Exploring Children's Resettlement from Custody to Community and the Educational Psychologists' Contribution

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Declaration

This thesis is being submitted for the award of Doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology.

I declare that this work is my own and has not been submitted for any other purpose.

Overarching abstract

This thesis explores the perspectives, processes, and practices at the centre of children's resettlement from custody to the community, and how Educational Psychologists (EPs) currently, or could contribute. It contains four chapters: a systematic literature review (SLR), a bridging chapter containing an ethical and methodological critique, an empirical project, and a reflection on the personal and professional implications of conducting the research.

Chapter 1: What are young offenders lived experiences and perceptions of resettlement from custody to community?

This SLR explores young offenders' (YOs') lived experiences and perceptions of the resettlement process transitioning from custody to the community. I adopt a meta-ethnographic approach to synthesising six, selected papers. The six studies included were conducted in England and Wales, to reflect the youth justice system context relevant to this. Through the translation and synthesis of themes, four third-order constructs were identified, which represent a new interpretation of the findings. Third order constructs indicated complex (often contradictory) beliefs about desistance, frequently influenced by external factors. The review also highlighted the social needs of YOs, including the mixed experiences of autonomy, a need for belonging and shared experience, and a lack of social capital. Relationships with professionals were also identified and consisted of varying degrees of emotional support, whilst practical support was commonplace. Finally, the ongoing resettlement needs of YOs were identified, informed by mixed experiences of co-ordinated care and a sense of purpose post-release. This construct highlighted the importance of meaningful, timely and collaborative pre-release planning. I conclude by highlighting the complexity of constructs and themes and propose viewing them within an eco-systemic framework.

Chapter 2: Bridging chapter: An ethical and methodological critique

This chapter bridges between the SLR and empirical project in chapter 3, providing an ethical and methodological critique of the research process. I begin by reflecting on my professional biography and how this influenced my axiology and the direction of the research. I outline my philosophical orientation and developing critical constructivist philosophical stance. I subsequently justify maintaining a qualitative methodology and propose methodological coherence in my choice of method and data analysis. Finally, I explore researcher positionality, reflexivity, the ethics process, and pertinent ethical considerations surrounding collaboration and participation and power in research.

Chapter 3: Supporting the Resettlement of Children from Custody to Community: A Group Exploration of Process, Practice, and Educational Psychologists' Contribution

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences and perceptions of youth justice (YJ) professionals who support the resettlement of children from custody to community, and to consider how Educational Psychologists (EPs) can support in this sparsely researched area. Using an interpretive, qualitative methodology, three focus groups were held with eleven professionals working at a local youth offending team (YOT). The data was analysed using a combined critical and reflexive approach to thematic analysis (TA). Findings highlight five themes, including: Working within a risk-focused system, challenges of shifting dominant narratives, resource constraints hinder transitions, impact of role demands on wellbeing, and opportunities for connection. The chapter concludes by discussing implications for YJ practitioners and EPs.

Chapter 4: A personal and professional reflection

This chapter is a personal and professional reflection of the research journey that explores the implications of conducting this research. I begin by discussing how navigating uncertainty and aligning with a critical constructivist (CC) philosophical orientation was a turning point in this research. Relevant to this position, I reflect on language, discourse, and research as a form of resistance, highlighting the impact and influence on my practice as a TEP and future EP.

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Chapter 1: Systematic Literature Review

Abstract

Aims: This systematic literature review aims to explore young offenders' (YOs') experiences of resettlement.

Rationale: Resettlement provision for young offenders has historically been developed on a risk-management model (Kemshall, 2008) and its effectiveness measured within a risk paradigm, often producing unsatisfactory statistical outcomes (Hazel & Bateman, 2021). With sustained high reoffending rates, the government and Youth Justice Board (YJB) purported 'desistance-focused approaches, proposing to reduce offending by supporting YOs' pro-social identity development (Bateman et al., 2013; Hazel & Bateman, 2021; Hazel et al., 2017). At present, there is a limited understanding of YOs' experience of resettlement. This SLR aims to develop an understanding by exploring the perspectives of those who have lived experience of youth custody. Doing so may support understanding about what is helping or hindering resettlement.

Method: A systematic search of the current literature was conducted. Six studies which met the inclusion criteria were selected and included in the analysis. A meta-ethnographic approach was applied, following Noblit and Hare (1988) seven step process, to analyse and synthesise papers.

Findings: A synthesis of papers led to the generation of four third-order constructs which offer an interpretation of YOs' experiences of resettlement. These are: beliefs about desistance, social needs, relationships with professionals, and ongoing resettlement needs.

Conclusions: The four constructs offer a new interpretation of YOs' experiences of resettlement. I argue that these should be considered within a framework which accounts for context and the fluidity of the resettlement process. The constructs provide a framework to support practitioners to consider what may be helping or hindering the resettlement process.

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Introduction

The aim of this meta-ethnography is to explore the experiences and perceptions of young offenders in the resettlement process through a synthesis of research focused on lived experiences. Terminology is first explored, followed by policy and research. Identifying issues with the risk paradigm and methods used to measure desistance provides the rationale for the approach to the Systematic Literature Review (SLR).

Terminology

Youth Secure Estate (YSE): The YSE are secure establishments for children and young people (CYP) sentenced or remanded to custody under the Youth Justice System (YJS) and comprise of Secure Children's Homes (SCHs), Secure Training Centres (STCs) and Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) (Case & Browning, 2021).

Young offenders: A population of CYP aged between 10-17 (though often including those 18+) known to the criminal justice system who have been convicted of an offence. The focus of this SLR is on young offenders who have received a custodial sentence and have experience of the YSE.

Desistance: Desistance is multifaceted and has been classified into several typologies. Primary desistance relates to an initial move away from criminal activity relating to behaviour changes. Secondary desistance refers to adopting a non-criminal identity and complete cessation from offending (Maruna, 2004). Tertiary desistance relates to acceptance, belonging, and participation in a moral community (McNeill, 2015).

Recidivism: In this context, recidivism relates to reoffending and a 'return' to crime and/or custody.

Resettlement: Resettlement has been conceptualised as a long-term process to support the process of leaving custody and re-entering the community. In this SLR, it is considered from the point of entering custody, to beyond leaving custody, with no definitive/fixed endpoint.

Moving from risk-focused to desistance-focused

Over the last two decades, there has been a shift in policy and research from risk-focused to desistance-focused practices with YOs (Farrall, 2002; McNeill & Batchelor, 2004; McNeill, 2006; McNeill et al., 2012). Historically, resettlement provision for young offenders has been centred on a risk-management and prevention model (Kemshall, 2008). Correspondingly, the evidence-base has measured risk factors, criminogenic needs and recidivism. Disappointing statistical results and sustained high reoffending rates prompted the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Youth Justice Board (YJB) to move towards 'desistance-focused' approaches. Influenced by desistance theory (Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Farrall, 2004) this

purported to support an identity change among CYP and subsequently, a permanent cessation from crime (Bateman et al., 2013; Hazel & Bateman, 2021; Hazel et al., 2017). Influenced by Haines and Case (2015) and Taylor's (2016) review of the YJS, the 'Child First, Offender Second' (CFOS) agenda was implemented as a strategy and guiding principle of the YJS (YJB, 2019). The YJB then altered this to 'Child First' (CF), which remains the strategic approach and 'over-arching guiding principle' for YJS (YJB, 2021, p. 4). While desistance-focused approaches informed this, comparatively, Child-First centres on children's rights and developmental needs (Case et al., 2024). As part both desistance-focused and CFOS/Child-First, the YJB pledged to support CYPs' 'pro-social identity development' through collaborative working with children and a 'constructive and future-focused' approach (MoJ & YJB, 2018, p. 9).

'Constructive Resettlement' was then developed in 2020, deriving from the Beyond Youth Custody (BYC) research programme (funded between 2012 – 2018), to support CYP leaving custody (Case & Browning, 2021). Constructive Resettlement was termed an 'evidence-based approach' (Case & Browning, 2021, p. 39) to promote children's 'individual strengths and capacities as a means of developing their pro-social identity for sustainable desistance' (YJB, 2018, p. 9). The approach consists of five core principles: *Constructive, Co-created, Customised, Consistent, Co-ordinated* (Hazel et al., 2017). Whilst designed for CYP leaving custody, it is claimed that these principles provide a framework for professionals working across YJS, including community contexts (YJB, 2018).

Challenges surrounding Constructive Resettlement

Despite the conclusion of the BYC programme, the tenets of Constructive Resettlement remain relevant to YJS (YJB, 2024). However, there are acknowledged limitations surrounding the evidence base of Constructive Resettlement and challenges to its implementation (Case & Browning, 2021). Moreover, a 2018-2019 inspectorate report identified inadequate resettlement/transition planning in custody and poor outcomes post-release across areas of housing, employment, education, health and wellbeing (HMI Prison/HMI Probation, 2019). In relation to education, training and employment (ETE), the report highlighted a lack of meaningful and goal-oriented work. The AssetPlus (a YJS assessment and intervention planning framework introduced in 2014) was updated to include a section on hopes and future outcomes. While described as a 'future-oriented approach' (Case & Browning, 2021, p. 44) to assessment, the AssetPlus (and interventions informed by the tool) remain largely centred on risk-management (Hazel & Bateman, 2021). This has implications on YJS staff practice, and their capacity to implement desistance-

focused approaches. Research on community YOT staff perspectives indicates a bifurcation between risk and desistance-focused approaches in practice (Day, 2023; Hampson, 2018). An inspectorate report also highlighted a need to 'promote an understanding of effective resettlement work across all agencies and departments within young offender institutions' (HMI Prison/HMI Probation, 2019, p. 35). Discussing the incongruencies, Case et al. (2024) highlight how desistance-focused approaches have existed alongside, and blended with traditional, risk-oriented approaches. Hence, whilst there has been a shift in research and political discourse, practice remains influenced by policies stemming from a risk-paradigm, thus creating a 'policy-strategy-practice gap' (Case et al., 2024). This is particularly contradictory to CF principles and policy centred on prevention and children's rights (Case et al., 2024).

Rationale for literature review

In an effort to reduce reoffending and support YOs' pro-social identity development (Hazel et al., 2017), there has been a paradigm shift from risk-focused to desistance-focused approaches. Research has elucidated the complexities of this shift, including a binary risk-focused or desistance-focused approach to practice (Day, 2023; Hampson, 2018). What is less known is the perspectives of those who have experienced resettlement first-hand. To my knowledge, there is no existing SLR currently in England that has focused on understanding YOs' experiences and perceptions of the resettlement process. It is hoped that exploring this will provide a greater understanding on:

- What could be helping and hindering resettlement
- What else may be needed to support YOs experiencing resettlement

Method

A qualitative approach was used to analyse and synthesise literature (Flick, 2009). Interested in subjective experiences and the existence of multiple, socially constructed realities, I ascribe to a subjectivist ontology and constructivist epistemology. This aligns with meta-ethnography, which was chosen to allow for the 'critical examination of multiple accounts of a situation' (Noblit & Hare, 1988). This was chosen over a thematic synthesis due to the reflexivity required in meta-ethnography that may offer greater credibility to the research (Darawsheh, 2014). Moreover, Noblit and Hare (1988, p. 35) state, 'the values of the researcher are ubiquitous'. The seven stages of meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988) are documented below to demonstrate the process of translating studies into a synthesis.

Phase 1: Getting started

Noblit and Hare (1988) describe the first part of this process as involving 'identifying an intellectual interest that qualitative research might inform' (p. 26) that is a 'contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context' (p. 27). Initially, I was interested in understanding the role of the Educational Psychologist (EP) in the Youth Secure Estate (YSE), having recognised a gap in practice from my own professional experience. The limited literature available proposed implications for EPs to support the resettlement of YO from custody to community. I then began exploring resettlement, and what constitutes an effective resettlement, and effective resettlement practice. From here, I decided that the research should be grounded in the lived experiences of those directly affected by the phenomenon. Searching elucidated an absence of qualitative syntheses centred on YOs' perspectives of resettlement. Consequently, I decided to examine YOs' views and lived experiences of the resettlement process. The research question to be explored was:
What are young offenders' lived experiences and perceptions of resettlement from custody to community?

