Hear HER Voice

INSPIRE HER

Research Evaluation

Draft not to be shared

Co-production in the Evaluation of OnSide, Crewe

A crucial element of the work that has been highlighted within the main report is the collaboration between Her Place and the youth co-researchers to design and carry out the evaluation. In order to explore this further, researchers from the Division of Social and Political Science at the University of Chester have been asked to explore how co-production was used within the evaluation that has been carried out by Her Place and the youth co-researchers.

Research aim: To examine the role and value of co-production with young women in the context of this project.

Research objectives:

- To understand why co-production with young women was used in this project.
- To explore how the process of co-production was carried out.
- To assess the value that co-production has brought to the project and identify how it could be applied by others working within an OnSide Youth Zone.

What is co-production?

According to White and Ross (2023) “Co-production is the building of respectful and empowering relationships alongside the sharing of ideas between those with lived experience and other stakeholders. Both contribute their knowledge, skills and experiences to co-create actionable change. Co-production is a challenging process that requires reflection and dedication to ongoing collective learning”. There have been increasing calls for co-production in the community sector, and this research aims to explore how this project has been co-produced and the value it brings, particularly in the context of co-producing with young people.

Involving young people directly in co-produced research is not only methodologically valuable but also an ethical responsibility. According to the Economic Social Research Council (2024), researchers should “consider the ethics implications of silencing and excluding children from research about their views, experiences and participation.” Excluding young people risks reinforcing adult-centric perspectives and overlooking the realities of those most affected by decisions and policies. By contrast, co-production ensures that young people’s voices shape both the research process and its outcomes, leading to findings that are more authentic, relevant, and impactful. It also empowers young participants by recognising them as experts in their own lives rather than passive subjects of study.

Data Collection

A range of participants took part in the data collection for this research, including the co-researchers who are able to discuss the process, challenges and benefits of this

approach to research (n=2 staff from Her Place and n=3 young co-researchers) and a trustee (n=1) who was able to discuss the strategic reasoning behind funding a co-produced piece of work.

Qualitative approaches were used for data collection to allow for an in-depth understanding of social phenomena to be gained, making use of discussion-based focus groups and interviews using semi-structured questions. The use of semi-structured questions enabled participants to share their experiences in their own words, while still providing a level of focus and consistency across interviews (Bryman, 2015). Working with a small sample size allowed for rich, detailed insights to emerge, making it possible to explore individual perspectives in depth and identify common themes that may not have been captured through larger-scale or more structured methods, such as quantitative surveys (Bruman, 2015).

Data was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a process involves familiarisation with the data, coding, developing and reviewing themes, and refining these into a clear narrative (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This method is particularly valuable in research that seeks to capture lived experiences, as it supports both rich description and interpretation of meaning. Discussion of the 'Local Voices Principles of Co-Production' (White and Ross, 2023) have been intersected throughout the discussion of the findings to provide wider context. These principles outline key considerations for effective co-production and focus on the need for valuing lived experience, transparency, mutual respect, reflection and the need for co-production to become a social movement.

Findings

Why include young people as co-researchers?

For the trustee's on OnSide it was crucial that the gender balance of those attending Youth Zone's was addressed, and imperative to this was the inclusion of young people. Having seen pervious co-produced work by Her Place, the London School for Economics and young people, the trustees were keen to carry out something similar:

> "It was important to us to hear the voice of young women, and how they perceived the issues" (Trustee, OnSide)

The young women who were co-researchers for the evaluation cited a number of reasons why they wished to get involved with the project. This including having the opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions, being able to influence a service that other young people would use in the future, including their own siblings, and being able to contribute to the design of a space where other young people could feel safe:

> “I liked the fact that would have a say in something that would affect my siblings in a good way” (Youth co-researcher)
>
> “The opportunity to state my opinion” (Youth co-researcher)
>
> “I wanted somewhere that people could go and feel safe” (Youth co-researcher)

This was reiterated by the Staff from Her Place who felt it was imperative that the voices of young people were at the heart of the research:

> “I think it is so important, all the work we do here is about empowering women and girls and a lot of the feedback that we get from young people is that they don’t have opportunities to get their voice heard, this gives them that opportunity not just to get their voice heard but to have an impact on their community and something that they can see and say ‘I have done that’” (Staff, Her Place)
>
> “It is the lived experience, because things are changing so fast for young people, it’s about the relevance of what [data] we are getting. We can say what we would have wanted at that age but times are different now. Research needs to be current and it needs to move with the times and be reflective of the people that are using the service” (Staff, Her Place).

