due to location and covid-19
27 restrictions.
28
29

30
31 Sessions typically lasted 1-2 hours. The young people were frequently quiet at first and it was
32 important that the artist established themselves as distinct from the YJS' and the power hierarchies
33 that exist within it (Harding, 2020). Some of the young people had previous experience of lyric writing,
34 this was discussed along with their music interests as part of the rapport building. The artist utilised
35 numerous techniques to get to know them through shared interests and presenting their music videos
36 through YouTube. The sessions were relaxed and informal; the young people would sometimes eat or
37 drink whilst within them. After around 30 minutes, the young people were much more conversational.
38 The artist then moved onto a worksheet they had devised entitled 'the real me' and guided them
39 through it:
40
41

42 *Fieldwork notes, artist quote: 'It is about being honest, subjective, if it's helped you, talk about*
43 *it, say it how it is'*

44
45 *Fieldwork notes, artist quote: 'We'll talk about experiences of YJS, if you don't mind, I'll write*
46 *things down'.*
47
48

49 The research team were not made aware of any specific speech, language or communication needs
50 of participants although aware that they are common for those within YJS' and may not be identified
51 (Simak, 2018). The artist sought to ensure that this did not present a barrier or a sense of
52 embarrassment for participants and so the artist populated the worksheet.
53
54

55 Following the worksheet activity, the artist guided the young people through lyric writing. Those who
56 were comfortable with this began to write their own lyrics. The artist invited them to be honest and
57 did not sanitise any language. For those less familiar with lyric writing, the artist also taught them how
58 to produce their own lyrics. They were encouraging and acted as a positive role model by mentioning
59 their own circumstances as a parent and being dyslexic, (for further detail see ANONYMISED). Harding
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3 (2020: 12) has noted elsewhere how “some of the most meaningful moments in the research relied
4 upon collaboration between the participants themselves, with the research space offering time for
5 reflection and healing”. The artist was able to perform a peer mentor style role due to closeness in
6 age and background to the participants (Creaney, 2020a). It is felt that their authentic and empathetic
7 approach elicited greater engagement and in-depth responses from the young people that might have
8 otherwise been obtained through more traditional methods. The artist recognised their experiences
9 and allowed a space for reflection. When moving to put the lyrics to music, the artist adapted to the
10 young peoples’ preferred music style, this was typically grime and rap.
11
12

13 There was a total of 17 participants. Within the first YJS’ one session took place as a telephone
14 conversation with a researcher following the workshop activity structure due to issues with the young
15 person’s connectivity and availability. Whilst this did not follow the method of data collection
16 intended, it was felt that it was better to obtain their views rather than deny their participation. Given
17 the small sample size, no demographic information (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity) and any identifiable
18 information about individual orders or backgrounds are shared. Participants are referred to by
19 pseudonyms which differ from their real names. The sessions were not recorded or transcribed, and
20 unstructured fieldwork notes were taken by researchers. The artist transcribed the lyrics as vocalised
21 by the young people, unless the young people wished to write themselves and the artist collated and
22 shared the lyrics with the research team following each session. The lyrics are retained in the way they
23 were written or spoken by the young people to maintain authenticity, any typos here are intentionally
24 left for this reason. The data provided below is drawn from fieldwork notes, the activity notes taken
25 by the artist and analysis of the lyrics written in sessions.
26
27
28

29 Analysis

30 The analysis was completed in two stages. First, the young people were asked to vocalise their lyrics
31 to the artist, which allowed for discussion and reflection thus ensuring that their narratives led the
32 analysis. The research team then analysed the lyrics using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006;
33 Braun and Clarke 2021); firstly familiarisation with the written lyrics before coding the lyrics. This led
34 to the identification and development of a number of representative themes (Byrne, 2021). Although
35 the analysis reflects the research team’s interpretation of the data, a member was present at each
36 session (albeit via Teams). This allowed for meaningful interpretation of the data due understanding
37 of the context in which the lyrics were developed and broader perspectives of young people shared
38 within the sessions allow (Byrne, 2021). The artist was consulted during the process to clarify meaning
39 for some of the ‘slang’, colloquial terminology that had been used. As such, the voice of the young
40 person was central to the research and analysis. The Thematic Analysis led to the development of core
41 central themes; Identity and relationships.
42
43
44