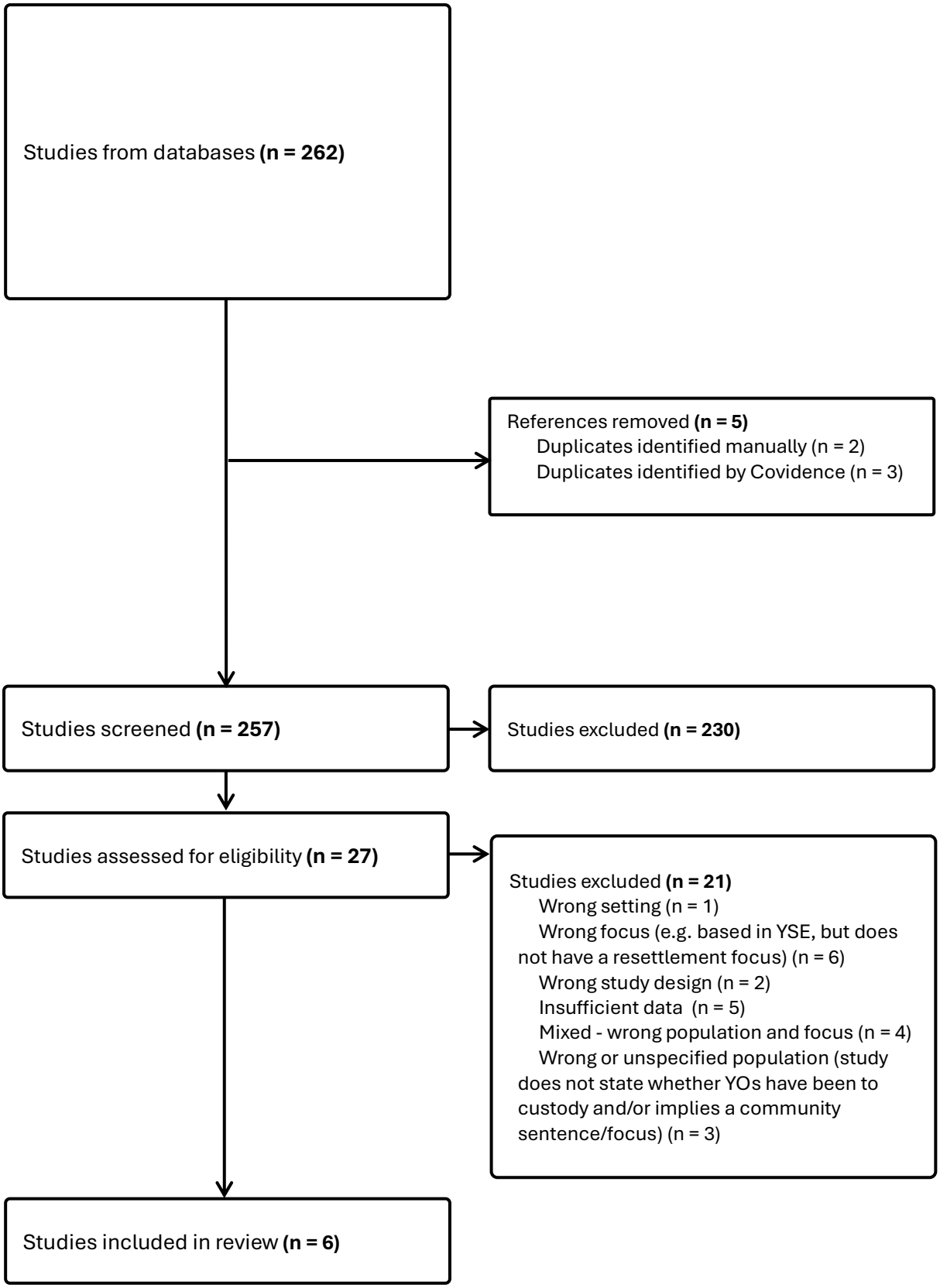
Phase 2: Deciding what is relevant to the initial interest

After establishing a focus and the research question, I conducted a systematic search to identify relevant studies for synthesis. Searches were carried out between August 2023 and November 2023 using the following databases: Scopus, ProQuest, Ovid, Eric (EBSCO), Child Development and Adolescent Studies (EBSCO), Education Abstracts (EBSCO) and British Index (EBSCO). The search string included 'resettlement' AND 'young offender' AND 'perspective'. All terms were 'exploded' to include any relevant search terms. It was decided that papers would be searched past the point of 2000. This was due to legislation changes which required YP to serve half of sentences in custody, and half on community licence, thus necessitating a co-ordinated approach to resettlement (Hazel et al., 2002). Following several initial searches, the search criterion was refined to only include papers conducted in the United Kingdom, excluding Scotland due to its distinct justice system. Whilst non-peer reviewed papers were included in the search, a decision was made to exclude grey literature and theses. This was to ensure a manageable dataset. The potential shortcomings of this must be acknowledged as conceptually rich data may have been excluded.

A total of 262 papers were identified for screening (see figure 1 for PRISMA diagram). Papers were screened based on titles and abstract and against the eligibility/inclusion and exclusion criteria (Boland et al., 2017). From here, 27 full-texts were obtained. These papers

were read in full and screened using the eligibility criteria (see appendix A). A total of six peer reviewed papers met eligibility criteria.

Figure 1: PRISMA Diagram



The appraisal of qualitative research and use of quality appraisal (QA) tools are increasingly used in qualitative systematic reviews (Dixon-Woods et al., 2007; Hannes & Macaitis, 2012; Walsh & Downe, 2006). I considered using the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP), a checklist tool containing 10 QA-based questions (Singh, 2013). However, I decided to discount this and other tools, in line with surrounding literature which recognises the inappropriateness of applying QA tools to qualitative research (Dixon-Woods et al., 2007; Flick, 2009; Toye et al., 2014). Moreover, the process of validating (or invalidating) experiences was discordant to my developing critical constructivist stance. As Kincheloe (2021, p. 35) states, 'inquiry and the knowledge it produces are never neutral but are constructed in specific ways that privilege particular logics and voices while silencing others'.

Phases 3 & 4: Reading the studies & determining how the studies are related

Phases 3 and 4 were conducted concurrently as the reading of papers and noting of metaphors and concepts was iterative (Noblit & Hare, 1988). To support this, relevant methodological details of studies, or as Britten et al. (2002) state, 'essential contextual information' (p.211), are included below (see table 1). The six studies were analysed individually and cross-compared for central concepts and metaphors (France et al., 2014). Those identified were examined against each other and key/recurring concepts supported developing overarching themes.

Table 1: Contextual Information of papers selected for meta-ethnography

Study	Sample	Setting	Method and data analysis
1. Moving on from young offender institutions: Young offenders' adjustment to release (Champion & Clare, 2006)	16 YOs pre-release, 11 YO post release (mean age 17.3 years)	South East of England Research conducted in custody and YOT	• Semi-structured interviews. Initial interview in custody. Follow up interview post release. • Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) used to analyse data
2. The experiences of a young Gypsy-Traveller in the transition from custody to community: An interpretative phenomenological analysis (Meek, 2007)	1 YOs (20 years old) Gypsy-traveller background	South East of England Research conducted in YOI and community	• Semi-structured interviews. Initial interview in custody. Follow up interview was conducted 18 months post release. • IPA used to analyse data
3. The Impact of a Sports Initiative for Young Men in Prison: Staff and Participant Perspectives (Meek & Lewis, 2014)	38 YOs (aged 18 – 21) 11 professionals	South East of England Research conducted in YOI and community	• Semi-structured interviews with YOs • Participatory group (YOs, prison staff and community providers). • Four focus groups (consisting of YOs, prison staff, partners)
4. From the Mouths of Dragons: How Does the Resettlement of Young People from North Wales Measure Up … In Their Own Words? (Hampson, 2016)	11 YOs (aged 13 – 18, one female) Welsh (North Wales) 25% care experienced	Research conducted in English custody and community (location unspecified)	• Semi-structured interviews with YOs conducted at two time points (shortly after release and before the end of license) • Focus groups with five YOs in custody • Three parent interviews • Deductive thematic analysis (TA) used to analyse data

5. Insider accounts of the move to the outside: Two young people talk about their transitions from secure institutions (Beal, 2014)	2 YOs (aged 15 - 17)	Unknown location Secure estate (type of accommodation unknown)	• Semi-structured interviews over 3 time periods • IPA used to analyse data
6. Citizenship, Marginalisation and Youth Offending: Acceptance, Responsibility and Resettlement (Parker & Morgan, 2020)	10 YOs (aged 16 – 18) 8 professionals	South West of England Residential home	• Semi-structured interviews with YOs • Focus groups with residents & project staff (x 2) • Used TA and axial coding to analyse data

Findings

Stages 5 & 6: Translating the studies into one another & synthesising translations

Translation entails comparing the metaphors and concepts in one account with those in another, whilst synthesis refers to 'making a whole into something more than the parts alone imply' (Noblit & Hare, 1988, p. 26). Stages 5 & 6 were conducted concurrently, through an iterative process of comparing and analysing concepts and themes. Determining how the studies were related through central concepts (phase 4) supported the translation and synthesis process, whereby overarching themes (containing multiple concepts) were identified. Ten themes were identified (see table 2). From recognising overarching themes, concepts in each theme were analysed to decipher the most suitable approach to synthesis. This entailed assessing whether studies related through:

- similarity and translatability into each other (a reciprocal translation);
- differing or conflicting meaning (a refutational translation);
- a broad and overarching interpretation, producing a 'line of argument' (Noblit & Hare, 1988).

Table 2: List of themes taken forward for synthesis

List of Themes
Conceptualising an alternative identity (pre-release)
Ambivalence towards reoffending
Experiences of autonomy
Belonging and shared experience
Lack of social capital
Practical support
Family support
Emotional support from professionals
Co-ordination between custody and community
Establishing purpose (for/post release)

As I proceeded, I recognised similarities and contradictions within themes across papers, which informed a reciprocal and refutational translation. To express the synthesis, tables have been used to evidence the reciprocal (table 3) and refutational synthesis (table 4). Within these tables, a brief explanation of identified themes has been included. Whilst themes have been influenced by second order constructs (the primary researchers'

interpretations of the data), first order constructs (direct quotes from participants in studies) have been explicitly included (Atkins et al., 2008; Schutz & Natanson, 1962). There is debate surrounding the use of first order constructs as ‘participants narratives are chosen by the author as exemplars of their second-order interpretation’ (Toye et al., 2014, p. 7), and may not be reflective of individual experiences. Though, I acknowledge the existence of multiple realities/interpretations of reality and have included first and second order constructs, viewing them as influential to the triple hermeneutic process (Noblit & Hare, 1988).

Following the translation and synthesis, I compared themes again for the final level of analysis and interpretation to create ‘third-order constructs’ (Britten et al., 2002). This analysis represents my, newly constructed, interpretation of the findings (see table 5). An overview of themes (with translation used) and brief interpretation has been included to support an understanding of how third order constructs were determined.

Table 3: Reciprocal themes

Reciprocal themes	1. Champion & Claire (2006)	2. Meek (2007)	3. Meek & Lewis (2014)	4. Hampson (2016)	5. Beal (2014)	6. Parker & Morgan (2020)
Ambivalence towards reoffending	YOs reflected on the likelihood of reoffending, referring to a lack of control in the situation: *"well I'm not looking forward to re-offending when I get out. I don't know."* *"and then I'm still looking out for jobs and that, but then I'm thinking 'no – I can still go and do the crime'. It's easier and it's quicker".* *"it's a violent world out there…and if I get caught in a violent predicament and I have to fight my way out, then I'm going to have to – I ain't got no choice."* *"The first day is when you decide whether you're going to go back, or if you're going to go through with what you've been saying god knows how many days you've been inside".*	There was a sense that returning to prison was somewhat inevitable, despite being unwanted: *"I'm going to try stay out of it this time now. Ain't planning on coming back in a hurry. I'd like to say I'd never come back but there's a possibility that I will come back."* Below, they refer to the barriers of criminalisation: *"If it was up to me I know I would never go back to prison, but it only takes me to bump into someone and that. You know with my record, even if they are in the wrong, the judge is going to look at my record and look at his record and if he hasn't got nothing on his… I'm going to be sent down"* *"Just staying out of prison really. If I can do*		For some, ambivalence related to a lack of better alternative to prison, implying a lack of support and opportunity in wider society: *"Don't want to go back in obviously, it's better out here but I wouldn't be bothered at all if it did happen."*	Ambivalence was perceived through reflections on the challenges that may be encountered following release: "*But obviously there's gonna be a few obstacles a few hurdles in the way. Like this tag and all that there's a couple of hurdles innit?"*	

		that it's a big goal in itself…So if I can just stay out of trouble I'll be happy you know?."				
Belonging and shared experience		On several occasions, the individual referred to returning to a travelling lifestyle and their community. They referred to distancing themselves from prison peers and parts of society.	The shared experience of the sports initiative within custody seemed to help foster a sense of belonging among participants: "*It is always just good to get to know people who have been through the same things as you have who can relate to what you're doing. There is always someone to talk to".* Experiencing the programme appeared to break down barriers between staff and YOs: *"Even with the govs we get on well now, have a little joke, so yeah it brings everyone together."*	YO's in the study reflected on peer relations developed from custody. One young female in a female adult prison said: *"I missed me mates cos we make good mates in there."* Another implied a need to belong (despite socio-cultural differences), perhaps for social and physical safety. *"I was chilling with all the scousers. It's scousers against everyone else really. And I just fit with all the scousers."*		There was some evidence of establishing belonging with peers in the residential placement: *"Straight away I knew that this is the place where I should be and that it would get me out of trouble. An' they're all lovely people here, even the boys [fellow residents]. They're like brothers".*
Lack of social capital	YOs demonstrated a lack of social capital post-release and anxieties towards social reintegration: *"every time I had to speak it all went quiet, and I was proper on the spot… I just wanted to crawl back in".*	This young person describes experiencing social exclusion in education, both in and out of prison. Comparing the two, they said: "*It's [education] just like being in school again isn't it? I wasn't never, I*		YO's accounts imply a sense of difference between themselves and others. The below account suggests concern for societal social norms/values: *"I just think people look at me differently now. Now like they think I'm, like, a bad person now,*	There were concerns over being accepted post-release. One YO appeared in the process of challenging a long-term narrative of being 'bad', stemming from being education and being excluded:	

	Others referred to social changes among peers: *"I hardly see any of them. I seen a few of them and that but they're all settled down now doing nice jobs, wearing suits and that".*	*could never sit down at school really. (Prison)"* *"I got kicked off [education] it. I didn't bother with it. Well me mate was up there and we were just playing and they split us up and wouldn't let us go to it. I just lost heart and that really."* The author ascribes this to intersectionality and the institutional racism experienced by Gypsy-Travellers known to the criminal justice system.		*because I've been to jail."*	*"I'd be a normal person. People wouldn't look at me and say 'Oh he's been in prison before. He ain't got a chance of getting good grades or owt. He'll never get a job.... Like being in education all the time. And not being out of education. Having a good life. Not being kicked out before and stuff like that. Not committing offences. Just to know what it's like being a normal person."*	
Practical support			The sports programme offered financial support: *"When you come out its harder than expected, you got lots of money issues and whatever, but when you've done the academy you get a lot of support and one to one conversations"* *"I came to [caseworker] with a couple of views of where I wanted to go when I left and they would research it for me, basically".*	The authors claimed that the YOI's were often meeting the immediate resettlement needs of YOs, reinforcing a risk-paradigm. *"Done loads of things like done CVs, done banking stuff, about paying bills and that."*		*"Yeah, most of the staff are alright. They all offer you a lot of support and they're friendly, funny. Help you cook, and iron and clean. Show you everythin' like, the skills that you need"* *"They're always reminding you about meetings. If you've got no food, if you've got money problems, they'll help you out"*

