

Supporting Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Youth Co-Production: An Exploration of Practitioner Views

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Abstract

The UK Government's Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (Department for Education, 2015), highlights the need for children and young people (C&YP) to participate in decisions that affect their lives. However, concerns have been raised around failures to support those with SEND in participating effectively (United Nations, 2016). In 2017, practitioners' in the North West set-up an interest group to explore practices around participation and co-production of C&YP with SEND, by which Participation Learning Events were subsequently created. Data from practitioners from two events led to the creation of '*Principles of Co-Production: Practitioners Perspective*' in order to fill the knowledge gap in this area; hoping these principles could be used to support their practice and that of others. These principles comprise of and include reflective questioning relating to: understanding of co-production; developing engagement opportunities; accessibility and representation; evidence-based practice; creating sustainable systems; creating goals and assigning responsibility; reviewing goals and challenging practice; sharing practice; and developing a co-production culture. Practitioners suggest that such principles should be used as a foundation for discussions at an individual and strategic level to inform co-production practice. Research implications, limitations and areas for further research are considered.

Keywords: Children/young people, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, Co-production, participation, voice of the child, youth work, educational psychology.

Introduction

There is increasing interest into how we listen and act upon the voice of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) following the SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (Department for Education, 2015). Research highlights a variety of techniques and approaches to listening to children and young people on an individual level (Harding & Atkinson, 2009), however there is little research into how we do this at a systemic level, such as how we develop and shape services and systems.

In 2017 an interested party of practitioners came together in the North West to discuss how co-production was being implemented in their respective services and how ideas and practices could be shared. This led to the creation of the Regional SEND Co-production Steering Group and subsequently termly Participation Learning Events for any practitioners with an interest in this area. The aim of the steering group and network events were to: support co-production at all levels; to set a programme of work; to influence policy and practice at local, regional and national level; and to identify and apply for funding where appropriate.

During two Participation Learning Events held in 2019, with support from a trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Manchester, data was gathered from practitioners from local authorities, charities and organisations who were interested in the topic of participation and co-production. Practitioners shared that they wished to find out what others were doing to support co-production with children and young people with SEND and what the facilitators and barriers were. They voiced that they wanted to use the data to create a set of principles that could be used as a foundation for which other practitioners could then consider and discuss in order to support co-production in their place of work.

However, it is important to consider that these principles came from practitioners and not the children and young people who they support. This was because practitioners wished to think about their role and what the boundaries of this included before taking it to children and young people with SEND.

Literature Review

Background and Legislation

Historically, it has been argued that children have been denied the right to make decisions about their lives, for judgements that they are unable and too inexperienced to make rational decisions (Cunningham, 1996). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNRC, 1989), the most endorsed treaty in history, made participation

a fundamental right of young people (O'Donoghue, Kirshner & McLaughlin, 2003). Articles 12, 13 and 14 state that children should have the opportunity to freely express their views on any matter affecting them and have their views considered (UN, 1989). This concept is also referred to as a child's right to participation (Kellet, 2009; O'Donoghue, Kirshner & McLaughlin, 2003). In England, this idea is supported by the Children and Families Act 2014, which stipulate the importance of the child in sharing their views and participating in decisions.

Across a range of public and private sectors, participation has led to the development of co-production and/or co-creation of services, with a wide range of service users, driven by the above political ideology but also by notions of 'customer value' and service effectiveness within a marketised environment (Brandsen, Verschuere & Steen, 2018; HM Government, 2012; Needham, 2008; Osborne, 2018; Pestoff, Brandsen & Verscheure, 2012). The SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (Department for Education, 2015) supports the co-creation and co-production of services and systems within local authorities, including stating that local authorities must involve children and young people with SEND in the planning, publishing and reviewing of the Local Offer. This document also advocates the use of person-centred planning, which puts the views of children and young people at the forefront of the support they receive.

Definition of Co-production

Despite the concrete understanding that participation is necessary and is mandated, how this is facilitated effectively or even how it is defined is still an area of limited knowledge. Participation itself is a contested concept, with queries around the extent to which participating is an active or passive process and whether it is enough to be present or if/ how your contributions must be acted upon (Kellet et al, 2010; Tisdall & Davis, 2004). It is questioned to what extent when children and young people are given a platform to participate e.g. school councils; they are in fact "labourers for agendas set by teachers" (Kiili & Larkins, 2018, p.408). Furthermore, there is also no clear consensus on what co-production entails (Brandsen, Verschuere & Steen, 2018).

