

In conversation: An inside perspective of youth justice practice and experience

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journals.sagepub.com/home/prb**Andi Brierley** 

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Abstract

This reflective, dialogue between two youth justice professionals who have lived experience of being incarcerated children aims to provide an insight into their unique transition. Although living in very different parts of Britain, they discuss and reflect upon similarities in terms of strengths and challenges that come with being formerly incarcerated youth justice practitioners. Both authors share their insights of youth justice developments, their perspectives of participatory practice and how experiential knowing can impact relationship building with justice involved children.

Keywords

Child First, participation, desistance, lived experience, experiential peers, peer mentors

Introduction

This paper is a dialogue that explores how the ‘pains of transition’ of being a previously incarcerated child can play out when that child becomes an adult practitioner in the youth justice system (YJS). Both authors have travelled through this unique transitional phenomenon and explore this through their embodied experiences of justice interventions as well as other theoretical perspectives. The dialogue examines both

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the strengths and challenges of experiencing this transition through a gendered lens and suggestions are developed for youth and criminal justice service research, practice and policy.

Background and authors

Andi Brierley is The Head of Access, Participation and Outcomes at Leeds Trinity University. Prior to this role, Andi was a University Teacher, teaching on the Unlocked MSc graduates scheme teaching prison officers while they work in prisons. Andi also has an extensive 15-year career in youth justice (YJ) which includes working with children and young people involved in the most persistent and serious offences, working to safely reduce looked-after children entering the system and mostly using participation methods. Andi is currently delivering a participation project (Clear Approach) to care experienced children in Wetherby Young Offenders Institution (YOI), ensuring this cohort of children speak to senior leaders and policy leads about how their experiences can shape service design. Andi was first sentenced to an 18-month prison sentence as a 17-year-old and consequently spent 4 years in custody over 4 sentences – last being released in 2005, aged 23.

Kierra Myles is a Mentor Co-ordinator, working within children's social care. Kierra started her work with children in care and in youth justice services working as a Children Rights Officer. Kierra then became a mentor co-ordinator, developing a peer mentor service for children in care and care leavers. Kierra was first excluded from school when she was just 8 years old, she entered the care system at 12 years old. By 13 years old Kierra faced her first month on remand in a secure home; she was sentenced to HMP La Moye just 15 years old.

Andi: Kierra, I found becoming a youth justice worker post being an incarcerated child quite difficult on several different levels. Firstly, I felt like I was transitioning from prisoner to criminal justice professional and would be viewed by the children and even my peers as a 'grass' or a 'snitch' for jumping sides. After all, the youth justice service is a multi-agency service that includes the police amongst other services. It was a constant worry in the beginning, but as the years went on, this worry became less prevalent and instead I found notions of inequality, power and the concept of *expert* a challenge to navigate. We can talk through this unique experience of transition here, so what did you find were your main challenges in the beginning of your career?

Kierra: My route into becoming employed was a long one. I kept getting knocked back and ignored from employment opportunities working with children in the care and YJ services. When I was finally employed, I was super excited for the opportunity. It took a few months to settle down. When I did, I remember some colleagues recognising and valuing my knowledge and ability to develop relationships and others being quite apprehensive about someone who has been in care and spent time in custody as a child becoming a professional in children's services. Living in a small community, people can be uncomfortable with change. Did you find you had the same problems when you worked in YJ and care services?

Andi: It is a really good question, and the answer is slightly different to your route into statutory services. I was working in a warehouse when I heard over the radio that Leeds YJS wanted volunteers at the time in 2007 – 2 years after my release. I rang them up, explained that I thought I would be good at helping children in the city of Leeds avoid future offending and when they found out I was no longer on probation, they agreed to put me on volunteer training. I didn't experience barriers to employment like you as such, my challenges came once I found my voice and started asking questions of practice, strategy, and policy instead of asking all the questions of the children's behaviour. It was at this point I felt my personal challenges started. It felt as if some colleagues assumed I was making excuses for my own childhood behaviour and frequently challenged my position on these social issues. Secondly, some colleagues seemed to perceive my position as a challenge to the institution which they felt strongly associated with, which in my view, especially at the time, created a frequent tension that was probably unnecessary and left me feeling isolated. Part of this 'pain of transition' was because I felt an association with the children more than I did the service. This seemed to create genuine connections with the children, even though at times fractured connections with some of my colleagues on reflection. This may have been more on my behalf than theirs and could have been a minority issue if I am being honest. How is the relational dynamic between you and your colleagues and children within your role and are there any differences or similarities?

