The service system challenges of work with juvenile justice involved young people in the Hunter Region, Australia.

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Abstract

Current policies suggest that collaborative approaches are core to working effectively with juvenile justice involved young people. However, there is little research examining the workings of multi-agency and collaborative endeavours in this field, or the experiences of the human service workers facilitating these connections. This paper reports on qualitative research that resulted from the *Juvenile Justice and Education Equity in the Hunter Region* project. Thirty--eight human service workers were interviewed about their perceptions of the workings, strengths and challenges of the service system that supports young people who come into contact with the Children's Court in the Lower and Upper Hunter regions of New South Wales. Data analysis revealed three key themes which related to; (i) Service gaps, cycles and maelstrom, (ii) Pursuing authentic service engagement, and (iii) Insider outsider dynamics in service provision. Findings are discussed in relation to emerging practice and research agendas.

Keywords: juvenile justice, young people, service sector collaboration, human service workers, service provision, service engagement.

Human service sector perspectives on the experiences and challenges of

juvenile justice involved youth in the Hunter Region, Australia.

Over 5,000 young people were under Australian youth justice supervision on an average day in 2016–17 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2018). This equates to around 1 in 500 of Australia's youth population. Half of these were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander youth (a rate eighteen times higher than for non-Indigenous youth). There were 7 times more young people from the lowest socioeconomic areas than the highest socioeconomic areas. While most were on community orders, seventeen percent were in detention (AIHW, 2018). Australia's juvenile justice systems have increasingly responded to high rates of incarceration - compared to international rates - with a diversionary and restorative focus (Murphy et al., 2010). Although these systems are characterised by elements originating from the *justice* and *welfare* models (Murphy et al., 2010), they tend more towards a welfare orientation than the adult criminal justice system (Richards, 2011). It is generally understood that young offenders present with the same complex issues as adult offenders, but their psychosocial immaturity and a duty of care require interventions that are more intensive (Richards, 2011). The NSW government advocates for a community based approach where service integration is central and where 'measures should be taken to maximise stakeholder buy-in and strengthen multi-agency collaboration in all areas, including policy formulation, information sharing, and personnel training' (Murphy et al., 2010, p.vi). Risk-factors are addressed 'in all facets of the environments of young people through collaboration with a range of community agents including schools, Indigenous and other minority communities and non-government organisations' (Murphy et al., 2010, p. vi).

While there is a reasonable amount of evidence pertaining to young people who are in contact with the juvenile justice system - including the precursors to offending, relationship to the educational experience, and offending trajectories - there is much less known, or written about, the service sector they encounter before or during engagement with juvenile justice. This is particularly so from the view point of the service providers themselves, and in relation to the collaborative expectation described above. In response, this paper offers qualitative insights from the *Juvenile Justice and Education Equity in the Hunter Region* project. Thirty--eight human service workers spoke about their perceptions of the workings, strengths and challenges of the service system that supports young people who come into contact with the Children's Court in this region. Three key themes emerged: (i) *Service gaps, cycles and maelstrom*, (ii) *Pursuing authentic service engagement*, and (iii) *Insider outsider dynamics in*

service provision. These insights are discussed and recommendations made for the ongoing practice and research agenda.

Juvenile justice and the human service sector: A brief review

There is considerable evidence about multi-systemic challenges when working with young people in contact with the juvenile justice system (Goodkind, Shook, Kim, Pohlig, & Herring, 2013; Richards, 2011). Given the vulnerability profile of this population, many young people will have concurrent or prior contact with two or more human service organisations (Goodkind et al., 2013; Graves, Frabutt, & Shelton, 2007; Howell, Kelly, Palmer, & Mangum, 2004). Young people often become dually involved with child protection and juvenile justice services (Chuang & Wells, 2010; Herz et al., 2012; Malvasoa, Delfabbro, & Day, 2017; Mendes & Baidawi, 2012), or with disability or mental health services and juvenile justice (Dowse, Baldry, & Snoyman, 2009; Graves et al., 2007). In reality, Maschi, Hatcher, Schwalbe, & Rosato's (2008) review of evidence revealed patterns of need and service usage that made young people more vulnerable to involvement in the juvenile justice system:

> Social/environmental risk factors, such as unmet service needs and/or prior service involvement with special education services, child welfare, social services, and mental health and/or substance abuse treatment, influenced youth's entry and prolonged service use patterns across multiple systems of care (p. 1382).