The youth co-researchers discussed how they felt it was important that they were at the forefront of much of the research activities:

> “I think a lot of the kids understood it wasn’t adults coming to speak to them, because it was us they felt like they would actually get heard. I think they opened up to us more than they would to an adult because of that” (Youth co-researcher).
>
> “I think that they [young people who participated in the wider research] were happy to have a chance to contribute” (Youth co-researcher).

They felt strongly that they felt the participants were more likely to speak with them due to being closer in age and they were able to draw upon their own lived experiences to help shape the research processes. They also discussed how they had good engagement from the young people that they spoke to during the data collection, who appeared to appreciate being asked to voice their opinions and share their experiences.

Staff from Her Place also commented how they felt that having the youth co-researchers at the forefront of data collected helped to gain more depth to the data collected:

> “With adults, they might have just said, yeah, well, we'd want this, this and this. But I think the fact it's somebody else [their age] that's investing the time to find out the young people did give more of their time back in explaining what they what they want, what they like, you know, and I do think young people want” (Staff, Her Place).

In line with White and Ross’ (2023) framework for co-production, this highlights the need to value lived experience and including the voices of those who are likely to be impacted by service provision.

Key Priorities for the Research

Understanding the lived experience of young people currently using youth zones was a key priority for the youth co-researchers:

> “They are the ones who have a youth zone so they could give us feedback about what they do or don’t like” (Youth co-researcher)
> “We want to make sure girls feel safe walking home” (Youth co-researcher).

Ensuring safety was a key theme throughout discussions with the youth co-researchers, and they discussed how the main reason for this stemmed from their own lived experience of feeling unsafe:

> “Firsthand going into school I’ve experienced what it’s like to feel unsafe, I wanted to contribute to something where they can be involved and not feel like the whole world is judging them… I think its just better firsthand as teenagers ourselves to carry this out as we have experienced it too” (Youth co-researcher).

The youth co-researchers highlighted why it was important that the young people who currently use Youth Zones were a key part of the data collection:

> “I think its ironic because everyone has been a kid so they [adults] know what it’s like [to not be listened to]” (Youth co-researcher).
> “They [adults] think they know better than everybody” (Youth co-researcher).
>
> “They [adults] are probably comparing teenagers now to what it was like then they were teenagers” (Youth co-researcher).
>
> “I think it is important for adults to know that these decisions affect our future and not their future and adults need to be more open minded” (Youth co-researcher).

They reflected upon their own lived experiences of not always feeling heard and discussed how this it is important that young people’s voices are amplified during decision making processes.

When asked whether they felt listened to by key stakeholders with an interest in the findings of their report, participants reflected that they did feel their voices had been heard. However, they also noted that the true test would be in the future, when they could see whether any changes were made as a result of their research and recommendations.

> “I do feel we have been listened to” (Youth co-researcher).
>
> “I will believe it when I see it, we have done the work so let’s see if they take it onboard” (Youth co-researcher).
>
> “We have spoken to so many people, they say different things so when we see it we will believe it” (Youth co-researcher).

The youth co-researchers expressed feelings of hope that their work would have a positive impact on the young people using the new Youth Zone in Crewe.

> “I hope it turns out good” (Youth co-researcher).
>
> “I hope our ideas are actually used inside of the building” (Youth co-researcher).
>
> “I hope people feel safe” (Youth co-researcher).
>
> “I want to see our voice has been heard” (Youth co-researcher).

They also expressed a hope that co-production with young people would continue in the future as part of the service:

> “What I would like to see the most is and it is ready to be used, I would like to still see young people being heard, say a youth councillor that is similar in age to those using the Youth Zone” (Youth co-researcher).

This is reflective of White and Ross (2023) eighth principle of co-production, which discusses how co-production should be indicative of a social movement, through continuate and development alongside working towards social change.

Challenges and Barriers to Engagement

When asked about the challenges of encouraging young people to engage in co-production, some participants highlighted a fear of being judged by their peers. They felt this could act as a barrier that might discourage other young people from taking on a similar role:

> “Not all teenagers are going to be reasonable, kind. A lot of teenagers out there are unkind people and I feel like when I first came here I barely spoke because I was scared of the others and I didn’t want to get judged” (Youth co-researcher).

Staff from Her Place reflected on some of the perceived barriers that presented engagement with some of the young people who initially signed up and explained how there was the potential for some young people to feel anxious as there were a number of unknown factors going into the project:

> “We did have a few that thought they would give that a go and then moved away [from the project. When we were starting we were having to feel things out. Some of them maybe didn’t have the confidence or were anxious to just go with it, where as others were happy to feel it out” (Staff, Her Place).

