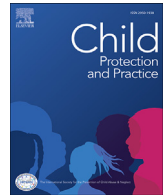




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Child Protection and Practice

journal homepage: www.sciencedirect.com/journal/child-protection-and-practice

Realising participation and protection rights when working with groups of young survivors of childhood sexual violence: A decade of learning



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Childhood sexual violence
Participation
Protection
Young survivors

ABSTRACT

Childhood sexual violence is a global problem that has far-reaching impacts on children, families and communities. Whilst there has been significant commitment and action to tackle this issue, research with young people consistently draws attention to gaps and limitations. Emerging research, and practice-based evidence, tells us that young survivors of childhood sexual violence hold essential knowledge and expertise about the impacts of, and solutions for addressing, this form of violence. Yet, despite widespread recognition that children and young people have a right to 'be heard', in practice there are limited examples where young survivors come together collectively to collaborate with professionals to inform and influence research, policy or practice interventions in this field. This discussion paper begins by reflecting on barriers to, and opportunities for, participatory engagement with young survivors. The article draws on a decade long international programme of work and shares three key elements that have helped 'scaffold' our participatory work with young survivors: forming the right partnerships; weighing up the potential risks and benefits of engagement; and putting in place support for all involved. In conclusion, we present potential ways forward, underscoring the importance of addressing structural barriers, the need for creativity, and the significance of support and training for those accompanying young people and facilitating their engagement in the future.

1. Introduction

Over the last 30 years, since the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), efforts to prevent, and improve responses to children and young people who have experienced violence and abuse have increased. State parties have implemented additional, or strengthened existing, legislation to prohibit child sexual abuse and exploitation (Simon et al., 2020). However, despite these advances – and increased knowledge and awareness of these issues – political commitment to implement law and policy and provide resources to support comprehensive prevention efforts and holistic, timely and appropriate support for young survivors remains limited (UN Special Rapporteur, 2022; United Nations Children's Fund, 2020).

The term 'childhood sexual violence' has gained traction in recent years. The Luxembourg Guidelines (2016), which outline and appraise terminology related to the protection of children from sexual exploitation and abuse, explain that:

'Sexual violence against children encompasses both sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children and can be used as an umbrella term to refer jointly to these phenomena, both with regard to acts of commission and omission and associated to physical and psychological violence' (Inter-agency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, 2016, p.16).

The term therefore covers a wide spectrum of circumstances. Although children and young people affected by sexual violence may have some shared experiences, the length, nature and type of abuse may look markedly different, and individual, social and cultural factors mean the dynamics and impacts may be equally diverse. In this paper we use the term 'childhood sexual violence' as this most accurately encapsulates the diversity of abuse experienced by the children and young people we have worked with.

There are a lack of comprehensive services for young people affected by childhood sexual violence globally (Cody, 2017a; Moynihan et al., 2018) and the lack of funds and 'teeth' of monitoring bodies to hold

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chipro.2024.100018>

Received 5 December 2023; Received in revised form 7 March 2024; Accepted 13 March 2024

Available online 18 March 2024

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states accountable continues to fall short (Simon et al., 2020; UN Special Rapporteur, 2022). Alongside a raft of new legislation, there has been increasing commitment by the international community to prevent childhood sexual violence. In 2015, the Agenda for Sustainable Development set a target of eradicating violence towards, and the abuse and exploitation of all, children. The INSPIRE framework (World Health Organisation, 2016) for addressing violence against children globally identifies seven key strategies to tackling violence. This framework, along with others, highlights the importance of different actors working together across various contexts, disciplines and areas to keep children safe. One of the achievements of those working to tackle childhood sexual violence over the previous decades has been the widespread recognition that everybody has a role to play in preventing childhood sexual violence. However, 'everybody', often does not involve those at the centre, young survivors of childhood sexual violence.

Whilst there is no consensus on a definition of child and youth participation (Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017), there is general agreement that 'participation' encompasses children and young people's involvement in a wide spectrum of activities that promote dialogue and aim to influence decision-making. Article 12 within the UNCRC outlines the right of the child to express their views freely in all matters affecting them. The 'right to be heard' is one of the four guiding principles underpinning how the UNCRC should be interpreted and applied. General Comment 12, on the right of the child to be heard, sought to elaborate on, and improve understanding of Article 12 and outlined nine requirements considered pivotal in ensuring the ethical and meaningful participation of 'all' children and young people. Whilst discussions centring on 'child participation' tend to focus on Article 12, scholars have pointed out that other articles, particularly 13–17 that outline rights to freedom of expression, thought, association, privacy and information – are equally important in realising rights to participation (Mitchell et al., 2023; Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017; Warrington & Larkins, 2019).

In considering these participation rights, it is critical to take into account the evolving capacities of the child. 'Childhood' itself is not a universally agreed concept, and it is widely recognised that cultural and social factors, not just biology, shape children and young people's lives and realities (Montgomery, 2009). The definition of childhood applied within international frameworks encapsulates an age range where there is significant variation in capacities, needs and levels of agency. This is why, in considering Article 12, the convention underscores that the views of the child should be '*given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child*'.

As Lansdown (2005, p. 3) writes in discussing the concept of evolving capacities:

'The Convention recognises that children in different environments and cultures who are faced with diverse life experiences will acquire competencies at different ages, and their acquisition of competencies will vary according to circumstances. It also allows for the fact that children's capacities can differ according to the nature of the rights to be exercised. Children, therefore, require varying degrees of protection, participation and opportunity for autonomy in different contexts and across different areas of decision-making.'

In this paper, when reflecting on 'young survivors', we are talking predominantly from our experience of working with children and young people between the ages of 11–25 who have experienced sexual violence during their childhood. Our work has often included those over the age of 18, with some young people crossing this threshold during a project lifespan. We discuss our decisions around working with this age group at further length in section 4.1.

Since the introduction of the UNCRC, child and youth participation has been widely promoted and various models have been developed to support the individual and collective participation of young people on a range of issues affecting them (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017). Collective participation involves bringing together children

and young people in a group to inform and influence change. It has been contended that less attention has been given to the role of collective participation in influencing child protection processes (Mitchell et al., 2023). Additionally, it has been argued that there is limited recognition of the relationship between how the collective participation of children and young people can improve and support the individual participation experiences of young people within child protection practices and procedures (Mitchell et al., 2023).

For example, in considering the individual participation rights of young survivors, visible efforts have been made to embed children's rights more centrally into judicial procedures and processes. Yet, whilst 'child-friendly justice' has become an established concept in juvenile justice across Europe, following the publication of guidelines by the Council of Europe in 2010, many states continue to fall short in meeting their legal obligations to provide opportunities for children "to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child" (UNCRC, Article 12) and to create an atmosphere that allows children to participate and express themselves freely (Liefwaard & Kilkelly, 2018). Collective analysis and actions by young survivors, that document the barriers to accessing justice and support, can and should play a central role in transforming systems and improving experiences for individual survivors in the future (Small Steps Collaboration, 2022). However, young survivors of childhood sexual violence are often not afforded their rights to participate and influence decisions about their own care (Lefevre et al., 2019; Sapiro et al., 2016; Warrington, 2013). They are also rarely invited to engage in collective decision-making and associate with other children and young people to inform and help develop policy and practice across the sector (Cody & D'Arcy, 2017; Hamilton et al., 2019; Warrington & Brodie, 2018) or to contribute to processes of knowledge generation (Bovarnick et al., 2018).

