Help or hindrance? Rethinking interventions with 'troubled youth'

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Abstract
This paper considers experiences of penal and voluntary-sector interventions in the lives of young people labelled as 'troubled' or 'at risk' of criminal behaviour. Drawing on data from a case-study conducted in the north of England, this paper focuses on the narratives of young people 'on the margins' of society who were involved with a range of community-based interventions, specifically youth clubs, a support group and a mandatory youth justice course. We consider how young people experience and respond to stigmatising elements prevalent in the structured interventions and everyday interactions with the institutions and agencies intended to support them. We argue that 'promotive' relationships between young people and the adults working with them enable young people to challenge risk-based identities and navigate the barriers they face.

Keywords: youth justice; criminology; youth work; stigma; affective relationships; youth outcomes

1 Introduction

Over the last few decades, youth justice policy in England and Wales has been underpinned by a dominant discourse depicting young people as risky. This has led to a range of punitive policy responses (Goldson and Muncie, 2015; Goldson, 2005; McAra and McVie, 2005). In recent years, however, the punitive landscape has begun to change, albeit in an ad-hoc manner; diversionary measures have largely increased and a more nuanced, hybrid approach to service provision has developed (cf. Bateman, 2020; Smith and Gray, 2019). But, despite a welcome shift away from punitive intervention, there is evidence that much youth-focused policy and practice (particularly youth justice) continues to socially exclude (Cunneen *et al.*, 2017), stigmatise (Deakin *et al.*, 2020) and reduce positive outcomes for young people (Motz *et al.*, 2019; Deakin *et al.*, 2020). In particular, young people from labelled communities[1] continue to be constructed as 'risky' and identified through government policy and local strategies as 'in need of intervention'. 'Risky youth' are the main focus of policies and practices targeted at individuals,[2] families[3] or young people within communities.[4] Practice ranges from state-led interventions focusing specifically on justice to voluntary-sector interventions promoting social and educational inclusion, and is often presented as support for young people in need of protection (Brown, 2015).

This paper focuses on 'risky' young people's[5] experiences of community interventions, within the public and voluntary sectors, from policing to community support and youth justice intervention.

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[1]We use this term to describe areas and communities stigmatised through multiple disadvantages (economic, social, cultural or political). See Wacquant's (2007) discussion of vilified neighbourhoods.

[2]See e.g. school disciplinary measures, targeted policing practices or mandatory youth justice interventions.

[3]E.g. the 'Troubled Families Programme' (HM Government, 2017).

[4]Such as community-based youth clubs or group initiatives.

[5]Young people in the PROMISE study included those aged fourteen to twenty-nine in line with definitions used by the European Commission; however, most of our participants were under twenty-one.

Drawing on data from a case-study conducted in the north of England as part of the PROMISE[6] research between 2016 and 2018, we consider some of the consequences (intended and unintended) of everyday interaction and structured interventions designed to manage and support young people identified as 'marginalised' and 'on the edges of criminality'. We consider the stigmatising nature of some interventions and, conversely, point towards features that may mitigate these effects. Central to our argument are key themes of stigma and exclusion within inhibitive elements of interventions, and affective dyadic relationships within those that are enabling.

2 Stigmatised identities: the construction and management of 'risky' youth

Images of 'risky' youth, in England and Wales, are perpetuated by frequent reporting in the populist press about 'out-of-control' young people (Goldson and Muncie, 2015) alongside the depiction of a small hard core of 'dysfunctional' or 'problem families' (Crossley, 2015). These blaming discourses (Fergusson, 2016) typically position young people, and their 'dysfunctional' families, as the cause of their own problematic situations, ignoring the role of structural factors, such as poverty, inequality and injustice.

Policy responses to the youth 'problem' have largely taken the shape of an increase in management and control through informal, formal and legal structures (Fionda, 2005) firmly grounded in the political rhetoric of punitiveness (Downes and Morgan, 2012). Despite recent moves towards diversion and a sizeable reduction in young people entering the youth justice system (Smith and Gray, 2019), other recent interventions have remained steadfastly punitive. Examples include 'zero-tolerance' punishment in schools (described as inhumane by the National Education Union (Weale, 2019)), oppression and exclusion within the youth justice system (Cunneen et al., 2017), increased levels of surveillance of young people from labelled communities and the overrepresentation of young people from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds in stop-and-search statistics (Irwin-Rogers and Shuter, 2017) and within the child secure estate (Bateman, 2020).

Attempts have been made at developing a more positive *policy approach* to the management of young people, suggesting that the picture is more nuanced and much less straightforward than the bleak 'risk' narrative may suggest. Within youth justice, desistance approaches focusing on transformational change are becoming more visible (Hampson, 2018; Fitzpatrick et al., 2015). For instance, the shift in emphasis from a deficit model of youth justice towards a desistance-oriented approach is evident in the AssetPlus assessment model (Hampson, 2018). On paper, AssetPlus places an emphasis on understanding a child's behaviour, recognising their protective factors and developing their strengths 'during intervention to support positive change' (Baker, 2014, p. 7). In practice, though, as Hampson notes in her research, 'youth justice practitioners appear not to have been able to apply desistance theory, resulting in 'business as usual' assessments and deficit-focused intervention plans' (Hampson, 2018, p. 18).