However, there is some international evidence that the service system is often unable to meet the needs of young offenders due to issues such as ineffective communication and coordination between services (Anthony et al., 2010; Cannon, Warner, Waid, & Knowles, 2008; Herz et al., 2012), overlapping and competing services (Anthony et al., 2010; Herz et al., 2012; Siegel & Lord, 2005), service gaps (Heffernan et al., 2005; Mendes & Baidawi, 2012), and providers' lack of knowledge about the existence or functions of other services (including referral pathways) (Dowse et al., 2009). High staff turnover, or inconsistent staff allocation, can affect continuity and the quality of service (Halsey, 2006; Herz et al., 2012). Conflicting goals, mandates, theoretical frameworks and funding arrangements can undermine trust in other partner/referral agencies (Anthony et al., 2010; Cumming, Strnadová, & Dowse, 2014; Heffernan et al., 2005; Herz et al., 2012; Wright, Spohn, Chenane, & Juliano, 2017).

There is a general consensus across research, policy and commentary papers that intervention with at- risk and offending young people requires a more collaborative approach (Alarid, Sims, & Ruiz, 2011; Cannon et al., 2008; Homel, Freiberg, & Branch, 2015; Malvasoa et al., 2017; Maschi et al., 2008). While there is some international evidence about the implementation of collaborative and integrative models in juvenile justice, effectiveness evidence is rare, and studies featuring the experiences of

service workers even more so. One exception is *Wraparound*, an evidence-based or best practice model that has been used in juvenile justice in the United States (Bertram, Suter, Bruns, & O'Rourke, 2011). Wraparound 'is a community-based, family driven collaborative team planning process that engages informal supports and formal services with families in culturally competent, individualized, strengths-based assessment and interventions' (Bertram et al., 2011, p. 1). McCarter's (2016) research found that the treatment group had statistically significant improvement in the following areas: withdrawal/depression, somatic complaints, thought problems, attention problems, rule-breaking behaviors, and aggressive behaviors. Pullmann et al. (2006) found less recidivism, fewer felony offences and less time in detention in the treatment group. Carney & Buttell (2003) found no differences in recidivism, but concluded that the treatment group were less likely to engage in risky and delinquent behaviour. Evaluation of the *Wraparound Milwaulkee* program claimed that recidivism rates were much lower (16.6%) than comparative arrest data in their region (41%) (Kamradt & Goldfarb, 2015).

Herz et al. (2012) describes multi-system reforms in the United States that have been aimed at crossover youth including the *Systems Integrative Initiative* and the *Crossover Youth Practice Model*. The *Systems Integrative Initiative* has been implemented to create structural conditions for change in various jurisdictions throughout the US. It uses 'a four-phase planning process to help jurisdictions with their integration and coordination planning, including not only the welfare and juvenile justice systems but three additional and critically related systems: education, mental health, and substance abuse' (Herz et al., 2012). The Crossover Youth Practice Model has built upon these foundations with a practice focus and had been implemented in 45 jurisdictions in 14 states by 2014 (Haight et al., 2014; Herz et al., 2012).

