Young people and police making “Marginal Gains”: climbing fells, building relationships and changing police safeguarding practice

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to describe a youth work model of participatory research practice which utilises a range of methods within non-traditional research settings, highlighting the importance of trust, risk-taking and the creation of mutually respectful and non-hierarchical relationships. The paper suggests that such methods enable the development of new insights into previously intractable challenges when working with adolescents needing a safeguarding response from professionals.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper reflects on the challenges and successes of a project which brought police officers and young people together to develop solutions to improving safeguarding responses to young people affected by sexual violence and related forms of harm in adolescence. In particular, this paper focuses on a residential held in October 2016 in the Lake District involving 7 officers and 15 young people.

Findings – Despite a number of ethical challenges throughout the project, this paper makes the case that potentially high-risk participatory research projects can be supported and managed by university research centres. However, for these to be successful, staff need to work in trauma-informed ways, and possess high-level expertise in group work facilitation. Transparency, honesty, constancy and a range of different and creative activities, including mental and physical challenges, all contributed to the success of the project.

Originality/value – By detailing the empirical steps taken to develop, support and realise this project, this paper advances a youth work model of participatory research practice, filling an important gap within the methodological literature on participatory work with young people affected by sexual violence.

Keywords Participation, Safeguarding, Police practice, Young people, Child sexual exploitation, Youth work

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Children’s and young people’s right to express their views, be heard and exert agency in matters affecting their lives is enshrined in Article 12 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), alongside their right to protection from harm, including sexual exploitation (Articles 31 and 35). Despite commitments to involving young people both in policy making and practice development (HM Government, 2018), multiple studies document the difficulty of achieving this in practice (Tisdall, 2013; Brodie et al., 2016; Lefevre et al., 2018). Recognised by participants and stakeholders as a successful participatory project, this paper describes the process undertaken to bring together police officers and young people affected by sexual violence and related forms of harm in adolescence to co-create solutions to improving professionals’ safeguarding responses to young people.
Background

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) has been the focus of much policy, academic and media attention over the last two decades in the UK (Beckett and Pearce, 2018) following a number of high profile cases and serious case reviews (Coffey, 2014; Bedford, 2015). The impacts of this form of abuse are pervasive and wide-ranging and can cause significant emotional, physical and psychological harm (Beckett et al., 2017); improving prevention and intervention efforts with young people at risk of or experiencing CSE is therefore a priority for policy and practice (Public Health England, 2017). Serious case reviews and public inquiries have identified areas of professional practice, including policing, that require significant improvement to better protect young people from this form of harm (Coffey, 2014; Bedford, 2015).

Young people affected by CSE often describe feeling powerless and that they have limited control as a result of the abuse they have experienced and the subsequent criminal justice processes in which they are required to engage (Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Hallett, 2016). In recognition of this young people’s participation is seen as increasingly important within CSE policy and many services are evolving and adapting to redress this balance by making space for young people’s voices (Brodie et al., 2016). Increasing evidence suggests that young people want to, should and can be active in sexual violence prevention efforts (Cody, 2017), and that young people’s meaningful participation in safeguarding processes is valued highly by young people and can significantly contribute to their safety and the effectiveness of interventions (Warrington, 2013; Hallett, 2016; Lefevre et al., 2017).

Reconciling young people’s rights to participation and protection is, however, a challenge for many professionals, with multiple studies reporting a tension between young people’s right to participate and current safeguarding processes (Gilligan, 2015; Lefevre et al., 2017, 2018; Warrington and Brodie, 2018). Furthermore, evidence shows that young people may resist professional intervention and support for a variety of reasons, including a lack of trust in professionals, a lack of faith in the child protection system and fear of the consequences following disclosure of sexual abuse (Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Lefevre et al., 2017).

Considering the police in particular, young people cite additional reasons that inhibit disclosure and help-seeking behaviour, such as previous negative experiences of the police, fear of negative repercussions either for themselves or their family, or feeling in some way to blame for what has happened (Beckett et al., 2016). These factors can often be compounded by race, class and gender (Beckett et al., 2016). There is evidence of work being done to remove barriers to young people’s engagement with the police and improve police practice (All Party Parliamentary Group for Children, 2014), but there is limited evidence of participatory work being done to engage young people in these processes.

