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Co-creative research with children and young people: A conversation about practice

Summary

This curated conversation brings together four researchers to explore the complexities, ethics and lived realities of co-creative research with children and young people. While participatory and co-produced approaches are widely championed as best practice, the contributors highlight how such work is inevitably relational, contextual and often messy. Together, we interrogate concepts such as authenticity, voice, agency and the »other adult« role, exploring how genuine co-production can be achieved when time pressures, hierarchical norms and adult cultural values shape encounters. We challenge the notion of »giving voice«, arguing instead for deep, sustained listening that recognises both the expressive multiplicity of children including non-verbal and embodied forms — and the constraints adults must acknowledge transparently. Playfulness emerges as a crucial research modality, enabling relationality, emergent thinking and shared discovery in ways that resist linear, adult-centred approaches. We hope our dialogue demonstrates that co-creative research is less a fixed method than an ongoing, relational process — dynamic, unfinished and grounded in mutual curiosity, humility and the vibrant cultures of children and young people.

Keywords: Co-creation; participatory research; voice; playfulness; young people.

Introduction

Participatory, co-productive or co-creative approaches are now firmly embedded as good practice in conducting research with children and young people (Coyne & Carter, 2014; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Co-creative approaches respond to the ethical imperative to conduct research *with* young people, not *on* them. They recognise that children and young people have rights to agency and self-determination, while also responding to the research imperative that children and young people are experts in their own lived experience. Co-creative research engages with children and young people as authentic and able knowers in their own right.

For researchers working in this area, such as those involved in this curated conversation, this clarity of aspiration is frequently accompanied by a strong awareness that the practice itself is messy, often the result of compromise, and dynamic. Our ways of working are based upon ethos and ethics, but always also shaped and improvised in response to context and relational practice. It is rare that one experience of conducting co-creative research with children and young people ever exactly replicates another. It is in this space of practice and experience that our conversation is located.

This paper takes the form of a conversation between four researchers – Lucy, Anna, Alice and Matthew – all based at York St John University (UK) and all interested in and grappling with ideas of co-ness, including questions of ethics, power, voice, context and meaning-making. As colleagues within the same institution, we often talk to each other about these experiences, sharing practice and insights. We were motivated to have this curated conversation as we believe that bringing together different but philosophically aligned voices captures the multiplicity, relationality and responsiveness of co-creative research. It always feels like a working through, rarely singular, rarely certain, never finished. Dialogue captures this plurality in a way that feels aligned to our doing as participatory researchers and our desire to construct meaning together.

We open the conversation by sharing moments from our individual practice that illuminate co-creative research with children and young people. These serve as evocative hooks to discover and learn about what each of us do, about our motivations and hopes and fears. Our conversation then explores themes including the seductive but problematic notion of »giving voice«, our desire to be the »other« adult in the room, the need to embrace the unknown, and more.

Through this conversation we also reflect on what co-creative research might say about children's culture, particularly in terms of relationships between adults and children, and who gets to place value and meaning on cultural experiences and research processes.

Moments of practice

Moment 1. Anna Glarin. Decision making and co-production

Anna is a PhD Researcher, applied theatre practitioner and theatre producer. Between 2015 and 2023, she was co-lead of Waterloo Community Theatre in London. Her PhD research focuses on how adults and young people collaborate with each other in theatre-making spaces.

This takes place with teenagers who attended weekly sessions with Waterloo Community Theatre. During COVID, when the UK Government's guidelines meant we were unable to meet in a physical space, we started making a podcast online. The podcast was edited

and shared on all streaming platforms. There is an episode in which two of the girls in the group just giggled a lot and they would not stop. This interrupted the flow and so, with the listeners in mind, my colleague and I made the executive decision to edit out the giggling for the published version.