Haight, Bidwell, Marshall and Khatiwoda (2014) conducted one of the most comprehensive published studies of multisystem collaborations between child welfare and juvenile justice, associated with the implementation of the Crossover Youth Practice Model. This involved document review, observation and semi-structured interviews with implementation staff, mid-level and frontline service providers (n=168), across five sites. Service providers described significant cultural change at the structural and psychological level, which resulted in improved service provision to families and young people, increased information sharing, improved professional support, better relationships with other providers and more positive understandings about families and young people. However, some described feeling confused about the 'core' features of the model and the vision for collaboration, as well as witnessing some resistance to change from some providers, all of which might have impacted implementation (Haight et al., 2014).

Wright, Spohn, Chenane, & Juliano's (2017) qualitative investigation of the Crossover Youth Practice Model used semi-structured interviews with 13 team members at one site, to explore their experiences of implementing this model (including legal, child protection, juvenile justice, community and family service providers). The findings highlight the tensions that can arise from conflicting organisational and disciplinary philosophies, as well as historical arrangements and differences. Regardless, service providers considered the collaborative model responsible for better decision-making (due to collaboration and information sharing), a strengthening of inter-professional relationships and trust, and a reduction in duplication of service (which some regarded as a cost and resource saving). They also reported a greater emphasis on the young person's voice and suggested that this translated to better service, more diversionary interventions, and less resourcing. Service providers attributed some mission drift to staff turnover and the absence of a 'formal leader'. They suggested that collaborative work could be resource intensive in relation to multiple contacts and working with, and through, unfamiliar and complicated processes. The service providers also anticipated positive outcomes for young people including: 'longer time to recidivate, reduced severity of offenses, and less trauma and stigma to the youth' (Wright et al., 2017, p. 488)

Methodology

Study design

The *Juvenile Justice and Education Equity in the Hunter Region* project aimed to document and describe a point–in–time overview of cross–sector professional awareness and insights about educational disengagement and involvement with the Children's Court for young people in the Lower and Upper Hunter Region. The purpose of the project was to identify key themes regarding factors thought to be associated with occurrence and outcomes, including challenges and opportunities for supports and services that may inform future intervention based research. It was undertaken by a cross–disciplinary research team (n=7) and was designed in collaboration with the Chief Magistrate of the Children's Court and a steering committee of key industry stakeholders. This paper reports on two of the four key research questions posed:

1. What insights do professionals have regarding children who come into contact with the Children's court in the local region?
2. What challenges and opportunities do professionals identify for supports and services in addressing this issue in the region?

Sampling and recruitment

A snowball sampling method was employed to recruit participants from a cross section of services. Participants were required to have current, or previous, engagement and experience in a role in the Lower or Upper Hunter region, that allowed them to offer perspectives and opinions on the links between educational disengagement, disadvantage and subsequent or concurrent contact with the Children's Court. *Expressions of Interest* invitations were distributed to a range of relevant government and non-government contacts/agencies. Potential key informants were invited to reply to the chief investigator via email who supplied them with a *Participant Information Statement* and *Consent Form*, which they were required to read and sign before being included in the study.

Data collection

Data was collected by 3 members of the research team, using semi–structured face–to–face or telephone interviews. A total of 31 interviews were conducted with 38 participants, representing a broad range of services that work with young people: Out of Home Care (n=9), Juvenile Justice (n=9), Family and Community Services (n=5), Education (4), Health/mental Health (n=4), Youth Services (n=3), Aboriginal Services (2), Legal Service, Police (1). Twenty-seven interviews were with sole participants, 3 interviews were with 2 participants and 1 interview was with 5 participants. Interviews lasted from between 9 and 50 minutes with an average of 29 minutes.

Data analysis

Audio data was transcribed verbatim, and analysed using a constant comparative method of inductive analysis. Initially, a sample of n= 24 transcripts were divided between 4 team members who analysed the transcripts for (i) answers to the questions posed and (ii) core themes (primarily open coding). A fifth researcher read across all the transcripts and completed a similar analysis. The team then met to compare and discuss prominent findings as well as the connection and comparisons that emerged from the entire data set (axial coding). Analytical notes – provided by the researchers and those taken during the meeting – were then amalgamated. The first two authors completed the analysis and drew up the final set of themes, which were later discussed, refined and agreed upon by the entire team.