Over the years, a number of participation models have emerged delineating young people’s involvement in projects or decision-making processes which allow practitioners and academics to explore and develop their understanding of young people’s participation (Shier, 2001; Hart, 2008; Larkins et al., 2014; Percy-Smith, 2018). Positing participation as a “process of learning for change rooted in the everyday lives of young people”, Percy-Smith (2018, p. 161) argues for young people’s participation to be present throughout project cycles, involving five stages: “identifying issues; understanding the issues; developing plans (decision-making); taking action; evaluating action” (p. 169). Critical work on participation has identified multiple ways in which the concept is understood and operationalised. This work highlights the misleading ways in which by labelling a process as participatory, it could be assumed that young people are empowered by the process, that they are actively involved in every stage of the work and that the project has influence on decision making or positively benefits young people’s lives in some way, when this is not always the case (Gallagher, 2008; Larkins et al., 2014; Percy-Smith, 2018). Recent theoretical work on young people’s participation critiques some of the ways in which participation can be seen to have been co-opted to validate or improve service delivery, without taking into account the radical and emancipatory roots of participatory work (Gallagher, 2008; Larkins et al., 2014; Percy-Smith, 2018). The work cited above also acknowledges that realising young people’s meaningful, non-tokenistic and ethical participation is challenging, messy and time-consuming work, as evidenced throughout this paper.
Methodology

Project aims

The activities discussed within this paper were coordinated by staff from the International Centre: researching CSE, violence and trafficking (research centre hereafter), at the University of Bedfordshire; a research centre committed to ensuring the participation of young people affected by CSE and related forms of harm in all projects undertaken. In 2015, the research centre was awarded funding from the College of Policing, Home Office and Higher Education Funding Council for England to establish the CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub (www.uobcsepolicinghub.org.uk). The overall aim of the Hub was to improve police responses to CSE and other forms of harm and involved a number of activities designed to encourage police officers to use research evidence in their professional response to CSE. An initial strategic needs analysis carried out by the team identified engagement with young people affected by CSE and related forms of harm as a priority area for the police (Firmin, 2015); a number of activities were therefore developed over 18 months to address this. This included consultation with young people across the country, workshops and a residential experience alongside police officers, followed by multiple co-created dissemination activities and outputs.

Participant recruitment and engagement process

From early 2016, young people were recruited to the project through specialist organisations with whom the research centre had previously established working relationships, a factor that contributed towards sustained organisational engagement during the project. Contacting “experts”[1] through these organisations had additional benefits: engaging participants through project staff ensured safeguarding concerns were considered, support made available, and staff members’ knowledge and understanding of where experts were in their recovery processes enabled careful consideration of the appropriateness of inviting experts to participate. The lead facilitator (also lead author) was aware that a trauma-informed approach, which recognises the journey for young people affected by CSE and associated harms is complex, non-linear and sometimes lengthy, would need to be embedded within the project at every stage to recognise and validate experts’ experiences (Hickle, 2016).

The engagement process with organisations was time consuming and complex; it was a difficult project to pitch as the outcomes were unprescribed. Rightly, staff at the organisations wanted to know what young people would receive in return for their participation, and more importantly, whether it would have any impact upon policing practice. Aware of the dangers of engaging young people in participative work which does not create the intended change, the lead facilitator was clear that this project had the potential to have considerable impact, but at this early stage there was no guarantee, especially given that at this point there was not yet buy-in from police officers. This honest approach became a key element of the engagement of both experts and police officers as the work developed over the next 18 months.

In March 2016, the lead facilitator was asked to predict the likely cost implications of this element of the wider CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub work. Despite the project’s uncertainty at this stage, the lead facilitator optimistically requested funding for a residential experience to bring together police officers and experts to develop solutions to the challenges previously identified within police safeguarding practice (Beckett et al., 2016). Brathay Hall in the Lake District, chosen for its beautiful setting by Lake Windermere and its offer of a variety of outdoor activities, was booked for a weekend during October half-term 2016. Additionally, the lead facilitator agreed to the wider team working on the CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub that she would secure the services of some of the residential participants to disseminate key messages at a research forum for police officers following the residential.