There are (often unintended) consequences for young people who experience punitive formal interactions and interventions. Whether these occur within schools, the care or welfare structures or the youth justice system, punitive interventions imbue a climate of criminalisation and stigma leading to reduced life chances (cf. Motz et al., 2019). As negative labels become entrenched, young people can become marginalised from mainstream society or exhibit antisocial or criminal behaviour (Deakin et al., 2020), thereby increasing their risk of a criminal record and reducing life opportunities (Stacey, 2018). The public stigmatisation of specific groups of young people – those with a criminal record (Deakin et al., 2020), teenage mothers (Kidger, 2005) or care-experienced young people (Taylor and Fitzpatrick, 2006) – results in marginalisation and a reduction in life chances for these groups (Deakin et al., 2020). Significantly, the discourse of collective public fear and disgust offers justifications, in the interests of public safety, for the safeguarding of normative social structures and for the use of 'risk-reductive' punitive measures. It is well established that young people from labelled

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communities are disproportionately targeted and affected by punitive interventions, for instance through harsher treatment within the criminal justice system for relatively minor offences (Bateman, 2012; McAra and McVie, 2010). The stigmatised identities of criminalised young people are significant factors in their marginalisation and reduced life chances (Deakin *et al.*, 2020).

3 Affective dyadic relationships

There are, of course, examples of young people who have thrived within the varied statutory and voluntary interventions designed to manage and support 'risky youth'. Even the most punitive of interventions is likely to be able to provide evidence of positive outcomes and transformational change for some young people. While there are many factors that promote developmental change, much of the research has focused on the critical role of affective dyadic relationships, often with an adult working in a professional role. Research in this area supports the contention raised in this paper that relationships with adults working in the justice, welfare or voluntary sectors can play a crucial role in affecting change in young people's lives (cf. Creaney, 2014; Case and Haines, 2015; McNeill *et al.*, 2012; Robertson *et al.*, 2016).

Relationships that make a difference to young people are often termed 'caring', 'supportive' or 'positive' relationships (Laursen and Birmingham, 2003; Nesmith and Christophersen, 2014). These relationships have been found to support young people to develop resilience and thus increase their ability to cope with adversity (Mota *et al.*, 2016; Robertson *et al.*, 2016). They are a critical determinant of successful development, discussed extensively in the literature on mentoring (cf. Rhodes *et al.*, 2006) but rarely in discussions about service delivery (cf. Smith and Gray, 2019) or youth justice intervention plans (Hampson, 2018).

Affective dyadic relationships can support the key turning points in young people's lives (Nolas, 2014; Wood, 2016; Mason, 2015; Munford and Sanders, 2015; Bryant and Ellard, 2015; Lister, 2007; Ekman and Amnå, 2012) and provide a channel for the transference of social capital (Coleman, 1990). More specifically, relationships with adults in authority can provide structure for young people that enables the development of boundaries and routines, thereby repositioning authority figures as sources of safety rather than of limitation (Mottern, 2012). It is this 'recasting of authority' (Harragan *et al.*, 2018), from agents of punishment and control to sources of guidance and reassurance, that supports young people to become active agents and seize development opportunities.

In making sense of our research findings, we draw on the two areas of literature discussed above: stigmatised identities and affective dyadic relationships. We seek to contribute to an understanding of how affective dyadic relationships between young people and the adults working with them can support young people and promote a shift away from risk-based identities. Before turning to the empirical findings, we set out the methodological approach used throughout the PROMISE project and present the ethical and contextual considerations relevant to this particular case-study.

4 Methodology and analysis: observation, interviews and arts-based research (ABR) methods

The case-study data discussed here were gathered as part of the H2020 PROMISE project[7] exploring the social engagement of young people who may be stigmatised or marginalised through negative representations or experiences. Young people were included based on their participation in a variety of youth-work settings. It focuses on a marginalised subset of young people labelled by authorities, and through public and media discourse, as 'troubled youth' or 'at risk' of offending.

The data were collected using a two-stage process drawing on elements of the ethnographic method combined with ABR methods (Barone and Eisner, 2011). The first stage of the fieldwork focused on observation at the research sites and becoming familiar figures to those who accessed the sites. This allowed the researchers to participate in activities and begin to appreciate the young people's interests,

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[7]See *ibid.*

behaviour and reasons for attending. There were five research sites accessed; four were youth clubs and support groups run by different third-sector organisations, whilst the fifth site was a creative-arts course also run by a third-sector organisation but as part of a statutory youth justice provision (YOT). Unlike the attendees of the other groups, young people in the fifth site were obliged to attend or face sanctions for not doing so (see Table 1 for additional information on the research sites).