Ethical considerations and study limitations

Ethics clearance was granted from the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee on September 6, 2016. Potential ethical issues, including confidentiality and conflict of interests were addressed in the following ways: participation and withdrawal were voluntary; no identifying information was recorded in publications.

Findings

This section offers a point in time overview of the workings, challenges and strengths of the human service sector working in this region. Hence, three key themes emerged in relation to the workings, challenges and strengths of the sector servicing the Upper and Lower Hunter: (i) *Service gaps, cycles and maelstrom*, (ii)*Pursuing authentic service engagement*, and (iii) *Insider outsider dynamics in service provision.*

Service gaps, cycles and maelstrom

Participants described a predominantly siloed *bricks and mortar* service system that was working hard to address multiple complex socio–historic family, community and service sector challenges. When young people were recognised and brought into this system, they were often exposed to, or moved through, a number of services, in what could easily become a cyclical or vortex like process. While young people employed measures to navigate this complicated arrangement, acts of disengagement from the service system cycle were usually the same acts that mandated further involvement. Interestingly there were two narratives here, where (i) young people had experienced high levels of service involvement from early ages or (ii) they had been largely overlooked by the service sector until contact with juvenile justice.

Participants described a dominant narrative, where a young person came before the Children's Court, and they had a history of contact with a variety of agencies:

> So we'll often see kids that have had FACS involvement, that have had juvenile justice involvement, that have had various kinds of family type therapy. They might have had the home school liaison officer involved. They might have been referred to various forms of counselling in the past (Participant 4).

Families might have had a history of service contact, but *young people* first appeared to be recognised as potential *clients in their own right* when difficulties occurred at school. Participants suggested that many of their clients' first experiences of being mandated to attend a service that did not *fit* their requirements occurred in the educational system. When schooling was not a good fit, the young person often avoided the source of conflict or discomfort and protected themselves through non–attendance. Others confronted perceived injustices or behaved in ways that were incompatible with the established norms, often resulting in expulsion.

As a result, cycles of educational and service *contact* often commenced during and after educational disengagement. Participants suggested that young people were often expected to return to schools that had not been able to engage them successfully in the past. They were expected to

change their behaviours in order to fit into an educational system that was simply not designed to meet their needs:

> We're wanting to put kids back into situations that the kids already rebelled against and then we're forcing them to go back. They're ostracised because of their behaviours – their non–attendance – they're behind in their academic performance – so they act out in order to get suspended again, so they don't have to deal with that (Participant 21).

Participants spoke about students who cycled through the processes of enrolment/re-enrolment and disengagement with multiple mainstream schools and alternate schools, with very few long term plans established.

Many participants suggested a strong link between disengagement and criminal activity, although they were fully aware that this link was complex and nuanced. They often explained offending as one activity that potentially filled the schooling/service gap and offered belonging and engagement to otherwise alienated young people: 'That sense of [school] belonging is so important. … Once you lose that they're going to look elsewhere to find it' (Participant 18). Ironically, young people's attempts to leave the educational system were often the very actions that legitimated further intervention. In these cases, participants described a process that appeared to rotate young people through an ever tightening service system.

Participants also described an alternative narrative where schools and other services failed to recognise and support young people who had disengaged from school:

> I think the problem with a lot of young people is they sort of fall off the radar. They just don't go to school or they get suspended or whatever and then they just wander around and do whatever and no one picks up on it until they get caught and then come before the court and then we get involved and then we try and involve other agencies (Participant 23).

Interestingly, inconsistent or inadequate service involvement appeared to have overlooked some young people. Hence, the second key period when young people were recognised as a client in their own right was an appearance at Children's Court.