This article begins by sharing a number of concepts to help explain why young survivors are often precluded from informing and influencing decisions individually about their own care, or collectively to help shape the care and protection of others. Following this, we provide an overview of how things are starting to change within the international child protection sector, and how this is creating an environment that is more open and committed to supporting participatory opportunities. The subsequent sections share what we have learnt in over ten years of supporting a wide range of group-based participatory initiatives and activities with young survivors in different countries. We reflect especially on the 'scaffolding' required to drive forward these new and experimental ways of working with groups of young survivors, sharing what we have found helpful in managing the uncertainties inherent in this work. Finally, we outline what this means for moving this work forward and return to consider some of the concepts introduced at the start.

2. Context: why has the sector not been listening to young survivors of childhood sexual violence?

Scholars have described, at length, the myriad barriers impeding child and youth participation (Lansdown, 2020; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). For children and young people who are classed as 'vulnerable', or may be engaged within the child protection system, these obstacles to exercise one's participation rights are even greater (Collins, 2017; McCafferty, 2017; Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017; Toros, 2021; Vis & Fossum, 2015; Warrington & Larkins, 2019; Woodan et al., 2023). Despite the indivisibility of children's rights, in practice, there is a well-documented tension between participation and protection rights (Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017; Warrington & Larkins, 2019). In addition to ensuring a young person's 'right to be heard', professionals also have a responsibility to ensure that children and young people are protected as they participate. Whilst references are often made to consideration of the 'best interest of the child' (Article 3), it is, as Mitchell et al. (2023, p. 3) espouse '*in a child's best interest to enjoy all their human rights, including their participation rights*'.

In contexts of limited resources, and when there is the potential to

cause distress, elevating the participation rights of young survivors however is often not the priority of professionals (Warrington & Brodie, 2018). Yet, time and money are not the only barriers to young survivors' participation in individual or collective decision-making, a culture of risk aversion and the potential negative consequences for not only the young people themselves, but for professionals held responsible if there are failings, also limit the enthusiasm and buy-in for creating such spaces.

In considering what is known about some of the barriers to participation, in this next section, we build on this and also present a number of additional concepts that can be helpful in considering why young survivors of childhood sexual violence in particular, are rarely heard. These concepts are 'ambiguous agency', 'intersectional stigma' and 'risk and uncertainty'.

2.1. 'Ambiguous agency'

'Ambiguous agency' is a term that is used when the 'agency' – the capacities, thoughts and actions of individuals – are only acknowledged and welcomed when they align with those of the adults involved (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012; Edmonds, 2019; Johnson et al., 2018). As such, 'ambiguous agency' echoes earlier concerns raised by Roger Hart (1992) about the tokenistic involvement of children in participatory initiatives through which children can be manipulated into legitimising professional demands or asked to 'perform' roles assigned to them by adults. The term 'ambiguous agency', coined by Bordonaro and Payne (2012), can be applied when thinking specifically about children and young people impacted by one specific form of childhood sexual violence, child sexual exploitation. Young people who have experienced child sexual exploitation have been repeatedly labelled as 'hard to engage' by service providers (Brown, 2006; Frost, 2019; Pearce, 2009; Saldanha & Parenteau, 2013). However, in reality there are many reasons for why children and young people who have experienced child sexual exploitation may find it challenging to engage with services (Pearce, 2009). This includes the fact that some young people develop disorganised attachments to their perpetrators and may not see themselves as victims (Pearce, 2009). Other young people may have had negative interactions with professionals in the past and therefore have learnt not to trust others in efforts to protect themselves from further hurt (Pearce, 2009; Warrington, 2013). Another contributing factor may be that the responses and services available to them do not always take account of their needs and lived realities (Hickle & Hallett, 2016). As research continues to illustrate, understanding young people's agency within their specific social structures, contexts and relationships – even when their decisions and actions contrast with what we may believe is 'right' – is necessary for mounting an effective response (Abede, 2019; Ranganathan et al., 2017). This however remains challenging when young survivors' beliefs, behaviours and 'asks' fall outside of what we assume is best for them. If their ideas and recommendations challenge existing policies and interventions, this therefore becomes problematic for the wider sector. As has been seen when responding to other issues, such as the rights of working children (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012; Liebel, 2020).

2.2. Intersectional stigma

Intersectional stigma is a term coined by Michele Tracy Berger in 2004 during her research with HIV positive women activists living in the USA (Berger, 2002). The term is used 'to characterize the convergence of multiple stigmatized identities within a person or group' (Turan et al., 2019, p. 1). Turan et al. (2019) draw on Goffman's (1963) work on stigma, and Crenshaw's (1989) seminal writing on 'intersectionality', to explore how stigmatized identities intersect but are rarely analysed through this lens. Crenshaw argues that the intersecting identities of race, gender, sexuality, disability, class and other characteristics and attributes compound and contribute to distinct and elevated levels of discrimination, harm and oppression.

When thinking about young survivors of childhood sexual violence, the concept of 'intersectional stigma' can be helpful. 'Adulthood' – the system, and accompanying structures, that prioritise adults as opposed to children and young people – is now commonly acknowledged as a barrier to recognising the rights of children and young people (Corney et al., 2022; Liebel & Meade, 2023; Wall, 2022). As with other 'isms', adulthood leads to prejudice or discrimination, in this context, against children and young people owing to their age. When thinking about participation, this means that children and young people's capacities to make meaningful decisions are questioned and their perspectives not taken seriously.

In research with older survivors of intimate partner and sexual violence, Crockett et al. (2018) draw attention to the consequence of 'ageism', sexism and other factors that lead to prejudice towards survivors of violence over the age of 50. In doing so they point to 'intersectional stigma', which interestingly, does not seem to have been examined in the same way for those survivors of violence that are impacted by 'adulthood'. Yet, the identity of a 'child' is a key feature of discrimination for victim-survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

In thinking about the participation rights of young survivors, in addition to their age, societal attitudes continue to stigmatise victims and survivors (Nielsen, 2016). Nielsen (2016) argues that victims of sexual abuse are doubly harmed – sexually and socially. 'Young survivors' as a group then are at an intersection straddling, at minimum, two oppressed categories, being both 'children and young people' and 'victims/survivors' and, as intersectionality theory predicts, this combination compounds their marginalisation and frequently leads to their exclusion from opportunities to exercise voice, agency and influence.

2.3. Risk and uncertainty

As noted above, understandably, professionals who have a responsibility to protect young survivors express concerns about inviting them into participatory processes and activities, particularly those that involve group-based, collective participation. They may worry that engagement may cause distress and that it may 'trigger' young people, or exasperate stigma and other forms of harm (Cody et al., 2022a; Frost, 2019; Soares & Cody, 2023a). Such outcomes may not only be significant for young people and their families, but may also lead to the risk of legal retaliation, liability and reputational risks or other negative outcomes for the organisations and individual professionals involved.