In addition, there is no clear term or definition to what child participation is and as a result terms such as 'pupil's voice', 'pupil involvement' and 'consultation' are used interchangeably (Whitty & Wisby, 2007). Fredrickson and Cline (2009) have proposed participation to be around the *principle* of a young person having the right to be heard but also the *practical* element of everyone being able to hear the valuable information children and young people hold about their situation. According to the SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (Department for Education, 2015) participation involves children

and young people and parents being involved in decision-making at individual and strategic level.

The SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (Department for Education, 2015) also refers to 'Co-production' around the Local Offer (*a Local Offer sets out in one place information about the provision that is expected to be available across education, health and social care for children and young people in their area who have SEND*), suggesting that it is often referred to when local authorities need to ensure that children, young people and parents feel they have participated fully in the process and have a sense of co-ownership when creating the Local Offer. For the purposes of this research however, co-production will be defined as "an equal relationship between people who use services and the people responsible for services. They work together from design to delivery, sharing strategic decision-making about policies, as well as decisions around the best ways to deliver services" (National Co-production Advisory Group, 2016, p.1). Therefore, this article considers that participation refers to the involvement of children and young people in decision making, whereas co-production refers to the co-ownership within these decision making processes. Within this article both the term 'participation' and 'co-production' will be used.

Participation of Children and Young People

The right for children and young people to be heard within Article 12 of the UNRC was the article that received the most controversy for fear it would undermine adult authority (UN, 1989; Lundy, 2007). The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) conducted a large-scale review including reviewing research, interviews, focus groups and a range of methods with children to look at how the UNRC were being applied (Kilkelly et al, 2005). The review found that there were numerous times when Article 12 was violated and that often children were given tokenistic opportunities to participate. The single most important issue raised by children was not being given a say in decisions made about them (Kilkelly et al, 2005). Indeed, over 50% of submissions around children and young people's experience within education related to 'not having a say' (Kilkelly et al, 2005, p.186). Yet it has been acknowledged that understanding concepts within education from the perspective of the learner is crucial for positive results but is often not acknowledged by adults (Satchwell & Larkins, 2018).

In the UNRC fifth periodic report in 2016, participation remained a current issue as it was shared that the UK government needed to "establish structures for active and meaningful participation of children and young people", with particular attention given to "younger children and children in vulnerable situations, such as children with

disabilities” and ensure that “children are not only heard but also listened to and their views are given due weight by all practitioners working with children” (UN, 2016, p.6-7). There have been three identified reasons for adults not complying with the participation of children and young people including; scepticism around a child’s capacity to have meaningful input; concerns around children undermining authority (particularly within schools); and that “compliance will require too much effort” (Lundy, 2007, p.929-930). Lundy (2007) proposed four elements that need to be considered for children and young people’s participation to be effective and meaningful: Space - to express their view; Voice - supporting them to express their views; Audience - to be listened to; and Influence - to be acted upon as appropriate. Although Lundy’s model is helpful in providing consideration around the environment and factors needed to support a child or young person to share their views, it is questioned to what extent it appreciates the complex interactions within services and systemic factors that may facilitate or act as barriers to this being successful (Lundy, 2007).

The Making Participation Work (Council for Disabled Children, n.d.) programme devised a ‘Participation Audit Tool’ in order to support practitioners, councils and young people around strategic participation. The tool provides a useful framework in which practitioners can consider their successes, actions and challenges and develop a working strategy around participation. It was based on a set of 10 principles created from the VIPER Project (a partnership project carried out by the Alliance for Inclusive Education, the Council for Disabled Children, NCB Research Centre and the Children’s Society) which were co-produced with children and young people. The document provides examples of different aspects to consider in relation to participation such as, “shared values”, “opportunities”, “structure” etc. However, it is a complex audit tool and some practitioners have stated that it can be overwhelming tool to employ when they are still at the start of their co-production journey.

Impact of Co-Production

Although legislation discusses the value of co-production, there is little research looking at the impact co-production can have for children and young people or the practitioners working with them. Mayer and McKenzie (2017) were the first to conduct research looking into the psychological impact of co-production within the field of youth mental health. Service users shared that a key benefit of co-production was the positive impact it had on their self-efficacy and self-esteem and the importance of being “trusted equals” (Mayer and McKenzie, 2017, p.1186).

Burton, Smith and Woods (2010) worked to develop the participation of children and young people through pupil-led research. Results of the study indicated that children were able to make a positive contribution to their setting. There were also several factors highlighted to be key for the success of participation of children and young people (Burton, Smiths & Woods, 2010). This included the presence of a mediator, undertaken by an Educational Psychologist, who was able to support the child's wants and wishes whilst negotiating with the staff and school what could be acceptable and feasible. Additionally, a benefit highlighted by the study was the development of skills and knowledge of the pupils involved in the research. Therefore, children and young people were able to build upon their skills in collaboration, challenge and sharing information through regular participatory activities as well as making the changes that were important to them in school.