Whether young people were deemed *at risk* from birth, during a period of disengagement from school or when they first appeared in Children's Court, participants described authentic service engagement as a process fraught with systemic obstacles. They described services that were not designed with young people in mind, that lacked fit with their current needs, and with insufficient flexibility to adapt to evolving challenges. They seemed to agree that there were services and

programs in place for young people, but not necessarily appropriate ones. This was particularly so for specific presentations including complex trauma and special needs.

Most services were time limited in some way, leaving young people without a service or needing to re-engage with a new service (with different staff, expectations and agendas). Participants identified a range of effective services throughout the interviews, but their prime message was to increase and replicate the services that were working well, and to maintain those that were working:

> I was so surprised when you said the other day that ISP program with JJs has gone. Because … that's the best program I've ever seen work. … Now it doesn't exist (Participant 32).

Under resourcing in existing services also restricted contact and intervention in certain populations. However, there were also significant service gaps in this area, particularly in relation to drug and alcohol issues and homelessness:

> It's difficult to find simple alternative accommodation if they can't go home or they've got no family members that are prepared to take them. … funding's been pulled from a lot of refuges and it's all dollar based and services have been cut (Participant 21).

Drug and alcohol rehabilitation centres were situated many hours from the Hunter Region (In Coffs Harbour, Randwick and Dubbo), and young people might be required to attend a service in another location/state for detoxification prior to admission to these.

Most suggested that services were introduced or intensified long after the young person actually needed them and that coordinated early intervention strategies were largely missing. By the time the young person was noticed by the service system, or entrenched in it, they were often requiring support for multiple issues, but these were generally addressed by separate services. One of the most significant constraints that participants cited was the lack of coordination between these services:

> It's quite haphazard … what we're missing, is a coordinated approach between services. … I mean the support is there but it's not coordinated so there are a lot of young people that fall through gaps and then end up in court (Participant 6).

Young people could become confused by their regime of attendance at multiple services, and plans were often devised without the input of all the services that were involved. As a result, young people were often given conflicting interventions and messages. Inflexible service specifications could exclude a young person from a suitable service or impact the transition from one service to the next. The siloing of funds could result in services absolving responsibility for providing a service or funding because it was not within their remit. Punitive laws created situations where service providers were

mandated to intervene in a way that they might consider counterproductive and inappropriate (e.g. mandatory charges under the Graffiti Legislation Amendment Act 2012, and new school leaving age in NSW).

Finally, there appeared to be a resignation that resonated throughout some of the interviews. Many participants explicitly expressed a frustration at being unable to make significant change. They, too, felt like they were being rotated throughout an ineffective and unresponsive system at times. Others implied a helplessness or acceptance that some young people, or groups of young people, would move through – or dip in and out – of the service system without being helped:

> I think and this is probably a bit cynical view. By the time they get to us, the options or opportunities are very much reduced. I think these interventions … need to be a lot earlier, a lot earlier. And who does that? (Participant 20).

Pursuing authentic engagement

Participants regularly referred to *engagement* and *connection* throughout the interviews, whether this was the impact of artificial, mandated and fleeting engagement with young people, or whether it was the transactional engagement they regularly experienced between overstretched service providers. Regardless, they were unanimous in their belief that *authentic engagement* – and systemic arrangements that supported authentic engagement – were key to working more effectively within the Upper and Lower Hunter. While they offered examples of authentic engagement in their practice with young people and between services there was a palpable desire for improving current relations.

Participants often depicted an historical backdrop of mandated service provision either before, or at the time of the young person's disengagement from school:

> Well, they are mandated. They are already mandated. … We are seeing some kids being brought, or rather their parents usually, before the Children's Court for not attending school. … There are penalties and all that sort of thing (Participant 9).

Indeed, many of the families had experienced multiple mandated interactions with organisations such as Housing, Education, Health, Police, Probation and Parole, and Family and Community Services. Additionally, a number of participants cited examples of young people being actively disrespected or rejected by the staff in certain institutions. Hence, most participants were cognisant of the mistrust that such histories created and the precarious position they were in when trying to build initial rapport, let alone create an authentic engagement with families and young people.