Munro (2019), in discussing the child protection sector in general, explores what she views as a culture shift from working with 'uncertainty' to that of 'managing risk'. Munro emphasises that risk is not the same as uncertainty. She argues that the term 'risk' is only ever equated with negative outcomes, and that as 'risk' has replaced 'uncertainty', we often disregard the potential for positive outcomes that may come with uncertainty. As part of this shift, we now see alongside this focus on risk, a 'risk of blame' which is increasingly placed on individual practitioners. This in turn means that many individuals, and organisations, wish to avoid blame and by doing so, 'displace the risk' elsewhere. This means that instead of facing the inherent uncertainties associated with engaging young survivors in group-based participatory work, the risk shifts and instead we miss out on hearing directly from this group.

There is also a risk of engaging survivors but 'not doing it right'. Given the many criticisms that occur of work that is presented as 'participatory' – that it is 'tokenistic', paternalistic or doesn't go far enough – it is no wonder that imitating such processes bring with them a potential critique. However, there is growing recognition of the fact that, as Lundy writes, 'tokenism is sometimes a start' and 'not as wrong as not starting at all' (Lundy, 2018, p. 15). Embedding healthy learning cultures that view participation as a journey, not a destination and mistakes as learning opportunities, enables safe and constructive reflection and allows organisations and individuals to improve their practice. In the absence of such 'error-friendly' cultures, organisations may prefer inaction over not doing participation 'well enough' and risk scrutiny. While, of course, any

engagement should be planned and supported with the greatest of care and consideration, we are also reminded of Judith Herman's words; that as survivors are rarely asked what could make things right for them, or what could be done differently, just listening turns out to be, in Herman's words, 'a radical act' (Herman, 2023, p. 4).

When ambiguous agency, intersectional stigma and risk aversion coalesce, paternalistic notions of child protection tend to emerge that curtail the scope for genuine opportunities for child and youth participation for young survivors. These notions however overemphasise vulnerability and underestimate children and young people's resilience and competence.

3. What is changing now?

In 2024, it feels as if we are at an important point in time for young survivors' participation rights. As although 30 years ago the UNCRC recognised the right for all children to be heard, changing discourses appear to be contributing to renewed commitments to listening to, learning from, and working with, young survivors of childhood sexual violence. Over the last decade, new approaches and agendas to advancing child rights, addressing trauma and broadening knowledge creation are permeating through the wider international child protection sector and in their wake widening opportunities for young survivors' participation. In this next section, we focus on three key changes that, taken together, we feel are turning the tide. These are interlinked and include: the questioning of dominant research paradigms, systems of knowledge-generation and the growing decolonising movement; the witnessing of youth-led and survivor-led activism; and the mainstreaming of trauma-informed principles and approaches.

3.1. Who is an expert?

Within, and outside of, academia there has been growing discussion in response to the question 'whose knowledge counts?' (Rose & Kalathil, 2019). In recent years there has been wider acknowledgement of the importance of lived, situated and contextual knowledge. For example, today, participatory research that is led, or co-led by those with lived experience is viewed as a legitimate alternative to, or complimentary feature of, traditional research (Burns et al., 2021). Despite these advances, a global scoping review exploring the role of children and young people in sexual violence research showed that youth participatory involvement in processes of knowledge generation remains limited (Bovarnick et al., 2018). Highly participatory or youth-led sexual violence studies, constitute the exception, rather than the norm.

Coupled with this need to expand our understanding of issues in different ways, the focus on decolonisation in the child rights sector, partly driven by an increasing recognition and accommodation of heterogeneous "childhoods" within the interdisciplinary field of global childhood studies over past decades (see Twum-Danso, 2012), and more broadly across institutes and organisations, strengthens the argument for participatory approaches. Blanchet-Cohen et al., (2023) in exploring decolonisation, examine how these processes can help to (re)imagine children's participatory rights. A renewed focus on learning from local practices and the importance of understanding concepts of health, wellbeing, trauma and healing from diverse perspectives are critical in this field.

3.2. Youth-led and survivor-led activism

Youth activism has caught the world's attention. Youth-led action has been central in initiating a number of high profile social movements such as climate change and gun control (Nishiyama, 2020). Other social issues, such as child marriage – that are underpinned by deeply engrained social and gender norms that revolve around sexuality, age and gender inequalities – have also been competently tackled through child-led activism (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2022). In addition, we are witnessing

an unprecedented surge in survivor-led movements including the recent #MeToo global social movement. In addition, initiatives such as the Brave Movement, a survivor-centred global movement fighting to end childhood sexual violence, have been successful at mobilising political action and significantly raising the profile of sexual violence on global agendas, as witnessed at the 2022 G7 summit in Germany (Brave Movement, n. d).

3.3. Trauma-informed practice

While many scholars argue that trauma theory is Eurocentric and that there is a need to decolonize trauma theory in order to understand local knowledge systems surrounding suffering and healing (Andermahr, 2015), the prominence of trauma-informed language is evident throughout this field. We acknowledge that, as Clarke (2016) notes, a focus on the 'individual', and preoccupation with medicalised interventions in the name of 'trauma' can be problematic and pathologising. However, in discussing 'trauma' here, we refer to an understanding of trauma that recognises and acknowledges harm and situates that harm within broader structures of historical and contemporary inequality, thereby leaning on feminist and critical psychology-informed approaches that contextualise trauma as part of wider patriarchal and structural forms of subordination (see Herman, 1997; Martín-Baró, 1994; Pederson, 2019).

As with other theoretical frameworks, such as intersectionality, that are enjoying a resurgence of interest both inside and outside of academia, the language of 'trauma-informed' has become ubiquitous in work with young survivors. Through drawing on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014) principles of a trauma-informed approach – which include an emphasis on collaboration, mutuality, peer support, voice and empowerment – there is a strong rationale for promoting both the individual and collective participation rights of young survivors of childhood sexual violence. As Herman's original work on trauma emphasised, 'if traumatic disorders are afflictions of the powerless then empowerment must be a central principle of recovery' (2023, p.2). Recent learning has highlighted the myriad potential benefits that may arise for young survivors who are involved in participatory group-work (see for example: Bovarnick & Cody, 2020; Cody & Soares, 2023a; Hamilton et al., 2019; Young Researchers' Advisory Panel, 2021). Whilst children have a human right to participate, and there is no need to justify why their input and ideas are important (Lansdown, 2020; Willow, 2021) these new agendas provide a clear argument for the importance of creating safe and respectful participation opportunities for young survivors of childhood sexual violence.

4. The 'Our Voices' Programme

Our colleagues at the Safer Young Lives Research Centre at the University of Bedfordshire have been pioneers in advancing the participation rights of young survivors of childhood sexual violence in the UK (see for example Beckett & Warrington, 2015; Hamilton et al., 2019; Pearce, 2010; Warrington, 2013). Through the 'Our Voices' programme of work, which started in 2013, we have built on these strong foundations to expand our understanding and experience of initiating and supporting participatory practice and initiatives with groups of young survivors in other regions of the world. Over the last decade, we have supported opportunities for young people, including young survivors, to come together in groups to discuss, analyse, share, plan, design and develop actions and outputs related to addressing childhood sexual violence. We have worked with children, young people and our partner organisations in Albania, Bulgaria, Kenya, Moldova, the Netherlands, Romania, Serbia, Uganda and the UK. We have also been supported by a group of young advisors through our research Centre's Young Researchers' Advisory Panel (YRAP). Their passion for addressing sexual violence, and their analysis of, and interest in, the relationship between protection and

participation rights and the value of peer support for young survivors, has also influenced and informed the development of this programme of work (see Hamilton et al., 2019; Young Researchers' Advisory Panel, 2021).