During the Summer of 2016, five workshops took place with experts around the country to explore the project’s potential. Messages from previous research undertaken by the research centre were explored and key areas of concern prioritised. The workshops also provided an opportunity to test the idea of a residential experience. A number of experts thought the idea was possible, but doubted that police officers would want to share a weekend away with them. Some experts made it clear their involvement with the project would end after the workshop as they did not feel comfortable to spend a weekend so far away from home or with police officers.
A parallel process involving numerous different and significant challenges was underway to recruit police officers. Hours were spent on the phone securing involvement and slowly, some officers began to express interest in the opportunity offered. It was constantly reiterated that the process would be managed as an environment of mutual respect, experts and police officers would be involved in all aspects of the process as equals, and this process was to be managed by experienced facilitators in whom the police would need to place their trust.

**Principles of practice**

For the lead facilitator, a youth worker in her earlier professional life, the key principle of engagement with experts was to ensure that the process was ethical and that those who participated felt that their voice was heard and their lived experience validated. It was important that the experts’ engagement did not become another research project which merely reaffirmed messages that had already been derived elsewhere; a new approach was required. Key to the development of the methods was the involvement of an experienced co-facilitator, Abi Billinghamurst, who was chosen because of her skill fit with the lead facilitator. Abi’s organisation, Abianda (http://abianda.com), works with gang-affected young women; her approach is both trauma-informed and solution-focused.

Care was taken to allow the project to develop in line with experts’ priorities and interests and to share decision making with experts about which areas of police practice to focus on; the solutions developed at the residential were a result of these conversations. However, having an aim and focal point for the work (the residential and the subsequent police forum) helped maintain focus and commitment to the project, a finding evidenced in other participatory work with young people (Larkins et al., 2014). Fundamentally, the approach developed throughout the project drew on established foundational youth work knowledge about the effectiveness and power of groups when brought together in different settings to undertake a given task, and the unpredictable nature of group dynamics that can unfold in such circumstances (Adams, 2001; Young, 2004). Trust in the ability to create safe and respectful spaces where potentially difficult conversations can take place and a strong emphasis on personal development and learning were at the core of this endeavour.

This was particularly evident in planning the residential element where four practice imperatives were employed to guide and underpin the experience; these applied to indoor workshop-based tasks, outdoor exercises and free time:

1. The creation of a mutually respectful space in which participants feel safe and comfortable, and where individuals are treated equally so that good, honest relationships can be established.
2. A shared understanding of the intense and inevitably tiring nature of the weekend and the need to be engaged in all sessions, taking care of self and others both in the sessions and during break times.
3. The need to be solution-focused and forward thinking rather than focus on previous negative engagement experienced by both experts and police.
4. For participants to leave the weekend having had a new experience, an opportunity to reflect, gain new insights and learning, and to have contributed to meaningful debate about how systems could be improved.

What follows will describe and reflect on the participatory approach adopted throughout this project, from the initial planning of the residential, through to dissemination of the co-created outputs. Written notes, facilitator and participant reflections, and photographs and video evidence have been consulted in the development of the model of participatory practice described here.

**Residential planning**

By September 2016, 7 officers from four force areas and 15 experts representing five of the six areas where workshops were held confirmed their attendance at the residential. All 15 experts had attended a summer workshop and therefore had met one or both of the facilitators.
Unfortunately, bringing the police participants together prior to the event inevitably proved unrealistic due to geographical distance and time. The police officers and experts were given pre-residential tasks to complete; a crucial step in establishing the nature of the environment over the residential period. This included completing pre-residential questionnaires identifying hopes and anxieties for the weekend ahead, all of which informed the contract and boundaries established on the first night together.