When we shared this with the group, one of the giggling girls noticed and said, »But I thought it was authentic«. So, we had a conversation with them about why we made that decision, to edit the giggling out. And after that conversation, they understood and agreed that it made sense because it was for a specific audience. However, reflecting on it, I think it raises a lot of questions about co-production with young people and who has the right to make decisions. I'd like to think it's a case of knowledge exchange and the young people learning from the person with more experience and knowledge. But then, where do we draw the line for when and how young people make decisions, and when the adults in the room do? At what point do we stop calling it co-production?

Moment 2. Alice Little. Youth researchers in a school context

Alice is a PhD researcher whose work explores children and young people's experience of working alongside adults as youth or peer researchers. Most recently, she worked with children as youth researchers exploring school toilet policies.

My work often involves working with young people as co-researchers and I typically start research projects by exploring ethical practice and rights within research with the young people who have chosen to become involved. During one particular session, we were exploring human rights, rights within research and school rights: an exercise intended to explore their understanding of rights and demonstrate how we would uphold these rights within the research. One co-researcher wrote »we are not human« in response to their perceived experience of school rights. I approached this reflection with curiosity but, as our research was taking place within the context of a UK secondary school, I felt ill-equipped to critically discuss the glaring differences in the approaches taken to engage young people. The formal, institutionalised nature of UK secondary education, where often the emphasis is on standardised outcomes and adult authority, presents particular challenges when considering more participatory, youth-centred research approaches.

Moment 3. Matthew Reason. Whose cultural values?

Matthew is a professor of theatre with a particular interest in creative and participatory methods, including in the context of children and young people. He supports a number of PhD researchers working in this area, including Anna, Alice and Lucy.

When using »draw-and-talk« methods to research a group of 10-year-olds' experience of a dance show, I had two very different responses. One girl drew an elaborate depiction of the staging, in which different areas were colour coded according to the emotional response they had on her – sad, joyful, dark etc. A boy, on the other hand, used charcoal to cover an entire A3 sheet in dense black and declared that it had been cruel to make him see the performance. A couple of other children copied him, producing equally black charcoal covered responses. The experience prompted so many thoughts. As adults we might value

the girl's response more, it shows empathy and engagement, thought and reflection. But that feels deterministic and not listening to the boy's response. At the same time, how do we account for the 'copying' that clearly took place amongst the other children? Is that an indication of a strongly felt shared experience or of the charisma and influence of one particular child? Equally, the responses could have been motivated by the clear pleasure in being subversive or the simple fun of making a mess with charcoal. While research aims for clarity, children's motivations, meanings and intentions are rarely singular or straightforward. And equally, as adults we need to be conscious of our perspective, our own cultural values, and how we might 'want' children to respond.

Moment 4. Lucy Cassidy. Embodied spaces

Lucy is a theatre maker with 20 years' of experience. She is artistic director of Aurora, which produces theatrical experiences for children. She is currently undertaking a PhD, in collaboration with Theatre Hullabaloo, which explores the processes and impacts of involving young children as co-creators.

During a playful co-creative session in our pop-up rehearsal studio, a boy aged 4 clambers onto a bench and launches himself into my open arms. He jumps before I can fully reach him. I catch him mid-air. I lift him up, and he smiles, flapping his arms in delight and calling out »raaaah«. This moment speaks to me about the importance of risk taking together in the co-creative space. It also illustrates the importance of being as »safe as necessary« in our collaboration, rather than as »safe as possible« (an Early Years Education concept). In the above moment, the accompanying educator chooses to permit this physical exploration despite indoor jumping and climbing not usually being allowed. It also speaks to co-creative concepts I value, of jumping into the unknown, meeting each other, and of lifting each other up through our collaboration, to do together what we cannot do apart.

Starting talking

Lucy: Reading each other's moments of practice made me wonder about where co-production starts and ends. Do you see the entire process of working with young people as co-produced, or just when working together in person?

Anna: In my theatre-making practice, it is ideally from the very start and throughout the entire process. But that's also what makes it challenging because sometimes that's impossible due to pressures beyond your control. Sometimes it is just a case of making decisions on the spot, in the moment. Then afterwards, it's going back and reflecting on what I could have done better in my decision making to perhaps include and consider the young people more, with the desire to get better at those in-the-moment decisions.

