

Towards Systemic Child Participation in Justice

Conceptualising a Framework through
Participatory Youth Practice

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BACKGROUND

Child participation in justice systems is widely endorsed yet remains narrowly conceived, anchored predominantly in a child's right to be heard in their own proceedings. This paper argues for a fuller account that distinguishes participation at the individual level from participation at the systemic level, where children's collective expertise informs the design, evaluation and reform of justice systems themselves. Drawing on international normative frameworks, the people-centred justice movement, and the concept of child-centred justice, it develops a conceptual framework for systemic child participation and illustrates it through Participatory Youth Practice (PYP), a framework of youth justice practice co-created with justice-involved children in England. We conclude by drawing on methodological lessons from PYP to consider how systemic child participation might be advanced at an international level.

Keywords: child participation, systemic participation, child-centred justice, youth justice, Participatory Youth Practice, Latin America

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1. Introduction

Child participation in justice systems is widely endorsed as a matter of principle yet remains narrowly conceived in much policy and practice. Across jurisdictions, reforms aimed at making justice more responsive to children have tended to anchor participation in a single, familiar form, the right of an individual child to be heard in the proceedings that directly concern them. This conception, grounded in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), has generated important advances in child-friendly procedures, child-sensitive courtrooms, and accessible legal information. Yet it leaves largely unaddressed a different and equally consequential question, whether children themselves contribute to shaping the justice systems and services that process them.

This paper argues that a fuller account of child participation in justice requires distinguishing between two complementary but analytically distinct levels. The first is participation at the individual level, where a child's voice influences the outcome of their own case or intervention. The second is participation at the systemic level, where children's collective experience and expertise inform the structures, procedures, policies and practice frameworks that justice systems apply more broadly. The distinction is not new in the children's rights literature (Foussard and Jung, 2021; Thomas, 2007), but it remains underdeveloped in justice-specific scholarship and inconsistently operationalised in practice (Smithson, Gray and Jones 2020).

Clarifying this distinction matters for a straightforward reason. No single case, however carefully managed, can reveal the structural features of a justice system that disadvantages children as a group, nor produce the reforms needed to address them. Children who have experienced justice systems first-hand occupy a distinctive epistemic position; they understand from the inside how those systems function, where they fail, and what would make them work better. Treating that expertise as a resource for systemic reform, rather than solely as testimony to be heard within an individual proceeding, is the central argument this article advances.

The article pursues two related aims. First, it sets out a conceptual framework for child participation in justice, tracing the evolution of the concept from Hart's (1992) ladder of participation through Lundy's (2007) four-dimensional model, and Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) P7 Model of participation, distinguishing the levels at which participation may operate. Second, it illustrates the systemic, policy-design dimension of that framework through a case study: Participatory Youth Practice (PYP), a framework of youth justice practice co-created with justice-involved

children in England and subsequently embedded across regional youth justice services (see Smithson, Gray and Jones 2020; Smithson and Jones, 2021, Smithson, Lang and Gray, 2020). PYP offers an empirical example of systemic child participation that moved beyond consultation to shape, directly and durably, the principles underpinning everyday professional practice; an iterative, bidirectional process between children as experts of their own experience and professionals as agents of institutional change.

2. Child Participation in Justice: Concept, Scope and Levels

2.1 International Normative Foundations

The right of the child to be heard in matters that affect them is established in Article 12 of the CRC (United Nations, 1989, Art.12). The provision requires States parties to assure children the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and to give those views due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity. It further mandates that children be given the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting them. Two additional provisions reinforce this foundation, Article 13 (UNCRC, 1989, Art.13), which protects children's right to freedom of expression, and Article 17 (UNCRC, 1989, Art.17), which obliges states to ensure children's access to information. Together, these three articles constitute the normative basis from which the concept of child participation has been progressively constructed.

It bears noting that the term 'participation' does not itself appear in the text of Article 12. As the Committee on the Rights of the Child acknowledged in General Comment No. 12 (2009), the concept has emerged through practice and interpretation. The Committee defines participation as *'ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes.'* (Para.3). This definition is significant for two reasons. First, it frames participation as a process rather than an event, emphasising continuity and dialogue over one-off consultation. Second, it explicitly links participation to the right to information. The Committee clarifies that access to relevant information is a prerequisite for the effective exercise of the right to be heard.

The relationship between Article 12 and Article 3, which establishes the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in all actions concerning children, warrants particular attention. These two provisions are frequently treated as sequential; adults assess what serves the child's best interests, and the child is then heard within that framework. This reading risks reducing participation to a procedural adjunct to adult decision-making. A more rigorous reading treats the two rights as mutually constitutive; the best interests of a child cannot be adequately determined without genuinely hearing that child, since adults' assessments of best interests are inevitably partial without the child's own perspective. This article

understands systemic child participation in justice as an extension of this logic to the collective level. Justice systems cannot be genuinely designed in children's best interests without drawing on the expertise of children who have experienced those systems.