4.1. Projects, activities and the young people involved

The projects and strands that have developed under this programme of work have built upon one another. In many cases new activities were initiated due to gaps and needs that were identified and expressed by young people and the practitioners we collaborated with.

Table 1 summarises the key details of the projects, and specific strands of work within these, that are drawn on in this discussion paper.

Our approach to working with particular age groups of young people encompassed conceptual, ethical and practical dimensions that we wish to briefly outline. In all of our projects and activities we have accessed children and young people through partner organisations. The majority of these have been specialist frontline services that have supported young survivors of different forms of childhood sexual violence. Some of these services have been for those under the age of 18, others particularly those offering longer term 'reintegration' support, have straddled children and women's service provision.

In working with young survivors, many of these services adopt what we might call a "transitional safeguarding" approach recognising that children and young people's needs do not suddenly stop when they reach adulthood (Holmes, 2022). This may be especially true for survivors of childhood sexual violence who may require support well into adulthood. Given that binary notions of 'childhood' and 'adulthood' are contested, we deemed it ethically problematic to deny young people opportunities to engage in participatory initiatives purely based on their age. Especially given that 'ageing out' of youth participatory initiatives can be mired in anxiety and uncertainty for some young people (Bovarnick et al., 2018), enabling youth participation along more flexible age categories felt appropriate for the programme of work. For ethical and pragmatic reasons linked to our recruitment criteria and risk assessment processes (discussed in more detail in section 5.2.) most of our projects primarily targeted children and young people at a later recovery stage who were therefore typically older. On a practical and methodological level, working with mixed age groups comprising youth with different levels of participatory experience enabled us to integrate elements of peer mentoring and peer support into our programme. A more detailed discussion of this can be found elsewhere (Cody et al., 2022b). Engaging in consecutive projects provided a sense of continuity and sustainability, particularly when young people were able to inform new projects and were subsequently part of their implementation. This enhanced their sense of agency while simultaneously promoting accountability and sustainability of previous efforts.

4.2. Data

Throughout this programme of work, we collected monitoring and evaluation data in addition to primary data gleaned from the more traditional research strands of this programme. Whilst for each individual strand we have implemented a robust analysis and write up of the data generated, for the purposes of this discussion paper, two of the authors discussed at length, what the key themes were that ran through this programme of work. Through returning to our previous publications and project documentation, this discussion paper therefore presents what we feel has helped us to initiate, explore and manage the uncertainties that come with collective participatory work exploring childhood sexual violence with young survivors in these different contexts. We illustrate our reflections through sharing quotes from programme participants and partners involved in the different activities.

5. Key themes - what has helped us to realise young survivors' rights to participation and protection?

In initiating activities that involve young survivors of childhood sexual violence, there are a number of pieces to consider and processes to put in place to create an environment that 'protects' young survivors as they participate. Here, we focus on three aspects that have helped us achieve a rights-based approach in this work: forming the right partnerships; weighing up the potential risks and benefits; and putting in place 'scaffolding' and support for all involved.

5.1. Forming the right partnerships

As a team of researchers, based within an academic centre, our partnerships with local specialist services that directly support young survivors of sexual violence are what makes this work 'work'. Over the years, we have benefited greatly from our relationships with our local service partners and have valued their care, expertise, insights, skills and thoughtfulness. The fact that these services have existing relationships with the young people we have worked with means they can adequately support young people as they participate. These foundational relationships of trust between young people and practitioners are critical in any engagement with those who have experienced childhood sexual violence (Frost, 2019; Lefevre et al., 2019; Pearce, 2009). Trust is also central when seeking to start new, group-based work (Bovarnick and Cody, 2020). Our local partners have provided an ongoing sense of consistency and presence for young people, and as noted below, are essential in ensuring that young people can access any support that is required both during and after projects end. In addition, they have that critical contextual knowledge regarding the sensitivities associated with work addressing sexual violence. This local knowledge and understanding is essential when planning initiatives that consider taboo or sensitive topics such as childhood sexual violence. We have also found that, when engaging in advocacy and campaigning with young people, finding the 'right partner' also means finding those partners who themselves command influence nationally and can support young survivors to elevate their work by connecting them to the right people and spaces (Bovarnick and Cody, 2020).

These elements can enable academic partners, such as ourselves, to engage and feel confident and secure in initiating this work, knowing that young people will be supported. Bovarnick and Meshi (2023), in a recent blog discussing the benefits of research-practice partnerships to support children and young people's safe involvement in child sexual abuse research, outline how such partnerships can also add value to the local service partners involved. They note that such collaborations can provide the vital space for discussion, reflection and learning, something that is challenging for busy practitioners whose focus is often on crisis intervention. The authors also share how such partnerships can support local services to enhance their knowledge and skills surrounding ethics, research and participatory methods which can further strengthen local services' processes and capacities.

5.2. Weighing up the potential risks and benefits involved

All children and young people have the right to be heard yet, often in research studies or other initiatives, there may be specific criteria put in place and decisions to be made regarding *which* young survivors should be invited to engage in different initiatives and activities. Through our work we have explored with our partners, and the young people we have collaborated with, how such decisions are made, who is involved, and what is helpful to think about when inviting young survivors to engage in different types of initiatives.