Matthew: That makes me think of the difference between formal and informal decision-making moments. So, where you arrange a meeting and you have everybody in the room – including the young people or whomever you are working with – and you're spending the time and making sure everybody is involved and engaged and informed, those are the bits which you can do co-productively. But sometimes, as you describe it Anna, you have to make quick decisions or maybe pragmatic decisions. And I think often that is where we start to fall away from an ideal of co-production, in which everybody works together in a fully

participatory, fully equal, fully engaged manner. Where everybody is engaged in making all the decisions collectively. Reality very rarely lives up to that ideal, and in particular I think it is often when we make decisions quickly that we start to exclude people. So, we need to pause and wait, but that is really hard to do in a live environment.

Anna: It's really hard to do, because often you have the pressures of time and you've got to produce something or you've got funders breathing down your neck, you need results, you've got to create something.

Matthew: In your example, Anna, it was a podcast, which you wanted to be a polished and accessible product. There is one word in your description that struck me. You said the girls involved thought that their giggling was »authentic«. And that's beautiful because obviously in some ways that authenticity is exactly what researchers always want to claim, we want to access that authentic experience and expression. So, did you feel like you edited out the bit that was their authentic voice?

Anna: Initially, yes. Initially we felt like, oh no, we took away the authenticity of what we were trying to say here. But then we also had to make the decision as the professionals in that space where we know an audience will not appreciate it because it deters from the content, the story we are trying to tell. I think once we had that conversation with those young people, they understood it and perhaps that also helped them better understand creative practice and making work for specific audiences. Reflecting on this, what we could have done better is to involve the young people in that decision-making process and have that conversation earlier.

Alice: Do you think, Anna, that the kind of the relationship that you'd built up to that point with the young people helped in terms of them understanding the clear intention behind the work and your decision?

Anna: Yeah, I think that's a really good point. We have known these young people for coming up to 7-8 years and we built up positive relationships and solid trust with them over that time. They know – at least I think they really know – that we are looking out for their best interest and our intention is always to make good theatre as professionally as possible with them (Glarin, 2020). I think we had established that trust between us and that's probably why they listened to us. I think it might have felt very different to them if we'd been in a different setting with a more traditional adult-and-young-person dynamic.

Alice: Yes, I agree. My practice does take place in a classroom context, also with teenagers, whom I describe as my co-researchers. And I'm quite explicit about that, and that the process is going to involve introducing them to something completely new, asking them to think about what research is and how it fits within the context of the school. Within the co-research, everyone's ideas are considered and their input truly valued, which is not always the case in a school context (Lundy, 2007). Once they experience this in a consistent manner, they begin to trust the process.

Matthew: Exactly, working with young people feels and looks very different according to where we are doing it. The bit I'd like to come back to in your moment of practice, Alice, is the striking phrase the young people use when they say »we are not human«. Is that knowingly teenaged hyperbole on their part? Are they playing with that notion or taking it seriously?

Alice: I think, for them, maybe they'd never had the opportunity to consider human rights, or research rights, or what rights they should have in school. So, I think it was when I started

talking to them about their rights within our research process, and they started contrasting that with their rights within the school. They had a strong awareness of their comparative lack of rights within the school context.

Maybe the phrase was designed to shock, but when I asked a little bit more about it, it was the very enactment of »we can't speak«, »we can't take off our blazer on a hot day«, »we cannot do things that human beings can freely do«. I didn't have to ask very much for them to be able to list things within the school that they felt were encroaching on their human rights. I think it represents a wider school culture within the UK of them being viewed as pupils in big institutions rather than as human beings.

Lucy: I'm thinking about how, in the rehearsal studio, we'd describe that process as »deep listening«, really listening and thinking very carefully about how the context is informing their words. It is resonating with me in terms of how central that is to the practice of co-production.