Despite being a significant challenge, many were convinced that engagement was the key to effective work with young people. However, the systemic conditions described previously seemed to

perpetuate client and interagency relationships that were often brief, transactional and impersonal. Participants often described the referral process as rife with contradictions. For example, young people were often mandated to attend certain services with the aim of gaining support and changing offending behaviours, but they might also be given messages that attendance alone would be sufficient to please the courts. This could significantly undermine the chances of authentic engagement:

> I remember seeing a young person who was sent by Juvenile Justice and there they were told if they turned up for five minutes, that would look better in a court than if they didn't turn up at all. So, they turned up for five minutes; I encouraged them to come back. They turned up for [another] five minutes and wanted to leave again (Participant 10a).

Many participants quoted time as a limitation to their engagement with young people and the length of their interaction was often compared to the length of time young people spent with other influences.

Participants also spoke about the importance of information sharing to increase engagement between services and between young people and service providers. Young people might be referred to a service without an introduction or background information being provided: 'If we kind of had some information, some background information or an idea that they were coming, then we can make sure that there's some more time available' (Participant 10b). Additionally, the formality of information sharing could slow processes down and create potentially dangerous gaps in service provision.

Participants agreed that bringing services together was key to providing consistent services and messages to young people. They often regarded this as best practice. However, some were highly aware that bringing services together did not automatically result in authentic engagement or shared investment in positive outcomes for the young person:

> They have these case coordination's, but they're kind of transactional, by and large they have these meetings with a bunch of people that are invested … and in some cases they work and in many cases there is a failure of investment if you like (Participant 11).

Nor did case coordination necessarily promote or include the voice of the young person. Some thought that current funding arrangements created targets that undermined genuine engagement with young people and other service providers. Participants fully acknowledged that authentic engagement took time and resources that they often did not have. This could result in an investment in clients who were perceived as ready to engage or change, and framing the more resource intensive client as unready or unwilling to engage.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that a number of participants spoke about services or service providers with whom they had a positive and authentic engagement. These relationships were often supported by shared knowledge, experiences and expectations for young people, and they resulted in mutual investment in the young person's wellbeing.

Insider outsider dynamics in service provision

The notion of *insider outsider* relations and boundaries became evident throughout the interviews: 'Currently we bring all these [service providers] in with good will and intentions but they only go to the fence…' (Participant 11). Service providers could be insiders or outsiders across a number of relational groups, including the local community, family networks, service systems and knowledge systems. Their status was often dependent on their time in the community or social service, their understanding of the 'order of things', and their professional and contextual knowledge base. Their insider outsider status could variably influence the ways that they understood and worked with the young person and the ways they were engaged with other service providers.

Participants described their work against a background of intergenerational conditions that were dominant in certain communities within the Upper and Lower Hunter region. Conditions included: high levels of unemployment, low levels of educational attainment and low levels of mobility. Rurality, seemed to create unique sets of rules that might be distinct from those in the city. While many of the participants understood the structural factors that underscored and perpetuated certain social conditions within these communities and families, they acknowledged their stark contrast with the ideologies espoused by broader society. They often described experiences and sometimes criminogenic world views that they considered to be entrenched, static and unmoveable (in both communities and families):

> For a lot of our young people smoking weed is normal, drinking alcohol even in the daytime is normal, going to the hock shop, not paying for things at the supermarket, eating or drinking while you're in the supermarket, that's all normal (Participant 18).

These ideas contrasted starkly with the aims and goals of human service provision, and generally the personal experiences of the service providers themselves:

> 18 and they haven't even bothered to try and get a licence or any of the things that I wanted when I was that age. That was my goal was I want to get a licence, I want to get a car. No, they don't even think about it (Participant 23).