General Comment No. 12 also extends the scope of Article 12 beyond individual proceedings, indicating that children's views must be considered in decision-making, policymaking and preparation of laws and measures when matters under discussion affect children. The Committee specifies that State parties should consult children in formulating related laws and policies, and in drafting, developing and implementing related plans and programmes. General Comment No. 24 (2019) on children's rights in the child justice system reinforces these obligations in the specific context of justice, calling on States to ensure that children's perspectives are meaningfully integrated into justice processes and systems.

Beyond the Committee's interpretive work, several international instruments address child participation in justice-related policy processes, with varying degrees of specificity. The Beijing Rules (1985) call for a constant appraisal of the needs of children in conflict with the law as a basis for improving methods of formulating appropriate policies, and their commentary notes that it 'may be valuable to obtain and to take into account the views of juveniles themselves' in this process. The Riyadh Guidelines (1990) are more explicit, stating that comprehensive prevention plans should include *'youth participation in delinquency prevention policies and processes' and that 'young persons themselves should be involved in their formulation, development and implementation.'* (Para.50). These references are primarily framed around prevention and do not establish participation in justice reform as a formal obligation, but they reflect a consistent orientation across international instruments towards involving children in the policies that concern them.

Taken together, these instruments establish a clear normative foundation for child participation in justice-related matters. They do not, however, articulate an explicit right to what this article terms systemic child participation, children's involvement in shaping the design, evaluation and reform of justice systems as a whole. That argument is one this article develops, building on the normative foundations reviewed above.

2.2 From Consultation to Systemic Participation: A Typology of Levels

Despite the progressive expansion of the normative framework outlined above, the bulk of policy attention and academic literature on child participation in justice has

remained concentrated on a single dimension, ensuring that individual children are heard within the proceedings that directly concern them. This focus has generated important advances in child-friendly procedures, accessible legal language, and adapted courtroom environments. Yet it leaves largely unaddressed a qualitatively different form of participation, one in which children contribute not to the outcome of their own case, but to the design, evaluation and reform of the systems through which those proceedings are conducted.

The distinction between consultation and genuine participation is well established in the broader children's rights literature. Shier (2001pp.113-4), notes that in consultation 'children do not participate at the stage where decisions are actually made', whereas higher levels of participation involve children in actual decision-making processes. Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, subsequently refined by Treseder (1997) and others, similarly distinguishes between lower rungs where adults retain full control and higher rungs characterised by genuine power-sharing and child-initiated or jointly directed processes. Applied to justice systems, this distinction maps onto meaningfully different forms of engagement.

This paper proposes a typology of three levels at which child participation in justice may operate, each with distinct possibilities and limits.

At the first level, consultation, children are invited to express their views in proceedings or processes that concern them, but without guarantee that those views will substantively influence the decisions made. This is the most widespread form of child participation in justice contexts, and the most frequently criticised as tokenistic. Children may be asked about their experiences, their preferences, or their needs, but the structural conditions that shape their situation remain unchanged as a result. As Thomas (2007) observes, the proliferation of participatory activity in the early 2000s did not translate into meaningful impact on public decision-making, precisely because most of what passed for participation was in practice consultation, with real decisions being made elsewhere.

At the second level, individual participation, children contribute genuinely to decisions that directly concern them. This may take place within a judicial or administrative proceeding, in the co-design of an intervention or reintegration plan, or in the ongoing evaluation of their own situation. The distinguishing feature is not the setting but the quality of the engagement. The child exercises real agency over outcomes that affect them, rather than simply being invited to speak before adults decide. This level of participation is more demanding of institutions, requiring practitioners to relinquish some control and to treat the child's perspective as genuinely constitutive of the decision rather than as one input among many.

At the third level, systemic participation, children contribute collectively to the design, evaluation and reform of the justice systems and practices that apply to all children. This is participation in the sense articulated by Foussard and Jung (2021) and Foussard et al., (2023:3), who define systemic child participation in justice as, 'the participation of children in the wider discourse on child justice at the local, national, regional and/or international levels, which results in children influencing the reform of justice and complementary systems in a systemic and structural manner.' This may affect legal and regulatory frameworks, procedures, operations, assessment methodologies and even the normative framing through which justice systems understand children's needs and rights.

It is the third level that this article addresses in greatest depth. The case study examined in the following section, however, also illustrates something important that a rigid typology risks obscuring that in practice, the three levels are not mutually exclusive. The most transformative examples of child participation in justice tend to be those in which the three levels are articulated together, where children's experience of consultation and individual participation feeds into systemic reform, which in turn creates conditions for more genuine participation at the individual level. The distinction between levels is therefore best understood as analytical rather than operational, it helps identify what kind of participation is taking place and what structural conditions it requires, rather than prescribing a hierarchy. What it does suggest, however, is that participation confined to the first level alone, however carefully managed, cannot by itself produce the structural changes needed to make justice systems genuinely responsive to children as a group.

2.3 Why Systemic Participation Matters

The case for systemic child participation in justice rests on several distinct but mutually reinforcing arguments, spanning children's rights, institutional effectiveness, and the concept of child-centred justice.