The young people involved in the research (twelve male and nine female) came from different backgrounds (six Black British, twelve White British, three shared heritage Black British/White) and had varied experiences; however, there were some significant similarities both within and across the groups. For example, all but one of the six care leavers had served community-based orders following a criminal conviction; half of the young people attending the youth justice course were looked-after children who were in local-authority care; in addition to this group, there were a small minority of children across the other groups who had also been subject to criminal justice interventions. What linked all of the young people engaged within this project were their experiences of conflict with authority figures and organisations, such as the police, being labelled as 'risky' youth and being the subject of targeted punitive sanctions and criminal justice attention.

At three of the sites, the research team engaged in arts-based methods with the participants.[8] This aided the young people in telling their own stories, using images and other art that they had created in order to express feelings and opinions that may otherwise have been difficult to articulate.

The second, overlapping stage involved conducting interviews with young people accessing the services and interventions. Twenty-one young people took part in the interviews. Most (twenty young people) were aged between thirteen and twenty-four years old. We also included one older respondent – a youth worker and former care leaver, aged thirty, who was able to reflect on her past experiences. A 'skeleton interview schedule' was designed to facilitate subsequent cross-case analysis and this was adapted for each specific type of group (i.e. youth club, support group or the mandatory course). While this loosely structured schedule was necessary to ensure meaningful multi-case analysis, it was flexible enough to allow participants to guide the interviews and more freely present their own narratives.

All interviews were recorded and informed consent from each of the participants was secured. The data, including the creative outputs, were anonymised to remove any identifying details, with pseudonyms being used instead of names.

There are three important observations to note in relation to ethics and research practice. The first relates to the positionality of the researchers. The role of the researchers was not neutral, and this could potentially have impacted upon participation and engagement of some of the young people. Access to each of the research sites was negotiated through various gatekeepers, who themselves were viewed as authority figures and were usually the people who went on to introduce the researchers to the young people. Therefore, from the outset, the researchers were seen by the young people as semi-authority figures aligned with the youth workers who were running the groups. However, these workers were generally not regarded as formal or authoritarian figures in the same way as many of the young people regarded teachers and social workers, and so they were seen more as supportive mentors who often had positive relationships with the young people. Despite having a connection with 'authority', the research team were typically viewed without suspicion, which in turn aided the development of trusting research relationships.

A second, related, issue was the varying levels of engagement within the activities and interviews. Whilst the majority of the interviews saw the young people keen to share their experiences, there were some instances of reluctance and disengagement. For example, one of the participants on the YOT course decided not to participate with the interview because it would be 'boring'; a further two participants from the same site consented to being interviewed but were then not forthcoming with their responses, resulting in notably short interviews. In these cases, the young men were also vocally

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[8]Photo-elicitation was used with the care leavers' support group and YOT groups – three focus groups were conducted with six and eight young people using the photo-elicitation method. Drama activities were used with Youth Group 1. No additional arts-based methods were used at Youth Group 2 or 3.

Table 1. Research sites

Research sites	Description	Attendees	Activities	Number of interviews
Youth Club 1	A voluntary-sector youth club for young women, organised by a local voluntary youth organisation and running two evenings per week. It is held in a large community-led space with breakout rooms and a dance studio	Between 5 and 10 young women	Activities range from art, multimedia and physical activities to talks about personal, financial social and health matters. Music and dance are particularly popular activities	2 females
Youth Club 2	Run by the same voluntary organisation that runs Youth Club 1 and provides a similar service for boys and young men in the same area for two evenings per week. It is held in a large community-led space with a separate basketball court	Between 10 and 20 boys and young men	The main activities are basketball and computer games	5 males
Youth Club 3	A partner organisation to Youth Clubs 1 and 2 providing a service for young men and women in a different area one evening per week. The club is held in a very small room that limits the types of activities it can support	Attended by 5–15 young people	There are no organised activities (other than using the art materials provided). The young people talk and play on their phones	1 male, 1 female
Young Care Leaver Support Group	A voluntary-sector weekly support group set up for young people, aged 16 and over, who have left the statutory care system for 'looked-after children'	Attended by between 15 and 20 young people	Activities range from talks about personal, financial social and health matters to art projects and physical activities. The young people are provided with a meal cooked on site by the voluntary-sector staff	6 females
Youth Offending Team (YOT)	Mandatory art course commissioned by the statutory youth justice agency and provided by a local art-based outreach group with experience in delivering creative courses to the penal sector. The course ran every day for 3 weeks and the young people were mandated to attend all sessions as part of their court order	Attended by 7 young men and 1 young woman serving community orders supervised by the youth justice staff	Activities involved drama, drawing, multimedia, photography and music workshops delivered by a team of 5 arts-based practitioners	5 males, 1 female

dismissive of the activities involved in the arts course, and sought to distance themselves from both the group and the tasks on offer by resisting any efforts to become engaged and physically distancing themselves by sitting separately from the rest of the group. These instances of refusals, resistances to follow accepted norms of behaviour, the backlashes to authority figures and the general apathy expressed were considered by the research team to be interesting responses to their situations that demanded greater consideration.