Staff from Her Place also commented on the need to motivate young people, especially early on in the process and how it took time for the youth researcher to develop a sense of ownership to build:

> “Getting the young researchers motived and keeping them engaged and making sure that their research was getting collected, collating it all could be difficult” (Staff, Her Place).

> “I think it [ownership] has had to build up” (Staff, Her Place).

Commitment and communication were also highlighted as potential barriers:

> “Working with young people and their communication. They decide on that morning kind of thing and getting them to commit to it can be a challenge” (Staff, Her Place).

When asked if there was anything they would do differently, the youth co-researchers reflected on some under explored themes, that given the chance they would like to explore in the future:

> “I would really like to know more about the differences between girls and boys and the differences between a youth zone in a rougher area compared to a nicer area” (Youth co-researcher).

The above highlights White and Ross’ (2023) argument for the need of transparency and reflection throughout the co-production process, including the need for expectations to be set out regarding roles and responsibilities.

Opportunities and Skills

The youth co-researchers spoke positively about the opportunities that they had had during the research. In particular, they spoke about how they were able to develop their own individual interests, such as reading and photography, and use their lived experience to make suggestions to improve service provision in these areas:

> “We all have our own hobbies and were able to use them” (Youth co-researcher).

> “It was nice to be able to try different things” (Youth co-researcher).

The youth co-researchers spoke about how they had developed valuable skills, with a particular focus on confidence building, public speaking and team work:

> “We have had differences of opinions, we have compromised and even if you can’t reach a compromise you are at least listened to” (Youth co-researcher).
> “Everyone was pretty nervous at the start, but then we all settled in and everyone could say their opinions” (Youth co-researcher).
> “Interacting with people, talking to new people is a massive fear, but it has given me the confidence to go out there and talk to people” (Youth co-researcher).
>
> “Public speaking is a new skill” (Youth co-researcher).

This was also reiterated by the staff from Her Place:

> “Team work, when they came together initially we had around 13 in total but when we recruited there was about two or three from each school that knew each other. So they have defiantly learnt how to work together as a team and how to communicate with each other and us as the people running the project and learning to communicate with the young people that they were talking to at the Youth Zones. Another big one is the confidence, which has been an amazing thing to hear” (Staff, Her Place).

The trustee reflected upon the potential legacy of young people developing key employability skills:

> “What is really important is employability beyond the age of 18. One of the things we are working on is working with local businesses, getting them to support us on programmes and connecting them with young people. If they can forge a career locally, that can change their trajectory significantly” (Trustee, OnSide).

In addition to skills development, the youth co-researchers also reflected upon how they had experienced personal changes, including being more empathetic to other people’s experiences and opinions:

> “I am a lot more attentive to what my siblings say” (Youth co-researcher).
>
> “I have become more open minded to other people’s opinions and some people’s views have helped to change my views” (Youth co-researcher).

This is reflective of White and Ross’ (2023) argument that opportunities for training and upskilling should be sought to support those collaborators with lived experience, and projects that wish to include co-production should ensure that opportunities are

given to those involvedtodeveloptheirskills.Italsohighlightshowco-productionis a reflective process, andspaceshouldbegivenforthoseinvolvedtoreflectupon their own experiencesofbeingengagedintheseprocesses.

Looking to theFuture

The trustee spokeofhowtheyareoptimisticforthenewYouthZone,andhowthey hoped it wouldbethebeggingforfuturecollaborations:

> "One ofthethingsthatexcitesmeabouttheYouthZoneisthatwearegoing to haveatwelve-million-poundfacilityinthemiddleofCrewethathasbeen designed entirely for and by the young people of Crewe. As a board we want to be acatalystforchangeinCrewe…Wehavetaskedourteamtoget involved with all the local teams and Charities in Crewe to see how we dovetail our activities so we support each other. The opportunities for identifying where there are needs issues in Crewe and then bringing young people together with our team and youth workers and seeing what the solutions could be" (Trustee, OnSide).

They also discussedcurrentdiscussionswithintheboardoftrustee'sthatare considering how youngpeoplecanbemoreinvolvedinstrategicdecisionmaking:

> "We are havingadebateatthemovementabouthowweyetyoungpeople's voices on the board.Wehaveconcernsaboutyoungpeopletakingonthe duties of a trustee,butaretherediffereтwaysofengagingyoungpeoplesuch as through associatestatus?"(Trustee,OnSide).

The youth co-researchersdiscussedhowtheywerekeentocontinuetobeinvolved with the Youth ZoneinCrewe:

> "It's been alotofworkoverthetwoyears,justtomoveonIdon'tthinkit would makemuchsense"(Youthco-researcher).
> "When theYouthZoneisupandbuiltIwouldliketobeastaffmember,Ithink that wouldbeawesomebeingabletobepartofthisandgoingintobeinga staff leaderwouldbereallygoodbecausewehavethatunderstanding"(Youth co-researcher).