For example, in the Our Voices Peer Support Study (strand 5), we

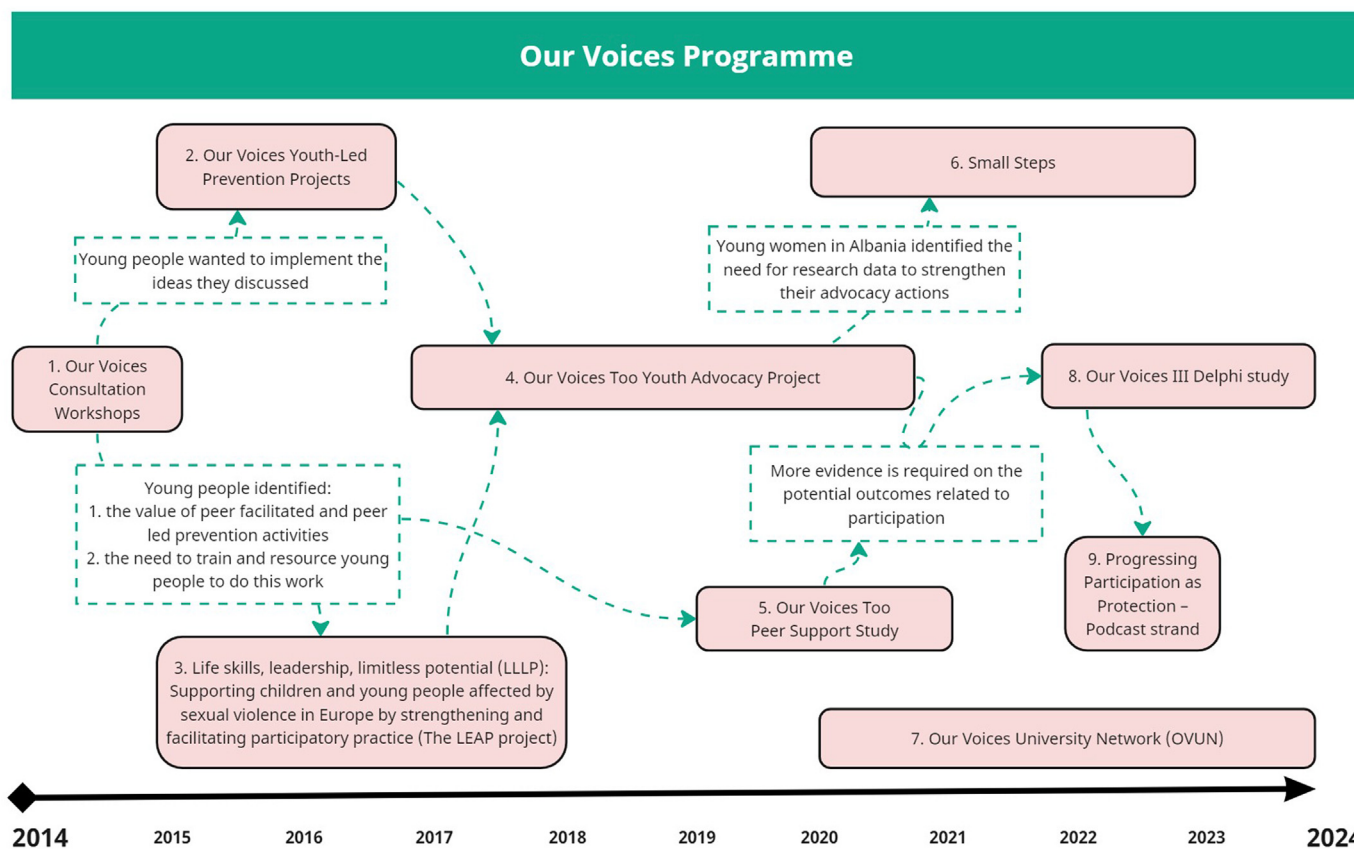


Diagram 1. Attempts to illustrate how these projects and activities evolved and were informed and shaped through the gaps and interests identified by young people and the findings and recommendations from these different strands.

Table 1
Different projects and strands of the ‘Our Voices’ programme that are referred to in this discussion paper.

| Project/strand | Purpose | Children and young people and professionals involved | Countries | Main activities | Sources for further information |
|--|--|--|---|---|--|
| 1. Our Voices Consultation (2014) | To understand: what young people felt were the issues around child sexual violence in their local areas; what they felt needed to happen to prevent sexual violence; how young people could be involved in these actions and; what would help or hinder young people's engagement in prevention efforts. | 47 children and young people (aged between 11 and 25) supported by seven partner organisations. | Albania, Bulgaria and England | The seven groups of children and young people each took part in a series of five consultation workshops. | See Cody, 2017b |
| 2. Our Voices Youth Led Prevention Projects (2015–2016) | To enable groups who took part in the Our Voices Consultation Workshops to develop and implement small scale projects based on the discussions held in the earlier workshops. | 39 children and young people (aged between 15 and 30) supported by four partner organisations. | Albania, Bulgaria and England | Each group was provided with a small amount of funds to develop youth-led awareness raising activities in their local communities. This led to the production of films, photography and poster campaigns and other activities. | See Bovarnick & D'Arcy, 2018 |
| 3. Life skills, leadership, limitless potential (LLL): Supporting children and young people affected by sexual violence in Europe by strengthening and facilitating participatory practice (The LEAP project) (2016–2018) | To build capacity of specialist support services: to listen to, better support, respect and protect children and young people affected by sexual violence. To enable children and young people affected by sexual violence to support and advocate for other | 88 professionals from specialist sexual violence support services took part in training on participation and sexual violence. 15 Youth Facilitators, supported by four partner organisations, were trained to co-deliver the LLLP programme. | Bulgaria, Netherlands, Romania and the UK | Professionals were trained and joined communities of practice to continue their learning and reflection. Youth Facilitators were trained to co-deliver the LLLP programme to other children and young people. The 12 week programme included sessions on children's | See Cody & D'Arcy, 2018 ; Billinghurst, 2017 |

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Table 1 (continued)

| Project/strand | Purpose | Children and young people and professionals involved | Countries | Main activities | Sources for further information |
|--|--|--|---|---|---|
| | children and young people and develop and influence prevention initiatives. | Over 40 children and young people who had experienced, or were at risk of experiencing, sexual violence took part in the LLLP programme. | | rights, participation, sexual violence, critical thinking, power, communication and listening skills, conflict resolution, goal setting, debating etc. Young people went on to develop a number of prevention resources including: a film, an animation, a training resource pack, photo exhibitions and an online journal which were shared with other young people and professionals. | |
| 4. Our Voices Too Youth Advocacy Project (2017–2020) | To train a group of young people affected by sexual violence to become young advocates and develop youth-led advocacy projects designed to influence change in response to sexual violence in their local contexts. | 15 young women (aged between 18 and 26) supported by three partner organisations, | Albania, Moldova and Serbia | The young women took part in a series of workshops which sought to build a 'safe space', develop knowledge and understanding around sexual violence, child rights, participation and advocacy. The three groups of young women went on to develop their own youth-led campaigns to address childhood sexual violence. They designed and led the production of films, posters, workshops for police, meetings with key stakeholders and a postcard campaign. | See Bovarnick & Cody, 2020 ; Warrington, 2020 |
| 5. Our Voices Too Peer Support Study (2019–2020) | This study was designed to learn more about peer support for young people impacted by sexual violence and how such initiatives work in practice. | 25 participants, including young survivors who were involved in providing peer support, attached to 12 different organisations took part in the study. | Europe and North America | Interviews | See Cody et al., 2022a ; Cody et al., 2022b |
| 6. Small Steps (2020–2022) | The "Small Steps" youth-led participatory action research project gathered evidence on young survivors' experiences of accessing support and justice in relation to sexual violence and trafficking with the aim to promote child-friendly and victim-centred systems in Albania. | 6 young women (aged between 17 and 26) | Albania | Young women were supported to lead a youth participatory action research project. Through 18 peer interviews, the young researchers elicited youth perspectives on accessing support and justice in Albania following sexual victimisation. The research findings were disseminated nationally and internationally. A young survivor-led monitoring panel was established to guide the development of victim-centred and child-friendly systems. | See Small Steps Collaboration, 2022 |
| 7. The Our Voices PhD Forum of the Our Voices University Network (OVUN) (2020–2023) | The OVUN was established to facilitate links between academics around the world in order to develop and share knowledge about the prevention of and response to child sexual abuse and exploitation. The PhD forum evolved as part of OVUN as it was recognised that those undertaking doctoral studies could benefit from a space to come together to | 22 students were part of the forum | Predominantly students studying at UK Universities. | 12 x 2-hour online sessions. An overview of learning and reflections from the forum was published and group members collaborated on a conference abstract to share their learning. | See Soares & Cody, 2023b |