A final concern for us was to ensure that the research did not add to or perpetuate the stigma experienced by the participants (O'Connor and Earnest, 2011). Our methodological approach was built upon an understanding of our roles as privileged researchers sharing in the experiences of young people. As such, we sought to break down power relations by using methods that valued and respected the participants' opinions and perceptions of their experiences and focusing on their roles as active agents, responding to stigmatising and marginalising discourses.

4.1 Analysis

The data collected during the case-study were extensive and varied, and could broadly be categorised into two sections: textual material and non-textual material. The former included the transcripts from both individual interviews and the group workshops, respondent memos and documents from field diaries that included details of participant observations. The non-textual material encompassed all the creative and audio-visual material that the young people had produced during the sessions, alongside the documentary artist's drawings that captured some of these sessions.

Data were analysed using Nvivo 11 to code, organise and develop concepts and themes. This allowed the different forms of non-textual and textual data to be linked via thematic coding. The dominant themes that emerged from the analysis centred on young people's experiences of stigma and trauma; their responses to the barriers, challenges and opportunities they faced; and the role of state and voluntary-sector interventions in their lives. The following analysis hones in on the key themes of stigma and labelling within inhibitive elements of interactions and interventions, and affective dyadic relationships within those that are enabling.

5 Inhibiting and unintentional: when interactions and interventions label

Young people from 'marginalised' communities face multiple everyday interactions and interventions designed to manage their potential risk and encourage them to engage in positive life choices. Approaches to young people deemed 'risky' (or in danger of becoming so) can take many forms and occur in many sites – from school-based interventions and youth-club provision to street-level interactions with the police, social-work practice and criminal justice sanctions.[9] Whether those provisions are voluntary or statutory, organised or casual, they can have unintended consequences serving to further negative perceptions of these young people as 'problematic'. One result of this can be to increase stigmatisation and, relatedly, encourage increasing disengagement and marginalisation (Deakin *et al.*, 2020). This is not unique to any one sector. Examples of such inhibiting effects that were felt by the young people in this study were seen in the youth justice sector, within the education system, with the police and social workers and, albeit far less commonly, within third-sector provisions for young people. It is, however, far from straightforward to assume any direct links between any one agency and the feelings of stigmatisation.

What was revealed through the data gathered for our project was far more complex, involving multi-faceted relationships with certain groups, such as social workers, and with individual authority

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[9]For example, included here are school discipline measures including temporary and permanent exclusion, youth clubs set up within 'marginalised' communities, heavy policing of young people on the streets of 'troubled' neighbourhoods, social-work intervention designed to manage specific communities, e.g. care leavers, and mandatory youth and criminal justice programmes for those who become justice involved.

figures. These relationships often had a confusing maelstrom of both stigmatising and supporting elements involved. It was also apparent that the majority of the young people engaged in the study, regardless of gender or ethnicity, experienced multiple and often overlapping sites of conflict, which frequently involved more than one (semi)authority figure. Related narratives often featured instances in which such conflict focused on young people simply because of their youth, but also because of the neighbourhood in which they were located and their 'availability' through occupying a public space at a particular time (cf. Newburn, 2011).

Within this section, we include interactions with the main sites of authority (and conflict) in young people's lives outside of the family: the police, social worker interventions, schools and youth interventions (youth clubs, support groups).

5.1 Police intervention

There were a significant number of situations described by the participants in which they had felt targeted by the police whilst in a public space, including being moved on to a different area, being asked what they were doing and being accused of things that they had not done. These types of police interventions are often based upon a risk-factor-reduction model, which focuses on identifying and limiting so-called 'risky' behaviours through activities such as surveillance, monitoring and, at times, incapacitation (Smith, 2018; McAra and McVie, 2016; Case *et al.*, 2015). Regardless of whether or not the young person had a criminal record, there was a universal feeling that they were judged before any discussions had taken place. This was particularly evident for those in neighbourhoods branded as 'problematic' or criminogenic, who are unlikely to be strangers to unwanted police attention (Flood-Page *et al.*, 2000; McAra and McVie, 2005). Troy lived in one such area and described how the police often targeted his friends: 'They chase us for no reason; follow us for no reason. When we just ride our bikes like that, they actually ride behind …. They're grown men – don't they have nothing better to do?' (Troy, aged thirteen, Youth Club 2).

They reported being made to feel 'suspect' or 'guilty', despite there being no justification for being treated in this manner. An equally common concern expressed by many of the young people was the feeling that they were restricted in what they could say to police officers without exacerbating the situation, as Jo, a young Black woman living in a deprived area of the city, highlighted: 'They can tell you to shut the eff up if they want to. Like with no cares in the world. But if you was to tell them to shut the eff up, that's one charge on your name' (Jo, aged nineteen, Youth Club 1).

An overwhelming sense of injustice was abundantly clear when police interactions were discussed (see also Smith, 2012).

Other instances were felt by the young people to be more specifically targeted at them, often influenced, in their view, by particular traits that they possessed, such as being 'in care', or were linked to their past offending or antisocial behaviour. Many care leavers involved in the project felt there was an association between being in care and being labelled by the police as 'troublemakers'. Indeed, being care-experienced makes it more likely that a child comes to the attention of youth justice agencies (Day *et al.*, 2020). This feeds into a stigmatising and criminalising identity for those young people (cf. Taylor and Fitzpatrick, 2006; Deakin *et al.*, 2020), regardless of any history of criminal offending.