The rights argument is the most foundational. As the normative framework reviewed above establishes, the Committee on the Rights of the Child has consistently extended the scope of Article 12 beyond individual proceedings to encompass children's involvement in the formulation and evaluation of the laws, policies and programmes that concern them. Read in conjunction with Article 3, this extension carries a particular force in the justice context. If the best interests of children cannot be adequately determined without genuinely hearing them, then justice systems designed without children's input risk serving an adult construction of children's needs rather than children's actual experience of those systems.

Systemic participation is, on this reading, not an optional enhancement of child-centred justice but a precondition for it.

The effectiveness argument is equally compelling. Children who have experienced justice systems first-hand occupy a distinctive epistemic position. As Foussard and Jung (2021) and Foussard et al., (2023:7) observe, *they 'often demonstrate graphically the vicious cycle of youth offending, arrest, trial, imprisonment, release and recidivism', and are therefore uniquely placed to identify where systems fail and what would make them work better.* Joining Forces, the alliance of the world's six largest child-focused international organisations (Joining Forces, 2021, p. 9), has argued that children in disadvantaged situations *'uniquely understand the problems they face and therefore have the greatest potential to devise sustainable and effective solutions'*, particularly given the limited availability of robust, disaggregated data (Foussard, Shields and Davidson, 2024) about their needs and experiences. Excluding children's expertise from justice reform processes does not make those processes more objective; it makes them less informed.

These arguments connect directly to a broader movement in international policy, the shift towards people-centred justice. Anchored in Sustainable Development Goal 16 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda, which commits member states to ensuring equal access to justice for all, this movement calls for a fundamental reorientation of justice systems away from institutional processes and towards the needs, experiences and outcomes of the people those systems serve. The Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, in their landmark Justice for All report (2019), articulate this shift with particular clarity. Achieving SDG16 requires placing people at the centre of justice systems and moving from a focus on sanctions and procedures to a focus on solutions and outcomes (Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures, 2024). This orientation has been advanced by a growing coalition of international organisations including UNDP, the OECD, and the World Justice Project, all of which have developed frameworks, measurement tools and policy guidance grounded in the principle that justice systems derive their legitimacy and effectiveness from their responsiveness to those they serve.

When applied to children, this people-centred logic acquires an additional and specific dimension. Children are not simply a subset of justice system users; they are rights-holders with a distinct legal status, subject to evolving capacities and specific vulnerabilities that make standard adult-oriented justice systems inadequate and potentially harmful to them. A people-centred approach to justice, when it takes children seriously, must therefore go beyond treating them as users to be consulted and recognise them as rights-holders (Davidson, Hope and Shields, 2023) whose lived experience of justice systems is both a legitimate source of knowledge and a

necessary input into how those systems are designed. It is at this intersection of people-centred justice and children's rights that the concept of systemic child participation finds its fullest justification.

The benefits of this approach are both individual and societal. For the child, participation in processes that shape justice systems contributes to procedural fairness and the protection of dignity. When children experience justice systems as genuinely responsive to their perspectives, research consistently shows stronger engagement with interventions, reduced reoffending, and better reintegration outcomes (Foussard and Jung, 2021; Smithson, Gray and Jones, 2020). Participation is itself a protective mechanism, affording children agency in contexts that otherwise expose them to significant power imbalances and safeguarding them against the tokenistic or harmful treatment that purely adult-designed systems can generate. For society, justice systems that incorporate the perspectives of those they serve are better designed, more legitimate, and more trusted. The OECD Framework and Good Practice Principles for People-Centred Justice (2021) establishes that responsiveness to the legal and justice needs of individuals is a precondition for fair outcomes and just societies. When that responsiveness is achieved, the benefits extend beyond individual cases. Stronger procedural fairness builds public trust in institutions, reduced reoffending produces safer communities, and the treatment of even the most marginalised with respect generates the social cohesion on which the rule of law ultimately depends.

The concept of child-centred justice provides the overarching framework within which these arguments converge. The Global Declaration on Advancing Child-Centred Justice, adopted at the Fifth World Congress on Justice With Children in Madrid in June 2025, defines child-centred justice as a system-level approach in which children, their rights, and their lived experiences constitute the central reference point for the design, functioning and evaluation of justice systems. This definition situates child-centred justice explicitly at the system level, frames children's lived experience as constitutive of system design rather than merely a consideration to be weighed by adults, and encompasses evaluation as well as design, implying an ongoing and iterative relationship between children's experience and institutional practice.

Systemic child participation is, on this account, the operational mechanism through which child-centred justice moves from aspiration to practice. A justice system may formally endorse children's rights and adopt child-friendly procedures while remaining, at its structural core, designed by and for adults. Genuine child-centred justice requires that children's collective expertise shapes not only how individual cases are handled, but how the system itself is built, evaluated and reformed over

time (Smithson, Gray and Jones, 2020). This is precisely what systemic participation, at its most developed, makes possible.