Participation of Children and Young People with SEND

Whilst there is clear legislative frameworks and guidance to make the participation of the children and young people a requirement, there is still a lack of confidence around the involvement of children and young people with SEND and how to promote active participation and not just hear those who speak on their behalf (Crutchley, 2017). Research has indicated that those who are often not listened to are children with SEND (Hamill & Boyd, 2002). This includes children with social, emotional, mental health needs, who were previously described as SEBD, are highlighted to be "the least listened to, empowered and liked group of students... while the number of studies on student voice is increasing, those on the voice of students with SEBD are still very few" (Cefai & Cooper, 2010, p.184).

Other domains have also questioned the lack of representation of the voices of children and young people with cognition and learning needs as co-researchers, as they are poorly represented within academic journals (Walmsley, Strnadová & Johnson, 2018). Satchwell (2018) demonstrated, however, that by using innovative methodology through storytelling and animated films, children and young people can share their views and be agents of their own lives. This research highlighted a need to consider a range of ways of eliciting the voices of children and young people, particularly for those who are often infrequently heard (Satchwell, 2018; Lambirth, Grainger & Goouch, 2005). A need for flexibility was highlighted and for young people with SEND to have opportunities to work alongside "knowledgeable others" who could be more responsible for motor or linguistic skills, whilst the knowledge very much remains with that of the young person (Vygotsky, 1978; Satchwell, 2018, p.3).

Practitioners' experience of co-production with children and young people

There appears to be little known research around practitioners' perspectives of co-production and indeed co-production with children and young people with SEND. Whilst it is important that perspectives of children and young people are gathered it is questioned as to why, despite legislation and guidance of co-production and participation, there is still very little academic research and knowledge shared within this field.

Therefore, there is a clear need for knowledge, ideas and shared practices for how we support children and young people with SEND with co-production and participation. The following research questions were devised in order to address this gap:

RQ1. What models of co-production are currently being used by practitioners when supporting children and young people with SEND in the North West of England?

RQ2: What are the facilitators and barriers to co-production from the perspective of practitioners within Local Authorities when supporting children and young people with SEND?

RQ3. What do practitioners envisage will be helpful in supporting the development and sustainability of co-production of services with children and young people with SEND in the future?

Methodology

Design of Study

A qualitative methodology was used to explore practitioner views around co-production when working with young people with SEND. The current research is not driven by pre-existing literature, models or frameworks but is an exploratory study, to increase and develop rich detailed knowledge in this area. Although interview and questionnaire methods were considered it was felt that these may be restricting in what information could be gathered. Therefore, other qualitative methods were employed including a facilitated world café and storyboard approaches, allowing participants to discuss, record and participate in the research in a way that they deem to be effective and appropriate. These were conducted over two Participation Learning Events, with a period of four months between each event.

At the first event during the first session where data was gathered, practitioners' journey of co-production was investigated. Storyboard methods were employed as a participatory method as they are a tool for visualising and organising ideas that promote discussion (Burton & Matthewson, 2015). It was felt that storyboarding would acknowledge the journey and progress practitioners had made around co-production in order to validate their efforts in practice whilst also working towards analysing this

journey so far (Labacher, Mitchell, De Lange, Moletsane & Geldenhuys, 2012). The second session at this event where data was collected included a world café. The world café approach is an interactive format in which interested participants engage in conversations that are meaningful in small groups (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). The structure of small groups discussing critical questions is used to build relationships whilst engaging in constructive dialogue as a means of fostering collaborative dialogue (Fouche and Light, 2011). It was felt that by bringing practitioners together to discuss different aspects of co-production, it would encourage comparison and reflection of practice with others in order to move our knowledge forward in this area.

At the first event, although each activity had prompts for participants to promote thinking and discussion, these methods allowed participants to engage in-group dialogue around topics they select, whilst supporting them to share openly without judgement (Brown, 2002; Prewitt, 2011). Facilitators were used to encourage practitioners at each table to contribute both by talking and listening and to ensure that conversations developed and remained relevant to each topic (Brown, 2002). To promote engagement from all practitioners in a way that was meaningful and productive, practitioners were sent a list of the questions that would facilitate the World Café prior to the event for their information. Information was recorded using post-it notes to summarise key points.

At the second Participation Learning Event the data from the first event that had been collated and analysed was presented back to the practitioners. It was important to member check in order to ensure the researcher had understood the information provided by participants. There were four main questions that were asked to participants within this session. These included:

- From the initial data – is this what you said and/or meant?
- These are the themes that emerged from the data – do you agree?
- We have put these themes into a ‘cyclical model of co-production’ – what do you think?
- What are our next steps?