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Table 1 (continued)

| Project/strand | Purpose | Children and young people and professionals involved | Countries | Main activities | Sources for further information |
|---|--|---|--|--|---|
| | share knowledge and discuss key issues. | | | | |
| 8. Our Voices III Delphi study (2022–2023) | To generate consensus on the potential outcomes associated with adopting a participatory approach with children and young people with lived experience of child sexual abuse and exploitation. | 58 research participants including practitioners, academics, adult survivor advocates and young survivors (n = 23) (aged between 16 and 30) supported by seven partner organisations. | Young experts were based in Albania, Guyana, Kenya, Philippines, Serbia, Uganda, Zimbabwe, UK. | Participants took part in an online questionnaire followed by focus group discussions. Six of the young experts also contributed to the development of a comic to illustrate research findings. | See Cody & Soares, 2023a, 2023c, 2023b, 2023d; Soares and Cody, 2023a |
| 9. Progressing Participation as Protection – Podcast strand (2022) | The aims of this strand of work were to reflect, with YRAP, on the interim findings of the Delphi study - and YRAP's own work in the area of participation and protection - and to co-develop a series of workshops for other groups of young people who had experience of sexual violence and participating in different projects. The aim of the workshops were to generate further insights into the relationship between participation and protection. | 19 young people (aged 17–25) supported by two partner organisations. | Kenya and Uganda (and YRAP input in UK) | YRAP co-designed the workshops and the groups in Kenya and Uganda took part in the six participatory workshops that were designed. A podcast bringing together reflections from the groups was shared with key organisations in the field. | See Young Researchers' Advisory Panel, 2021; Cody et al. (forthcoming); Warrington et al., 2024 |

found different approaches were taken by services when it came to identifying whether they felt that survivors of sexual violence were 'ready' to take on formal roles as 'peer supporters', offering support to other young survivors ([Cody et al., 2022b](#)). The practitioners we interviewed discussed three elements they were looking for when recruiting survivors to take on the role of either a peer supporter or peer mentor. They conveyed how they often wished to know whether the individual: had accessed support or therapy for their experiences of abuse and harm; had some 'distance' from their experiences and; was willing and able to draw on their own past experiences and to 'hear' the experiences of others. Yet, during these discussions it was also acknowledged that recovery is not linear, which means it can be challenging for a professional, or a young survivor, to always know when they may be 'ready' to engage in such work.

In the Our Voices Youth Advocacy Project (strand 4), we initiated a project that enabled young female survivors of sexual violence in Eastern Europe to lead their own youth advocacy activities ([Bovarnick and Cody, 2020](#)), again this concept of 'readiness' was debated. In one project meeting, practitioners from a partner organisation talked about how they felt that young survivors needed to be emotionally 'stable' enough to take part in these types of participatory initiatives. Yet, equating 'readiness' to participate with 'emotional stability' was challenged by one of the youth advocates who was part of the project and in attendance. This highlighted that professional perspectives can be at odds with young people's own assessment of how vulnerability and resilience intersect. Here, the young person suggested that the notion of 'emotional stability', in the aftermath of sexual violence, can be mired in contradictions:

'it's normal not to be emotionally stable when you experience the things you did. I don't know any survivor that is emotionally stable. I have anxiety, I have a problem with big groups, I have a problem with public speaking, I have a problem with strangers touching me ... [but] I can be ok, I'm emotionally stable.' (Youth advocate, Serbia)

The quote illustrates that a young survivor's emotional state, rather than being static, can fluctuate as part of a non-linear recovery trajectory that can include set-backs. Over the years, we have witnessed repeatedly

how young people's ability to cope with difficult topics and potential 'triggers' during group work was individual and variable and moreover hinged significantly on what else was going on in participants' lives. In framing 'emotional stability' as an unrealistic expectation and simultaneously recognising the listed difficulties as normal responses to sexual harm, the youth advocate invites us to rethink thresholds for participation. Similar to how the quote challenges a narrow and oversimplified understanding of mental health and well-being following childhood sexual violence, there is merit in questioning the usefulness of constructing 'emotional stability' versus 'emotional instability' in binary terms, considering its potential for perpetuating survivor stigma. If we take the quote's central message to be that vulnerability can coincide with resilience, we can detect an inherent plea for a more nuanced and contextual understanding of young people's 'readiness' and capacity to participate. The way we, as professionals, conceptualise and conduct risk assessments is not only an expression of our ability and willingness to manage the uncertainties associated with this work, it also constitutes an act of contouring the spaces in which children can exert their participation rights.

In our most recent international research study, the Our Voices III Delphi study (strand 8), which aimed to generate consensus on the potential outcomes associated with adopting a participatory approach with children and young people with lived experience of child sexual abuse and exploitation, participants also questioned the idea of 'readiness'. Participants emphasised that it wasn't just about a practitioner knowing whether a young person was psychologically 'ready' to take part. They emphasised the importance of checking whether a young person was in the 'right space' and this meant considering what was happening not only in relation to their engagement with the sexual violence-related service provision, but also outside of that, in their day-to-day lives ([Cody & Soares, 2023b](#)). Individual's changing life circumstances, related to housing, education and employment, custody arrangements and personal relationships, can significantly impact on a young person's capacity to engage in this work.

In this study, there was agreement that contextual risk and needs assessment processes could be helpful as part of understanding whether

young survivors were in the 'right space'. However, it was also emphasised that such processes should not be overly bureaucratic but proportional and in line with the 'ask' of the activity (Cody & Soares, 2023b). Participants felt that these discussions should be strength-based and collaborative in nature. It was stressed that young survivors should be part of these discussions so they could have the opportunity to provide their own perspectives and illustrate the resources and attributes they felt would be important in helping them to safely engage. One participant shared that without this perspective, it was likely that young survivors would always be viewed as 'at risk':

"Young people don't have an opportunity to defend themselves, you know, against people saying, 'well, you're at risk and that's it'." (Professional Research Participant, UK)

Yet, because of the lack of control young survivors have experienced due to the abuse and exploitation, young people themselves may question their own capacity to make 'good' decisions regarding their engagement. One young person who collaborated in 'Small Steps', a youth participatory action research project (strand 6), shared that young people may experience difficulties in determining what serves their best interest after experiences of abuse:

"When someone is traumatised, how can they know what's best for them? The young person may not know." (Young Researcher, Albania)

In the aftermath of sexual violence therefore, young people may need guidance from adults and support to evaluate their options and to make independent choices about their involvement. Part of making an informed decision means considering the full gamut of outcomes, the potential benefits as well as the potential risks. As we explored earlier, if we focus narrowly on risk rather than uncertainty, we may overlook the potential for positive change. In the Progressing Participation as Protection Project (strand 9) young survivors in Kenya and Uganda spoke eloquently about how participating in different initiatives and actions had been beneficial for them with regards to: promoting their self-worth; helping professionals understand their problems and therefore better respond to their circumstances and needs; opening up new opportunities and; building positive relationships with others in the community (Cody et al., forthcoming). In the Our Voices III Delphi study (strand 8), participants were clear that the potential benefits should be calculated into decision-making surrounding young survivors' participation:

"What does it really mean to be "ready"? I think there should probably be some mechanisms in place to ensure the emotional and physical safety of the young people participating, but I could also see some young people not being "ready" per se but still getting therapeutic benefits from participating – maybe that is necessary in order to get them "ready". (Professional Research Participant, USA)

"Often where it does harm, the benefits outweigh the harm, and I think that's what needs to be looked at." (Professional Research Participant, UK)

A key message from this study was that the potential for risk should not automatically lead to withholding individual or collective participatory opportunities for young survivors. Instead, a recognition of these risks should inform how we communicate and present opportunities to young survivors and shape how sessions and activities are planned, facilitated and supported (see Cody & Soares, 2023c).