2.4 Conditions for Genuine, Non-Tokenistic Participation

Establishing a normative and conceptual case for systemic child participation is necessary but insufficient. The history of child participation initiatives is also a history of their failure, of consultations that generated no discernible change, of advisory groups whose recommendations were ignored, and of children who participated once and declined to do so again, having concluded that their involvement made no difference. Thomas (2007) documents this pattern systematically, noting that despite a proliferation of participatory activity, most initiatives had little impact on public decision-making, and that children themselves were often aware of this gap between participation as a stated commitment and participation as lived experience. The risk of tokenism is not incidental to systemic child participation; it is its central challenge.

Lundy's (2007) four-dimensional model offers one of the most widely used analytical frameworks for distinguishing genuine participation from tokenistic participation. The model identifies four interdependent conditions: space, meaning that children must be given safe and inclusive opportunities to form and express their views; voice, meaning that children must be facilitated to express those views; audience, meaning that the views must be listened to by people with the power and responsibility to act on them; and influence, meaning that the views must be acted upon, as appropriate. The last two conditions are the most demanding and the most frequently absent in practice. Providing a space for children to speak, and even genuinely listening, does not constitute meaningful participation unless those with decision-making powers are both willing and able to respond to what they hear in ways that are visible and traceable by the children themselves.

Drawing on the broader literature, several further conditions can be identified as markers of genuine systemic participation. Participation must be institutionalised as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event. General Comment No. 12 is clear on this point, participation is a process of sustained exchange between children and adults that must include a feedback loop through which children are informed of how their views were interpreted and what difference, if any, they made. Without this feedback loop, children cannot assess whether their participation was meaningful, and institutions cannot improve their practice over time.

The power dynamics inherent in any encounter between children and adult institutions must also be actively addressed. This is particularly acute in justice

contexts, where children's legal and social status significantly constrains their capacity to participate freely. Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) P7 model of participatory research, grounded in the interconnectedness of purpose, positioning, perspective, power relations, protection, place and process, provides a useful framework for navigating these dynamics. Recognising that power imbalances are structural rather than merely interpersonal is a precondition for designing participation mechanisms that genuinely rebalance them.

Inclusivity is a third condition that deserves particular attention in justice contexts. The tendency of participatory initiatives to involve children who are already relatively articulate and institutionally connected is well documented (Thomas, 2007). Yet children whose contact with justice systems is most intense, those in conflict with the law, those deprived of liberty, those facing compounded social disadvantages, are precisely those whose expertise is most needed for meaningful reform, and precisely those most likely to be excluded from participatory processes unless deliberate and resourced efforts are made to reach them. Participation that does not include these children risks reinforcing the very inequalities it claims to address.

Finally, institutional commitment must extend beyond individual practitioners to the culture and governance of the organisation or system as a whole. Smithson, Lang, and Gray (2020) document how, even where individual youth justice practitioners were enthusiastic about participatory approaches, their efforts were constrained by organisational cultures oriented towards risk management and enforcement, and by a lack of structural support from senior leadership. Systemic participation requires not only willing practitioners but institutional architecture that enables and sustains participatory work over time.

These conditions are demanding, and the literature is candid about the difficulty of meeting them fully in practice. Foussard and Jung (2021) acknowledge that full participation at every stage of a process is rarely achievable, and that what is more realistic is what Franks (2011) terms 'pockets of participation'; partial but genuine moments of shared power and knowledge that, accumulated over time, contribute to structural change. The value of these conditions lies not in setting an unattainable standard but in providing a framework for honest assessment. Underlying all of them, however, is a more fundamental premise, that children are already democratic subjects, not citizens in training. Thomas (2007), drawing on Young's (2000) theory of deliberative democracy, argues that including children's perspectives in institutional processes enriches democratic deliberation itself, by introducing forms of knowledge and experience that would otherwise remain absent from the decisions that shape their lives. Systemic child participation in justice is, on this

account, not only a matter of better practice or stronger rights compliance; it is a contribution to democracy. It is against the conditions identified in this section that the case study examined below is assessed.

3. Participatory Youth Practice: Systemic Child Participation in Policy and Practice Design

3.1 Origins and Context

'They really should start listening to you... but they just go through what they've got to do. That's their procedure. That's their job.' These words, spoken by Ant, a fifteen-year-old boy with experience of the youth justice system in England, captures something that researchers, practitioners and children themselves have observed across very different justice systems and national contexts; that justice processes are routinely *done* to children rather than *with* them, and that the gap between formal commitments to child participation and the lived reality of justice-involved children remains wide and largely unaddressed (see Smithson, Gray and Jones, 2020).

The project that produced PYP was a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) between Manchester Metropolitan University and ten regional youth justice services across Greater Manchester, a large region in the Northwest of England. ([Participatory Youth Practice - Centre for Crime and Youth Justice Research](#)).

It was the first funded KTP of its kind in the field of youth justice in England. Fifty justice-involved young people were nominated by youth justice colleagues across the region, of whom 28 young men expressed an interest in the research and went on to actively participate in the project. Their average age was 17; a third were from ethnic minority backgrounds, over two thirds had been exposed to at least one adverse childhood experience, and more than half had previously been or were currently in local authority care. These are not incidental details, they describe children whose lives were shaped by compounded disadvantage and whose contact with the justice system was both extensive and, in many cases, deeply negative. They were also, as the project would demonstrate, children with substantial expertise about what justice systems did and failed to do for them, and with both the capacity and the willingness to contribute to improving those systems.