As such, the behaviours and motivations of young people could be easily pathologised and labelled by service providers - *outsiders*. Participants often described one part of their service provider role as an influencer - or the *bearer of alternate messages*. They described this as a difficult outsider position

considering the socio-historical weight of the young person's understandings and experiences: 'As outsiders we can say all these things are going wrong in your lives, but for them that's life, that's all they know' (Participant 22). Some suggested that it was difficult to find appropriate role models within the community itself. Hence, the role of influencer or role model had the potential to position service providers as an adversary against community and family norms. In this frame, *time* was considered a limiting factor (as described earlier):

> We have limited time involvement with a young person … It's across the generations and it's very entrenched … how do we pro–social model to a young person on limited time? (Participant 21).

Parents were often described as the most difficult insider group to reach or influence: In many instances, parents were suspected as sabotaging their children's service involvement. As a consequence, a sense of fatalism was apparent in some narratives, where participants described a sense of frustration and futility at being an outsider. While they wanted to create meaningful relationships with young people and many described periods where they felt at a loss, not knowing how to change certain dynamics. For some, the frustration appeared to underscore solutions that included young people's *separation*, *escape* and *removal* from the insider influence.

However, for some, time and experience within the community was related to enhanced insider knowledge, where certain participants might have an intergenerational understanding of a young person's family: 'I've had probably four families where I've – easily four, maybe more if I check – where I've had three siblings in the one family' (Participant 26). There appeared to be some participants who held a wealth of intricate socio-historic knowledge about young people and their families, a situation unlikely to be replicated in larger towns and cities. Some had been involved with the community for decades. There was also some evidence of informal networks of service providers who met and shared important information when this was considered important to the young person's welfare. They might be able to offer another service the 'heads up' on a situation that was developing or potentially risky in a young person's life. Regardless of where the knowledge was obtained, mutual understandings of a young person's behaviour appeared to make or break relationships between service providers. Common understandings of community, family and young people appeared to be fundamental to the development of trusting relationships between service providers and the quality of intervention offered to young people.

Discussion

Participants described the sector as often uncoordinated, inflexible and siloed. They detailed services that they regarded as effective but these were often under resourced, time limited or inaccessible. Inconsistent service provision and contradictory messaging was also regarded as problematic across the sector. Collaboration was occurring between services in terms of case management, but there was also some evidence that these arrangements could be quite transactional and imbalanced in terms of power and jurisdiction. Some suggested that rigid funding arrangements further delineated individual service roles and parameters, and this created tension when a seemingly obvious and simple solution to a young person's problem was denied or pushed back as a result. The voice of the young person or the family was reported inconsistently in these types of meetings or conferences. Interestingly, the most successful collaborative work appeared to be initiated - or at least enacted - at the level of the individual service worker. At times, it appeared that the positive reputation of one worker, or the relationships developed by and between individual workers, contributed positively to a service level reputation. However, these arrangements were fragile and dependent on the position or service remaining in existence.

The findings from this research leave no doubt that participants regard a collaborative and transparent service system core to improving engagement with, and outcomes for, young people, families and communities. Participants understood collaboration must reach beyond individual level relationships. However, findings also suggested that service providers were often focused on the practicalities of collaboration, and the factors that were *not working* in terms of creating and maintaining effective working relationships. Primarily, they appeared focused on the impact of service gaps, miscommunication between services, and service flexibility on their immediate intervention with the young person. Few articulated the connection between the collaboration they sought and a longer term collective vision for the communities in which they served. While this probably says more about the intensity and immediacy of work encountered on a daily basis than it does about the training or the intent of the participants, a focus on the mechanics of any intervention or process can be problematic. Maybe these findings will go some way into reinvigorating an examination of the foundations that underpin concepts such as wraparound, joined up and integrated services in this community. For example:

> wraparound's theory base is often described as a team focused ecosystems perspective that is variably influenced by multi-systemic therapy, social learning theory, change theories and the strengths perspective (Bertram et al., 2011; p.1).