Participants were initially asked to discuss these questions within groups and collate ideas on post-it notes. After discussion time, each group was asked to share these ideas and thoughts with everyone else within the room. These were then recorded along with information on the post-it notes.

Sampling and Participant Recruitment

Purposeful convenience sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. As there was an initial planned network event for practitioners interested in participation

and co-production it was agreed that this was an ideal opportunity to start to gather data. The Council for Disabled Children who were leading the first event initially contacted prospective participants via email to outline the aims of the research project. Participants varied in their professional capacities in background, some working for local authorities within the SEND departments or youth services and others being part of private organisations and charities, all with an interest in participation with individuals with SEND. If participants did not want to participate in the research, they were asked to contact the researcher prior to the event. Again, participants were contacted via email prior to the second event where further data was gathered. A follow-up email was sent after the events to ensure that everyone was happy for the data to be used. Around 60 participants were involved in the research, no person-specific data or names were collected as part of the research.

Data Gathering Methods

The research was conducted opportunistically at the North West SEND Participation Learning Events in which qualitative methods were employed. The first event included an initial session which explored current models and practice around co-production in which participants were encouraged to use storyboards in order to flexibly record their narrative journey of success and learning points in relation to co-production. The second session at this event included a discussion which took place in the form of a World Café in which participants visited as and when they chose to, tables with discussion points e.g. What do we understand about co-producing with children and young people? (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). The schedule for the world café contained a variety of open-ended questions, which allowed for group discussion. On the second event the data from the first two sessions was presented back to participants and discussions were held and recorded. Each session lasted around 1 hour.

Data Analysis Methods

Data obtained during all three sessions were analysed using content analysis (Robson, 2002; Robson & McCarten, 2016). This method was chosen as it allowed the opportunity to yield inferences from a range of data as dictated by the participants (Krippendorff, 2013). This allowed not just written data to be analysed but also maps, pictures and images too, whilst also considering the context of such information, for example, considering the intentions of the writers or the authenticity of the data. Content Analysis was employed as a means of providing “knowledge and understanding of the phenomena under study”, in this case, co-production (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p.34). In

order to remain true to the topic of participation an inductive approach to analysis was applied, in which themes and ideas were not preconceived but emerged from the data rather than being influenced by pre-existing theoretical frameworks or the preconceptions of the researcher (Kondracki, Wellman & Amundson, 2002).

Findings

Data analysed from the three sessions from the two network events exposed several core areas that practitioners indicated were important around co-production. It must be noted that for the first session, where participants were asked to share their journey of co-production through storyboards, some groups chose to share their journey using pictures, metaphors and diagrams, whereas others shared their journey through written text alongside their top tips for co-production. It was considered that because of the latter, the flexibility of this approach may have resulted in information about organisations journey of co-production being less clear. Only two groups also chose to represent their data in picture form, perhaps suggesting that participants did not feel content with this method. Yet those that did choose this method also chose to write notes which helped with the interpretation of this data. Despite there being separate questions that dominated the discussion during the World Café, key themes were evident throughout the data. These themes were then shared and discussed at the second Participation Learning Event. Participants were initially presented with a 'cyclical model of co-production' however it became clear that they felt a 'model' was not appropriate and instead these themes should be changed to 'principles' that practitioners can then use to think about within their practice. Participants suggested that a model was too prescriptive as everyone is on their own journey of co-production and therefore guiding principles would be more valuable. When practitioners were asked about the 'next steps' within this session, several practitioners explained that they would like the researchers to formally write-up the research and publish these principles. Although they felt sharing it at this event and subsequent events would be useful in guiding their own practice, they suggested that these principles could also be helpful to practitioners across the UK and perhaps further afield.

It was felt that this methodology allowed for identification of facilitators and barriers to co-production and indicated future development that was needed in this field. The key themes that came from this research include understanding of co-production; developing engagement opportunities; accessibility and representation; evidence-based practice; creating sustainable systems; creating goals and assigning responsibility;

reviewing goals and challenging practices; sharing practice; and developing a culture of co-production.

The key themes described above are presented below with the supporting anonymised data provided by practitioners. These themes have been placed in Figure 1 highlighting them as ‘principles of co-production’. This figure also includes questions that support practitioners in thinking about how these principles then relate to their practice. It must be noted again that these results are provided by a range of practitioners in different organisations and services who are interested in co-production and participation; they are representative of a small group of practitioners within the North West and therefore are subject to the local context. In keeping with the ethos of the research, it was felt that it would be appropriate wherever possible to use exact quotes from the practitioners themselves in order to prevent misinterpretation.