Inevitably, ethical considerations, safeguarding protocols and endless risk assessments were undertaken to enable the smooth organisation of the residential experience. These were highly complex and required careful and diligent negotiation with all stakeholders concerned; the organisations, parents/carers, experts, university’s ethics committee and health and safety departments, police officers and staff at Brathay Hall. Early on it was established that there were no previous relationships between the experts and police officers attending, making the process a little less fraught. However, moving experts from one part of the country to another, ensuring safeguards were in place, booking train tickets, negotiating shift patterns for police officers and securing appropriate staff attendance from organisations was extremely time-consuming and in some cases highly problematic.

The two facilitators were clear that to ensure a high-quality residential experience, it was important that experts’ individual support needs were facilitated by (paid) organisational staff, rather than residential facilitators, as this could be distracting and impact upon the ambitious task at hand. Organisational staff were not expected to participate in sessions, but to be there if needed and to check in with their groups after sessions to ensure that the experts felt comfortable and safe and to resolve any conflicts. Two research assistants also attended to record the discussions, capture thoughts and feelings of participants throughout the weekend, and to be helpful observers of group dynamics and reflect back their impressions to the facilitators following each session to allow for appropriate de-briefing. Undoubtedly, high staff ratios significantly contributed to the weekend’s success.

**Design and methods**

The programme utilised a balance of methods to reflect different learning styles. Participants’ diverse backgrounds and experiences were considered with care, alongside continual reflection of how power dynamics might require careful and sensitive management. A number of activities designed to give everyone the opportunity to shine were organised; these activities underlined the idea that everyone brought something different and valuable to the residential and acted as a leveller amongst participants. Additionally, it was important not only to ensure the process had built evaluative tools for research and funding purposes, but also to provide participants with a mechanism for reflection and learning to embed these processes throughout.

Friday night was spent getting to know each other, sharing information derived from the workshop feedback and pre-residential tasks, and developing the group agreement: a contract detailing how participants were going to work together including expected standards of behaviour during the weekend was key. Four groups were established, comprising a mix of experts and police officers, with the intention of embedding the positive relationship building that would be required to ensure the weekend’s success. Solutions to some of the identified anxieties on both sides were explored and agreed. At this point, a participant realised the challenge of changing the culture of 48 police force areas across England and Wales was too great, but that small steps could be taken to improve current police safeguarding responses. As an accomplished sportswoman, she explained this to the group by using the metaphor of the British Olympic Cycling team making “marginal gains” by tweaking their bikes to achieve success. “Marginal Gains” was then adopted as the project’s title.

Saturday’s programme combined discussion-based workshops involving vision trees, role play activities and an activity on long boats on Lake Windermere. After the session on the Lake, participants were encouraged to reflect upon the experience and identify what behaviours had been helpful/unhelpful in enabling success or completion of the challenges set. After dinner a session took place using creative methods to begin to identify solutions to previously identified priorities in terms of making a difference to police safeguarding practices. Using props and role
play, each group made a pitch to suggest possible tools that would be helpful to achieve this. At the end of the day, the facilitators reviewed feedback and information captured about the day to ensure the intentions for the next day were still relevant and achievable.

Sunday started with a walk up a nearby fell, during which participants were tasked with speaking to someone new about what had most surprised them over the weekend. At the top, time was spent enjoying the stunning view of the Lake before heading back for lunch. The afternoon was devoted to action planning for the research forum alongside evaluating the residential experience. Considerable time was given to closing and carefully managing endings as everyone prepared to leave by 4 p.m.

By all accounts, the weekend was an outstanding success and exceeded all expectations. In particular, the strength of respectful and caring relationships developed within the short but intensive experience, proved the power of all participants’ ability to give their trust and engage in many activities which took them out of their comfort zone. This all took place in an unknown environment, with multiple strangers and no clear notion of any particular outcome:

Expert: seeing the police officers let down their guard and just talk to us like how they would talk to their friends […] not enforcing their authority on us […] that was really really nice.

Ethical challenges and solutions

Unsurprisingly, managing a project of this nature brings multiple, unanticipated ethical challenges which no end of contingency planning can predict. During the Marginal Gains project, they coalesced around four themes; working with gatekeepers, direct work with young people and the police, personal and professional challenges, and wider system challenges.