45 Findings

46 The research aimed to explore young peoples’ authentic experiences of two YJS’ during the covid-19
47 pandemic. Creative arts-based methods facilitated greater exploration of their narratives which have
48 been presented in two themes below.
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50

51 Identity

52 Nationally, the pandemic impacted upon face-to-face contact and some wider areas of YJS’ support,
53 such as substance use support and mental health access that could be offered, resulting in decreasing
54 safeguards (Hampson, Case and Little, 2022). Government restrictions meant that phone calls were
55 the primary means of contacting young people and garden/doorstep visits were used for those
56 deemed to be most ‘at risk’. The higher assessment of risk, the higher level of contact received. This
57 population are also likely to have a number of different agencies involved. It is evident that rather
58 than supported, the young people within this research reported finding this means of contact
59
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1
2
3 restrictive and had a sense of feeling trapped. Zaheed reported receiving a number of calls from the
4 different people within the YJS and associated agencies:
5

6 'They think that I'm mad but I know that I'm calm' (Zaheed)
7

8 'Swear down I'm gonna go off no cap
9 I told them its return of the Mac' (Zaheed)
10

11 'I wanna be free but I'm feeling trapped
12 These long hours got me feeling tapped' (Zaheed)
13
14

15 The creative process meant that young people articulated a disconnect between their perceptions of
16 themselves and others of them. Whilst some recognised feelings of anger, they frequently felt that
17 this was something others attributed to them, but they did not identify with. Processes of
18 criminalisation can have traumatic implications (Harding, 2020) and the stigmatisation of this
19 population can impact upon their sense of self. Whilst some young people may be able to resist this
20 frequent labelling, others may become angry or withdraw (Deakin, Fox and Matos, 2020). Zaheed
21 articulated an internal struggle as they sought to resist anger and frustrations and move away from
22 this identity where they were perceived as angry but felt the approach taken by services' they were
23 subject to could anger them.
24
25

26 The young people articulated how they felt surveilled and punished rather than actively engaged in
27 activities they did not wish to participate with. Supervision can be something that is 'done to' rather
28 than 'with' young people (Creaney, 2020b: 110). The frequent surveillance, regulation and social
29 control young people experience was exacerbated during the pandemic (Woodrow and Moore, 2021)
30 and felt keenly by participants:
31
32

33 'I remember the days in youth offending
34 Had to do things I didn't want to
35 Early morning calls was annoying
36 Never had time for myself
37 Every week was a different meeting
38 Coming to my house without saying
39 Thought it was hard I kept praying' (Elijah)
40
41

42 User Voice (2021) found that positive views towards YJS reflected how easy young people perceived
43 their involvement within it; being 'left alone' and a lack of intensive or challenging intervention.
44 However, this can be argued to reflect an absence of support which the young people did not
45 recognise they required (User Voice, 2021). This reflects the balance between control and autonomy
46 required within services (Drake, Fergusson and Briggs, 2014).
47
48

49 At this stage in their life-course, young people are undergoing neurological development which has
50 impacts upon their behaviours and identity formation and progress towards desistance. It was evident
51 the young people resisted prior identity and labels associated with their orders (Coyle, 2019). Young
52 people within YJS' may not meet desirable norms of behaviour and are frequently stigmatised. It was
53 clear they had aspirations and were seeking to move towards a positive future identity:
54
55

56 'I'm only a teen that's tryna [trying] to chase [their] dreams
57 They label me a bad [...] but I get referred to the youth team' (Kai)
58

59 'Same old story same old ending'
60

1
2
3 Stuck in the youth offending
4 Ain't no one there to defend him
5 Case is stacked and it's stacked against him
6 And then that covid hit
7 Case got stuck for a bit
8 Still in the shit learning to live
9 And the kid begins to fix
10 Recognise his mistake
11 Slowly begins to change' (Omari)
12
13

14 Risk-based approaches taken within YJS' have been criticised for not allowing sufficient space for
15 young people to articulate reasons for their behaviour and future aspirations (Wigzell, 2018). A child-
16 first approach is premised on a de-emphasis on responding/reacting to children and young people as
17 offenders (Case and Haines, 2015: 171). The 'risk' narrative remains evident in practice (Day, 2022)
18 and young peoples' narratives through the lyrics. This can have negative impacts upon self-
19 development and identity away from past criminal behaviour:
20
21