Table 4: Refutational themes

Refutational themes	Champion & Claire (2006)	Meek (2007)	Meek & Lewis (2014)	Hampson (2016)	Beal (2014)	Parker & Morgan (2020)
Conceptualising an alternative identity (pre-release)	Custody offered some YO's opportunity to reflect on hopes for the future. *"by coming here I can sort myself out like... like when I get back out I can start doing college or something... So I'm glad I got caught"* However, this opportunity was clearly not applicable to all. One YO implied his criminal identity had instead shifted, stating: "*as far as bank robberies and shops go, that's not really my league any more"* Another implied a complete lack of change to their criminal identity: *"prison didn't do nothing for us. 'cause we're back on the same things we were doing before... that's why I've totally forgotten about going inside".*	The individual implied being limited in their ability to challenge their offender identity. This was inferred from their reflections on likely engaging in further violence, as well as reference to their social identity as a young Gypsy-Traveller. Furthermore, they acknowledged that their identity made them a target, implying a level of police discrimination.	The sports programme appeared to begin to inspire sensing change/an alternative future. *"I got into a lot of trouble. But as soon as I got into the academy it's like something sparked. And everything that is in my mind is being pushed aside. So once I was in the academy my behaviour started to change, you could see the change."* For one YO, the encouragement received from their caseworker appeared to support an identity change: *"Now I'm even considering going to university to do a foundation [qualification] then possibly doing physiotherapy or something like that, before I never had anything like that in my mind and that all came through working with [caseworker]".*		The two YOs appeared highly motivated to move away from an offender identity to one centred on a career and family. *"I hope I start work as a joiner for a few years. Eventually build a business up."* "*I mean a job as well it's not just to earn money though it's like me family support me but I need to support me family you know."* There was evidence of actively separating from their offender peers, which was goal-directed: "*Obviously they don't have like hope for their self if you get me?...They say I've had this, I've done this, I've done that. It's not about what they're gonna do in the future..."*	

Experiences of autonomy	*"I appreciate freedom more than I did before".*	Autonomy was apparent through the individuals independence. They referred to change as their sole responsibility, and something only they could action with freewill: *"But I just know what I'm going to do like, I just make me own mind up and just do it like, you know?"* *"I don't rely on no-one really, know what I mean? I suppose it's just the way we were brought up. I suppose, you know, not relying on no-one and that, just being strong and that."* The individual reflected on their autonomy from receiving support from the state: *"I never sign on or anything like that."*	YO appeared to develop a sense of autonomy and control through the support and goal-directed work in the sports initiative. *"It was good to actually look at what I'm doing wrong and how I can improve myself and what I want, because most of my life I've just been basically what everyone else wants me to do. Looking at what I want to do myself and how I can take smaller steps to reach the bigger goals in my life."*		The two YO's appear to identify how certain decisions will support their autonomy. "*But I just need to work around don't I? Just got to make it work really haven't I? No point saying it you might as well do it."* *"it's like what choices I make now is like gonna be with me for like not just the rest of my life, but it's gonna start off the rest of my life. As soon as I make now from when I get out of here like if I'm making a good decision go, do school, get good grades, that's a good decision."*	There was a sense of lack of autonomy and trust from residents. *It's no different [to custody] . . . Come in here and they're tellin' you what to do. Fuck me. Exactly like jail, except you're allowed to walk out the door and you've got a bit of freedom…Is that it?* "*I want some trust".* "*If I wanna go out with mi' mates and spend all my weekly allowance in one day, I should be allowed. It's my money. There's no trust."*
Family support	Time in custody encouraged some to consider the importance of family. *"But I think in a way I'm closer with my mum now as well, since this has happened… I used to talk to my mum and*	The individual referred to family connection and support: "…they said they missed me and that. Cos we're close, close family like, you know?"		There was a breakdown in some family relationships, partly due to the location of the YOI and distance family members would need to travel. "*My mum. She never visit me, she just come as a meeting thing (for a*	There were some doubts from family members in relation to YO's ability/likelihood to desist from crime: *"She [mother] thinks that I won't be able to cope with it and I'll get back into committing offences but I think she*	

	all that, but I never had conversations with her"	*"me mum and dad have always been there for me."* *"Just glad to be around them [brothers] again"*		*DTO meeting?) Yeah, that's all she done. Then I stayed there for two month without no-one visiting me".*	*knows really that I will do alright."* *"I'd say my dad, but my dad he, my dad thinks I'll be able to do it but he is in and out of prison".*	
Emotional support from professionals		The individual referred to the support from his probation officer: *"John has been alright, he's been understanding like".* However, the individual implied an absence of care from professionals and a regressive system. They implied this was inherent to prison culture: *"I don't reckon there's any rehabilitation. It's no good, it's just somewhere to keep us off the streets isn't it, that's all they really care about."*	Participants responses indicate the consistency from caseworkers, as well as a humanistic approach: *"I'm confident if I ask for any type of help they will help me out, I'm confident of that, cos of the way they've spoken to me."* *"…there's always someone there if you need them."* There was a sense of a relational approach being taken, with staff considering the wider context of individuals circumstances: *"And he spoke to my mum, made sure my mum was up to date with what I was doing and what I'm doing now"* Staff acted as mentors and helped to support	Meaningful professional support seemed to be lacking among participants. "*Took me two weeks to get hold of a keyworker as well…I only seen her twice when I'd been sentenced yeah".*		There were mixed opinions about the support from professionals, with some residents seeing their support as authoritarian. Others recognised the support, and extent of professional involvement: *"here you get the support 24/7."*

			and develop YOs emotional regulation skills: *"because of the stuff I learned on the academy like not getting wound up with people I've been able to use that on the outside and I don't usually get violent with people to get my way now."*			
Co-ordination between custody and community	YOs alluded to not feeling prepared for release, indicating insufficient planning and coordination between professionals. *it's not like in prison... what they do there is all slow... but when you're out, everybody's moving around doing things and you're not used to moving that quickly"*. One referred to their mental health needs following release: *"I remember when I first came out, I was actually having dreams about prison and all that. Like when I was in my bedroom at home I ripped my door off and threw it out the window.*	There was an absence of joined-up support and planning for the individual. There appeared a lack of communication between professionals to support the individual on the day of release, and to ensure that their licence conditions could be met: *"Oh I was just worried about probation, cos it's getting here, cos I don't have no [driving]licence and that"*	The sports initiative and caseworker system enabled a co-ordinated approach between custody-community. Participants recognised the continuity of care, and benefits of receiving resettlement support and involvement from services post-release. *"It feels much better, instead of getting out and chucked outside and there you go on you go, it's sort of more, there's someone there if you need to talk to."* *"I had a letter from [caseworker] just saying don't forget we're still here. It's good to see it and know that when you get out you've got someone."*	There was evidence of poor planning and co-ordination working between professionals, as the individuals failed ETE experience demonstrates: *"I would have started a course sooner, so that I'm not like bored all the time...I was meant to start it actually when I first got out wasn't I? _____ sorted it out for me that I was meant to start it, and I just haven't for some reason, and now, like I think that course has finished."* *"It's like they expect you to sit in the youth justice office all day and half the day you're*	There was evidence of planning between custody and community, as arrangements for education/training had been established pre-release. *"Yeah. I'm going straight into college once I get out."* However, one YO reflected on wanting greater input during the transition, suggesting a need for further support and join-up: *"Better if it was more.... It would help me keep on track and think about what I'm doing. More chances to think about my transition."*	Carried out within a residential home, the study was broadly focused on the transfer of care from custody to community. The below account may be indicative of good planning and partnership between custody - community: "*This place has given me everything I need an' that I want at exactly the right time."*

	And it was 'cause I was getting paranoid'. 'cause I was in my bedroom and waking up I kept thinking I was in my cell still".		*"Now I'm a bit more driven to do things but sometimes I still kind of slack on, you know, certain things so I'd rather have someone to guide me and help me out whenever I need it."* *"he tried to make sure that things could happen for me on the out and this is why I'm here today, because of him."*	*not even doing anything."*		
Establishing purpose for/post release	YOs experienced challenges adjusting and establishing a purpose post-release. One referred to the inappropriate type of work post-release: *"but then I thought 'no' as soon as I stepped in the place. It's not my sort of environment 'cause it's office work. And I just walked straight out of there without telling anybody"*	This primary purpose of the individual was to stay out of prison and return to the traveller community. Post-release, they said they had *"settled back into the life"*, referring to their return to their community.	A sense of purpose was established from the sports initiative, through YO's active participation in the programme. One YO communicated how this purpose and activity would be transferrable upon release: *"It's got me back into football so, obviously, that's a good thing and it's going to help me to take up more time, isn't it? So when I get out, I'm not just hanging around. I'm doing something and then not messing about."*	Several referred to a lack of purpose post-release. One participant reflected on their loss of routine: "*Cos your days fly in there [custody] than they do out here. People think they don't but they do. Go well quicker. You're always busy yeah. You're in a routine aren't you?'"* The individual appeared to have little sense of purpose post-release: *"Keep your head down till your licence is over, that's what I've done. Not really moved."*		There was opportunity to reflect on the future post-release in the residential home. Below, there is a sense that the individual's outlook and purpose had changed. The authors refer to a 'journey to citizenship', based on Tambakaki (2015) conceptualisation of citizenship. *"It's changed my mind about just goin' out an' getting pissed up. I'd rather see my girlfriend an' that an' like, just have a job. I've obviously got a bit older and a bit wiser."*

Table 5: Synthesis

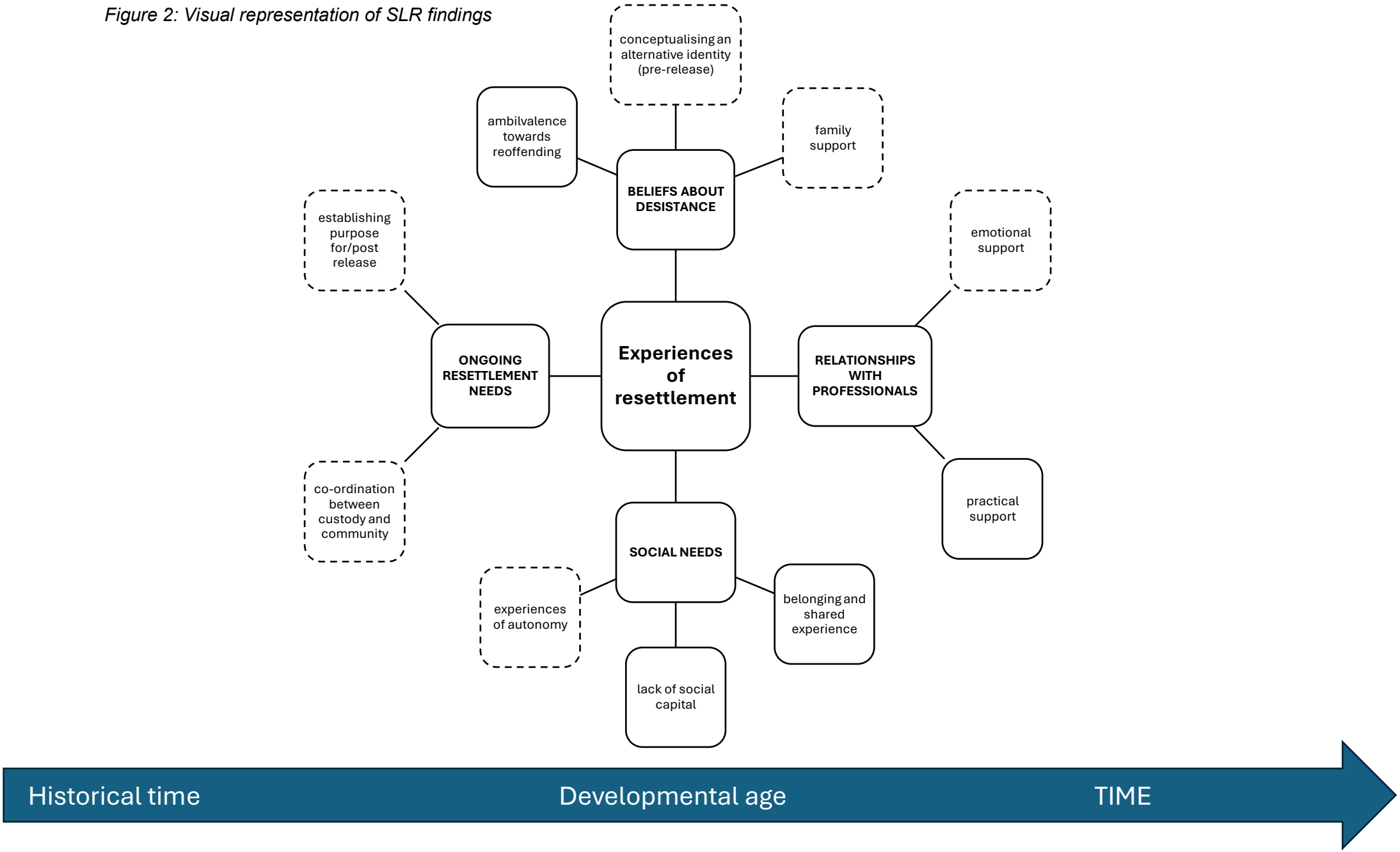
Themes identified	Interpretation	Third order construction
Conceptualising an alternative identity *(refutational)* **Ambivalence towards reoffending** *(reciprocal)* **Family support** *(refutational)*	YOs referred to beliefs about a future self. Often, they talked of an identity reconstruction, moving away from an offender identity to something 'pro-social' (e.g. being a good son/family member, gaining qualifications, a career, better citizen). However, this was not consistent, as others voiced maintaining an offender identity. In these instances, it seemed that there had been a lack of support, or opportunity to conceptualise a better alternative. Many YOs seemed ambivalent towards reoffending and implied a lack of control over their lives. As part of this, systemic issues were indirectly referred to by YOs (e.g. poverty and racism), as well as issues of criminalisation. The support of family members appears variable; some YOs talked positively about the encouragement received from family members during custody, whilst others expressed a lack of optimism/belief from family members.	**Beliefs about desistance** YO accounts highlight the complexities of believing in desistance. Differences apparent in YO's conceptualisation of an alternative identity related to opportunities and ideas about alternative futures. The consistent ambivalence to reoffending related to the realities of criminalisation and systemic barriers. The variable family support and beliefs surrounding ability to desist from loved ones appeared influential in YOs' beliefs about themselves and their desistance journey.
Experiences of autonomy *(refutational)* **Belonging and shared experience** *(reciprocal)*	Within custody and in the community, YOs made indirect references to their experiences of autonomy (or lack thereof). Having autonomy, or a sense of having autonomy, appeared important. YOs discussed belonging with peers; some through relationships within custody, and other relationships out of custody. References of belonging were often made in relation to shared experiences.	**Social needs** YOs' accounts highlighted the significance of their social needs, firstly through their mixed experiences of autonomy during resettlement. Some were afforded autonomy, some managed to retain a sense of autonomy, whilst others expressed grievances over a lack of autonomy. Whilst mixed in this area, there