A researcher from the University was assigned to the ten youth justice services across Greater Manchester, where she spent two years immersed in the day-to-day reality of youth justice practice, observing first-hand how practitioners worked with children. What she found confirmed what the children themselves were saying, despite formal commitments to Child-First approaches within the Youth Justice

Board's³ Participation Strategy (2016), the practical reality was that managerialism and risk-assessment priorities left practitioners with little space to genuinely involve children in the processes that concerned them. As Smithson and colleagues (2020) document, youth justice systems remained characterised by top-down approaches, adult-devised assessment tools, and a preoccupation with managing risk, all of which served to marginalise children's voices in both individual interventions and service design.

This is not a problem confined to England. Thomas (2007) documents the same pattern across European jurisdictions, noting that despite a proliferation of participatory initiatives, most had little discernible impact on public decision-making, and that children were acutely aware of the gap between participation as stated commitment and participation as lived experience. Foussard and Jung (2021) reach a similar conclusion at global level, observing that child participation in justice contexts has remained predominantly anchored at the individual procedural level, with systemic participation, where children's expertise shapes the design and reform of justice systems themselves, remaining rare and inconsistently supported. This perspective is increasingly being recognised in the policy literature, for example it is reinforced by the Global Working Group on SDG 16 Justice for Children, by Davidson, Hope and Shields, (2023), who call for intergenerational partnerships to *"shift the paradigm from child participation in adult justice processes, to partnerships with children"* (p. 2) for sustained justice solutions. And regionally, the genuine participation of children and adolescents was recognised as being *"indispensable for transforming justice"* (p. 43) across Ibero-America (Rodríguez and Espejo Yaksic (2025). A coherent, evidence-based model of children's participation in youth justice practice however did not exist.

Participatory Youth Practice (PYP) was developed to address this gap. It is a strengths-based framework of youth justice practice, co-created with justice-involved children, that structures the work of practitioners around eight youth-led principles. In practice, PYP is used by the multidisciplinary professionals working in youth offending teams⁴ across England, including social workers, probation officers and educators, who structure their daily sessions with each young person around the eight principles rather than around risk assessment tools. PYP is not a therapeutic programme or a research project; it is a methodology for professional practice, designed to be adapted to each individual relationship between a practitioner and a child. To illustrate what this means in practice, where a

³ The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales is a non-departmental public body responsible for overseeing the youth justice system in England and Wales.

⁴ A statutory multi-agency team that works with children and young people (aged 10-17) who have committed an offence or are at risk of contact with the criminal justice system.

conventional risk-assessment approach might begin an intervention by mapping a child's offending behaviour and its consequences, PYP begins differently. Its first principle, '*let them participate*', asks practitioners to make their willingness to hear and respond to the child's views explicit from the very first contact, to explain their role clearly, and to establish that working in partnership is a priority, not an afterthought. The child is not the object of an intervention; they are a participant in shaping it.

3.2 Methodology of Co-Creation

The methodology underpinning the development of PYP was explicitly participatory, grounded in the principle that co-production with justice-involved children was not simply a desirable feature of the project but its defining condition. As Smithson and Jones (2021) argue, the unique co-productive element of PYP is what distinguishes it from other participatory models in youth justice. Rather than involving children in validating a framework that adults had already designed, the project set out to build the framework from children's own expertise, with adults in a supporting rather than directing role.

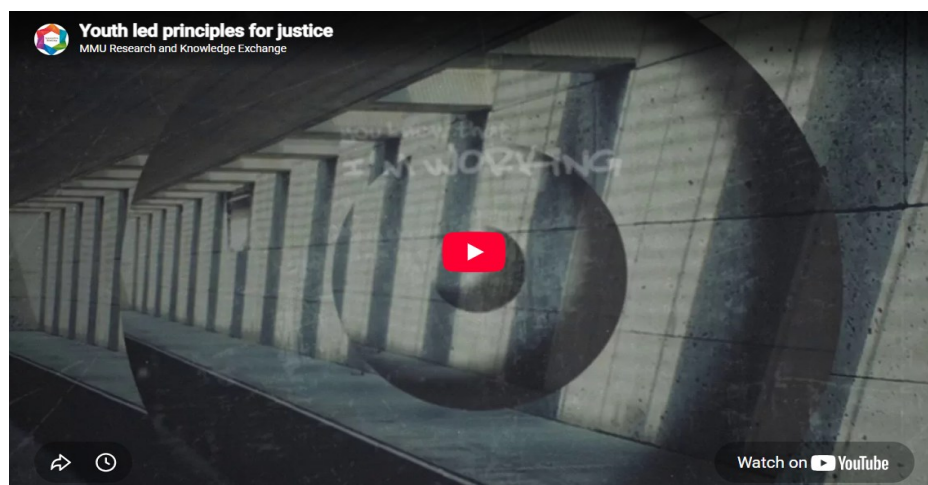
The methodology unfolded across three phases, each building on the previous one and each designed to progressively deepen children's involvement in the construction of knowledge.