Working with gatekeepers

The involvement of gatekeepers can be both helpful and problematic. One organisation decided to withdraw an expert from the project following a disclosure made to another expert on the train home from the residential. This expert was obviously still experiencing post-traumatic stress and clearly felt the residential was an opportunity to take herself out of her current chaotic life. At the residential, she was evidently exhausted and had arrived with a bag of dirty clothes asking to use the washing machine. The lead facilitator experienced a great deal of internal professional conflict about the decision to withdraw the expert and initially resisted this decision; she wanted to continue supporting this individual who had contributed so much at the weekend and who was excited to continue her involvement in the project. However, to adhere to the particular organisation’s safeguarding policy, it was understandable that this decision was taken and the young person was withdrawn. Assurances were given that key workers would stay in touch with the individual concerned and offer a different form of support. Delightfully, the expert concerned presented at a conference a year later where she reflected on her journey and her aim to join the police to further improve safeguarding practice.

One worker had to back out of the residential the day before as she was birthing partner for a young person who had gone into premature labour. Multiple discussions took place about the appropriateness of her experts participating without her being present. They were both aged 17 plus and it was agreed that one of the research assistants (also co-author) would offer on-site support. Risk assessments were re-visited and travel arrangements from London to the Lake District reviewed to ensure safety.

Another unanticipated role for the lead facilitator was undertaking informal support to gatekeepers who were sometimes at the end of their tether with their experts at various stages throughout the process from recruitment, workshops, residential to dissemination events. Becoming a “non-managerial supervisor” in this way, whilst time-consuming, was helpful in giving further insight to the needs of experts participating in the project, undoubtedly enhancing the effectiveness of the engagement strategies employed.

Direct work with experts and the police

When immersed in projects of this nature, it can be difficult to remember that young people also have broader interests and lives outside their experience as an “expert”. This is crucial for all
professionals working with experts who are participating in projects; they are more than a “survivor of abuse”, they too have aspirations. An expert who was integral to the weekend’s success and due to be the keynote speaker at the end of project conference, pulled out of the event the day before. After much soul searching, she had rightly decided that her priority was to stay at college in the hope she would be selected for the English Women’s Basketball team. She was and continues to represent her country.

Some of the more memorable challenges in working directly with experts during Marginal Gains included managing group dynamics at the residential after what was perceived as an “unhelpful” look was given in the dining hall to another group, creating conflict before the work had even begun; having to remove a young person’s name from the credits of the film as a result of safeguarding concerns and asylum status; retaining the participation of an expert who had moved to London and wanted to remain involved but was no longer associated with a project that could offer support.

All officers who attended the residential were drawn from their force’s specialist teams working in safeguarding roles; however, several viewed this as an opportunity to come and “tell” the experts what they were doing to improve the situation. Others said they would bring their own resources to show the experts what they were doing in their area to seek out the experts’ opinions. Unbeknown to the lead facilitator, alongside many other more commendable reasons for attendance, there were some officers who thought it would be a good “jolly” and others who had never been to the Lake District who decided to come for these reasons alone. These dynamics required honest conversations to allow officers to fully understand the purpose of residential.

**Personal and professional challenges**

For the lead facilitator, there were a number of personal and professional challenges. She originally applied for the Project Manager role for the wider CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub and was unsuccessful. Research centre managers had helpfully asked her take the lead in young people’s engagement. She needed a job as her previous research contract was ending and therefore was pleased to retain an income; however, for her it felt like a consolation prize. Additionally, as an older member of the team, she felt somewhat out of her comfort zone to re-engage in direct work with young people. This was echoed at initial meetings when young people frequently expressed they expected to be meeting someone younger! It was also very apparent in late night reflections when stuck on a cold, frequently wet and dark train platform hundreds of miles away from home after project visits. It felt like she had come full circle and was now re-engaging in youth work practices that she had been involved with nearly 30 years earlier.