Understanding of Co-production

A key comment that kept presenting itself from the data was around the understanding or definition of co-production. Many of the participants were clear that co-production was important, yet there appeared to be uncertainty around what co-production entailed. Practitioners commented on co-production being “*jargon*” or it is a “*vague term*” with the need to understand “*what co-production really is*”. This lack of confidence around co-production was further reflected by practitioners commenting on it being “*poorly understood*” and the need for “*training*” or “*sessions*” on co-production to be available, implying a need for greater knowledge. The difference in understanding of co-production between practitioners was attributed to varying “*interpretation of the Children and Families Act 2014*”. Therefore, this is a key area for consideration when attempting to think about and support co-production within services.

Developing Engagement Opportunities

Threaded throughout the data collected was discussion around ways in which to develop opportunities to engage children and young people. A core principle of co-production was highlighted around children and young people being “*willing to be involved and sharing their voice*”. Some practitioners highlighted the need for events to be fun in order to “*incentivise children and young people to be involved*” and for events to be during “*evenings, weekends and holidays*” to promote access and ensure co-production is “*equally rewarding for all*”. A need was highlighted to capture the voices of children and young people’s that may not want to contribute to meetings, forums or events. An idea to support this was shared around the development of “*virtual communities*” through apps,

social media and Skype. Others considered the way we present meetings or gather the views of children and young people and the language used around this, offering ideas around *"parties rather than meetings"*. A need for engagement opportunities to be *"creative and social"*, a way of providing *"new experiences"* for children and young people as a means of *"starting a dialogue"*. Practitioners found it key that children and young people would be *"engaged and enthusiastic"* and an important part of this would be *"finding out what children and young people want to talk about"*. To further promote motivation for children and young people engagement, some practitioners shared ideas around introducing a *"formal reward scheme for children and young people"*. Concerns were raised, however around the time and funding required to set up and maintain such opportunities. Suggested engagement opportunities included children and young people taking part in activities and processes such as *"panels"*, *"tendering for short breaks"*, *"interviews"*, *"designing the SEND local offer"*, *"secret shopper"*, *"work experience"* and *"take over day"*. Other practitioners further highlighted the value of going *"into schools and speaking to their school council"*. This highlights the need for providing such opportunities for children and young people to be involved with services, but that these should be creative and motivating in order to support meaningful engagement.

Accessibility and Representation

Intertwined throughout practitioners' thoughts around developing engagement opportunities were concerns around providing opportunities for ALL children and young people to share their voice and the importance of co-production being *"equally rewarding for all"*. The importance of *"reaching hard to reach groups"* was raised and ensuring that all practitioners are working with *"wide enough groups to get a better representation"* and not just working with a *"few people with strong ideas"*. Concerns were around how to involve children and young people with *"complex needs"*. Discussions further explored the accessibility of the term co-production and documentation, guidance and legislation. Practitioners spoke of being given *"huge documents and told to make them 'child-friendly'"* and the difficulties around this, as well as making communication accessible for children and young people. The need for consideration around co-production and person-centred working and how this will need to be adapted to the needs of the individual was also mentioned. *"Support for children and young people"* was an identified barrier to co-production being successful and practitioners highlighted a need for the cost and resources for travel and personal care/support to be considered. Finally, practitioners shared the importance of them recording what is *"truly reflective of the contributions"* as practitioners should not record *"what you think people may have meant"* and equally

giving children and young people the platform to share their own ideas rather than purely relying on “*families choosing for the young people*”. This highlighted concerns around children and young people’s Voice being truly represented. Therefore, this suggests that accessibility and representation is an essential aspect of co-production with children and young people with SEND.

Evidence-based Practice

Practitioners highlighted a concern around “*how much evidence is there that co-production makes a real difference to the users’ experience?*” Others shared a need to “*create an evidence base*” and the value in measuring impact in order to ensure “*continued funding*”. Therefore, this suggests that there is a need to employ evidence-based practice where possible as well as attempting to add to the field of evidence.

Creating Sustainable Systems

Creating systems that support co-production was another area discussed. It was highlighted that local authorities “*are having to do more with less*”, that co-production is “*resource heavy*” and local authorities are experiencing “*funding cuts*”. Practitioners’ core discussion around this area included a lack of “*commitment*” or “*sign up*” for co-production and complications around “*conflicting agendas*”. Concerns were further raised around “*worries of tokenism*”, implying there is a need for co-production to be meaningful. Practitioners highlighted a need for “*sign up from local authority strategic leads*”, “*protocols and policies*”, “*space*”, “*capacity*” and “*commitment at all levels*” to ensure that co-production is sustainable. Included in this was the need for practitioners and children and young people to have “*time to prepare*” so they can share and contribute effectively. There was further discussion around the involvement of children and young people to be embedded in a range of groups and processes including “*panels*”, “*tendering for short breaks*”, “*interviews*”, “*designing the local offer*”, “*secret shopper*”, “*work experience*” and “*take over day*”. Concerns around potential barriers were a lack of investment in co-production and therefore a “*lack of resources*”. This highlights some of the complexities around co-production and the need to not just have one-off events or consultations, but meaningful and long-term systems to support co-production.