Alice: In one of the groups I was working with, there was a 13-year-old co-researcher that was very, very quiet. They said they really wanted to be there. They turned up every week without fail, but they weren't really participating. Then, in one of our final sessions together, they said that they were embarrassed to share their thoughts. They felt embarrassed about sharing their voice, they were worried about how it was going to be received or how people were going to respond.

It was quite a vulnerable admission of theirs, I suppose, to say that they actually felt embarrassed. So sometimes it is about noticing, that, okay, this behaviour is telling me something. But what is it saying? What relationship is going on here between me and them? Or between them and their peers? And really paying attention to that.

»Voice« and other forms of expression

Matthew: That's really interesting because I know, or I suspect, we all share a suspicion about the phrase »giving voice«, which is often used as a kind of shorthand in the context of youth participation. As applied-theatre scholar Selina Busby writes, the phrase »giving voice« is troubling because it has the potential to simply reproduce existing hierarchies (Busby, 2021). But listening to Alice, it sounds as if, really, co-production is much more about listening. If we are giving anything, it is giving an ear and listening and seriously paying attention to young people. However, what I'm immediately aware of is that we can listen, but can we actually do anything? In your context, Alice, you can't change the school environment, for example.

Lucy: I agree. It makes me think about my participatory theatre practice with children and how I conceive of it as the chance to create a utopian space of sorts. A space where new rules can operate, even if they don't last beyond that. I have to believe that that is enough, that it has value.

As a practitioner, I often wish that I could change a school's culture. I'm thinking of contexts where I've been very disillusioned with the school and all I could think of is, I can't change your life. But what we can do today is to show you that there is a possibility of something else, a different way of being together. And I hope that is powerful as a taste of something different.

Alice: I think it comes back to what Anna was saying about clear intentions. I remember recently a youth co-researcher said, »why ask if nothing's going to come from it?« I think

young people are very used to this idea of sharing their voice or giving voice, but what is often lacking is a response or reply to that. They know that, actually, there might not be this great impact and they're not going to change school culture all of a sudden. But they still want to know that they've been heard. Like you said, Matthew, it is that idea of a listening ear.

Matthew: Young people aren't naive. They know that they can't magically change the world. They know we can't either. But I guess there is also what's been described as »empty participation«, which provides a veneer of choice but results in no meaningful change to outcomes.

Lucy: I think there's a need for transparency, isn't there? Acknowledging our limits. I think that's quite powerful when adults do that in terms of their relationship with young people. In my own work, I've been lucky enough to work with a whole range of different ages of young people, but most recently, I'm working with 3-to-4-year-olds. And this has really challenged me in my thinking about these questions of co-production and voice.

The contexts I'm working in often include children who are starting school with low levels of spoken English. This includes delays in speech development that are being attributed to COVID (Pejovic et al., 2024), and the high numbers of children with English as a second language or Special Educational Needs or Disabilities. For all these reasons, I've found there is an increasing need to listen to things other than words. It's an interesting process that we're in, which is trying to deeply understand the children using an embodied approach to voice.

In my practice, we are inspired by two early-years-education concepts in relation to children's voice: the 100 languages of the of the child from the Reggio Emilia approach (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998) and Montessori's concept that children reveal themselves from their play (Montessori, 1995). Yes, in terms of what they do with their body, but also what they're doing in relation to materials, or to the space. One thing I've found here is that, in terms of conversations or relationships between adult and child, often it is the adults – the nursery educators who come into the space – who are much less confident than the children in expressing with their bodies. There's a sense of reserve here. I've been looking at how we can scaffold an embodied conversation between adults and children. I've been looking at a cycle of offers and responses, using materials, objects and play, and thinking about that sort of dialogical form of embodied exchange.

On playfulness

Matthew: I think using other forms of expression is a key thing. You're talking there about materials and movement and I've used drawing or model making. Alice, I know you've used different forms to engage young people in research as well. And there is something interesting here about how that enables different forms of voice to emerge.