The first phase focused on engagement. Over a period of six months, the assigned researcher had informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with 50 justice-involved children nominated by youth justice practitioners across Greater Manchester. The criteria for involvement were deliberately loose; children had to be aged between 15 and 18 with experience of involvement with regional youth justice services. No assumption was made about what the project would produce or what form it would take. Interviews explored their experiences of the youth justice system, how they felt the system could better understand their needs, and what activities and interests the project could draw on in subsequent stages. It was through these conversations that a shared sense of direction began to emerge, shaped by the children themselves rather than by a predetermined research agenda.

The second phase centred on co-developed creative workshops. Drawing on the interests expressed by the children in the first phase, three workshops were designed collaboratively; a boxing workshop, a grime lyric writing workshop, and an urban art workshop. The choice of activities was itself a methodological statement. By hosting workshops in spaces and around activities where the children were confident and skilled, the project deliberately reversed the usual power dynamics of

research, placing the young people in the position of experts rather than subjects. As Smithson and Jones (2021) note, the research team had no experience of boxing, rapping or urban art, whereas the children were confident in these spaces and flourished when given the opportunity to teach adults about their worlds. Each workshop combined participation in the chosen activity with structured reflection on the young people's experiences of the justice system, generating rich data that formal interviews alone could not have produced. Not all children participated in the workshops; 28 attended at least one, five of whom attended more than one. Those who did not attend the workshops had nonetheless contributed to shaping the project through their earlier interviews, developing what Franks (2011) describes as 'pockets of participation.'

The third phase involved co-analysis and dissemination. Initial thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and workshop outputs was conducted by the research team, producing a set of themes grounded in what the children had said. These themes were then brought back to three of the children who had attended the workshops, in a two-part analysis workshop. They were invited to challenge, revise and re-explain the themes based on their own experience, and their input led to significant reformulation. Some themes were expanded, others collapsed, and the language was revised throughout to reflect how the children themselves understood their situation. After a series of iterations, eight themes were agreed upon, which became the founding principles of the PYP framework. The children then decided how they wanted these principles to be disseminated. They chose to create lyrics, working with the grime artist who had facilitated the earlier workshop, which were subsequently set to a short film used to introduce PYP to practitioners and policymakers. [Youth led principles for justice](#)



This three-phase process enacted, in practice, several of the conditions for genuine systemic participation identified in the preceding section. Children were not

consulted after decisions had been made; they shaped the direction of the project from its earliest stages. Power was actively rebalanced through methodological choices. A feedback loop was built into the design. And the outputs were disseminated in a form chosen by the children themselves.

3.3 The Eight PYP Principles

The eight principles that constitute the PYP framework did not emerge from academic theory or professional consensus; they emerged from the lives and words of justice-involved children. Each principle captures something that the children identified through the workshops and interviews, as missing or distorted in their experience of the youth justice system. Together they constitute a coherent reorientation of practice, from a system that processes children towards a system that works with them. They can be understood as organised around four interconnected themes.

- 1 The first theme concerns listening and understanding. The principle of ***letting children participate (principle 1)*** addresses the most fundamental failure identified by the children; their systematic exclusion from meaningful involvement in the processes that concerned them. As one child put it, *'They really should start listening to you... but they just go through what they've got to do. That's their procedure. That's their job.'* The principle asks practitioners to make their commitment to working in partnership explicit from the first contact, and to create genuine space for the child's views at every stage of their work together. ***Always unpicking why (principle 2)*** builds directly on this, it asks practitioners to move beyond the consequences of behaviour to its causes, creating space for children to share the personal circumstances, unmet needs, fears and aspirations that shape their decisions. Understanding why a child has acted as they have is, on this account, a precondition for meaningfully supporting them to act differently.
- 2 The second theme addresses structural context. ***Acknowledging limited life chances (principle 3)*** reflects the child's acute awareness of the constraints on their options. Many described feeling that the aspiration to *'be whatever you want'* was a fiction for people in their situation: *'You need money behind you and stuff like that... It's just how it is.'* The principle asks practitioners to place an acknowledgement of the role of structural disadvantage and systemic failures at the heart of their practice, rather than locating responsibility for offending solely in the individual child. ***Helping***

problem solve (principle 4) builds on this acknowledgement: recognising that structural disadvantage cannot be wished away, it asks practitioners to work collaboratively with children to identify what can change and what practical support can be put in place, approaching problem-solving as a co-creative process rather than a professional prescription.

- 3 The third theme concerns building a future. **Helping children find better options (principle 5) and developing their ambitions (principle 6)** together address the need to move beyond the immediate intervention towards a longer-term vision of what the child's life might look like. The principle of finding better options recognises that decisions about a child's future are most likely to be acted on when the child has been a genuine partner in making them; things '*done with*' rather than '*done to*' children. Developing ambitions asks practitioners to nurture children's positive goals, interests and sense of identity, recognising that the development of a non-offending self-concept is supported by having something to work towards, not only by the avoidance of negative consequences. Remembering **it is their choice (principle 7)** completes this theme: as one child said, '*You can't just do it because somebody says, You've got to do this... You do it because you want to do it.*' The principle asks practitioners to keep the child's agency at the centre of their work, and to measure progress by the distance travelled by the individual child rather than by compliance with externally set targets.