Creating Goals and Assigning Responsibility

A need to have responsible individuals was highlighted e.g. an “*engagement co-ordinator working with SEND schools to develop pupil voice*” or “*a dedicated participation lead that is ring-fenced for that work only*” however it was also shared that co-production should be embedded within practice so “*it’s everybody’s business*”. In order to make

progress with co-production practitioners highlighted a need for “*some authorities to recognise that they are at the beginning of their journey*”, but also a need for “*support from strategic leads to ensure co-production becomes part of the corporate aims*”. “*Local Authority area inspections*” were highlighted as an opportunity to develop co-production which could be in line with the previous comment around it providing an opportunity for co-production to be part of the corporate aims. A final consideration was shared around the need for “*financial investment*” in order to “*commission projects*” around co-production. Therefore, there is a need for co-production to be allocated to a specific person or persons as well as it being an integral part of everyone’s thinking and practices at all levels.

Reviewing Goals and Challenging Practice

Another theme that arose from the data was around challenging practice and reviewing goals. Practitioners highlighted a need for co-production to be “*re-evaluated*” at regular points. It was further anticipated that regular reviewing would allow the opportunity to “*identify challenges*” whilst also setting “*Short-term and long-term goals*”. There was also discussion around “*a need to challenge*” where appropriate. Another practitioner shared how children and young people could lead on “*scrutiny meetings*” and others shared the need to “*challenge regional and national bodies*” around their practice. This suggests there is a need for goals to be reviewed and in turn adapted based on how practices and understandings are being developed.

Sharing Practice

In conjunction with the above theme around reviewing goals and challenging practice, many practitioners talked and placed value on doing this collaboratively with other services and authorities. Some practitioners shared the need to develop links to different groups and youth services as a means of “*developing opportunities*”. Others discussed the need to “*build relationships with practitioners*” as a means of creating a shared understanding of what co-production looks like and “*what questions need to be asked*”. It was further thought that this would allow the opportunity to “*share ideas*”, “*share good practice*” and “*develop future working*” within local areas. There was also a shared benefit in local authorities “*feeding back on work and projects*”. Some practitioners discussed the need for networking locally, perhaps in clusters to not just “*repeat*” practice but to “*build on local practice*”. It was further proposed the value in developing a “*regional strategy*” in which “*strategic leads sign up to action planning*”. Therefore, it was clear that many practitioners placed value on the knowledge, skills and ideas that they could learn and develop from other practitioners and needed time to be able to do this.

Developing a Co-Production Culture

The final theme which came out of discussions at the second event was around developing a culture of co-production. Practitioners suggested that “*co-production is a journey*” and there is a need to recognise and reflect upon this. Practitioners added this theme as they felt it encompassed the above themes and is a way to “*recognise that there are challenges*” but that co-production is still “*everybody’s business*”. This theme reflects the complexities of this type of work and that the other themes are aspects that practitioners feel should be considered into to build a culture of co-production.

These themes are presented as principles in Figure 1 below, including questions that support practitioners in thinking about how these principles relate to their practice.

Figure 1- Principles of Co-Production: Practitioners Perspectives.



Discussion

RQ1. What models of co-production are currently being used by practitioners when supporting children and young people with SEND in the North West of England?

The information shared by practitioners around models of co-production was very unclear. In fact, this is further evidenced by the first identified theme within the data being around the understanding, guidance and definition of co-production. Whilst some practitioners shared their ideas around what co-production should look like, which is evidenced throughout the principles many were not able to share their current model or framework of practice within the organisation, though some did consider themselves to be at the *“beginning of their journey”*. Consideration is given here to whether this is due to a lack of experience of co-production; a lack of support from the organisation or authority or perhaps a lack in confidence around admitting what little co-production is taking place. However, it is not surprising that this is the case as there is little academic research and guidance around the implementation of models of co-production.