Alice: Working with young people, I've often found, if I put some Lego on the table or playdoh and suggest we make models, that there's almost a reserve from the young people themselves. I can almost hear them ask, »You want me to play?« It's crossing the threshold into something not allowed. But I think it is really important to make that movement and, generally, in every session we reach a playful, creative place. That might be that we explore an idea using Lego, such as building models of what their ideal school would look like or creating a space where their rights are enacted.

Often, I will notice different things emerging which will feed into the rest of the work that we do together. What it does reveal is a lot of the interplay between the young people themselves. They will share ideas, and they will have differences, but there's something really fruitful in that and we can work through it together. And because it's with Lego, there is maybe less pressure to answer in a certain way, which I think works really well, particularly for that age group of teenagers that are very aware of their identity and getting things right and getting things wrong and standing out from the crowd. It almost allows them to do that without any attachment to the wider school culture.

Lucy: Different ways of doing things are important I think, in terms of how adults and children interact together. There is an exercise I use, called the Magic Glove Game, where somebody – adult or child – puts on a pair of gloves and everybody else has to follow how their co-player moves with hand gestures. This playfully scaffolds an embodied conversation. It is a way of making visible what I call your embodied voice, and it shows the child that we are listening and paying attention. I wanted to make it clear to the children that they have some control, that you have agency, that you are powerful in this way. That's why we use this Magic Glove Game, because then they could know they had control, as they could see it in real time, reflected back to them immediately by the response of the adult. I think when we first played the Magic Gloves Game, it was a real aha moment, particularly for some of the children with SEND [special education need or disabilities] or English as a second language. It suddenly became much more transparent to them how they were powerful within our co-creative process.

Anna: I like that word, co-player, what a great word. Is that what you use to describe the adults in the space?

Lucy: That's the way I've started thinking about it. I use a lot of games in my work. I'm really interested in what you were talking about, Alice, about that the lightness of play and how useful that was in your process. I think that the term co-player is useful to keep in mind because we can get quite weighty with things sometimes. You know, thinking, we've got to honour all these children's ideas or the voice of the young people. But we're in the process too, right? Working it out, together, as we go along. And actually, there's a lot of joy to be had in those sessions, isn't there?

Matthew: I've written about playfulness as a research method (Reason, 2022) and how play or creativity might be commonly seen as an icebreaker or something fun and engaging. But actually, I think it's got a lot more things going on. Playing is a relational practise. In the examples you're giving, Lucy, where you are co-playing, you are engaging with each other as humans in a really significant sense. There is a give and take, a collaboration, a world building, whether at the level of manipulating Lego bricks or the Magic Glove Game.

As well as that, I think play allows emergent thinking. We develop and discover things that we didn't know we knew before we started and there's something really important in a research process to allow space for people to engage with imagination or future thinking or exploration through playfulness. It generates new ideas, new thinking, new connections between things. When we talk about voice, that sometimes implies that these young people know what it is they want to say before they say it, and that isn't the case. The workshops, the processes, the art explorations, the questions that we ask are spaces in which to think, as well as spaces to talk and express their experiences and opinions.

Alice: Absolutely. In the project I described earlier, it was through engaging with creative processes and explorations that we discovered how the youth co-researchers wanted to focus their research questions on identity, belonging and inclusion within spaces in school. We wouldn't have reached these insights without the model making and the emergent thinking.

Lucy: I don't know how to say this in words, so you'll have to imagine me doing a hand gesture. When I think of play and emergent thinking, I think about how it allows us to work from the inside out in all directions at once. A bit like a conker [a horse chestnut tree seed] with all the spikes exploding in every direction at once. I think that feels quite different to spoken or written voice, which is a much more linear structure and a more linear form of thinking. This way of working with play is also really useful for us in that it addresses this power balance a little bit. In some ways, it forces us, as adults, to have less control about where that conversation goes, which I think is a very useful place to be.