Kierra: When I started, some professionals were still around from when I was a child. I went to a children's home and a care home worker pretended not to recognise me or my name. Others clearly remembered me as a child labelled as a 'violent young offender.' They didn't say it, but it was all over their face and their not-so-subtle body language. Suffering complex trauma as a child taught me to read people and rooms quite quickly. While this led to some reactions that may not have been necessary, it is a skill that I have managed to control and harness as an adult. Others were supportive of having people with my lived experience working within children's services. The biggest challenges I have had are similar to yours; when I have included children and empowered them to participate in decisions being made about them – especially children who do not trust professionals – I have been told I am advocating rather than mentoring, or my boundaries are blurred. Some colleagues were unable to take in what the young people were saying because their perspective went against the professional's view, what they wanted to happen and at times challenged their practice. I mean you cannot ask children what they think about their experiences if you are not willing to listen to the answer, right?

Andi: That seems interesting and certainly very challenging for you to manage. I hope you had adequate support. I can relate somewhat, although certainly not as extreme. There are numerous examples of this tension or conflict in research when exploring the integration of people with embodied experiences of being in custody or receiving criminal justice interventions into criminal justice practice through concepts such as 'experiential peers' and 'peer mentors.' I believe these are interesting and critical questions that require further exploration. There are

tensions, and I am interested in exploring why they exist when everyone is working towards the same objective. Especially when research clearly indicates that there are generative benefits to supporting people involved in persistent offending to develop desistance narratives by recruiting this group as 'wounded healers' through the making good process (Maruna, 2001). Did you know that researchers have found that peer mentors create three core conditions: listening, caring and encouraging small steps (Buck, 2018).

In my work, I have found it interesting that there are theoretical overlaps between desistance (cessation of persistent offending) and recovery from addiction such as identity growth, shift or change, yet there is little similarity in appetite to develop desistance or redemption communities as there has been for recovery services. This is despite evidence suggesting that the general conclusion from the body of evidence is that participation of peers in recovery support interventions appears to have a salutary effect on participants and makes a positive contribution to substance use outcomes.

I spent many years in youth justice arguing that experiential peers and mentors can act as 'hooks for change' and support mentees as a catalyst for desistance and/or recovery. I often found a push back from some colleagues when arguing that YJ is not progressing this idea of employing people with lived and embodied understanding of transitioning through the desistance process as much as they should. That YJ should embrace this empirical understanding of the generative benefits, especially as it does coincide with a central tenet of Child First Youth Justice such as developing a pro-social identity for children. Do you think this knowledge and understanding has found its way into youth justice policy and practice, and how do you think this should be taken forward?

Kiera: Yeah, I found that when researching peer mentors for my own work. The findings do not surprise me, that is my frontline practice experience too. Listening to children is more than just hearing the words they have to say, it is about listening to their body language, the changes in their tone of voice, encouraging changes in behaviour when your brain is still developing is a challenge for most children during adolescent development. Add multiple complex traumas, no safe attachment figures, little stability or consistency, how is a child supposed to be able to understand that developing emotionally and being aware of your actions is important. This process is not easy. It isn't a onetime event or intervention; it is a journey. What addiction recovery communities understand is it takes time; therefore, the focus is one day at a time. One person helping another through shared experiences, the process is about relationships.

The adult criminal justice services are more advanced in this area compared to youth justice services. Although, in the adult services mentors have also felt due to stigma, practitioner views and sometimes the lack of support that they have not been viewed as knowledgeable professionals. Researchers have found that mentees need to be nurtured over time to develop pro-social identities and feel like they belong, developing self-esteem. While this research is with the adult population, there is plenty of research suggesting children who have suffered multiple adverse childhood experiences need to be nurtured, they need safe attachments,

and they need to develop connections to feel like they belong. Healing happens in the context of relationships.