How, then, might the values that inform these approaches potentially add - or not - to the development and maintenance of such arrangements in this particular context? Collaborative approaches require resources, cultural readiness and adaptation, and services need to compromise in order to reach a consensus about the values, approaches and goals they wish to establish (Cannon et al., 2008). It is likely that these conversations have already been canvassed in the Upper and Lower Hunter, and while they might be happening on a small scale within and between services, the findings from this study suggest that the nature and extent of collaboration may benefit from further exploration, and no doubt experimentation, to create a meaningful and contextually specific service sector vision.

One of the most significant findings in this study regarded service *lack of fit* and inflexibility, and the subsequent effect on the cycling of young people through a largely impotent service sector. Here *impotence* had nothing to do with service provider's professionalism, training or competence, but rather the inability to situate a young person in an appropriate service, because it did not exist or was inaccessible. Participants described services that lacked fit with the young person's needs or failed to understand, or account for, the impact of their socio-historical experiences (such as neglect, trauma, domestic violence, mental illness, learning disability). In these instances, young people were often expelled or excluded from the school or service (and interestingly this dynamic was often reconfigured in a way that labelled the young person as *lacking fit*). In other instances, young people appeared to take it upon themselves to leave or avoid a service that they found unsuitable. Of course, the irony of being expelled from, or leaving, a mandated service is that subsequent intervention can become even more punitive and involve further surveillance. The lesson here is simply the timely provision of more flexible and appropriate services for young people who have complex and multifaceted service system needs. The participants in this study gave examples of services and programs that were working well or had shown success in the past, but it became apparent that their input had not been readily considered in terms of further funding or roll out across the region.

There is no doubt that this study revealed a dedicated group of service providers who genuinely cared for the young people they worked with. There were also signs that the sheer significance of the daily work was taking a toll, with narratives also revealing some cynicism, detachment and concerns about practice effectiveness. Remarks and conversations of this type were mostly fleeting and sometimes they were overridden or contradicted by the participants. However, one idea that appeared to persist through the narratives and one that has implications for service delivery was the idea of 'removing insider influence'. This appears to mirror the notion of contagion which is also embedded in juvenile justice policies, where detention centres are often thought to foster further criminality through peer influence (Richards, 2011). Ironically, diversionary policies

prioritise maintaining the young person in the very communities that participants were describing as contagious. While there is obviously no solution here, there might be some merit in examining these positions in terms of service delivery. What might these ideas and attitudes signal to young people and their families? How is authentic engagement affected when some of the young person's key connections are regarded as toxic and or unnecessary? And if some degree of separation or change is actually warranted, how is this achieved without disregarding or shaming insider perspectives?

Research implications

It is hypothesised that canvassing more informal and voluntary contacts might provide more depth - and maybe more strengths focused insights - into the stories of young people, families and communities in this region. It would also be important to examine the lives of young people beyond the formal service sector, to determine areas for potential collaboration. These might include: churches, youth groups, sports clubs, and cultural groups. Beyond this, an asset mapping exercise might determine even more informal areas and contacts available to, and currently utilised by, young people (e.g., skate parks and unofficial mentors). It is anticipated that this type of research would not only highlight the young person beyond the negative label of juvenile offender (e.g., good soccer player, singer or skater), but it might provide clues to the development of more strengths focused approaches at all levels of intervention.

Conclusion

The multi-agency and collaborative expectation is espoused as a best practice response to juvenile justice involved young people by all levels of the Australian government. However, little research has been conducted to understand the value of such an approach or the experiences of the workers and young people within this environment. This study drew insights from human service workers who understood the importance of authentic engagement and cultural knowledge to genuinely understand and address pertinent issues within this population. However, it also highlights an often uncoordinated and under resourced service system that potentially undermined such goals and lacked the flexibility to meet the complex needs of the young people and families they worked with.

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