A real conversation

Matthew: We've used the word »conversation« several times, talking about conversations between adults and children in particular. There is something really interesting about the word and both what it might be in practice and what it might ideally imply. I remember listening back to some transcripts of early interviews I did with children and cringing because, quite often, I fell into a slightly teacherly relationship of asking questions which I already knew the answers to. And that's not a conversation. It doesn't produce Buber's notion of a conversation having genuine surprise in it (2002). We need to think about how that moment can be a genuine encounter between an adult and child that isn't rote or isn't question and answer. A genuine conversation rather than something that replicates hierarchical relationships between adult and child.

Lucy: I agree. In all our example moments, I see how we are trying to escape pre-defined roles and instead find a meeting point between adult and child. I view this point as a nexus of discovery, for both adult and child. I think that's why I'm interested in co-creating with adults and children together. It's to open something up and to experience it in new ways. I think that finding structures that allow for that newness and discovery to come in is very important.

Anna: Yes, and I guess, in terms of ways of structuring that discovery, the work that I do is often focused on what's going on in the young people's lives at that moment. The questions we tend to ask quite a lot are »What are you thinking about right now? What's going on in your head, in your mind, at this moment in time? What are you talking about with your friends?« Because we have no idea what that is and anything could be thrown into the space, so anything they tell is likely to be met with genuine surprise. We can have ideas of what we think it might be, but that's usually wrong because we don't live in their world. But it usually sparks interesting conversation, and we have no idea where it's going to lead. And again, yes, it's about the opening up and engaging in that deep listening to what they're bringing into the space.

Lucy: It is a special opportunity to be invited into a world that is sometimes shut off to us as adults and to be invited into a child's world through this kind of playful conversation you describe. I think, as a society, we often look at children as mini-adults, but this offers quite a different way of engaging with children and their culture.

Anna: Yeah. And I think it comes back to the fact that I like to operate on the assumption that they are the experts in their lives. I haven't got a clue what it is like to be a young person today, so I need to sit down, shut up, listen and learn. And that's quite liberating, to come into a space where you're supposed to be the adult and the leader and know it all and just say, actually, I don't. So, you tell me, and we can go on this journey of exploration and discovery together. It's basically about acknowledging and celebrating the perspectives of others. Young people often respond well to that because, by society's norms, that's not how children and young people are usually treated.

Matthew: But if we are only listening, is that a conversation? If we're facilitating children's voice or children's fascinations, then in some ways we are just replicating another kind of divide between adults and children. So, maybe we need to enable children to get that surprise and conversation from us in return? You know, those genuine encounters need to be in both directions, and I think that's really key.

Lucy: I agree. In my practice, I suggest that we bring all that we know into the space, and we offer it out as a creative springboard to leap from together. Sometimes, there is a sense that artists feel that they can't do that, as if that wouldn't be honouring a child-led process. But I think this potentially creates a strange power imbalance where one, the child, is expected to be free to do whatever they like, and the other, the adult, is more restrained or tied to something that's invisible to the rest of the group.

Matthew: And that's the art practitioner's equivalent of the teacher asking the question to which they already know the answer, isn't it?

Lucy: That's right, yeah. I think it's interesting because authenticity has come up as a thread throughout this conversation, and I know that's a loaded word, but perhaps the work we're doing is about working towards an authentic relationship. I'm interested in how I can work with children in artistic collaborations, asking »where do my fascinations meet your fascinations?« Finding out how can we work alongside each other in some form of radical participation.

Embracing unknowns

Matthew: I suppose one of the things I was interested in, in my moment of practice, is that question of what do we, as adults, as researchers, or practitioners, what do we want? Sometimes when we go into these encounters, while we might not necessarily admit to it consciously, we do want certain things from children. One of the things I was thinking of is Jacqueline Rose's book, *The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, in which she writes something along lines of that children's fiction is what adults want or demand of children (1994). As in, adults demand of children is for them to be full of imagination and play and wonder. You know, all those kinds of things. So, in the case of my moment of practice, we wanted children's responses to the dance performance to be full of empathy and engagement and wonder. That's what we as adults want when we take children to the theatre or to the gallery. And when they scribble a page black and say it was cruel and horrible, it kind of destroys that. And I'm not denying those values at all, or the importance of those values, but just we need to recognise that they are in some sense constructions or adult imaginaries and, certainly, to apply them to all children, all of the time, is an adult imposition.