- 4 The fourth theme addresses social recognition. **Affording children a fresh start (principle 8)** responds to the stigma that many of the children described as one of the most significant barriers to change. Children who had made efforts to move away from offending frequently found that others continued to see them through the lens of their past behaviour: '*People just see the old me. I want people to see... I'm not like that now. I've changed.*' The principle asks practitioners and institutions alike to actively welcome children's efforts to create a new future, recognising that social recognition of change is as important as the internal motivation to change.

Taken together, these eight principles constitute what the PYP Engagement Framework describes as a **framework designed by children, rather than a rigid set of steps which must be followed in a particular way or order**. They are not a protocol to be applied uniformly but a set of relational commitments to be adapted to each child and each context. Their significance as a contribution to systemic child participation lies precisely in their origin. They represent what justice-involved

children, given genuine space and support to contribute, identified as the principles that should guide the adults who work with them. These principles offer an implementation-ready application of the “***Meaningful Elements for Partnerships with Children***” identified by children and young people globally, proposed as essential to building new, meaningful partnerships with children for sustained justice solutions (Davidson, Hope and Shields, 2023:3).

3.4 From Co-Creation to Embedded Practice: Facilitators and Barriers

The co-creation of PYP was not an end in itself. The project's second aim, alongside producing the framework, was to embed it in everyday youth justice practice across the Greater Manchester region. This ambition distinguishes PYP from many participatory research projects that successfully generate knowledge with marginalised groups but fail to translate that knowledge into sustained institutional change. Understanding how PYP moved from co-created framework to embedded practice, and what facilitated and hindered that process, is essential to assessing its significance as an example of systemic child participation.

The primary dissemination mechanism was a series of regional professional working groups, through which the PYP framework and its eight principles were presented to youth justice practitioners across the ten Greater Manchester youth offending teams and discussed in detail. These sessions produced a suite of practitioner resources and guides, designed with practitioners to support the embedding of PYP principles into daily practice, and made freely available through the project website. Each of the ten youth offending teams then nominated a ***Participation Champion***, a practitioner whose role was to support colleagues in understanding the framework and embedding its principles in their everyday work. Two youth justice practitioners from each team were trained as Champions, creating a network of twenty practitioners committed to sustaining participatory approaches across the region.

Follow-up assessment conducted approximately eighteen months after the project's conclusion found evidence of concrete change in practice. In one team, a set of risk-focused assessment questions had been replaced with PYP principles. In another, the principles had been integrated into supervision sessions with children. A third team had established working groups with children to involve them in decision-making about the development and delivery of new initiatives and programmes. A Head of Youth Justice Service described the impact directly, *'Because of the work we've done around participation in youth justice, young people are being worked with in a different way and that is a direct result of this project.'*

Beyond the initial co-creation phase, PYP has continued to evolve through the ongoing engagement of practitioners with children in their daily work. The working groups established within some teams, through which children contribute to the design of new initiatives and programmes, represent a living extension of the participatory logic that produced PYP; a continuous feedback loop between the experiences of children and the evolution of professional practice, ensuring that the framework remains responsive to the young people it serves.

These outcomes, however, were uneven, and the barriers to embedding PYP were as instructive as the facilitators. The most significant structural barrier was the risk-based and enforcement-led culture of youth justice systems more broadly. Even where individual practitioners were committed to participatory approaches, their efforts were constrained by organisational cultures that prioritised compliance and risk management, by prescriptive working requirements set by management, and by time pressures that left little space for the kind of sustained relational work that PYP requires. Some Participation Champions reported frustration at colleagues' resistance, rooted in a view that listening to children was incompatible with holding them accountable.

A second barrier was the tendency to treat participation as a discrete activity rather than an embedded way of working. Several Champions noted that their teams had achieved what one described as 'quick wins', producing reports on changes made in response to children's views, without fundamentally altering the principles underpinning day-to-day practice. This tension, between a commitment to children's rights and participation on the one hand, and a system oriented towards risk control and enforcement on the other, is not unique to Greater Manchester or to England; it is a structural feature of youth justice systems in most jurisdictions. The experience of embedding PYP suggests that this tension cannot be resolved at the level of individual practitioners alone, it requires sustained, high-level institutional commitment to reframing what youth justice is for.

3.5 PYP Assessed Against the Conditions for Genuine Systemic Participation

What began as a series of informal conversations in youth justice offices across Greater Manchester ended as something rare in the field, a framework of professional practice shaped, from its earliest stages, by the children it was designed to serve. The journey from those first interviews to a suite of practitioner resources adopted across ten youth justice teams illustrates, in concrete and traceable terms, what systemic child participation in justice can look like when it is genuinely pursued.