22 'I wanna change but I feel like I can't because of my past' (Femi)
23
24

25 The practitioner working alongside Femi contacted the research team for a second session as they had
26 been excluded from school yet "in light of how well Femi opened up to [artist], I'd like to see this
27 through". This was just before Christmas and by the time a follow up session could be arranged, Femi
28 had been involved with a serious crime. This, along with lyrics below where young people highlight
29 their enjoyment of lyric writing, highlight the value of engaging young people in pro-social activities
30 that enable them to develop skills, something which was heavily reduced during the pandemic
31 (Hampson, Case and Little, 2022).
32
33

34 The stigma of involvement within the CJS can also damage esteem (Holligan and McLean, 2018). In
35 the discussion, Daniel initially struggled to articulate their internal feelings, the artist demonstrated
36 empathy and rapport to encourage them:
37

38 *Fieldwork notes, artist quote: What about positive? Because I can tell you know, you're a joker*
39 *bro, you've got comedy, you're creative, you're extremely creative. (Daniel)*
40
41

42 Some of Daniel's subsequent lyrics are present in the following theme demonstrating how the creative
43 process encouraged their perspective. Young Advocates for Youth Justice (2022) have reported a lack
44 of understanding between themselves and practitioners. Music and lyric writing activities allow young
45 people to explore their style and aspects of their identity. During the sessions, the artist created an
46 accessible space for the participants to explore their feelings (Baker and Homan, 2007), including
47 movement away from past identity. It may take time for young people to see and articulate a change
48 in how they perceive themselves away from negative identities (HMI Probation, 2016). Crucial to this
49 change are the relationships they have whilst within the YJS and with wider social contacts, as detailed
50 below.
51

52 Relationships

53 The theme of relationships represents the interactions between the young people and practitioners
54 as well as personal relationships outside of YJS'. The accounts demonstrate some of the challenging
55 backgrounds and experiences young people involved within YJS' have experienced:
56
57

58 'I remember the days I had to hustle on the street
59 Trying to make a living and make mama proud
60

1
2
3 All my life I've been on my own
4 Can't trust no one no more
5 I've had my family and friends turn on me' (Elijah)
6

7
8 Demonstrating empathy rather than judgment is key to developing positive relationships (Creaney,
9 2020a). It is evident that an absence of relationships and support previously impacted upon Elijah and
10 the lyrics reflect the importance of these connections being built within the YJS. Initially Craig reported
11 that they did not wish to engage with the service because they 'didn't know' their YJS worker, but they
12 later referred to their YJS worker as calm; seeking to help Craig which 'keeps me on track' if Craig were
13 going to do anything they should not, although Craig would 'be on track anyway':
14

15 'Even though I don't need help and I never have either, even if I did, I've got' [YJS worker]
16 (Craig)
17

18
19 Trust is important for relationships to be transformative. Relationships are negotiated and also require
20 the space for difficult conversations between the practitioner and young person (Drake, Fergusson
21 and Briggs, 2014). Craig had the opportunity to meet with their YJS worker in person prior to their
22 interactions moving remotely, something which was highlighted by HMI Probation (2020) as
23 important in facilitating working together. Alternative means of establishing deeper relationships
24 between practitioners and young people were also found during the pandemic through bike rides and
25 walks (see Hampson, Case and Little, 2022).
26

27
28 Relationships with YJS' workers are a vital aspect of support for young people and improved when
29 practitioners listen, show interest and are available (User Voice, 2021):
30

31 [...] 'YOT and i can tell you that they have opened my mind with life and every thing
32 yer the ses is some time broring' (Daniel)
33 'Yer i get called 1 a week or i see one of the a week but that is it they help me with my
34 depression and my druges used but if it wasnt for them i would probly be in a hole difrent plass
35 then i am now' (Daniel)
36

37
38 The lyrics capture the reflection that Daniel's order, and consequently the time they spent with the
39 YJS has opened their mind, despite sessions at times being 'boring'. The once weekly phone call and
40 once weekly visit helped them with depression and substance use. Daniel outlined how their
41 experience was positive, and they felt supported as without their YJS worker, they would be in a
42 'whole different place'. Daniel articulated in the session not receiving help in other institutions when
43 asking for it.
44