As discussed previously, the Making Participation Work programme (Council for Disabled Children, n.d.) devised an audit tool to support practitioners, councils and young people with participation strategies. This document centres around the ideas shared by practitioners within this research, including *“Building better relationships”*, helping *“young people who cannot participate via these groups have opportunities to have their voice heard too”*, be *“clearer on who is responsible for participation”* and have *“more opportunities to learn”* (Council for Disabled Children, n.d., p.7). Further to this, difficulties around participation are represented by the following statement *“Be honest about the challenges you face. Remember that challenges are not failures, all local authorities have them. Look for ways of working with stakeholders, including children and young people to overcome them.”* (Council for Disabled children, n.d., p.7). It appears that a key part of being able to make progress around participation and move towards co-production is in acknowledging a lack of knowledge of this area. As a result, participation strategies provided by the Council for Disabled Children embed this in their audit tool for challenges to be acknowledged (Council for Disabled Children, n.d.). An interesting aspect to this tool, however, is the need to consider participation from different aspects. The examples provided within the document include shared values, structures, systems, skills and knowledge and staffing (Council for Disabled Children, n.d.). They further highlight a need for monitoring and evaluation in order to make progress but also a means to feedback to children and young people. These are key themes that presented themselves within the current research.

The themes which were produced within the current research have evidentially supported the Council for Disabled Children's participation strategies. The main difference between the two is the focus, as the audit reviews were an organisation is up to in developing and reviewing their participation practice, whereas the current research has attempted to create a foundation for discussions around co-production. Therefore, it could be suggested that these two documents could be used together in order to support the initial conversation and subsequent monitoring around participation and co-production.

At present it appears that models of co-production are not being employed within local authorities. Indeed, practitioners commented on it being unhelpful to create such a model, but instead they highlighted the need to create 'principles' which include ideas and areas to think about as part of your and your services co-production journey.

RQ2: What are the facilitators and barriers to co-production from the perspective of practitioners within Local Authorities when supporting children and young people with SEND?

Within the current research, there were more barriers than facilitators presented from practitioners around co-production. This again could highlight a lack of confidence or progress within this field. Some of these barriers included "investment" from local authorities, particularly at a strategic level. This was represented by the development of the "Creating Sustainable Systems" principle. Investment was discussed in relation to the need for co-production to be on the agenda with the commitment from all practitioners. It was, however also discussed in relation to resources. The need to have the resources available to make co-production accessible to a range of children and young people and for opportunities to be suitable, engaging and in line with what children and young people want.

There was little evidence in the current research around what has worked previously, only ideas around what could/should help in facilitating co-production. Again, it is questioned to what extent this is the result of a lack of experience in promoting co-production and participation through practice. To support participation, the Council for Disabled Children has provided a factsheet around the barriers and solutions for promoting the participation of children and young people (Council for Disabled Children, 2017). Despite there being little research available to better understand and compare facilitators and barriers to co-production, Ofsted frameworks for SEND Inspections within local authority, which was developed with young people, now focuses upon engagement with children, young people and their families as part of those inspections

(Local area SEND inspection Framework, 2016). Below are the key parts of the framework relating to this:

- *How well the local area engages with children and young people, and their parents and carers, to inform decisions about the strategic commissioning of services (joint strategic needs assessment);*
 - *How well the local area involves the individual child or young person, and their parents and carers, in the process of assessing their needs;*
 - *How well the local area communicates with the children and young people, and their parents or carers, to ensure that these primary users are clear about the identification and assessment processes and the criteria used to make decisions.*
- (Local area SEND inspection Framework, 2016, p.9)*

Following inspections, many local authorities have faced criticism from OFSTED around a failure to “effectively engage with children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities and their families” (Joint local authority SEND Inspection, 2017, p.4). It is therefore considered whether it is only following this area of need being identified by OFSTED inspections, local authorities may begin to more actively invest in engaging with children and young people and move towards an understanding and implementation of co-production. It has become evident, however, that although practitioners have some ideas around this, there is not enough practice-based evidence to create an evidence base for good practice.

RQ3. What do practitioners envisage will be helpful in supporting the development and sustainability of co-production of services with children and young people with SEND in the future?

Altogether, the information provided by practitioners indicated key areas that need to be considered in order to aid successful co-production and support it to be sustainable over time. Figure 1 details these themes as ‘principles’ with reflective questions which are set out within a cyclical illustration with the theme ‘Developing a Co-Production Culture’ placed at the centre of this. Practitioners felt that this principle was really at the heart of supporting co-production within services and without this culture and ethos from practitioners at both an individual and strategic level work could not and would not be completed.

After the first event a model was created and presented to practitioners, however, interestingly they suggested that a model is unhelpful due to its prescriptive and sometimes hierarchical nature. Practitioner’s acknowledged the current lack of evidence-based practice and ideas within this area and their need to want to plug this gap by creating

something which could be useful and supportive to themselves and other practitioners. Therefore, they suggested that they would like the themes to become guiding principles that practitioners could think about and consider when employing any form of co-production with children and young people with SEND. They suggested that although the model could be used in a cyclical manner, starting with the 'Understanding of Co-Production' and moving clockwise through each principle, practitioners could also dip in and out of the at any point to support co-production.