The children's contributions did not remain confined to the research process. Through the co-analysis workshops, their experiences and insights were translated into eight principles that now guide how practitioners approach every child they work with. The Participation Champions network, the regional working groups, and the practitioner resources ensured that what the children had said travelled beyond the research team into institutional practice. In teams where embedding was deepest, the principles visibly changed how practitioners worked, replacing risk-focused assessment questions, shaping supervision sessions, and creating spaces for young people to contribute to the design of new programmes.

It is worth clarifying what the grime lyrics and short film represented in this process. They were not a therapeutic output of PYP, nor an illustration of what PYP involves in practice. They were a dissemination tool, chosen by the children themselves to introduce their framework to practitioners and policymakers in a form that felt authentic to them. The choice is itself significant, it reflects the children's ownership of the process and their determination to shape how their contribution was presented to the institutions they were seeking to change. As for the reach of PYP across the region, all ten Greater Manchester youth justice teams adopted the framework, meaning that in principle every child passing through those services benefits from practitioners trained in its principles. In practice, embedding has been uneven, shaped by organisational cultures and individual commitment, and deepening that embedding remains an ongoing process.

Nuances remain and acknowledging them honestly strengthens rather than diminishes the case. The feedback loop back to the children who created PYP was limited. They were not systematically informed of how their principles were being used across the region, or what difference their participation had made to the children who came after them. The embedding of PYP was uneven across services, shaped by organisational cultures and individual commitment rather than by structural mandate. And the research process, while deliberately inclusive of children facing compounded disadvantage, involved only male participants, leaving the perspectives of girls and young women outside the framework's founding knowledge base.

Does PYP constitute genuine systemic child participation in justice? Assessed against Lundy's (2007) conditions of space, voice, audience and influence, the answer is substantially yes. Safe and meaningful spaces were created. Diverse forms of voice were facilitated and valued. The children's contributions reached an audience with the power and responsibility to act on them. And their influence is traceable in the principles that now shape professional practice across a region. What PYP also demonstrates is that systemic participation is not a threshold to be crossed once but

a practice to be sustained and deepened over time. Its most significant contribution may be precisely this, showing that the conditions for genuine systemic participation can be created, and that when they are, children's expertise produces frameworks that neither research nor professional experience alone could have generated.

This accumulated experience constitutes a mature foundation. What it has achieved, above all, is the translation of children's rights into legislative and institutional frameworks: the formal recognition that children in conflict with the law are rights-holders, not objects of tutelary protection or purely punitive response. What remains less developed in many other regions, is the complementary question that this article has sought to address; how children's own expertise and lived experience of justice systems can be systematically integrated into the design, evaluation and reform of those systems. The normative foundation is in place; the methodological infrastructure for genuine systemic child participation is still being built.

The experience of PYP offers methodological insights that may be relevant to this process. Three insights stand out.

The first concerns the conditions for genuine co-creation. PYP's most distinctive feature was not its eight principles, but the process through which those principles were produced. Children were engaged through activities they chose, in spaces they found safe, over a period of time long enough to build genuine trust. They were positioned as experts rather than beneficiaries. Their contributions were taken through a structured process of analysis and validation, and the results were presented back to them for revision before being adopted as the framework's foundations. These conditions, sustained engagement, safe spaces, genuine power-sharing, and iterative feedback, are not specific to England or to youth justice; they are transferable design principles for participatory processes in any justice context.

The second insight concerns the relationship between systemic participation and institutional culture. PYP's experience in Greater Manchester illustrates that the most significant barrier to systemic child participation is not methodological but cultural. Where organisational cultures prioritise risk management and procedural compliance, the space available for genuine participation contracts, regardless of the quality of the participatory methodology deployed. This tension, between a commitment to children's participation and rights on one hand, and a system oriented towards risk control and enforcement on the other, is not unique to England. It is a structural feature of most youth justice systems, where advances in rights-based legislation have not always been matched by equivalent transformation in the cultures and practices of the institutions that implement them.

The third insight concerns the importance of sustained institutional commitment. PYP was not embedded through good intentions alone; it required a dedicated network of Participation Champions, a suite of practitioner resources, and ongoing engagement between the university and the youth justice services long after the original research concluded. Over 10 years since its original conception in 2017, PYP continues to impact practice and subsequently the lives of justice involved children. It was revised and re-launched in 2023, to take account of practitioner assessments of its use and new areas of research, such as trauma-informed practice. Training resources were updated and provided to youth justice professionals. Feedback from practitioners include, that **PYP is “a very positive framework which gives the information necessary for a truly child focused approach.”** A Senior Head of Youth Justice Services stated that, **“PYP doesn't play a part; it's the way we work. It's the way we plan; it's the way we assess; it's the way we engage; it's the way we review, it's the way we close, and it's the way we advocate and articulate on behalf of the children.”** One Youth Justice team across the Greater Manchester region has seen a reduction in re-offending and detention rates. These reductions have been attributed to the ‘hard-wiring’ of PYP in youth justice service provision. This demonstrates that systemic child participation does not sustain itself it requires investment, governance structures that protect it from competing institutional pressures, and leadership that treats children's expertise as a legitimate and valued input into how services are designed and delivered.

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