By promoting approaches, such as the use of police discretion, that are designed to reduce risk and manage those who have offending histories or who have been deemed at risk of offending (and therefore avoid criminalisation of this population), the police and other criminal justice-based interventions have unintentionally created or perpetuated stigmatisation of young people by creating a 'permanent suspect population' (McAra and McVie, 2005, p. 27).

Similar messages were evident in the arts-based data. One set of photos taken by young people attending the YOT programme depicted them having fun in ways that might be considered anti-authority, such as riding around in a discarded shopping trolley. Whilst such behaviour was regarded as harmless by the young people and could very much be seen as fairly typical teenage activities, there exists the potential for it to tip into being branded as 'causing trouble' by the police or other adults

when marginalised young people are involved. For the young people in our study, there was a tendency for adults to call out such behaviour too quickly as antisocial, resulting in restrictions on their activities and potential interventions from authorities, and with a sense of inevitability for some conflict with those authority figures.

For those who had negative interactions with the police, the stigma was felt so keenly that they were reluctant to call on the police them for help when needed:

> 'The police, I could never … if I, say for example, if I was arguing with Scott [boyfriend] and there was a big domestic of whatever like, I would not ring the police, like no matter how frightened I was. Because I feel that they are definitely against me…. I've had bad like, things with the police.' (Amelia, aged twenty-one, Young Care Leaver Support Group)

The overriding concerns were based upon mistrust of the police, their questionable ability to protect the young people in our study and the belief that calling the police could simply further the negative labelling already experienced due to what was thought to be a stigmatising agenda that existed amongst many officers (Harragan *et al.*, 2018).

5.2 Social-work interventions

It also makes it more likely that a child comes to the attention of youth justice agencies (Day *et al.*, 2020). Being on the cared-for continuum, from short-term interventions and occasional interactions with social workers to a constant presence throughout childhood, including stays in foster homes and care homes, offered another site for potential conflict, with care workers, foster carers and other young people presented as the agents of such conflict. Embarrassment evoked by this engagement with the care system and bullying from other children on account of being in care both culminated in feelings of stigmatisation (cf. Taylor and Fitzpatrick, 2006) as reported by some of our respondents. The impact of the transient nature of the support received by social-care staff were discussed extensively by those on this care continuum. Most felt ignored or that staff had no interest in communicating with them over major and traumatic decisions that were taken about their lives, such as splitting up siblings or having their own child removed.

Relationships with staff from statutory interventions and the social-care sector were frequently inherently problematic, particularly in cases (which were all too common) in which the young person had felt unfairly treated or prejudged: 'I just don't like them … because they just judge me' (Samantha, aged twenty-four, Young Care Leaver Support Group).

The high staff turnover in care homes, coupled with the frequent movement and displacement of young people in care, made forming meaningful and supportive relationships with staff very difficult, as highlighted by Amelia:

> ''Cos obviously when you go in care homes, like, it's different staff every day and like, yeah, you get attachments to them, like you bond, but it's not the same, you know, it's not the same … so it's just emotionally not good.' (Amelia, aged twenty-one, Young Care Leaver Support Group)

Such behaviours experienced by some of the young people served to exacerbate existing feelings of stigmatisation and create or reinforce positions of disengagement, frustration, exclusion and/or disenfranchisement.

5.3 School

Similarly, school was cited by the majority of our respondents as a site of conflict embedded in a culture of stigma. Becki reflected on her experiences of withdrawing from school after being labelled as a failure. She found herself unable to cope with schoolwork after missing classes due to a serious illness.

Her feelings of being overwhelmed were compounded by a teacher explicitly telling her that she would fail her exams. Becki felt so 'degraded' by the 'label of fail' (Harragan *et al.*, 2018; Deakin *et al.*, 2020) that was imposed upon her that she felt denied the opportunity to discredit this label through any actions to demonstrate the contrary (cf. Wood, 2016):

> 'it was the way he [her teacher] was saying it as well, very direct like "you're gonna fail", like. There wasn't like "if you do this, Becki, you're gonna fail". It was "you're gonna fail", like and after that he didn't even seem like he cared. He was like, he made his judgement … I really thought I was gonna fail and really got my mind to the point where I was gonna fail.' (Becki, aged eighteen, Youth Club 1)

A fairly common response to school-based stigma experienced by the young people in the PROMISE study was to become disengaged with school activities and withdraw from interaction. Danielle, after experiencing trauma at home and struggling to keep up at school, was branded with the 'label of fail'. The lack of support from her school led her to withdraw in classes and eventually withdraw from education: ' I thought to myself, I would fail it anyway … so I thought there's no point in staying just to fail it' (Danielle, aged twenty, Young Care Leaver Support Group).