Lack of social capital *(reciprocal)*	YOs experienced difficulties establishing social capital following a custodial sentence. Several discussed concerns about social skills, reintegrating into society, feeling isolated, and a sense of shame.	was a consistent sense of YOs lacking social capital and requiring support to develop this. YOs finally demonstrated their social needs through wanting to belong to a community/group and through shared experiences.
Emotional support from professionals *(refutational)*	YOs received a mixture of emotional support from professionals. Those who received emotional support recognised the value of this, and the time and input from professionals. However, others appeared to lack meaningful professional input.	**Relationships with professionals** Whilst YOs received differing degrees of emotional support from professionals, they frequently received practical support from these relationships. This often took the form of life-skills/practical support. Overall, these relationships with professionals appeared central to YOs' experiences of resettlement.
Practical support *(reciprocal)*	YOs regularly received life-skills and practical support (often with finances and spending) from professionals.	
Co-ordination between custody and community *(refutational)*	Co-ordination between custody to community appeared frequent, yet there were mixed experiences of organisation, preparation, and support for release. There was evidence of pre-release planning, as well as joined-up/multiagency support. However, for some YOs, this planning and partnership appeared to be lacking. A lack of co-ordination resulted in some feeling unprepared for release.	**Ongoing resettlement needs** The mixed experiences of co-ordinated care and sense of purpose post-release is indicative of the ongoing resettlement needs of YOs. Furthermore, the construct demonstrates the importance of meaningful, timely and collaborative pre-release planning.
Establishing purpose (for/post release) *(refutational)*	YOs had different experiences of establishing purpose for/post release. Targeted support/interventions, routine days within custody, hopes and plans for release afforded a sense of purpose. However, YOs also demonstrated the challenges of establishing purpose post-release, relating to a lack of routine and structure, and challenges establishing meaningful education, training, or employment (ETE).	

Phase 7: Expressing the synthesis

Noblit and Hare (1988) propose that a 'written synthesis is only one form' (p. 29) and alternate ways of presenting findings should be considered to ensure findings are accessible to different audiences. Noblit and Hare (1988) also highlight the importance of understanding the culture of those who may engage in the research. Prior to conducting the research, I spent several months building relationships with practitioners from a local Youth Offending Team (YOT). During this time, I was able to develop an understanding of the local structure and YJS policies and procedures. As such, the visual representation of the SLR (see figure 2) has been created with some wider socio-cultural understanding (see p. 49-50 for reflections on being an insider-outsider researcher). The four broad constructs are positioned around the centre, with themes surrounding them. Dash-lined boxes represent refutational translations, signifying YOs' varied experiences. Time is included (historical time and developmental age) to signify how experiences of resettlement are entangled with developmental processes, context and historical time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Figure 2: Visual representation of SLR findings



Discussion

The use of reciprocal and refutational translations demonstrates the complex and varied experiences of young offenders (YOs) navigating the resettlement process. While reciprocal translations show similarities across studies, the variation within and across papers signifies the heterogeneity of experience, and of YOs as a social group. Each construct is explained in greater depth below.

Beliefs about desistance

Beliefs about desistance appeared central to YOs' experiences of resettlement. This construct was formed from amalgamating several complex, sometimes conflicting, themes: conceptualising an alternative identity, ambivalence towards reoffending, and family support. Self-efficacy is a commonly cited psychological construct relating to 'beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments' (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). This belief in self-capabilities was perceived through YOs accounts of conceptualising an alternative identity whilst in custody (Beal, 2014; Champion & Clare, 2006; Meek & Lewis, 2014). Across several studies, YOs implied pursuing pro-social avenues and societally valued/normative roles (e.g. employment, fatherhood), seeming optimistic and goal-oriented. In one study, YOs reflected on how and why they came to prison, seeming to recognise positive aspects of incarceration for their future selves. In moving towards an alternative identity, they also voiced distancing themselves from offender peers (Beal, 2014).

Whilst often an important time for reflection and redefining identities, some seemed to remain connected to their offender identity (Champion & Clare, 2006). Desistance theories indicate secondary desistance (identity change) as a long-term, complex cognitive process (Giordano, 2014; Laub & Sampson, 2001). These complexities were perceived through YOs maintenance of an offender identity and ambivalence to recidivism. As a theme, ambivalence to reoffending was consistent and translatable across several studies (Beal, 2014; Champion & Clare, 2006; Meek, 2007). In some accounts, YOs openly acknowledged the likelihood of reoffending and relapse, framing a return to prison as outside their locus of control. This seemed apparent in Meek's (2007) study, as on several occasions the individual discussed the likelihood of future violent encounters and implications of criminalisation. Desistance theories have tended to explain the cessation of offending as a continuum of individualistic to structural factors, drawing on narrative theory to explore points of change (Maruna, 1997, 2001, 2004). Meek's (2007) study would benefit from being

examined with a lens which accounts for macrosystem influences (cultural values, norms, practices and beliefs) on individual and family functioning (e.g. Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Moreover, consideration should be given for how being a YO from a Gypsy-Traveller background interacts with beliefs about desistance.

The variability of family support appeared significant to YOs' experiences of resettlement. For some, the pursuit of an alternative, non-offender identity appeared to be reinforced by the support and beliefs of others (Meek & Lewis, 2014). Research has identified that familial beliefs about change can influence beliefs about desistance. Lent and Lopez (2002) conceptualised relational efficacy to capture the significance of social influences on individuals' beliefs about themselves. They define relational efficacy as 'the network of interpersonal or interactive efficacy beliefs about the self and the other within the context of a particular relationship' (p. 257). The theory of tertiary desistance is also of relevance (McNeill, 2015). While primarily centred on a moral transformation and societal acceptance, family relationships can be a source of social recognition (and reinforcement) (McNeill, 2015). In Beal's (2014) study, the presence and support from family appeared a motivation to desist from crime for one individual. The other participant reflected on doubts from family members, however, appeared hopeful that their mother did, 'deep-down', believe in their ability to change. Geographical distance – a recognised barrier to resettlement (Stephenson et al., 2011) – impeded family support in Hampon's (2016) study. Based on the accounts of Welsh YOs in an English YOI, the study highlighted how the distance exacerbated fragile family ties. Although varied, YOs' experiences of family support and 'relational efficacy' (Lent & Lopez, 2002) should be considered during resettlement.

Social needs

Social needs have been extensively conceptualised and commonly viewed as central to human motivation and happiness (Buijs et al., 2021). Here, social needs relate to YOs' experiences of autonomy, belonging and shared experience, and social capital. Experiences of autonomy were complex and sometimes contradictory. YOs' accounts elucidated an appreciation for autonomy (Champion & Clare, 2006; Meek, 2007), developing autonomy (Beal, 2014; Meek & Lewis, 2014), and restrictions to autonomy (Parker & Morgan, 2020). Self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000) purports that intrinsic motivation – 'for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself' (p.71) – is essential to satisfy the human need for autonomy. The voluntary nature of the custodial sports programme in Meek and Lewis's (2014) study may have enabled a move away from superficial compliance, to YOs' active, and intrinsically motivated, participation (Bateman & Hazel, Beyond Youth Custody, 2013).

YOs' experiences of autonomy could also be explained by a perceived increase in trust in/from professionals. Trust has been investigated within the wider desistance research and described as a 'powerful catalyst for desistance' (Ugelvik, 2021, p. 624). An absence of autonomy was experienced by participants post-release in Parker and Morgan's (2020) study. Based in a residential placement, YOs referred to a lack of trust from professionals and described this as akin to custody. In Meek's (2007) and Beal's (2014) studies, autonomy was inferred through YOs reported self-reliance. Though, Deci and Ryan (2008) express caution with individualistic interpretations of autonomy, encouraging consideration for the difference between acting independently and being autonomous.

Belonging and shared experience was perceived as significant to YOs' experiences of the resettlement process. A sense of belonging, rooted in cultural identity, was inferred in Meek's (2007) study, as the individual discussed returning to their Gypsy-Roma community post-custody, implying belonging as something to be experienced outside of the YOI environment. Conversely, in Hampson's (2016) study, the need to belong appeared to surpass potential socio-cultural differences. Based on the experiences of Welsh YOs in an English YOI, one participant stated: *"I was chilling with all the scousers. It's scousers against everyone else really. And I just fit with all the scousers."* This may reflect a greater need for safety than belonging, or the safety that comes with/resembles belonging. Belonging was perceived in Meek and Lewis's (2014) custodial sports intervention study and Parker and Morgan's (2020) residential study. In Parker and Morgan's (2020) study, relationships with residential staff seemed to support a sense of belonging amongst CYP and subsequently, the environmental conditions for their social participation and inclusion. Inclusion and participation, as well as relationships between young offenders and staff, was a core focus in Meek and Lewis's (2014) study. Tertiary desistance, which proposes that desistance occurs through belonging to a moral and political community, alongside acceptance and social reciprocity (McNeill, 2015), may offer a theoretical explanation for these findings. This relational conceptualisation of desistance is becoming increasingly recognised (Albertson & Hall, 2019).

Closely associated is the concept of social capital (SC). Bourdieu (1986) was influential in identifying two core components of SC: the social connections between individuals which grants access to resources, and the quality and effectiveness of these resources in enabling social mobility. This was extended by Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000), who highlighted the importance of cohesion between networks, and the influence of societal norms. Perkins

et al. (2002, p. 33) stated that SC is 'generally defined and measured…in terms of networks (bridging) and norms of reciprocity and trust (bonding) within those networks'. For the purpose of this SLR, SC is understood in relation to the resources embedded in social ties at varying levels (Weaver & McNeill, 2009; Albertson & Hall, 2019). Within custody, there was evidence of a breakdown in community peer relations, as YOs referred to losing contact with, and in some cases, trust in people from their communities (Champion & Clare, 2006). From Perkins et al. (2002) definition, we could assume this would lessen bridging and bonding SC. In Beal's (2014) study, there was reference of actively distancing from offender peers. Whilst seemingly proactive, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) argue that distancing is not necessarily positive (particularly if already lacking SC) and can result in isolation. Other studies have referred to this strategy of peer separation as a way of restricting temptation, known as 'diachronic self-control' (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011).

YOs also voiced concerns about their reintegration into society, societal norms and judgement towards their offending histories. The lack of SC reflected across studies may reflect YOs limited access to resource and networks, both prior to and post-custody. Furthermore, resources needed to ascertain SC are recognised as limited to marginalised groups, due to pervasive structural inequalities (Cattell, 2001; Holland, 2009). To enhance SC, Albertson and Hall (2019) propose needing macrolevel change and a societal shift in perceptions, which recognises individuals who have offended as valuable contributors. This shift would prevent further disenfranchisement and, subsequently, offending.

Relationships with professionals

Increasingly, the approach of professionals and quality of relationships between YJS practitioners and CYP is recognised as significant in supporting desistance (Jacob et al., 2024; Staines et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2018; Zoe, 2020). This corresponds with research on desistance which highlights the social and relational aspects of ceasing offending (Rex, 1999; Farrall, 2002; Maruna & LeBel, 2010). Whilst professionals were present during the resettlement period, YOs seemed to experience varied levels of social and emotional support. In Parker and Morgan's (2020) residential study, YOs recognised the presence and extent of support from residential staff. However, for some, this involvement was perceived as intrusive. As part of the sports initiative, participants from Meek and Lewis's (2014) study received individualised support from independent resettlement caseworks. Participants reflected on the holistic support and presence of caseworkers. One said *"…this is why I'm here today, because of him [caseworker]. And he spoke to my mum, made sure my mum was up to date with what I was doing and what I'm doing now."* Positive experiences may be

attributed to caseworkers' approach, which the authors described as humanistic, strengths-based and person-centred (Meek & Lewis, 2014). Additionally, caseworkers' independence from the YOI may have had a positive impact by alleviating power discrepancies.