45
46 YJS' interventions are intended to promote children and young peoples' best interests and outcomes
47 and should be supported with positive relationships. The lyrics below demonstrate the benefits of
48 providing opportunities for young people to engage with activities they are interested in and creative
49 means of interaction to gather their perspective (Case and Haines, 2015):
50

51 'First and foremost I want to thank YOT
52 If it wasn't for studio I wouldn't be doing much' (Hashim)
53

54 'YOT gave man some studio time
55 if it wasn't for that id be in some unusual sides' (Jameel)
56

57
58 'Officer you must be mistaken
59 I'm trying to be a real cash earner
60

Now making music shout out to my YOT worker' (Leighton)

Participatory and pro-social approaches can be more effective in engaging and interacting with young people. The space to create music was valuable to those seeking to move away from previous negative circumstances and criminal identity. By recognising young people's potential and providing positive opportunities for them to communicate (Parker et al., 2018) and develop skills, practitioners within YJS help young people to see a potential for change in their life (Holligan and McLean, 2018).

As highlighted above, vulnerable young people are likely to have had disrupted relationships previously (Mitchell, Jones, and Renema, 2015) and so trust and rapport is important. Relationships outside of the YJS were also valuable to Daniel, who when encouraged by the artist, described developing a sense of purpose.

'Whether your life is worth living or whether you're good enough fmg that came in to my head was that for people and you continue to sit there and do things that makes you unhappy what ever you think it is not time to leave evon if the devil because 've lived that life and i can tell u that where i am right now i am only still alive because of the one that i call my angel' (Daniel)

Feelings of being trapped by past or current negative circumstances can heavily impact upon young people. Child-first approaches seek to recognise children and young people's strengths (YJB, 2021). In doing so, practitioners need to understand individual needs and provide emotional and practical support (HMI Probation, 2016). Daniel outlines how they transitioned to a mindset that they were good enough to live their life due to their 'angel'. The prior trauma experienced by Daniel is reflected in their lyrics and the depth of this perspective may not have been obtained within traditional methods. Their movement away from upsetting past is an ongoing process and they drew on numerous therapeutic resources including spirituality and relationships with others (Holligan and McLean, 2018). The value of broader relationships enabled Daniel to see their potential for future change.

Discussion

The findings show how through the creative process the young people were able to express their perspectives about the services. This was presented in two themes: identity and relationships. Within YJS', young people can feel disempowered (Creaney, 2020a, 2020b). Children and young people's perceptions of services can be negatively impacted by their perception of levels of support (if any) they require. It is important to tailor services to recognise their interests; address their thinking, decision making and behaviour; and to meet their needs (User Voice, 2021). Taking a reductionist, risk-based approach has the potential to alienate young people. Through their lyrics, the young people voiced how they felt stigmatised by services and struggled to overcome negative perceptions of them. The young people felt that contact from YJS' could be overbearing and was a struggle for participants to not express and instead overcome frustrations. More so in the context of the pandemic where there were many deprivations (Woodrow and Moore, 2021). The ongoing risk-based approach within YJS', rather than child-first was felt here. The young people wished to move away from previous negative identity and circumstances (Coyle, 2019; Holligan and McLean, 2018) and some felt supported to do this through positive relationships and activities. Relationships were better when pre-established before the removal of face-to-face contact.

Grime and rap music has been linked to youth offending, yet this research, along with others (see for example Smithson and Jones, 2021) have highlighted the benefits for young people within the CJS as