Similarly, Samantha, who had also experienced significant trauma in her life and was also aware of the expectations of failure that had been assigned to her, felt unable to manage school: 'So, I just, I just thought "nah, I'm not gonna go back to school anymore". So, I just left' (Samantha, aged twenty-four, Young Care Leaver Support Group).

In these situations, young people seem to have responded to the 'label of fail' and other stigmatising presentations with expressions of apathy towards school (e.g. 'there's no point', 'I don't care anymore'). Their avoidance approach to school work, school life and education in general led to eventually dropping out of school altogether. For the majority, this was not seen as an active form of resistance; however, as Corrigan (1993) suggests, in these situations, young people are not only demonstrating agency; they are also questioning or rejecting normative processes to which they are so frequently subjected.

5.4 Criminal justice sanctions

Expressions of apathy were also common in relation to the stigmatising 'offender/risk' discourses embedded in the mandatory programmes and interventions run by youth justice teams. Many young people attending these programmes responded to what they saw to be the unnecessary/unjust use of the sanction and the pointless nature of it. While they were obliged to attend sessions, they made clear their underlying negativity towards the intervention by engaging at a very minimal level. We have defined this elsewhere as 'latent rejection' (Deakin *et al.*, 2020). This was evident among those young people who were required to participate in the Youth Offending Team intervention as part of a criminal justice sentence, and was also reflected in the stories of young care leavers required to meet social-work obligations in order to receive benefits or demonstrate their capability as a parent. Latent rejection, in these cases, is not an outright refusal to engage, but rather a superficial or reluctant involvement, sometimes coupled with a form of partial withdrawal and/or active resistance or criticism of the activities involved in the intervention. Irritation at the activities ('pointless'), the staff ('some of them are alright, but they don't fucking listen') or the perception of ineffectiveness of the intervention were targets for the young people's frustrations. For these participants, their actions were aimed at meeting the requirements imposed upon them, which were often seen as unfair ('I shouldn't even be here'). For young people who are so frequently denied agency and are subject to increasing controls, these state-led interventions often served to further feelings of powerlessness and social exclusion, thus making them counter-productive. Those interventions that are centred upon risk management may therefore perpetuate the difficulties already faced by this group, and inadvertently may also serve to deny or significantly reduce opportunities for positive social involvement.

It would be inaccurate to present all interventions and the responses of young people in a negative manner. Some of the young people involved in the PROMISE research project used what they saw as stigmatising and negative attention as an incentive to build their own resistance, perceiving it as a flashpoint for change, but on their own terms (Harragan *et al.*, 2018; Deakin *et al.*, 2020). There were also those who, despite experiencing some inhibiting elements of interventions, also felt enabled by other elements. It is the features of these enabling relationships and interventions, evident in the data, to which this paper will now turn.

6 Promotive and transformative: when interactions and interventions enable

It is a challenging task to pinpoint the features of interventions that young people experience as enabling or 'promotive'. As with any group, there is no one-size-fits-all: what is experienced and described as positive by one person may not be by another. However, within the narratives shared by young people taking part in our case-study, three key interrelated elements stood out as central to interventions experienced as promotive: (1) the existence of affective pro-social relationships with adult (semi) authority figures; (2) access to a 'safe space' (physical and dialogic) that allows the non-judgmental respectful sharing and challenging of ideas; (3) opportunities for development or hooks for change that encourage agency and support, the key turning points in young people's lives, enabling them to challenge negative labels. It is the presence of affective pro-social relationships that underpins Elements (2) and (3), allowing them to become possible.

6.1 The power of 'promotive' relationships

Relationships with adults in youth justice and youth-work settings play a vital role in transforming the lives of vulnerable young people (cf. Creaney, 2015; Case and Haines, 2015; McNeill *et al.*, 2012; Barry, 2007; Bradshaw *et al.*, 2008). Relationships that make a difference to young people, those that are (for the most part) seen as positive in a young person's life, are often termed 'caring', 'supportive' or 'positive' relationships (Laursen and Birmingham, 2003; Nesmith and Christophersen, 2014) and are well covered in the mentoring literature (cf. Rhodes *et al.*, 2006). They are a critical determinant of successful transition, particularly in the lives of young people identified as risky or marginalised (cf. Creaney, 2015; Case and Haines, 2015; McNeill *et al.*, 2012).

From the perspective of the young people in our study, a key feature of these successful relationships is their foundations of equality and mutual respect. Being treated with respect by an adult was discussed as a positive, and often a new, experience:

'You're made to feel quite equal anyway. So, like they don't, like the staff don't look down on you, … they're on your level, do you know what I mean? They chat to you, they involve you … they don't look down to you or anything.' (Sophie, aged twenty-three, Young Care Leaver Support Group discussing relationships with care support workers)

'[I] love the people that work here …. Everyone that works here, I love them. Because they like show me the respect that … like I don't usually get treated with respect, so like it's a new thing. (Jacob, aged seventeen, Youth Club 2, discussing relationships with youth workers based at the club)

The value of respectful relationships is evident in the narratives of the young people in our study. Many specifically discuss the personal affirmation, confidence and recognition that they provide. In essence, they generate 'the kind of affirmation that a person receives by being recognised by someone as someone' (Carleheden *et al.*, 2012, p. 1).