In the other custodial-based studies, there was evidence of a lack of meaningful and targeted support from professionals (Hampson, 2016; Meek, 2007). Referring to the prison culture, one participant said *"I don't reckon there's any rehabilitation. It's no good, it's just somewhere to keep us off the streets isn't it, that's all they really care about"* (Meek, 2007, p. 143). It must be noted that this paper was published before the implementation of Constructive Resettlement and Child-First policy. Although, the most recent study included from Parker and Morgan (2020) indicated tensions related to the punitive approach of some staff. Research on staff perceptions surrounding the change from risk-focused to desistance-focused approaches highlights the complexities of the paradigm 'shift'. Furthermore, research from Hampson (2018) and Day (2023) elucidate a lack of professional understanding surrounding desistance-based approaches. Additionally, staff reported dissonance between upholding risk management and applying relational and trauma-informed approaches. Both papers concluded a need for staff training and support on implementation, and a consistent message from policy – transferrable to, and congruent with, the courts and HMIP inspectorate – to enable Child-First ways of working (Day, 2023; Hampson, 2018).

Whilst relationships with professionals were central to experiences of resettlement, approaches were varied, with some professionals taking a greater risk-focused approach than others. However, practical support from professionals appeared consistent during resettlement. This included support with finances, CVs, future employment, and household upkeep. In Parker and Morgan's (2020) and Meek and Lewis's (2014) studies, YOs highlighted receiving practical support which, when combined with emotional support, seemed particularly meaningful. Whereas in Hampson's (2016) study, practical and offence-related work was prioritised, which limited strengths-based and goal-oriented approaches. The author concluded, 'this not only contradicts principles of desistance support but also serves to treat them as an offender first, child second' (Hampson, 2016, p. 259). This was reflected in YOs' accounts (pre and post-release), as they appeared less goal-oriented and hopeful about the future (Hampson, 2016).

Ongoing resettlement needs

YOs accounts demonstrate the importance of co-ordination between custody and community and long-term resettlement support. Furthermore, the transition from custody to community requires young people to 'adjust to a less regimented and more pressured environment, re-establish relationships and reconstruct their previous lives' (Bateman et al, 2013, p.23). This adjustment requires sufficient time for services to plan for (and post) release. The earliest study included highlighted unidentified and unsupported mental health needs pre and post release, implying possible issues with joined-up care (Champion & Clare, 2006). Though, there was evidence of good planning and partnership, particularly in the sports intervention study where YOs had access to a resettlement support worker pre and post-release (Meek & Lewis, 2014). There was also evidence of join-up and planning between agencies in Beal's (2014) study, as participants discussed prearranged plans for education, training, and employment (ETE) for release.

However, some experienced difficulties establishing a sense of purpose post-release due to nebulous or unsuitable ETE provision (Champion & Clare, 2006; Hampson, 2018). Establishing appropriate ETE is recognised as significant as a key factor in effective resettlement (Cosma & Mulcare, 2022). YOs accounts indicate how an absence of ETE post-release can lead to a breakdown of routine and structure, impacting on a sense of purpose. Establishing routines pre-release that are applicable to life post-release has been acknowledged as supportive of the adjustment from custody to community (Stephenson et al., 2011). More generally, feeling a sense of purpose is recognised as important to reducing reoffending and should be considered as part of YOs resettlement experience (Hazel & Bateman, 2021). The above suggests that earlier planning and support which extends beyond custody can help to sustain routine and purpose. Research indicates that this necessitates collaboration between multi-agency professionals and a commitment to constructive resettlement principles (Hazel & Bateman, 2021).

Summary

By using meta-ethnography, I generated four new constructs which provide an understanding of YOs lived experiences and perceptions of resettlement. These experiences were complex, varied and interconnected. YOs experienced different beliefs about desistance, which were influenced by opportunities for identity change, degrees of ambivalence (often relating to systemic barriers), and the beliefs of others. The findings indicate opportunities to explore narratives and personal constructs. There was evidence surrounding the prominence of social needs during resettlement, with some needs –

particularly relating to opportunities to develop social capital – remaining unmet. Relationships with professionals commonly existed through the practical support they offered, as well as through varying degrees of emotional support. These findings suggest that fostering meaningful relationships and emotional connections, whilst also providing practical support and advice, may be the best approach. Finally, YOs experienced varying levels of custody-community planning, which impacted on their sense of purpose post-release. This elucidated the ongoing resettlement needs of YOs and the importance of holistic, long-term support. I have argued that these constructs should be viewed within an eco-systemic framework which recognise the influence of context and time on experiences of resettlement (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Limitations of SLR approach

Meta-ethnography may be viewed as somewhat reductive; whilst the process required a detailed analysis of individual studies, expressing this as a 'whole' compromises the richness of individual experiences, and of studies (Sattar et al., 2021). Additionally, there are recognised limitations surrounding the transparency and clarity involved in conducting each stage of a meta-ethnography, particularly the synthesis and generation of third order constructs (Atkins et al., 2008; France et al., 2014). It is hoped that being explicit with each step of the process and including detailed information on the synthesis has ensured a level of transparency.

Implications for practice

The findings suggest that resettlement can be an opportunity to conceptualise an alternative identity away from crime. To do so, YO require opportunities to consider a better alternative, plus the relational efficacy of others to challenge narratives of being 'bad'. As part of this, professionals would benefit from support on developing relational, future-oriented and strengths-based approaches. Additionally, acknowledging the possibility of relapse appears important (both for YOs and professionals supporting them), given the ambivalence towards reoffending. This may be particularly relevant for those at risk of socioeconomic adversity, exposure to crime and/or violence post-release, or those who have experienced (or at risk of) a breakdown in family relationships.

The findings are congruent with the wider literature on the challenges and risks associated with release and the importance of joined-up custody-community support. Whilst the independent resettlement support described within Meek and Lewis's (2014) sports intervention study may not be commonly available, custody and community professionals

can be supported to adopt similar relational, strengths-based and future-oriented approaches. Given the limited information about the type of support YOs received post-release, this could be explored further.

There is a lack of research from the perspective of Educational Psychologists (EPs) within the current SLR – only one paper out of the six was written from the EP perspective (Beal, 2014). The SEND Code of Practice (2015) outlines the statutory responsibilities of EPs to support CYP sentenced to custody with and without an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Despite an identified role, evidence of EPs' working with the YSE context is sparse, as research has predominantly focused on a community context (Howarth-Lees & Woods, 2022). A doctoral thesis explored the EP role within the YSE/resettlement, and use of narrative practices with YOs (Ackland, 2018), while limited published research identified the EP role to support resettlement through assessment and multiagency working (Beal, 2014; Cosma & Mulcare, 2022). Further research conducted by EPs would be beneficial.

Finally, the meta-ethnography has provided a way of including some perspectives from an underrepresented, seldom-heard, marginalised group. However, the SLR has identified papers with a large male focus, with only one study incorporating young female offenders (Hampson, 2016). Whilst the youth custody population is overwhelmingly male (97%), further research should consider the differences in experiences of young female offenders. Additionally, it has been argued that research including the voices of CYP known to YJS is often 'reserved for children who behave in a manner congruent with the status quo…omitting children assessed as 'high-risk' and negating their voice' (Hampson et al., 2024, p. 13). Thus, supporting the (meaningful) participation of those who are perceived 'high risk', or who challenge the status quo, should be prioritised.

Conclusion

I have argued that YOs' experiences of resettlement are complex and largely heterogenous and should be considered within the wider ecological context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The visual representation of the synthesis (see figure 2) has aimed to capture the spatiotemporal nature of YOs' experiences of resettlement. It is hoped this can be used to support an understanding of YOs' resettlement experiences and help to inform practice. Furthermore, the SLR is congruent with the surrounding literature that suggests YJS professionals (and the wider justice system) could benefit from developing desistance-focused practice (Hampson, 2018). Spaces for professional reflection may support alternative ways of working that could benefit YOs in the resettlement process.

Chapter 2: An ethical and methodological critique

Abstract

This chapter is an ethical and methodological critique of the research process. I begin by reflecting on my professional biography and how this influenced my axiology and the direction of the research. I outline my philosophical orientation and developing critical constructivist philosophical stance. I justify maintaining a qualitative methodology (from the SLR to the empirical), whilst exploring researcher positionality, reflexivity, the ethics process, and pertinent ethical considerations surrounding collaboration and participation.

Word count: 3,294

Introduction

The chapter aims to bridge between the research conducted in the systematic literature review (SLR) and the empirical project. I begin by discussing the conceptual framework and the current context in which I am working. Following this, I briefly summarise the findings from the SLR and discuss how this informed my approach to the empirical project. I then explore researcher positionality, reflexivity, and ethics.

N.B. Within this chapter, I have altered my terminology from the SLR. Instead of 'young offenders' and 'children and young people', I refer to 'custody experienced children (CEC)' and 'children' – see chapter 4 for my reflections on this.

A reflection on the experiences and values underpinning the research

The conceptual framework for this research has been influenced by an interplay of experiences, values, and axiological stance on what matters for humans and society (Biedenbach & Jacobsson, 2016; Le Gallais, 2008; Parker, 2013). My experience working as a Restorative Practitioner in an adult prison has been influential in shaping my values, axiology and the direction of this research. This role entailed supporting men approaching the end of a custodial sentence who were experiencing the process of resettlement. Here, I was confronted with the realities of societal marginalisation, deprivation of liberty, and prison culture – where power and authority seemed to shape interactions at different levels. Simultaneously, I noticed cycles of control, resistance, and punishment, and the exacerbated criminalisation of some individuals. This cycle, arguably shaped by the conditions of prison, made rehabilitation seem unrealistic, as offending identities were reinforced.

Whilst experiencing these challenges, I recognised the value of presence within my role and dedicating time to hear individuals, their stories, and circumstances that led to crime. Increasingly enthusiastic to work in a preventative capacity, I later worked for YJS in a local Youth Offending Team (YOT) as the Education Worker. This involved mentoring and advocating for children open to YJS who were in and out of education, training and employment (ETE). Although more hopeful, this role further elucidated the impact of societal marginalisation, the level of adverse childhood experience, and overrepresentation of minority groups in the youth justice system.

Values-based practice (VBP): A praxis for navigating tensions

Over the three years as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), I have come to appreciate the guiding nature of values. I now recognise how values of social justice,

equality, equity, inclusion, dignity and respect had tacitly underpinned my reason for working in custody and the YOT. Simultaneously, they contributed to leaving these roles, as elements of these systems jarred with my values. Through training to be an Educational Psychologist (EP), I have spent time understanding my values and holding onto these in situations/contexts which continue to challenge. While influenced by ethical codes (e.g. BPS, 2018; HCPC, 2023), my outlook shift reflects recognising the significance of values and using VBP to navigate ethical issues, decisions, and the diverse values and perspectives of those I work with (Prendeville & Kinsella, 2022, 2025; Prilleltensky, 2001). Using VBP in a way to support reflection and manage the complexities of practice reflects a praxis orientation, where theory and action align (Prilleltensky, 2001). Hence, tied to experiences and values is my values-based praxis, which has influenced the direction of this thesis. Below I discuss how working as a TEP in a local YOT shaped my approach to the empirical project.

Current context

Through professional experiences and an interest in the role of EPs in Youth Justice, I have recognised the limited presence of EPs within the youth secure estate (YSE). In my TEP role, EP time remains dedicated to discussing new referrals to the YOT within a multiagency team/consultative context. Whilst some custodial cases are raised, discussions are brief and not explicitly resettlement focused. Within the wider literature, multiagency working and consultation is a recognised EP function/contribution within YOTs (Jane, 2010; Wyton, 2013; Parnes, 2017; Rayfield, 2021). Howarth-Lees and Woods (2022) SLR on the EP role in YJS also highlighted this, and broader functions at an individual, group and organisational level. However, only one paper out of ten in the SLR considered the custodial context (Parnes, 2017).

Overall, research on the EP role in supporting the YSE and custody experienced children (CEC) is very limited (Rayfield, 2021). Cosma and Mulcare (2022) paper outlined EPs statutory responsibilities to support those entering and leaving custody. Likewise, Rayfield (2021) doctoral thesis emphasised EPs statutory responsibilities and raised questions (from their research findings) surrounding whether all CEC should have an EHCP. Beal (2014) research (included in the SLR) highlighted the holistic view EPs can provide in the transition from custody to community, as well as working in future-focused and strengths-based ways. Parnes (2017) doctoral thesis on supporting education practice among YOTs proposed using individual assessment to support the education placements of those on the nexus of youth custody and the care system, highlighting this group as particularly vulnerable during

resettlement. Ackland's (2018) doctoral thesis on narrative practice with CEC is, to my knowledge, the only research which has had a resettlement focus. Given the dearth of research in this area, I used the empirical as an opportunity to explore how EPs can, through working with professionals, support the resettlement process.

Working with professionals

The decision to work with professionals related to my role, the local context, and the ethicalities surrounding involving children in the research. Increasingly, CYPs' participation in research is viewed as a moral imperative to providing a 'voice' and promoting autonomy (Holland, 2009; Holland et al., 2010). Arguably, this oversimplifies the redistribution of power and insufficiently considers the implications of responsibility and possible harm (Hammersley, 2017; Holland et al., 2010). Instead, Graham and Fitzgerald (2010) emphasise establishing environments in which children can actively participate, where their voices are heard, meaningfully responded to, and engaged with. Within the SLR, I also highlighted the significance of professionals who were physically present, with whom children could develop meaningful, trusting relationships. Cognizant of the fleeting nature of the research, I deemed it would be ethical to work with professionals who have sustained input with children at the YOT.