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3 “an outlet for expression” (Baker and Honman, 2007: 468) to explore their creativity, identity and
4 reflect upon their experiences (Harding, 2020). The themes within this paper demonstrate how
5 participants were able to develop their music writing ability whilst exploring and defining their own
6 identity (Bilby et al., 2013). The sessions also allowed the young people to communicate their
7 perspectives to challenge perceptions others had of them (Payne, Hobson and Lynch, 2020). The
8 relationship they had with the artist in the small timeframe was key to their active engagement (Bilby
9 et al., 2013; Smithson and Jones, 2021) and sense of collaboration. The artist encouraged the young
10 people and allowed them to explore notions of stigma and promote their self-esteem (Holligan and
11 McLean, 2018). Taking such an approach, the research broke down institutional barriers between the
12 young people and the YJS’ as they participated within an activity facilitated by the service which
13 empowered them to lead the narrative and share their perspective (Smithson and Jones, 2021).
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17 The ‘affective experience’ of art-based methods includes the passing of time and sense of
18 achievement (Bilby et al., 2013: 5). Many young peoples’ social needs and well-being were negatively
19 impacted during the pandemic (Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorates, 2021; HMI Probation, 2020) which
20 occurred at the crucial and critical period of development and identity formation (Coyle, 2019). This
21 highlights the value of this affective experience. Their sense of isolation and frustration demonstrates
22 why such methods were appropriate as an alternative means of engagement and development of self-
23 worth particularly at a time when other forms of social contact were so limited. This research sought
24 to focus upon young people as experts of their lives and experiences using methods to reduce power
25 imbalances in knowledge production and allow for meaningful cooperation. Communication
26 difficulties can exacerbate power imbalances (Simak, 2018) therefore the use of music, a familiar
27 aspect of their lives (Smithson and Jones, 2021) was a valuable way of driving participation and
28 engagement. The lyric writing activity was utilised to create an experience that was beneficial to the
29 young people (Creaney, 2020a). Through their participation, encouraged by the artist, the young
30 people were able to develop or learn new lyric writing skills, positive aspects of their identity, and
31 attain of sense of achievement. This is important to creating new pro-social and positive attributes,
32 something which is important for desistance (Bilby et al., 2013). The psychosocial benefits of the
33 research (Parker et al., 2018) reflect the child-first approach.
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37 YJS workers must understand and engage with individual subjective notions of maturity and identity
38 development (Coyle, 2019) and find ways for them to express this. Positive relationships and engaging
39 with young peoples’ social interests can facilitate their emotional development (Creaney, 2020a) away
40 from problematic behaviours associated with their past, as was evident within the research.
41 Relationships are complex and dynamic; they require a balance of control and autonomy. This means
42 the opportunity and context for young people to “envisage [their] world differently” (Drake, Fergusson
43 and Briggs, 2014: 33) whilst offering intervention and support. Engaging rather than surveilling is
44 important. To break the cycle of labelling young people receive, interventions should not feel
45 restrictive and punitive (Deakin, Fox and Mathos, 2020). The YJB (2019: 6) highlight: “supportive
46 relationships [...] empower children to fulfil their potential and make positive contributions to
47 society”. How young people perceive themselves and the support they require from the service can
48 differ to that perceived by YJS workers. It is important that YJS workers focus upon positive
49 relationship building and allow young people to articulate their experiences and future aspirations
50 (Wigzell, 2018). Completing exercises that allow them to articulate their motivations and recognising
51 their autonomy (Drake, Fergusson and Briggs, 2014) can allow for more positive involvement within
52 the service.
53
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56 The research has practical implications relating to child-first principles of promoting best interests
57 (YJB, 2019). Music based approaches with young people involved within YJS’ have been found to
58 liberate them from the constraints of their daily lives (Baker and Homan, 2007). In the context of the
59 pandemic this was particularly important. The first YJS responded to these findings that they were
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3 seeking to further embed research-based practice and encourage more socially prescribed
4 psychosocial therapeutic interventions. This included music and spoken word artist groups with
5 children and young people. They were also exploring greater use of peer mentor roles to focus upon
6 relationships. Whilst this is at a local level, it demonstrates how these findings might be adopted
7 within YJS' nationally to focus upon pro-social activities to engage and encourage children and young
8 people to develop skills and a positive future identity. There is the opportunity to ensure that
9 interventions can result in a sense of achievement (Youth Music, 2021) and social capital (Bilby et al.,
10 2013) rather than a sense of isolation. The role of a facilitator or peer mentor is useful to break down
11 barriers perceived between children and young people and YJS'. Offering such services within YJS' but
12 ran by external agencies (and thus reducing formal system contact) can be challenging due to lack of
13 funding, but in this way might be less stigmatising and criminalising (Hampson, Case and Little, 2022).
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