Sophie and Samantha voice the feelings of many of the young people when they describe being seen and heard by the youth workers at the care leavers' support group:

'she was dead nice, she helped me. I feel like she was, she cared, she listened.' (Sophie, aged twenty-three, Young Care Leaver Support Group)

'They're like family here now. Do you know what I mean? So, you can talk to them, you can have conversation with them. They wouldn't go and tell other people, like, your business. It's nice to have conversation with someone who understands you and stuff, and what you been through, because they've been through the same.' (Samantha, aged twenty-four, Young Care Leaver Support Group)

Samantha describes the high level of trust she has in the youth workers at the young care leavers' group. She trusts that they will listen to her, they will not break her confidence and they will understand her perspective, since many of them share experiences of leaving care. Others discussed the positive impact of respectful relationships on their own confidence: 'Like, they brought me out of my shell and made me, like, feel a lot happier. So, I love it here. They really are supportive' (Princess, aged twenty, Young Care Leaver Support Group).

Importantly, young people feel that respect is reciprocal within these relationships. These are flexible relationships, in which young people feel listened to and have freedom to express their thoughts and feelings (no matter, at times, how unpalatable these sometimes may be). Promotive relationships are those that challenge young people's views and encourage them to think through a problem and enact their agency. Kade mentioned how Sarah, one of the youth justice workers, supports the young people at the arts programme by 'not backing down':

'Yeah, they've been supportive of everyone, especially [Sarah (pseudonym)]. She's like never backed down from anyone and she always helps us when we're struggling or we don't know how to do something. And she's always there like helping us and everything.' (Kade, aged fourteen, Youth Offending Team Art Intervention)

Our respondents, on the whole, found the adults in youth-work settings challenged their views and actions by offering constructive support that provided them with structure and boundaries, confirming the findings of other studies (cf. Mottern, 2012).

In most cases, relationships with youth workers and other adult (semi-authority) figures encapsulate the ways in which youth-focused organisations act as agents of support for young people. Affective dyadic relationships were more frequently described by young people as developing with adults working in voluntary youth interventions (e.g. with youth workers in clubs and support groups) rather than in statutory sector settings (e.g. with youth justice and social workers). This may well reflect the roles and responsibilities of the professions working in each of these capacities; for instance, a support-group worker will not be required to engage in the processes of assessment or enforcement that are discharged by a youth justice or social worker. However, that said, promotive relationships also existed with statutory sector workers (as described by Kade, above). A common feature of these relationships is that they move away from hierarchical power-based models and are 'recast' as reassuring, not restricting. By valuing trust and respect, they encourage personal benefits such as confidence and help young people to enact their agency and navigate the barriers they encounter in various aspects of their everyday lives.

6.2 Access to a safe space

The notion of a 'safe space' in young people's lives has been discussed widely in the literature. From youth studies to urban geography, drama, education and psychology, most agree that access to a 'safe space' free of stigmatisation and surveillance is important for young people's development (McDermott and Graham, 2005).

Our data provide examples of physical spaces, provided by interventions or within schools, that were considered safe spaces to meet with friends, hang out and for young people to simply be

themselves: 'I just literally … like I'll sit around and chat and stuff' (Sophie, aged twenty-three, Young Care Leaver Support Group).

In particular, the youth groups felt 'safe and secure', 'like home' and somewhere that 'you feel wanted' (Respondents from the Young Care Leavers group). Many respondents valued the consistency of the support offered by adults working with them, particularly when other areas of their lives were unpredictable. This level of support was most common within the voluntary-sector organisations but was also noted, to a lesser extent, as part of the youth justice mandatory art intervention and in schools (particularly from pastoral staff).

There were a number of key features of these welcoming, safe spaces that emerged from the young people's narratives. They were defined as somewhere young people could be themselves, voice their opinions and felt confident that they would not be judged for their actions or opinions. Sophie explained that at the young care leavers' support group, she felt seen for who she had become rather than judged for previous misdemeanours: 'Because she [youth worker] seen me for who I am now, rather than back then. Rather than just reading my files, she actually listened to me and spoke to me before she even read any of my files' (Sophie, aged twenty-three, Young Care Leaver Support Group).

Young people in our study overwhelmingly felt that the youth interventions (and the relationships that had been forged within them) allowed the 'safe' exploration of ideas, values and identities without fear of judgment or shame. They provide a space for self-expression, self-discovery and 'trying on' different identities. These results corroborate the findings of previous work that value spaces where young people 'feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours' (Holley and Steiner, 2005, p. 50). A space where young people can express their ideas and be challenged in a formative way contributes to young people's development.