It was also a professional and personal ethical challenge to manage the tension between remaining solution-focused and participative within an extremely short funding timescale and balancing the needs for protection and participation with a vulnerable group of experts alongside project demands. The need to continually review risk assessments and engage stakeholders in discussions about experts’ participation at the different project events was sometimes all-consuming and cannot be underestimated in terms of worry time. Fortunately, having another experienced facilitator alongside provided support when decisions required further review.

**Internal and external system challenges**

System challenges existed internally and externally. As workers from projects were being paid for their time, a legally approved partnership agreement was in place to clarify payment terms and partnership parameters; endless toing and froing between legal departments in respective organisations prior to agreement sign-off inevitably created delays in the project’s start. Sadly, no such agreement was in place for the police force areas involved. An immutable challenge in this regard was the refusal of a senior manager to release his staff members to stay involved with Marginal Gains after the residential which was difficult for both police and experts.

The perceived lack of engagement from colleagues on the wider CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub project was also difficult. Initially, this worked for the lead facilitator as it meant she had free rein to develop the project as she saw fit. However, the disinterest in what was happening with
this aspect of the work can be explained by either, she was a safe pair of hands and the team knew a quality output would be delivered, or, frustratingly at times, her feeling that this element of the project was less important than the more “serious” research work being undertaken. Ensuring the right number of young people had been engaged in line with bid intentions appeared the priority at meetings, rather than the nature and quality of the actual engagement. The dangers of “tick box” participative practice felt ever apparent.

Initially, the lead facilitator asked for a budget and was given a very small sum to run some workshops with police and experts as identified in the original bid, then money was made available for the residential. In the final three months, the realisation of an under-spend in other areas became apparent and the newly found money was used to make the film and poster. These additional outputs were unexpected and enabled the Marginal Gains team to come together again on multiple occasions to create these exciting outputs in time for the end of project conference in March 2017. A considerable amount of unexpected and additional work was required to meet the timescale and the facilitators were extremely concerned about suddenly having to drive the process without the same due regard for participative practice that had been evident previously. They need not have worried as the opportunity to come together again overrode any concerns in that regard from participants. However, earlier clarity of resources available would have allowed for a more considered approach in pitching the project to potential participants, as well as a less rushed final three months.

Impact, outputs and legacy

The Marginal Gains project had impact in multiple and unexpected ways. Participants presented at the research forum a few weeks later in November 2016, to an audience of over 70 officers from across the country. Between January and March 2017, the group made a film which is now embedded in the College of Policing training materials for new recruits. A poster about police engagement with young people was co-created with professional artists and 2,000 were distributed to every custody suite in England and Wales.

Additionally, the group ran workshops for police officers at the CSE and Policing Knowledge Hub final conference in London in March 2017. The work was also presented at a number of individual organisation events, annual conferences and the Metropolitan and Bedfordshire Police’s Safeguarding Conferences. Of particular note was an invitation from the College of Policing to deliver the keynote address at the end of their Police Knowledge Fund conference in November 2017, where Marginal Gains was cited as an exemplar of police co-production.

A youth work model of participatory research practice

The model of practice guiding and facilitating this research project was embedded from the project’s inception (see page 5); however, it continued to emerge and evolve throughout as facilitators responded and adapted to the multiple challenges that arose. The underlying principle was respect for all participants and recognition of their potential contribution throughout the process, echoing Larkins et al.’s (2014, p. 733) argument that participatory practice can only facilitate social change within a context that values children and young people as “competent citizens”. In particular, whilst there were no pre-determined outcomes or outputs, all activities were designed to be solution-focused and future facing, drawing on methods derived from youth work theory about group development, personal growth and learning derived from activities undertaken in non-traditional settings (Young, 2004).

Tension between participants was managed by an honest approach which did not shy away from conflict, but instead identified it and sought to create solutions together. Facilitators acknowledged that the residential would not be easy at times, and recognised the need to sometimes sit with discomfort, “hold the space” and work with the risks that bringing disparate groups together can create. Some of this was managed by modelling positive respectful behaviours, some by creating an environment in which everyone was treated as equal; a perception of a hierarchy of knowledge was eradicated by a combination of levelling activities, the group agreement and flexibility around how experts engage. This approach was embedded
throughout the project, providing stability and consistency for participants, thereby fostering a sense of safety and trust:

PO: I’ve loved working in teams with the young people and we’ve all been equals, everyone’s participated and been able to have their opinion, everybody’s listened really well which has been great, everyone’s taken part.