Lucy: I think that it is interesting to think about clashing expectations. In my work, we seek to set up free-flowing exploratory sessions, where there's a sense of shared leadership, but

on one occasion, one of the children started organising all the other children. She took control and set up a playing-house-type game where she took all the instruments that we were exploring freely and turned them into lollypops that she, as the little mum, was giving to each of her children. This was counter to the kind of play we as adults had intended and it was interesting looking at that, thinking, yeah, whose agenda wins out?

Anna: I think this happens all the time because, like you say, Matthew, we always come in with our own expectations and our needs and our wants. And for me, my research has also become about interrogating my own intentions, taking a step back, reflecting on what it is that I want when I walk into a space. And actually, trying to let go of that and just see what unfolds, to enter the unknown. That's scary and really hard to do, but the more I think about it and reflect on it, the better I get at doing it, and the more excited I am about the prospect of working within the unknown.

Lucy: I concur with the ideas we're talking about, that balancing of being prepared while also being ready to see how things unfurl within the room. In the early stages of my career, I would create very detailed workshop plans but slowly, over the course of my practice, I've adopted what an educator I worked with called the »snakeskin-up-your-sleeve« approach. That is, you come in with an open spirit to see what the children bring into the session, knowing that, if nothing happens, then you've got something up your sleeve that you know, no matter what, will work as a stimulation or provocation. Of course, you rarely need to draw out the snakeskin, but it's there just in case.

Articulating the experience?

Matthew: Something about all this makes me think about how, as a researcher, it is difficult to account for these kinds of things. These things that we know are going on within a space – the relational, the playful, the ephemeral, the silences as well as the words. However, in an academic article, or even, if we're kind of lucky, other forms of publication, how do we account for or communicate that a young person's voice was contained in a glance between two young people where they kind of give each other the side eye in response to something an adult said? Or how do we account for the experience of control and voice in the examples you're giving, Lucy, which are embodied and gestural and constitute an explosion in all sorts of multiple directions, like a conker shell. But because we are researchers, these experiences somehow have to be captured and communicated. And that's a real challenge, isn't it?

Alice: Yeah. I mean, I think I've only managed to do that within my reflective journals, where I try and capture as much as I can, in notes, of what I felt, what was witnessed, what was the mood, what the room felt like.

Anna: That's kind of the way that I document as well. It's just writing things down and journalling and noticing or observing and making sure that I record that somehow, and reflect on it. But I know that it is just my perspective, it is my observation of what I saw and what I felt and maybe it was experienced very differently by other people. How do I capture that?

Lucy: In terms of how to capture things, I use video a lot, and I like using photography, but it doesn't capture everything. I've also been lucky enough to have an educator present within the space, providing additional eyes to reflect on what is happening, to add a sense

of context or simply another voice. Sometimes I've given the educator a camera, to capture moments, and then they've added their annotations or memories to that moment.

Matthew: What we're talking about, I guess is capturing the affective experience. Affect being the felt, bodily, sensorial experience. We might capture the content of what young people say, but equally we need to capture the feeling. And we can witness that, but we can also ask the young people to reflect on that as well. And that's something I know you've tried to do, Alice, inviting young people to use an emotion-word structure (Dewar et al., 2009; Little, 2025) to reflect on their experiences as co-researchers.