6.3 Opportunities for development and context for change

The relationships developed within the safe space enabled the young people in this study to make changes in their lives. Young people in our study shared examples of affective dyadic relationships across different sites with adults in varied roles, including youth workers and pastoral school teachers. Their stories included examples of gaining confidence and motivation, moments of realisation about previous behaviour and developing plans for the future:

> 'I wouldn't be where I am now if it wasn't for the café … 'cause they gave me support and I changed my life around, so ….' (Danielle, aged twenty, Young Care Leaver Support Group)

> 'From year ten, I realised, when one of the pastoral teachers, like, just put it into my head that I can't be doing certain things to make other people like me and stuff like that. So, I just learnt from that. Yeah, it just went all better, really.' (Marcus, aged eighteen, Youth Club 2)

Many of our respondents described the confidence gained from a relationship with a significant adult and discussed the transformative nature of these supportive relationships. Crucially, these relationships supported young people to identify and seize opportunities for development, whether that is continuing in education, applying for a job, finding accommodation or creating a home. Youth workers and other supportive adults were able to signpost additional services and opportunities and, perhaps more importantly, they bolstered confidence and encouraged developmental change. These relationships provided opportunities for the young people to be open to possibilities in their lives and to take the next step towards development (of career goals in Jacob's case) and change (avoiding problem behaviour in Aiden's case):

> 'I wanted to get a job, but it's like I wasn't motivated to get a job. And it's like coming here and Tej started speaking to me about jobs, and he made me like get off my… he made me get up and

think about it, and it's like, "I want to do that." I wouldn't have got a job, I wouldn't have got nothing like.' (Jacob, aged seventeen, Youth Club 2)

'Sometimes I feel that obviously I'm gonna do something bad. But I've always come round here and spoken to Andy about it, and Andy's helped me through it. He's given me advice on what I could do to help myself. And ever since I started coming here and talking to Andy, I've not been that person any more, 'cause I knew I've always had a lot of people I can go to no matter what.' (Aiden, aged eighteen, Youth Club 3)

The narratives of young people in our study clearly present the crucial role that 'promotive' relationships with adults play in their development that encourage the creation of turning points in young people's lives.

7 Conclusion

Our analysis raises questions about the deeply compromised connections between young people and the structures designed for their care and protection. An overriding theme, discussed by young people across the case-study, is the inhibiting effects of interventions that reproduce the stigma of a 'criminal' or 'risky' label (cf. Bateman, 2011; McAra and McVie, 2007; Case, 2006). The interventions discussed within this paper include those from both the statutory and the third sector (although it should be noted that there is not necessarily a neat line dividing the two; cf. Tomczak, 2017). What links these interventions together is that they are all designed and run to support and manage those young people who have been given the label of 'troubled', 'problematic' or 'at risk of offending'. However, whilst it has been argued that reducing criminal justice interventions and maximising diversionary responses for those who have been identified as 'risky' offers a more constructive approach that 'may mitigate the potential for damage that [criminal justice] system contact brings' (McAra and McVie, 2007, p. 336), policy-makers and practitioners alike must be mindful that such diversions and alternative interventions are not without their own risks, not least in the shape of the unintended consequences and potential for 'net-widening' (Prichard, 2010).

So, returning to the question in our title, what helps and what hinders? Our research has demonstrated that those organisations, or parts of organisations, that (re)produce stigma and limit the potential for future, constructive opportunities are – unsurprisingly – those that have at their core methods that engage in surveillance, monitoring and risk management. It is these interventions that restrict expression for young people and struggle to nurture more supportive relationships between staff and young people, which are critical in building emotional resilience, enabling positive outcomes and reducing stigmatisation (cf. Creaney, 2015). Instead of helping young people to move away from the 'label of fail', these (elements of) interventions often further reinforce this label, creating further barriers to positive developments for 'troubled' youth. Those interventions that present a site for change, encouragement and support (often to be found within third-sector provision) are those that actively foster encouraging relationships with staff, whilst allowing space for young people to develop and express themselves or challenge normative processes.

Given the range of actors that may be involved in the lives of 'risky youth', and in light of budgetary constraints, it is clearly a challenge to devise and implement effective interventions that allow young people to be steered away from potentially problematic situations and life choices, without furthering the perceptions of them as 'risky'. Whilst Newburn (2011) points to the key role of the police as gatekeepers and the first point of contact for this population in determining the success, or otherwise, of any newly designed interventions, this paper demonstrates the importance of all authority or semi-authority figures, from youth-club staff to teachers, in promoting (or denying) successful intervention activities.

Our findings have implications for the delivery of youth services in education, youth work and criminal justice. What is apparent from our data is the potential for certain interventions, those that include the positive elements previously discussed, to aid young people in increasing their support

networks and improving their resilience and control over their own lives. Interventions with young people work when they are supported by meaningful relationships. These findings are important because they demonstrate the ways in which affective dyadic relationships between young people and adults are crucial in empowering young people to make changes in their own lives. They highlight the importance of respect, recognition, listening, trust, patience and acknowledging mistakes in allowing young people to explore their own identity and achieve dignity.

This, however, is being undermined by the risk-management-focused, controlling interventions that serve to potentially alienate 'risky youth' and perpetuate cycles of stigmatisation and disengagement. Greater understanding of the experiences of positive interventions, alongside how young people perceive different types of support, could present a way for addressing the challenges of designing and implementing effective interventions.

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