Another one of the child first tenants is to promote collaboration. To collaborate with children, you have to be able to connect with them and understand their starting point. You have to be able to understand their language and experiences. I believe a big part of why some professionals find this difficult with children considered to be 'persistent,' is that they are unable to recognise the barriers because they come from very different backgrounds. I have not met a professional that does not want to see children recover from trauma and move away from a life of criminality and pain. Having said that, they do not always have the patience and understanding to support children through that transformation. They can also struggle to understand that inclusion is an important part of the process. Within my professional role my aim is not to achieve desistance – it is to develop a relationship, its attachment based. Only then can any work, intervention whatever you want to call it can take place.

To progress this in policy and practice within youth justice services, the stigma for adults with experience of custody as a child needs to be addressed. While there has been progress in recent years, especially within the third sector, there seems to be little change within statutory services. Do you think stigma is the sticking point?

Andi: Really interesting point about different backgrounds. Various studies of desistance found that there are a number of *pains* that can be endured through the desistance process. They found that many who travel through the desistance process arrive to a sense of isolation and loneliness; goal failure; and, increasingly, a lack of hope. I often find practitioners lack an in-depth understanding of what we ask of people to leave a criminal life behind and step into an unknown, especially when achieving an alternative pro-social identity can be 'difficult' and that before people attempt to desist, they often have a life full of friends, substance abuse, crime and excitement, often negative, but leaving it all behind is a significant risk if your new identity is not accepted.

In terms of why we haven't seen the same 'inclusion' in the youth justice system as in the adult one is an interesting question. My experience has taught me that the adult criminal justice system needs to include ex-prisoners to maintain legitimacy and authenticity because of the age range and ex-offenders retuning to 'make good.' The YJS claims to be inclusive by working with children under 18 years old through collaboration and participation. This does not allow for authentic and constructive lived experience challenge to the system itself and let's youth justice off the hook, because children do not have the capacity or knowledge to hold the system accountable. I would like to see an approach that the Care Review took, which was to understand the life-long impact of the care experience and reaching out to adults with the experience to help shape policy and practice, by understanding how it impacts on children and the life course. Youth justice ignores this voice and the life-long impact of youth incarceration.

This has been a really interesting reflection and dialogue. Just to wrap this up Kierra, can you think of one thing you would like to see most in the YJS, and then one thing you see that is better now than when you were a child being worked with by YJ?

Kierra: I would really like to see more children being included, fairly, with more consideration to the power differentials between institution and child. Some ideas of participation have manifested into exploitative approaches from my perspective. Developing a relationship with vulnerable criminalised children and using that relationship to encourage participation that legitimises some of the harms caused by the system itself is not fair, equal or inclusive. I have also witnessed a pushing aside of that child once the institution has achieved its objective with them which is a very similar process seen within child criminal exploitation. The methods are like grooming. Children are being asked to participate, promised things they never receive, and moved to the side when they are no longer needed. This can be a blind spot of well-intended professionals; therefore, I would also like to see more people with lived experience of youth justice being employed to work with children involved in the youth justice system as I believe we are well positioned to identify and challenge this practice.

Something that has changed since I was a child is less children are in custody; it is the obvious one – but the biggest change. Although it is all too often still care experienced children and children who have been excluded from school who enter custody. It is still our children who have suffered the most trauma and usually been failed by multiple services. What are your views to the same question?

Andi: Well Kierra, there must be something about our perspectives on relationships emerging from our embodied experience. I would also like to see people with our experiences and backgrounds getting more opportunities to work within statutory youth justice services. I believe desistance as with recovery is generative due to shared experiences generating authentic and relational legitimacy. Indeed, I recently wrote that in an article outlining why I believe that experiential peers cultivate a participation culture in youth justice. We are on the same page, so I wonder what the children would think about our perspectives.

Kierra: It would be a great bit of research! In the moment feedback I have captured is children saying, 'She actually get what this feels like, I don't have to explain' and 'I like her because she knows what it's like to be locked up'. For me, the fact that children who struggle to trust professionals turn up to meet me consistently, tells me they must feel more comfortable being worked with by professionals with a shared social identity. Andi, as always, it's been great to chat!

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