Additionally, I deemed working with professionals as potentially impactful in fostering change, aligning with a view that empowering and increasing the capacity of professionals can promote better outcomes for CYP (Farrell, 2009). In my TEP role, this has involved supporting professionals to engage in reflection and dialogue (in both one-off and ongoing sessions). A recognised definition of reflection comes from John Dewey, who described it as:

> *'the active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends'* (Dewey, 1933, p. 6).

Reflection/reflective practice can support consideration for underlying assumptions and biases, as well as provide space for the personal and emotional aspects of work (Gaskell & Leadbetter, 2009; Schön, 1983). Types of communication and reflective questioning play a role in fostering 'dialogic space' – open, provisional, reciprocal, 'exploratory talk', where those involved influence and change each other (Boyd et al., 2019; Mercer et al., 1999; Wegerif, 2013; Wegerif et al., 1999). This necessitates establishing an environment where multiple perspectives are valued and included (Boyd et al., 2019), and where knowledge is constructed with others within a socio-cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978).

Whilst research has focused on classroom learning (between children and adults), this has relevance to adult interactions and learning (Mezirow, 2000). Knipfer et al. (2012) paper on reflective practice in organisational learning highlight the importance of 'organisational climate', where 'different perspectives are valued and critical reflection is encouraged' (Knipfer et al., 2012, p. 14). From a constructivist perspective, this type of reflection and knowledge co-construction has both an individual and group transformative potential. At a systems level, Knipfer et al. (2012, p. 10) state it 'has the power to change organisational routines and organisational work practice by questioning assumptions and values that are taken for granted'. Multiple doctoral theses highlight the benefits of using individual and group reflective practice with YJS practitioners (Jane, 2010; Wyton, 2013) and propose a greater focus on incorporating reflective practice (Parnes, 2017).

From a critical constructivist view, dialogue has an emancipatory potential (Kincheloe et al., 2017). In EP practice, opportunities for reflective dialogue can support a praxis reorientation from individualistic to more inclusive, eco-systemic approaches (Gaskell & Leadbetter, 2009; Prilleltensky, 2001). This aligns with community psychology philosophies pertaining to challenging systemic inequalities through participatory, co-constructed knowledge (Burton et al., 2011). Theories which highlight the socially constructed nature of reality, while recognising the influence of dominant power structures, align with my underpinning philosophical position and have shaped my approach to the empirical.

From meta-ethnography to empirical research

Having decided to work with professionals in the empirical phase, I prioritised exploring children's perspectives and experiences of resettlement in the meta-ethnography SLR, acknowledging their unequal power and representation within the broader cycle of praxis (Prilleltensky, 2001). In the SLR, I identified four constructs which helped to shape my understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of youth resettlement. These constructs included: beliefs about desistance, relationships with professionals, social needs, and ongoing resettlement needs.

Between writing the SLR meta-ethnography and beginning the empirical project, I received feedback from the Head of Service at the local YOT surrounding the language within participant information sheets and consent forms. I was advised to remove 'young offender' from these documents due to the negative connotations associated, and the YOTs approach to challenging punitive discourses. I welcomed the feedback and replaced the term with 'children and young people' in these forms (see appendix B), though maintained 'young

offender' within the meta-ethnography (discussed in chapter 4). Altering the language elucidated the importance of space for feedback, adaptations, and ethics in practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Philosophical stance

Billington and Williams (2017, p. 9) state that researchers within the field of educational psychology should 'identify and make transparent the epistemological, ontological and methodological assumptions'. Whilst I recognise the argument for transparency, this perhaps downplays the dynamic, evolving researcher position. My experience of identifying a philosophical stance has entailed grappling with paradigmatic overlap and methodological fit during different stages of the research process (Creswell, 2023). As such, this process has been fluid. Though, what has remained consistent is my interest in interpretivism – how phenomena are experienced or perceived within a particular context (Bhattacherjee et al., 2019; Kerdeman, 2015). This corresponds to a subjective ontology, which views reality as synonymous with the meanings that people attribute to it (Gergen, 2015). Below I discuss my epistemological position and methodological considerations.

Epistemology

Epistemology refers to knowledge, about what can be known and how (Willig, 2013). The central aim of the empirical research is to support new ways of thinking surrounding resettlement (and possibly changes in practice) through negotiating meaning within a group space. Epistemologically, this reflects a social constructivist/constructionist position (Cohen, 2018). Espousing a social constructionist view, I acknowledge how realities are multiple and co-constructed between people through language and culture. From a social constructivist position, I am also interested in the individual learning experience and how the social, dialogic space supports this. By aligning with these positions, I acknowledge the dynamic and evolving nature of reality and adopt a relativist stance, viewing reality as shaped by socio-cultural context (Burr, 1995).

Critical Constructivism

Whilst constructivism/constructionism captures my overarching epistemological position, I recognise an underpinning critical theoretical influence which views interactions and knowledge production as deeply entangled with power structures (Kincheloe et al., 2017). Consequently, I have adopted a critical constructivist (CC) position. CCs recognise how 'knowledge is not complete in and of itself', and is instead, 'produced in a larger process and can never be understood outside of its historical development and its relationship to other

information' (Kincheloe, 2021, p. 23). CC also recognises the transformative potential of dialogic research, as 'social action informed by thick description and rigorous understanding of a social and political circumstance is made possible'(Kincheloe, 2021, p. 22). This is congruent with my values of social justice and the aim of moving beyond exploring experiences and perspectives, to considering ways of improving practice and supporting children experiencing resettlement.

Methodological considerations

Having used a qualitative approach in the SLR, I maintained this methodological approach in the empirical study. This was driven by qualitative research values and a belief in interpretive techniques to provide new and in-depth insights on resettlement (Braun & Clarke, 2024). From this position, I chose to use focus groups, recognising this method of data collection as providing opportunities for dialogue and multiple perspectives (Salazar Orvig et al., 2025). Additionally, I anticipated that focus groups could support the consideration of possible underlying power and systemic influences that come to form experiences and reality. I employed reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), combined with a critical component (see chapter 3) for data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Of increasing importance to me was the coherence between values, epistemology and method (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Carter, 2010). The decision to use TA seemed methodologically coherent and, given its recognised flexibility, was a suitable choice (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, critical theorists encourage researchers to 'remain open enough to allow for changes, disagreements, and growth' (Kincheloe et al., 2017, p. 235). As the research process evolved, I came to appreciate employing a flexible method (see appendix C). Additionally, I recognised the challenges I may have encountered had I used a specific methodological design (see chapter 4). Other methodological considerations relevant to my CC position include reflection on how knowledge is constructed, and whose voices are privileged over others. Reflexive and critical TA is well suited to these considerations, as it requires researchers to continually, and critically, engage in their assumptions that may shape data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2023).

Reflexivity and positionality

Darwin Holmes (2020, p. 2) state that 'self-reflection and a reflexive approach are both a necessary prerequisite and an ongoing process for the researcher to be able to identify, construct, critique, and articulate their positionality'. In adopting a CC position, I recognise my active, involved, value-laden position, and how my values, history and views of the world

have shaped the research (Kincheloe et al., 2017; Le Gallais, 2008). Additionally, I recognise how the research is occurring within a socio-political context that I am inseparable from and influenced by (Bhattacherjee et al., 2019; Kerdeman, 2015). This necessitates ongoing reflection and reflexively throughout the project (Darwin Holmes, 2020). As part of this, I reflect on my insider-outsider research position below.

Insider-outsider continuum

The insider-outsider continuum is commonly referred to in qualitative research as a way of viewing and understanding positionality (Darwin Holmes, 2020). Ontologically, I ascribe to an *emic*, insider account, which views research as relative and subjective, and researchers as active and influential. This contrasts with the outsider position, which Darwin Holmes (2020) classifies as *etic*: objective and value-free. However, this binary view of insider-outsider has been challenged to acknowledge the shifting and potentially simultaneous insider-outsider researcher position (Hanson, 2013; Mercer, 2007). Rather than a dichotomy, the insider-outsider is more aptly described as:

> *'a continuum with multiple dimensions, and that all researchers constantly move back and forth along several axes, depending upon time, location, participants, and topic'*
> (Mercer, 2007, p. 1).

This moving back and forth resonates with my experience. Prior to the research, I had spent roughly ten months developing my position as TEP at the YOT, building working relationships with staff and an understanding of the local context. Having also previously worked at a local YOT, I felt a sense of commonality with staff through shared professional experiences, reminiscent of an insider position. Simultaneously, I recognised my outsider position through our professional differences and my researcher-practitioner role, plus the physical and psychological separation I had from the YJS/YOT research context. An outside position is recognised as favourable in preventing a myopic or all-knowing view of the phenomena being studied (Darwin Holmes, 2020). Equally, an insider position has its advantages in that preexisting knowledge and experience of the research context can result in meaningful engagement (Darwin Holmes, 2020). Hence, 'the insider's strengths become the outsider's weaknesses and vice versa' (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 411). Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p. 54) refer to the 'space between' that permits similarity and difference – the simultaneous insider-outsider position that a researcher may occupy. This fluid, multidimensional position reinforces the importance of ongoing reflexivity.

Ethical considerations

Ethics process

This research received the full ethical approval of the university (granted 20th February 2024) and has been conducted in accordance with British Psychological Society (The British Psychological Society, 2014; 2017) and the Health Professions Council (Health and Care Professions Council, 2016). As part of gaining ethical approval, I outlined how I would manage informed consent, minimising harm, and data protection. While I gained informed consent, those who engaged may have felt some pressure to do so, as recruitment was supported by seniors. Additionally, although the research was deemed low risk, I acknowledged that participation had the potential to rouse thoughts and feelings in participants which they may not have experienced otherwise (Willig, 2013). Being cognizant of the possibility of unexpected reactions reflects the need for researcher responsivity, ethics in practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) and ongoing reflection in qualitative research (Cohen, 2018). Below, I reflect on the ethics of collaboration and participation.

Collaboration and participation

From the onset of the research, I have been guided and influenced by collaboration and participation, common to participatory research designs (Bradbury, 2015). Whilst I discounted a participatory research methodology, I aimed to retain core associated principles. This was values-driven and reflective of my belief in 'democratic engagement' and the cooperation and inclusion of community stakeholders in research (Duea et al., 2022; Jordan & Kapoor, 2016). However, my espoused values and beliefs raise ethical questions, particularly surrounding power in research. As Grover (2004, p. 256) states, 'one party is investigating the other. One party (the academic), for instance, normally has the power to disseminate information broadly about the other'. While I challenge a separated view of the researcher, I acknowledge that the research places me in a position of power in relation to participants. Critical theorists are cognizant of power discrepancies and how this can hinder dialogue and reflection (Kincheloe et al., 2017). To support the coming together of individuals, critical researchers should listen with 'raw openness' and adopt a learning stance (Keating, 2013). At the start of focus groups, I voiced my co-learner role and challenged the notion of being the 'expert'. Whilst not diminishing power, I aimed to position myself alongside participants and highlight a shared learning process (Kincheloe et al., 2017).

Combined with a co-learner position is my role as facilitator – to support and guide participants through the process, and (where appropriate) constructively challenge ideas.

This has parallels to EP practice and collaborative-directive forms of consultation (Gutkin, 1999; Nolan & Moreland, 2014). In holding a facilitator role, consideration for group dynamics and impact on collaboration and participation is important. From a CC perspective, group dynamics are shaped by dominant discourses, ideologies and power, but also the social hierarchies and positionalities of participants – all of which may support or hinder participation (Kincheloe, 2021). Through reflection and reflexivity, researchers can consider how those involved (including themselves) contribute to discussion and group meaning making. Additionally, how participants reinforce and/or challenge dominant discourse and ideologies is relevant to my critical constructivist position and the transformative aims of the research (Kincheloe, 2021; Mezirow, 2000; Friere, 1970).

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated my inseparability to, and influence on, the project (Le Gallais, 2008). I have espoused a values-based praxis orientation and highlighted how personal and professional experiences (plus practice context) have shaped the direction of this project. Acknowledging this, I conceptualised a critical constructivist (CC) stance which views knowledge production as socio-historically situated, entangled with power (Kincheloe, 2021). Adopting this stance has necessitated exploration on positionality and ethical responsivity (Kincheloe et al., 2017). Having established my philosophical orientation, I have justified maintaining a qualitative methodology and proposed methodological coherence in my choice of method and data analysis. Throughout, I have engaged with pertinent ethical considerations, including employing collaborative and participatory principles. Examining these areas has required reflection and reflexivity, both essential and ongoing within qualitative research.

Chapter 3: Supporting the Resettlement of Children from Custody to Community: A Group Exploration of Process, Practice, and Educational Psychologists' Contribution

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences and perceptions of youth justice (YJ) professionals who support the resettlement of children from custody to community, and to consider how Educational Psychologists (EPs) can support in this sparsely researched area. Using an interpretive, qualitative methodology, three focus groups were held with eleven professionals working at a local youth offending team (YOT). The data was analysed using a combined critical and reflexive approach to thematic analysis (TA). Findings highlight five themes, including: Working within a risk-focused system, challenges of shifting dominant narratives, resource constraints hinder transitions, impact of role demands on wellbeing, and opportunities for connection. The chapter concludes by discussing implications for YJ practitioners and EPs.

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Word count: 7,387

Introduction

This chapter presents my empirical project which sought to explore the experiences and perceptions of professionals who support children experiencing the resettlement process. The project was carried out in the North West of England with eleven professionals working at a local Youth Offending Team (YOT) who support children's resettlement from custody to community. I begin by providing an overview of the Youth justice System (YJS) and context of the Youth Secure Estate (YSE), before discussing the current role and contribution of Educational Psychologists (EPs). I then detail the aims of the research, research design, methodology, findings and implications. I finalise by considering the limitations of the research and possible avenues for future inquiry.