5.3. Putting in place 'scaffolding' and support for all involved

As there is the potential for engagement in participatory activities to 'trigger', 're-traumatise' or cause other forms of distress for young survivors (Soares and Cody, 2023a), it is important to not only discuss this with young people themselves and be very open about this, but also as professionals, prepare for this. As one of our research participants

recently shared, it is important that we: are honest about the potential of 'doing harm'; do our best to create an environment that mitigates harm; and be prepared to act if harm does occur:

"Can we say we will do no harm or can we say we will, we will set up an environment that is the least likely to do harm. And if harm is caused, we'll have a process, a kind of ethical structure and that we're going to spell out ethical group-work, ethical participation. And then with the structures and processes we have in place ... [and] if harm occurs on our watch, that we have a robust and immediately responsive process for addressing it." (Professional Research Participant, UK)

This is therefore another reason for why partnerships with local specialist services are critical as they can enable wrap around support for the young people who engage in these projects and initiatives. Over the years, we have, where possible, included a budget line in our projects for partners to use to pay for any additional support that might be required for young people engaged in these projects. Such funding enables organisations to provide high quality wraparound support and to flexibly respond to any additional therapeutic or other support needs that are identified during this work.

In addition, we recognise the stress and anxiety that facilitating such work can have on facilitators themselves. Due to the uncertainty and sometimes 'new' ways of working, facilitators can find facilitating or supporting group-based participatory work challenging and they may require more intensive support and supervision. Therefore, again having a budget for facilitators to access any additional support needed is also helpful.

Our recent Our Voices III Delphi study (strand 8) also drew attention to the importance of other types of support to help 'scaffold' young people when engaging in participatory initiatives. For example, participants drew attention to the importance of supporting young people to develop or learn new skills to help them to participate:

"I think it's vital that young people are shown HOW to have their voices heard so this can be carried on in different parts of their lives." (Professional Research Participant, UK)

It was also highlighted that even if young people are involved in projects that aim to address sexual violence, they need to be supported to help them know how to communicate with others what they have gained from this work, in ways that are not exposing:

"This requires helping them have language for what they accomplished and know how to speak about it in an interview and put it on a resume. It is important they learn how to do this without sharing that they were clients as well – they don't need to share their stories to share this work." (Professional Research Participant, USA)

As was shared early on, during the original Our Voices Consultation Workshops (strand 1), and in our most recent research (strand 8), even where young people are engaged in projects or campaigns to improve rights and protection for other children and young people, these actions may still be viewed in a negative light by friends, family and community:

"Albanian mentality is a challenge, as in villages or rural areas people do not talk about sex. For example a girl can be stigmatised if she gets involved in an information session about sexual violence, because we don't talk about sex, and also our society thinks that it is always the victim's fault." (Youth Advisor from Albania)

"Saying [you're] a volunteer is good but when it's a sexual topic it can be seen

in a negative way." (Youth Advisor from England)

"For some people this work can be quite exposing, particularly in their personal lives ... I speak as someone in the UK, in a Western country. But I'm also thinking about young people in societies where there's [a greater]

element of shame associated with sexual abuse. And I'm also speaking as a young man who experienced sexual abuse as a boy. And, you know, it can feel very exposing actually.' (Professional Research Participant, UK)

This means, as we explore below, we need to be more creative in how this work is framed and articulated and ensure that young people are supported to think carefully about how they can communicate their involvement, particularly if we want to maximise benefits for them as individuals.

6. Moving forward: addressing the barriers

As we reflect on at the beginning of this paper, we are at an exciting point of time when it comes to realising the participation rights of young survivors of childhood sexual violence. There is increasing recognition of both the protective dimensions of participatory approaches (Hamilton et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2023; Warrington & Larkins, 2019) and the potential for collective action to improve responses to, and opportunities for enabling the individual participation rights of, children and young people in the future (Mitchell et al., 2023). As spaces and resources open up to support this work, it is an opportune moment to contemplate what else needs to be considered. Although it is important to learn from previous work, we should not simply be doing 'more of the same'. Instead, we need to start to creatively address, and find solutions for, some of the pervasive barriers that continue to limit the potential changes that the collective participation of young survivors can foster (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Veitch & Cody, 2023). This final section then reflects on some of the broader learning identified at the start of the discussion paper, situates lessons from this programme of work within this, and underscores what we believe are some of the key barriers that do not just impede the initial engagement of young survivors, but limits how their voices, ideas and inputs influence wider change.

6.1. Tackling structural and systemic barriers

As Lundy (2007) contends, 'voice is not enough', we also need to consider space, audience and influence when thinking about meaningful child and youth participation. Youth activists today, particularly in areas such as climate justice and education, are increasingly claiming 'space' and 'voice', yet their realm of influence still very much hinges on adult 'audiences' endorsing their ideas and demands. McMellon and Tisdall (2020) in reflecting on children and young people's participation rights over the last three decades note that 'influence' continues to be one of the most challenging areas to enact.

The impact of intersectional stigma and epistemic injustice means that young survivors who are seeking to address childhood sexual violence may face elevated barriers when it comes to accessing 'audiences' and 'influencing'. In the Our Voices Youth Led Prevention Projects (strand 2) for example, young people reported that at dissemination events they were sometimes met with rudeness or hostility. As part of the Our Voices Too Youth Advocacy Project (strand 5), this was also an issue, particularly for the young women in Albania. When delivering their advocacy messages, drawing attention to problematic treatment experienced by young survivors in the law enforcement and the criminal justice system, the group in Albania reported instances where they felt dismissed and not taken seriously by professional audiences. As mentioned previously, biases towards young survivors can coalesce and delegitimise youth activism on the issue of childhood sexual violence. In this example, however, the youth advocates in Albania refused to accept the outcome and identified strategies to address their 'legitimacy problem' (see diagram 1 illustrating how these youth advocates shaped and informed a subsequent project). Through Small Steps (strand 6), they conducted peer research on young survivors' perspectives on seeking support and justice with the aim to evidence common challenges and inform the

development of more child-friendly victim protection and criminal justice systems in Albania (Small Steps Collaboration, 2022).