By utilising a range of different and creative methods of engagement, a mix of physical and mental challenges, and the opportunity to support one another throughout the weekend’s activities, everyone’s contributions were recognised as equal and valid by all. By establishing a level playing field in an unfamiliar setting the first time oppositional groups came together, the opportunity to push the transactions and engagement further, and over a longer period, began to reveal themselves. As a result, the outputs, designed to disseminate messages from a shared understanding and language to wider audiences, possess a highly credible voice rooted in research and lived experience:

Expert: Just you know, hearing the police officers’ like points of view and them giving us knowledge, because we didn’t know circumstances and sections of the police force and because it’s more detailed now we know certain processes that they have to go through […] we know where we need to work on, what’s fine or doesn’t need that much improvement. So just you know having a more clear outview of what we need to be doing. It’s been amazing, once in a lifetime opportunity.

PO: The best part of this has been being able to get to know the young people, building a rapport with them, enjoying just spending time with them, knowing them as people and getting them to know us as people rather than just police officers […] Now we’ve got some really good ideas going forward […] hopefully we can […] make this a bit of an epidemic going through the police service.

Involving “experts” in research processes is highly desirable and research outputs are usually enhanced by retaining their voices as central; no more so is this the case than with vulnerable young people. The experts’ desire to make safeguarding processes better for other young people was palpable throughout Marginal Gains. The opportunity to value and embed their lived experience was never in question; it was the coming together with previously oppositional voices that made the process more challenging.

Without the high-level expertise in group work facilitation, as well as being trauma-informed practitioners, such methods would not ordinarily be comfortably or successfully used by staff located in university research centres with more traditional academic skill sets. The understanding and acknowledgement that there was a risk the project would not be successful created an honesty and transparency within the relationships formed, increasing trust, a level of risk-taking and ultimately success. This was taking place whilst managing and balancing the priorities of an award-winning research centre for whom failure was a non-option: it was a gamble and the option to play it safe was never far from the lead facilitator’s mind. Inevitably, the intensity of effort and nature of resource to facilitate this process was never adequately accounted for in the funding or time available.

Finally, the geographical setting of the residential and impact of the environment cannot be overstated. For some experts, rarely having been away from their home town, the opportunity to lie out at night looking at the Milky Way and discuss their aspirations for the future was a unique and incredibly special experience; it is the joy of youth work practice in residential settings recognised in time and memorial (Brew, 1968). The ability for newly acquainted experts and police officers, normally in oppositional roles, to work together like this is a testament to the relationships of trust established and an undeniable respect for each other’s lived experience. The team provided the framework within which this impactful experience took place; a number of previously identified factors enabled its success. Whilst it remains a highlight of the careers of those who were responsible, undoubtedly, it could have been a completely different story:

Expert: This weekend’s been absolutely amazing how everyone’s just pulled together to make a change for the young people. Me, my past I had bad experiences as a young person, so for my son I want to see a change […] with all the people being here today and through this weekend I can see that can happen. I definitely will be going back home with a great confidence boost as I made it up the mountain and got on the biggest Lake in England!
Note

1. Following discussions with participants and how we, and they, saw their role in the project, young people will mainly be referred to as experts throughout this paper as a way of recognising and valuing their lived experience.

References


About the authors

Dr Fiona Jane Factor’s professional background is in youth work. Her academic career began at the University of Bedfordshire in 1995 developing youth work training. Since then she has run her own consultancy company, established numerous professional and academic partnerships in the UK and overseas and undertaken multiple research projects focusing on how professionals support vulnerable young people, particularly within youth justice systems. As Senior Research Fellow, she led on the young people’s work within the Child Sexual Exploitation and Policing Knowledge Hub. She has developed a number of undergraduate and postgraduate courses and is now Principal Lecturer, Teaching and Learning, for the School of Applied Social Studies.

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