The Youth Justice System

The Youth Justice System (YJS) in England and Wales was established during Tony Blair's Labour government as part of its 'Tough on Crime, Tough on the Causes of Crime' agenda (Garton Grimwood & Strickland, 2011). In response to rising concerns about youth crime - and as part of a prevention strategy - the Crime and Disorder Act (1998) established community-based Youth Offending Teams (YOTs). Detention and Training Orders (DTOs) were also introduced in 2000, which halved custodial sentences for children, necessitating the remaining period to be served under local YOT supervision (Garton Grimwood & Strickland, 2011).

Since these changes, the number of children (typically aged between 10 – 17 but extending to those 18 years old and over) in the Youth Secure Estate (YSE) has reduced. According to government data, 3,130 children were housed in the YSE in August 2000 (MoJ, 2024). The most recent governmental figures published in a youth custody population report indicated that as of August 2024, 555 children were in the YSE (MoJ, 2024). While the reasons for this are multifaceted, this reduction has been (partly) attributed to the legislative changes and increase in diversion schemes (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2021). Demographic information on the youth custody population (based on MoJ 2024 statistics) are included below.

Table 6: Youth Custody Population by Age (MoJ, 2024)

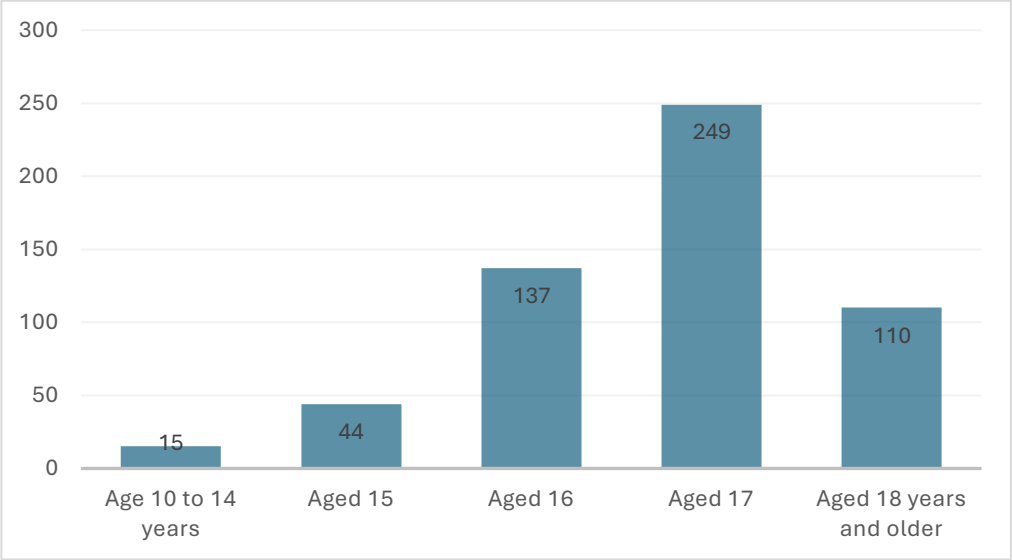


Table 7: Youth Custody Population by Sex (MoJ, 2024)

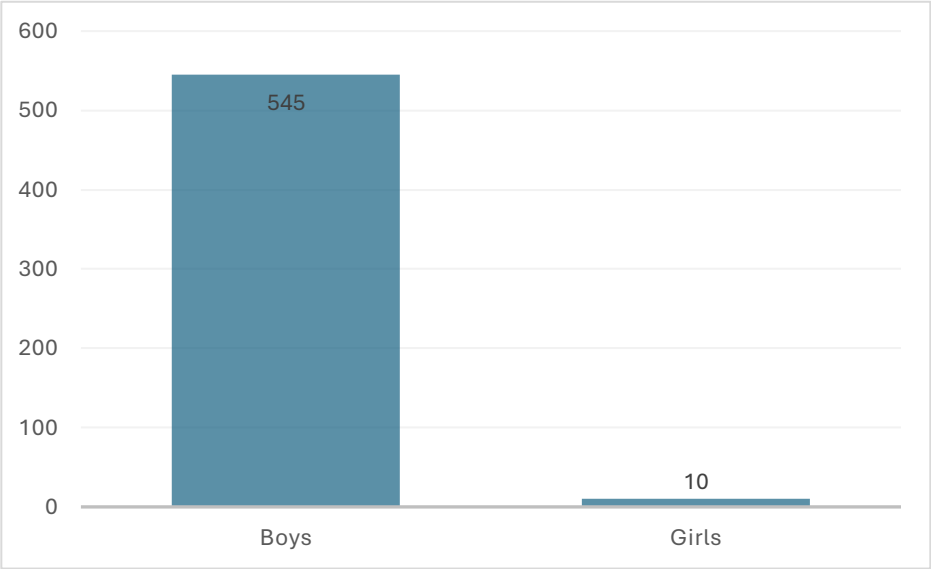


Table 6 indicates that 17 years olds constitute the majority of the YSE population. Also evident is the disproportionate number of boys in the YSE (see table 7). Table 8 shows the youth custody population based on ethnicity. Whilst white (including white minorities) appear most prevalent, it is recognised that Black and Black British children are disproportionately represented in youth custody in comparison to the general youth population (Yeebo et al., 2022).

Table 8: Youth Custody Population by Ethnicity (MoJ, 2024)

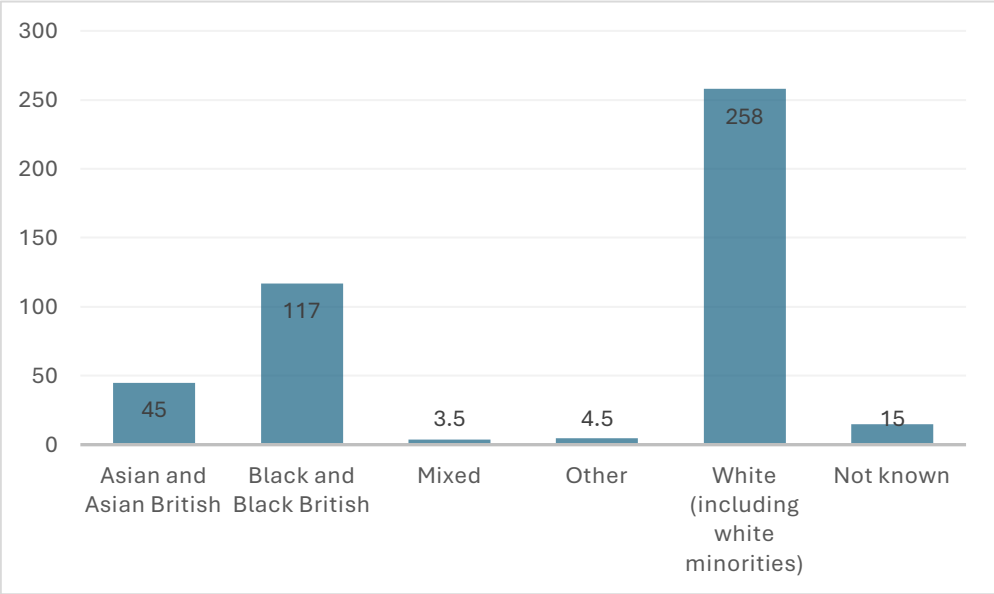


Table 9: Youth Custody Population by Legal Basis (MoJ, 2024)

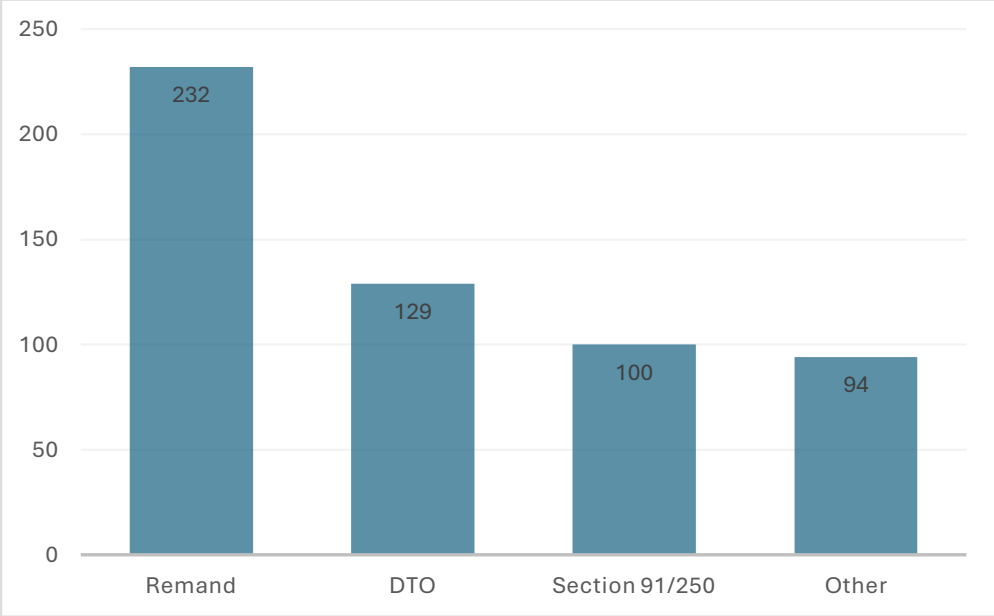
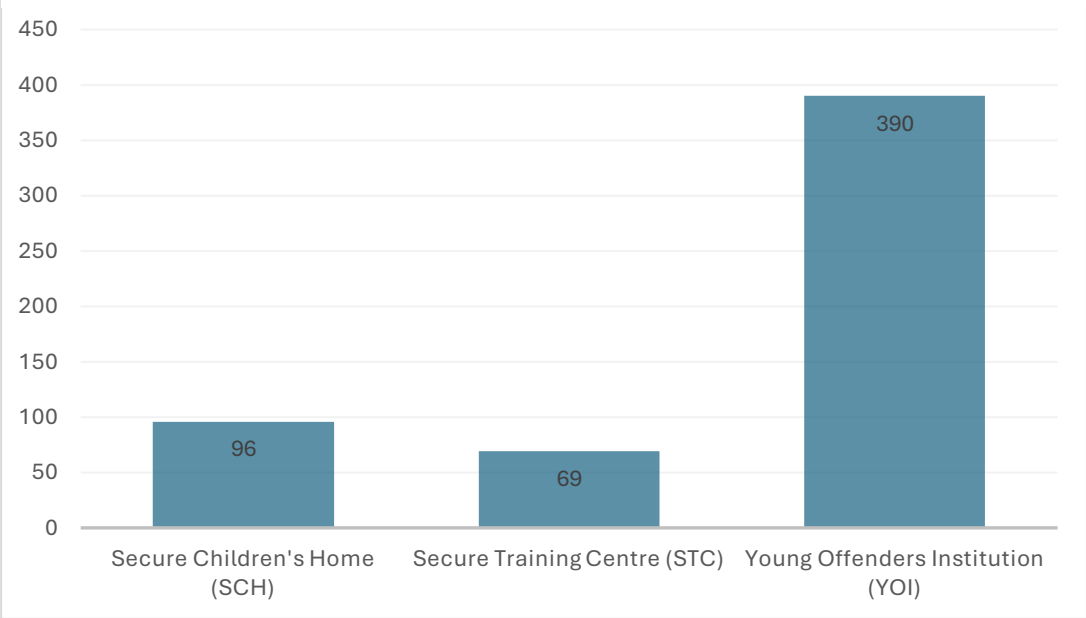


Table 9 shows that most children in the YSE were on remand sentence, followed by DTOs, and Section 91/250 (reserved for custodial offences of more than 7 years for serious sexual and violent offences). Remand in custody is a legal measure (decided by the courts), which is given to those awaiting trial or sentencing, usually deemed higher risk (who have not been granted release on bail in the community) (MoJ, 2022). While seemingly reserved for these purposes, remand in the YSE has been critiqued for being overused as an unnecessary

deprivation of liberty measure (Gibbs & Hickson, 2009). Bateman (2020) highlighted that this is often due to safeguarding concerns and a lack of community alternatives, rather than offence severity. Recent data from the YJB indicates that roughly 62% of children on remand were not sentenced to custody (YJB, 2024). The data also indicated that Black and Mixed ethnicity children disproportionately received remand sentences in comparison to the general youth population (YJB, 2024). This elucidates issues surrounding institutional and systemic racism and the need for a culturally and racially responsive YJS (Yeebo et al., 2022).

Table 10 indicates that most children in the YSE were sentenced to a Young Offenders Institution (YOI), as opposed to a Secure Children's Home (SCH) or Secure Training Centre (STC). YOIs are larger institutions for children aged 15 to 21 which house between 60 – 400 children (HM Government, n.d.). STCs house children aged 12 to 17, are smaller than YOIs, and required to provide 30 hours of education or training a week. SCHs are for children aged 10 to 17 and have a higher staff-to-child ratio (housing between 10 and 38 children). Like STC, SCHs are required to provide 30 hours of education per week (HM Government, n.d.). Unlike YOIs and STCs (overseen by Youth Custody Service or private companies), SCHs are managed by Local Authorities/Councils. SCHs are not limited to children from the YJS, and house care experienced children deemed at risk of absconding and harm (Children Act, 1989). A report commissioned by the DfE exploring the use of SCHs for welfare and justice reasons highlighted stakeholder critique surrounding the housing of these children together (Hart & La Valle, 2021). However, there was some agreement that 'the common factor shared by all children in SCHs is a very high level of vulnerability, whether they enter via a justice or welfare pathway' (Hart & La Valle, 2021, p. 31).