Staff from Her Placereflectedontheaddedbenefitoftheseyoungpeoplegoingon to have roles withinthenewYouthZoneandhowthisispotentiallyanunintended benefit of the project:

> "It's [co-production]lifechangingforanybodybutespeciallyforyoungpeople and hopefully twooftheresearcherswillgoontoworkasayouthworker within the CreweYouthZone.Sothatisanaddedbenefitthatwecouldnever have predicted really"(Staff,HerPlace).

All of the youth co-researchers who took part in the focus group for this report expressed a keen interest in being involved in similar projects in the future, and in particular they wanted to be involved in work that addressed young people's mental health:

> "I would like to see more opportunities like this" (Youth co-researcher).
>
> "We should have a voice in our future, as it is us that will be living it" (Youth co-researcher).

Staff from Her Place also reflected on some key points that should be reflected on further if other organisations wish to engage young people with co-production, although it was noted that payment did not appear to be the main motivation for the youth co-researcher's engagement:

> "I think it [paying young people for their time] is important. If you were an adult researcher you would be getting paid for your job and I think it is important that they felt equal to what would be expected as an adult. They gave a lot of time and a lot of their ideas, so I thought it was important that they felt that that was appreciated" (Staff, Her Place).
>
> "I think it [payment] is important. It's about valuing them because it wasn't one off it. There were things they had to do in between. It was co-produced and they had the knowledge that we needed. So showed that we valued them with payment. I don't think that was the motivator for them all. I think they were just generally invested, really do, and that they were honoured to be paid" (Staff, Her Place).

Paying young people to compensate for their time is imperative in order to show how their time is valued. This highlights to need to ensure that policies and practices are in place, to ensure that this is accounted for when budgeting for a similar project, as highlighted within White and Ross (2023).
Additionally staff at Her Place reflected upon some of the wider societal barriers that could prevent young people from engaging with co-production.

> "They want opportunities to get their voices heard but it is about them finding those opportunities and having a home life that could accommodate for that. The schools have been really good because they have let us take them out but if they don't have that support or a parent who was willing to give permission. I think more support, more signposting and making sure they know about opportunities" (Staff, Her Place)

Staff from Her Place also reflected upon their own learning from being involved in this project, and are keen to integrate co-production with young people into future work. They also considered the potential positive impact that the research they

co-produced with the young people could have, but also the need for further opportunities for young people to engage in co-production:

> “I hope that for our Youth Zone in Crewe that girls do feel more welcome and included and I hope we do have a smaller gap with the different genders that are going. I also hope that places do take note that the young people’s voices are important to build in their services” (Staff, Her Place).
> “I've picked up so much of how we can do things again, co-producing with young people” (Staff, Her Place).

Again, this is reflective of the need for co-production to be part of a wider social movement, and also emphasises the need for sharing best practices with others to help further this movement (White and Ross, 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, co-production with young people is not only an ethical responsibility but also a powerful way to enhance the quality and relevance of research. Actively involving young people ensures that findings are grounded in their lived experiences while challenging adult-dominated perspectives. The process also creates opportunities for young people to develop valuable skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and confidence in sharing their views. At the same time, co-production is built on a foundation of mutual respect, where young people are recognised as equal partners and their contributions are valued alongside those of adults. This respectful, collaborative approach strengthens trust, empowers young people, and leads to outcomes that have the potential to be more meaningful and more impactful.

Recommendations

- **Future research and evaluations regarding services that young people access should endeavourtoincludeyoung people in the design and developmentof these services.** This would ensure that research priorities, questions, and methods reflect the realities and priorities of those most affected. Involving young people at the earliest stages can make findings more relevant and actionable, while also fostering a sense of ownership and accountability for the young people involved.
- **Wideropportunities for youngpeople tobeincluded ingovernanceof organisationsshould be explored,for exampleyouth trusteeor associatepositions.** Creating formal pathways for young people to contribute to decision-making helps to challenge tokenism and embeds youth voice at a strategic level. Roles such as youth trustees can build leadership skills and confidence while allowing organisations to benefit from the insights and lived experiences of young people.

- **Services that are targeted at young people should look to consider how theirinfrastructurecould support long-term co-production withyoung people, ensuring theyare paidand upskilled.** Sustainable co-production requires more than ad-hoc engagement. Organisations should invest in systems and resources that allow young people to participate meaningfully over time, including fair payment for their contributions, training opportunities, and mentoring. This not only values their input but also equips young people with transferable skills that can benefit their future education and employment.

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