Further consideration was given to the levels at which these principles could be considered. Practitioners suggested that these principles were not just to be employed at an individual level (working directly with a children and young people) but also at a strategic level (local authority, organisation or school level) – which is included within the 'Developing a Co-Production Culture' principle. It is proposed that there are certain aspects of all principles that require heavy investment and consideration at a strategic level for other principles to in turn be able to be successful at an individual level. In order to support these principles time and funding is required. This reflects comments made during the research around investment from strategic leads, the need for joint working and the sharing of practice between authorities and services as well as the need to be reflective and work towards goals.

Implications for Practice

It is proposed that moving forward these principles and supporting questions could be used as a 'starting point' for discussions and reflections for how local authorities, organisations and practitioners could consider their needs, strengths and the next steps in order to think about and support co-production. It allows for consideration of what areas may need to be identified whilst considering the need to review the practices and actions regularly as well as the importance of disseminate findings and reflections to others. It is noted the difficulty of doing this at times within services which may not be prioritising co-production with children and young people with SEND, however, it is proposed that by using these principles for self-reflection, practitioners could help overcome this barrier and facilitate effective practice on an individual level. It is hoped by changing practice individually that a difference could be made to those children and young people with SEND and it is hoped this in turn influence others. The principles created above reaffirms some considerations within the 'Participation Audit Tool' produced by the Council for Disabled Children whilst clearly airing the thoughts and concerns of practitioners working within this field (Council for Disabled Children, n.d.). It

further provides consideration of the relationship between factors and the influence they can have on the success of co-production.

Indeed, it could be suggested that although these principles have been created in order to support practitioners practice in supporting co-production with children and young people with SEND, it could also be used as a basis for discussion with the development of any co-production, such as by supporting all children and young people or even practitioners to be more involved in creating the services that they are a part of.

In line with co-production, it is also important to consider that these principles have been created with a small group of practitioners and in turn only represents their views. These principles and corresponding questions create a foundation for thoughts, conversation and reflection, and it is hoped that they will continue to evolve and develop based on the feedback from others. Therefore, the authors would welcome any feedback on these principles from other practitioners particularly in relation to practice and implementation and for them to be considered as a set of working principles for co-production.

Reflections and Limitations of Research

This study aimed to explore the current practice of practitioners within the North West in relation to co-production and participation of children and young people with SEND. Information was gathered at the North West SEND Participation Learning Events. Although a range of methods were employed in order to gain a full and varied picture of current practice, engagement with each methodology differed e.g. some practitioner's chose not to engage in the storyboard method but instead wrote notes. These practitioners chose to use post-it notes to record short comments in relation to different research questions. It is questioned to what extent this could reflect practitioner's confidence around discussing the topic of co-production of children and young people with SEND. Luckily, with this method, sign up to be part of the research was high with no practitioners withdrawing or not wanting to take part. Alternative methods, e.g. interviews or a focus group may have provided greater detail around this topic and would have further provided an opportunity to unpick what was meant and the reasoning behind some of the information shared. Future research should consider such methodologies, to move beyond principles, framework and audit tools of co-production but instead to evaluate methods and practice surrounding co-production as well as participation with children and young people with SEND.

Finally, in keeping with the ethos of the project, where possible, future research should consider discussing with children and young people with SEND these principles of

co-production. The aim of the current project was to seek practitioners' viewpoints around co-production with children and young people, which was successful, but for practice to develop it would be important to determine if these viewpoints are shared by children and young people with SEND. In the spirit of co-production, this could not be done by sharing the current principles but should instead entail asking children and young people about co-production and what it is they feel may support or hinder it first, as they may consider such principles to be unhelpful for them.

Concluding Comments

The present study explored practitioners' practice and current evidence, models and tools of practice around the co-production of children and young people with SEND. Practitioners shared a range of barriers and perceived facilitators to co-production being successful but there appeared to be little practice-based evidence shared and a lack of confidence in discussing this topic. Ideas and thoughts that were shared were utilised to create a set of principles of co-production and corresponding questions, which need to be considered at both an individual and strategic level, as an initial 'starting point' for thinking about co-production. The researchers along with the practitioners involved in this study hope that by sharing these views and opinions it will help reaffirm other practitioner's thoughts around co-production and give them the confidence to acknowledge both their strengths and needs within their own practice or their organisation's practice. It is envisaged that these principles created could facilitate discussions and reflections around practice and the promotion of the co-production with children and young people with SEND, whilst acting as a working document which practitioners can in turn evaluate in line with practice-based evidence.

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