Alice: Yes, for young people, they can struggle to articulate what their relationship to research is or how the process feels for them. I use an exercise where I ask them to select »emotion words« as a framework to pinpoint different aspects of their experience of the process. Like, what did it feel like to be recruited to the research? Or what are their feelings about what it might be possible to change? What I've found is that the co-researchers often work together to discover and unpick how they felt. One time, they shared that they felt vulnerable, but actually it was a good vulnerable, and another time a co-researcher described the experience as making them feel »royal«, which really encouraged reflection about the value of the experience for them.

What is our role?

Matthew: I'm interested in what roles we think of ourselves as having, within these spaces and in relation to voice. I guess our formal role, the reason why we're in these spaces, is as researchers and for Anna and Lucy also as arts practitioners. But do we have other roles? You know, I suppose, for me as a researcher, I'm interested in finding out and sharing and generating knowledge. But that always is also accompanied by a why. Why am I doing this kind of research in this kind of way? And often, it is about researching with people whose experiences aren't heard and aren't listened to. And I'd include young people within that. There is a question of epistemic justice here (Fricker, 2007). So, the research role is also always accompanied by a kind of politics.

Anna: For me, it all stems from the principle that young people should be taken seriously and met for who they are, where they are right now. Rather than, you know, this criticised and outdated notion that they are »adults in training«, that adolescence is simply an »in-between stage« (see Oakley, 1994; Water, 2018; Coyne & Carter, 2018). Young people are valid and valuable for who they are right now, at any given time, and as adults we perhaps need to start appreciating that a bit more and make conscious efforts to meet them where they are. My approach is based on that ideal, I see you and I want the rest of the world to see you, and celebrate you, for who you are right now.

Alice: I'm constantly questioning my role in every single session. I feel it changes. I do at times take on the »least-adult role« (Mandell, 1988; Fitzgerald, 2021), but the more work I do, the more I see myself in an »other adult« role. Young people have adults around them all the time, parents, teachers, who have expectations of them or who demand certain things of them or ask certain questions of them. I want to be other to those. In fact, one youth co-researcher summed it up perfectly and they said we were »working alongside«. That is my intention every time. I'm here. I'm alongside. Where are we going together? How can I be the other adult that enables that to happen? And I think that works.

Lucy: I feel quite emotional hearing you say that, Alice. It really echoes with my experience. There is something about being in this alongside relationship, as you describe it, that creates a dynamic that we don't have access to very often in our everyday lives. I think it allows us to relate to each other in new ways. It's a different experience for the children and young people we're working with, but it can also provide us, as adults, with the chance to experience something of that freeness for ourselves.

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Biographies

Lucy Cassidy is a theatre maker and PhD student at York St John University (UK). Her research, in collaboration with Theatre Hullabaloo and The Unicorn, focuses on co-creating theatrical play installations with very young children using participatory and practice-led methodologies. She has over twenty years' experience in experimental and children's theatre, with work presented internationally, including at the National Review of Live Art (UK) and the World Festival of Theatre for Young Audiences. She is Artistic Director of Aurora Theatre. Further information is available at www.lucycassidy.co.uk.

Anna Glarin is in the final stages of completing her PhD with York St John University (UK). She is interested in a witness-centred practice and the tensions of the complex space shared by adults and young people. Her research is an exploration of the potential and possibilities of making theatre with young people. Anna has had two peer-reviewed papers published to date and serves on the editorial board of online journal ArtsPraxis.

Alice Little is a part time postgraduate researcher in her 5th year at York St John University (UK). Her research explores how children and young people experience engaging as co-researchers and how we can build meaningful spaces for youth co-research. Alice adopts a young people as researchers approach within her research and is currently exploring how this approach can be utilised within English school settings.

Matthew Reason is Professor of Theatre and Director of the Institute for Social Justice at York St John University (UK). His research focuses on politically and socially engaged arts practice, audience research and co-productive and participatory research methodologies. Recent publications include the Routledge Companion to Audiences and the Performing Arts (co-edited with Conner, Johanson and Walmsley, Routledge 2022). His current research uses creative, inclusive methods to work with learning disabled and autistic artists to explore the themes of identity, representation and voice. For further information visit www.matthewreason.com