The pervasiveness of structural barriers impacting on the outcomes of participation was also acknowledged by participants in our recent Delphi study (strand 8) (Cody & Soares, 2023d). Aligning with others' assessments (Warrington & Brodie, 2018), participants shared how organisational barriers, such as the lack of commitment to participation within leadership, can limit the potential changes young people may seek to achieve. They reflected on the reality that barriers within child protection, social care, health and criminal justice systems and processes meant that even if children and young people's views were captured, they may not be incorporated. Again, these findings echo those of others researching child participation within child welfare agencies (McCafferty & Garcia, 2023). Social norms surrounding the role of children and young people in society, and silence and stigma associated with child sexual abuse, were also identified as ultimately impacting on the potential impact of young survivors' engagement. Therefore, even if we see more commitment and financial support to enable participatory processes which engage young survivors, societal attitudes, together with wider systems and structures need to simultaneously be addressed.

As highlighted above, the 'ambiguous agency' of young survivors and the intersectional stigma they may experience, requires professionals, both those currently working with children and young people and future generations of practitioners and researchers, to revisit their own understandings, beliefs and values and consider how open they are to be challenged. Part of this work includes continuing to contest how young survivors are described, imagined and 'othered' and their experiences sensationalised by many sections of society. As Ruiz-Casares et al. (2017) reflect, it is critical to stop seeing children and young people who have experienced harm only as 'victims' and instead recognise them as rights-holders. Organisations must also acknowledge stigma as a central structural barrier and be creative in how this is approached in order to minimise negative impacts on young people involved in this work.

6.2. Being creative with how young survivors are identified and involved

In today's environment where, survivor-led movements are gaining visible momentum internationally and, more funds for survivor-led action are developing, a pertinent question remains, is identifying publicly as a 'survivor' necessary?

Public identity disclosure has been an ongoing challenge in many of the projects we have described in this paper. Young survivors may, understandably, wish to be acknowledged and credited for their contributions but may fear the consequences of being associated with such work. In addition, in the current environment, more 'weight' or 'credibility' may come from labelling young people involved as having 'lived experience' or as 'survivors'. Yet, not everyone wishes to be identified as such.

Identifying publicly as a survivor of childhood sexual violence is a contextual choice mired in myriad external factors. These experiences were reflected in our recent Our Voices III Delphi study (strand 8) where participants identified a number of factors and situations that young people may need to consider. Whilst ultimately, this is a personal choice, young people may benefit from working with a supportive adult to think through the implications, both now and in the future, of being identified as a survivor (see Cody & Soares, 2023c). Moving forward, we need to be more creative and flexible, consider a range of different options, and provide more space to discuss with young people involved how they wish to be acknowledged and compensated for their time and expertise. As has been recognised by others, when collaborating with young survivors to create knowledge, we also need to think carefully about ownership and authorship of that work (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020).

Practitioners and researchers need to consider the different types and levels of engagement and not presume that young survivors' will all wish to, or can, engage in every aspect of a project, study or campaign

(Bovarnick et al., 2018). As has been underscored by others, decisions need to be informed by young people themselves, taking account of the context and 'societal framework' (Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017). As a sector we should also be conscious of the potential for 'care exploitation' which can occur when those who care deeply, often due to personal connections with an issue, are constantly called upon to aid in activism and movement building (McKittrick-Sweitzer, 2024).

6.3. Supporting practitioners and researchers

Wall (2022) writes that, unlike other disadvantaged groups and forms of discrimination, overcoming adultism requires active contribution from adults. Young survivors may need support and solidarity from adult allies to project their voices into adult spheres of power so their perspectives can affect change. This therefore requires intergenerational dialogue and collaboration (Wyness, 2013; Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017; Warrington & Larkins, 2019).

Through this programme, we have had the privilege of working with a number of excellent frontline practitioners. These practitioners typically have years of experience and are highly skilled at supporting young survivors of childhood sexual violence. However, facilitating opportunities for collective decision making in groups, particularly when it involves elements of research or advocacy, can feel very different and requires a different set of skills (Bovarnick and Cody, 2020). Our recent Our Voices III Delphi study (strand 8) highlighted just how central facilitators are in the context of collective participatory group-work with young survivors (Cody and Soares, 2023a). Participants expressed that the majority of potential risks associated with this work could be mitigated by strong facilitation by experienced and confident professionals. It is evident therefore that if we want to engage young survivors in safe and meaningful ways – and reduce associated risks – then the key to this centres around preparing and supporting those initiating, facilitating or accompanying this work. This aligns with calls from other scholars who have noted the importance of raising awareness among professionals of the benefits and challenges of participation and providing training and support to strengthen capacities to not only facilitate this work, but also to 'hold' the risks involved (Ruiz-Casares et al., 2017; Warrington & Brodie, 2018). Through the LEAP project (strand 3) training and support was developed for practitioners specifically around participation rights for young survivors (see Cody & D'Arcy, 2018; Billinghamurst, 2017). Having access to support and training is not however only useful for practitioners, but also practitioner-researchers and 'traditional' researchers wishing to employ participatory approaches in their work.

As part of the Our Voices University Network (strand 7), we supported a PhD forum for doctoral students researching the issue of childhood sexual violence. A number of these students are employing elements of participatory practice in their research. During the forum sessions, participants reflected on the lack of relevant training, formal supervision and peer-to-peer support available to help them with the 'messiness' and uncertainties they were having to navigate in their research with young people (Cody & Soares, 2023b). Participatory research and practice in this field can be tricky, experimental and uncertain and it can take time to traverse. Therefore, if as a sector we are promoting opportunities for young survivors of childhood sexual violence to collectively identify and analyse issues and shape responses, then training, support and peer learning opportunities must be available for those who are ultimately tasked with accompanying young people and ensuring these interactions and initiatives are safe and meaningful (Bovarnick et al., 2018; Warrington & Brodie, 2018).

7. Conclusion

This article has drawn attention to a number of concepts and theories to help understand the nature and status of participation rights for young survivors of childhood sexual violence. The international child protection sector is increasing its commitment to working collaboratively with

young survivors to inform and influence efforts to address childhood sexual violence globally. Learning from the 'Our Voices' programme emphasises the importance of establishing and enabling both participation and protection rights. This work can be aided through strong collaboration with local specialist services, the continuous weighing up of the risks and benefits throughout, and putting in place mechanisms to support all those involved. Moving forward, it will be critical to address the structural barriers that often impede this work, and develop innovative approaches to the different ways we can support, and work in solidarity with, young survivors to inform and influence the sector.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

One of the Editors of this journal was on a project advisory group for a project mentioned in the article. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all of the young people, our partners, and the research participants who have worked with us throughout this programme of work. We would also like to thank former and current colleagues at the Safer Young Lives Research Centre who have provided so much support and guidance. Particular thanks are owed to Professor Jenny Pearce, Professor Helen Beckett, Dr Camille Warrington and Helen Veitch.

This programme of work has been made possible thanks to the support of Oak Foundation through grant numbers: OCAY-12-533, OCAY-16-457 and OFIL-20-170. In addition, financial support for specific strands came from: the European Commission JUST/2014/RDAP/AG; Porticus Foundation GR/072094 and Research England's Participatory Research Fund via the University of Bedfordshire.

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