Table 10: Youth Justice Population by Sector Type (MoJ, 2024)



Widely recognised among researchers and policy makers is the vulnerability of children entering the YSE through the YJS. Research indicates disproportionate multiple adverse childhood experiences, including socioeconomic deprivation, abuse, neglect, and family separation (Gray et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2016). Linked with experiences of adversity is a prevalence of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs (previously BESD – behavioural, emotional, social difficulties) of the YSE population is widely acknowledged (MoJ & DfE, 2016), however, arguably misunderstood (Day, 2025b). Increasingly, the prevalence of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) of this cohort of children has been recognised (Hughes et al., 2017). Bryan et al. (2007, p. 508) stated that: 'high-risk children may receive services aimed at ameliorating their behaviour problems, but there may be little or no attention paid to suboptimal development in the realms of expressive and receptive language competence' (p. 508). Although understudied, this misunderstanding of SEND is a likely contributor to high rates of permanent exclusion among custody experienced children (CEC). Cathro et al (2023) also propose that the academisation of schools and their stringent behavioural policies is a contributor. Also recognised are higher rates of learning difficulties (Hughes et al., 2012) and neurodevelopmental differences – the latter gaining particular, increased interest over recent years (Day, 2022; Day et al., 2024; Kirby et al., 2020). Overall, Paterson-Young et al. (2022) highlight that although the number of children in custody is decreasing, their needs are increasingly complex because of multiple, intersectional indicators.

Educational Psychologists and the Youth Secure Estate

The SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) provides guidance on supporting detained children, including the statutory contribution of EPs, and need for SEN provision and support for all children in custody. It highlights requirements for Local Authorities to:

- Ensure detained individuals and their parents are involved in decisions-making, have their views and wishes heard and have access to advice to support participation.
- Identify and assess special educational needs early, providing high-quality support regardless of 'whether they have an EHC plan or not' (DfE, 2015, p. 223).
- Promote collaboration between education, health, and social care for continuous provision during custody and post-release, prioritising timely decision-making.

Whilst outlining a statutory and non-statutory role, evidence of EP involvement in the YSE and with CEC is limited. Gumbs (2023) recent exploration of the EP role nationally highlighted functions of assessment, consultation, intervention, multiagency working and training. However, it did not explicate the EP position in the YSE and, rather, highlighted the challenges of working with this system (Gumbs, 2023). Howarth-Lees and Woods (2022) systematic literature review (SLR) on the EP role in YJS also highlighted the EP role to support YJS at different levels across core functions of practice (consultation, assessment, intervention, training and research). However, the SLR contained papers with a predominantly community focus; Parnes (2017) doctoral research was the only paper included which mentioned the EP role to support the transition from custody to community.

The paucity of research, and lack of EP presence relates to acknowledged barriers surrounding commissioning models, Local Authority funding constraints, and increased demand for statutory assessment (Howarth-Lees & Woods, 2022; Lee & Woods, 2017). Other barriers surround the Code of Practice (2015) and EHCPs being unalterable whilst in custody (Cosma & Mulcare, 2022). The prohibition on amending or carrying out a reassessment has been recognised as negatively impacting access to SEND support in custody, and on the transfer of EHCPs post-custody (Parnes, 2017). Whilst these barriers prevail, EPs have a statutory responsibility, plus the skillset to support resettlement processes from the point of a child entering custody, to beyond release and within the community.

Research aims

The research is an exploration of the phenomenon of resettlement within a local YOT context. By using focus groups to support group dialogue and reflection, I aimed to provide insight and generate new possibilities of meaning on:

- The barriers and facilitators to supporting children through resettlement, from the perspective and experiences of professionals
- What is, or could be, the role of the EP to support the resettlement process?

Methodology

In chapter 2, I emphasised how my professional biography, values-based praxis and philosophical position shaped this project – from conceptualisation to methods and analysis. In doing so, I proposed methodological coherence between my philosophical position, choice of qualitative methodology and method of focus groups.

Research context

The research was conducted within a YOT in the North West of England. Data from MoJ (2024) indicated that, as of August 2024, the North West had the third highest number of children in the YSE (74), following London (117) and the West Midlands (78).

Recruitment and participants

Potential participants were sent participant information sheets and asked to express their interest by email. The recruitment strategy was multi-pronged and entailed senior management support to promote the project to the wider team. In total, eleven participants working at/with the local YOT agreed to participate.

Table 11: Focus Group and Participant Information

Focus group 1	**Focus group 2**	**Focus group 3**
Case manager	ISS (Intensive Supervision and Surveillance) Case Manager	Case Manager
Speech and Language Therapist	Case Manager	Youth Mentor
Business Support Officer	Case Manager	ISS Case Manager
Social Worker/ISS Case Manager		
Case Manager		

Focus groups

Focus groups were used as the primary method to facilitate a space where group discussion, dialogue and reflection could take place. As detailed in chapter 2, the research is underpinned by a critical constructivist philosophical position and values-based praxis (Prilleltensky, 2001). I hold the view that language is transformative, and that experiences and reality are shaped by a dynamic interplay of language, interaction, discourse and power. From recognising the multiplicity of views and realities, focus groups provide opportunities for participatory dialogue, the co-construction of knowledge and the de-construction of dominant discourse (Salazar Orvig et al., 2025). Concurrently, I anticipated that coming together in groups could support professionals to connect through shared stories, professional and personal values. The connecting, reflecting and meaning-making in professional groups has been described as a 'catalyst' for learning (Knipfer et al., 2012).

However, there are recognised challenges associated with using focus groups, including informed consent, confidentiality, and risk of harm (Sim & Waterfield, 2019), as well as issues of power and – particularly in this research – attending to my insider-outsider position (Kornbluh, 2022). Additionally, unlike semi-structured interviews (where there is usually greater structure and control of the dialogue), researchers are required to be receptive to the dynamic and quickly shifting nature of focus groups (Morgan, 1997; Sim & Waterfield, 2019). This has parallels to EP consultation practice, where individuals (often) from different vantage points come together within a social space, necessitating the considered acknowledgment of multiple realities (Wagner, 2000). This entails responsivity and the moving between consultation styles/approaches (Gutkin, 1999). Several discursive consultation strategies (Nolan & Moreland, 2014) including 'demonstrating empathy and deep listening, 'questioning, wondering and challenging' and 'focusing and refocusing' were of relevance. Additionally, 'process consultation' skills were used to encourage participants to draw on each other's statements, as well as what might be absent (Schein, 2009).

The research process

The three focus groups took place between July – September 2024 in the local YOT building. Each focus group lasted roughly 90 minutes each and was audio recorded for transcription. Following introductions, I presented the visual framework from the SLR findings (see p. 33). The four constructs and surrounding themes were printed off and used as visual tools for participants to handle and refer to. I hoped that supplementing communication using visuals would facilitate engagement, collaboration, and enrich 'knowledge creation and exchange' (Clark, 2015, p. 35). The incorporation of visual tools

aligns with participatory research principles that I have espoused as meaningful to my practitioner-researcher position.

I described the time element of the framework as capturing how resettlement experiences are intertwined with developmental processes, context and historical time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). I hoped this would also prompt participants to consider the historical context of their practice. In all groups, the framework was explicitly acknowledged and referred to as my interpretation of the literature – not a 'truth'. I encouraged participants to view the framework with criticality and voiced anticipating that our discussions might lead to its reconstruction. To support this, I asked about the relevance of themes to practice, and what was missing. I used flip chart paper to note down initial ideas and guide dialogue (this was not used in the analysis).

Participants voiced challenges in the role (current and historic), as well as possible facilitators and examples of 'good' resettlement practice. At points where I sensed that dialogue was becoming problem-saturated, I used questions to encourage thinking about exceptions and preferred futures, akin to solution-focused consultation approaches (Ajmal, 2004; de Shazer, 1991). Additionally, I incorporated questions which aimed to explore participants' values, and what – despite the challenges and barriers – sustained them in their roles. This was influenced by narrative psychological principles (White, 2007). Narrative psychology is rooted in the idea that our identities and experiences are shaped by the stories we tell about ourselves and the meanings we ascribe to them (White, 2007). Encouraging reflection on what sustains practice can support individuals to connect to underpinning, guiding values – the concept of the 'absent but implicit' (Carey et al., 2009; White, 2007). Connecting in this way can support thicker narratives that are grounded in strength, preferred identities and hopeful futures (White, 2007). Whilst applying narrative psychology, I began to think about different degrees of hope across the focus groups and the role of Hope Theory (Snyder, 2002) (see appendix C).

Data analysis

My philosophical position, professional biography, and values-based praxis has influenced how I have made meaning of the data. Recognising these influences is an integral part of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023). As an insider-outsider researcher, TEP, and espoused critical constructivist, I was inclined to hear macrosystem practice challenges, but also possible opportunities and thicker narratives of underpinning values and strengths (White, 2007). These influences both shaped and were integral to my analysis.

Reflexive and critical TA

I used a reflexive approach to TA with a critical orientation, aligning to my philosophical stance and values-based praxis (Prilleltensky, 2001). As an espoused critical constructivist, I wanted to pay close attention to language and discourse. Whilst RTA necessitates criticality and consideration for discourse (in conjunction with the researchers role in knowledge production), I viewed critical TA as purposeful and proactive in hearing imbedded power influences (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As Byrne (2022, p. 1396) state, 'a critical orientation appreciates and analyses discourse as if it were constitutive, rather than reflective, of respondents' personal states'. To structure the process, I followed the six phase guide to TA (see table 12) (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Table 12: Six Phase Guide to TA (Braun & Clarke, 2022)

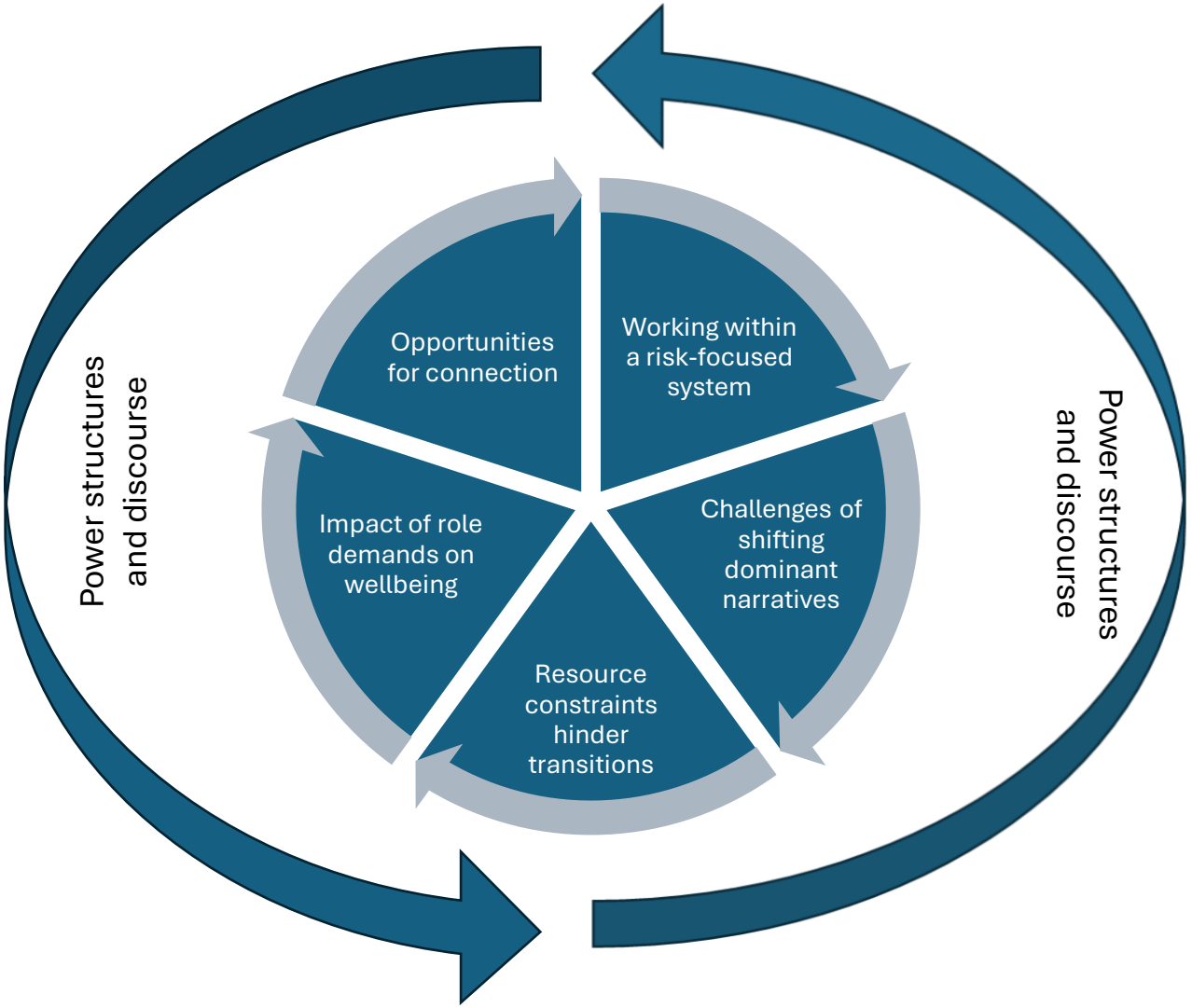
Phase 1: Familiarising with the data	I familiarised myself with the data by listening, reading and re-reading through transcripts.
Phase 2: Generating initial codes	I coded using an inductive and deductive approach. This was to allow for new and emerging themes from the data, whilst acknowledging the deductive element and how the research had been influenced by theory and the SLR (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). To code the data, I examined lines and sentences (initially on Word) to identify segments of ideas in the dataset. Transcripts were then uploaded to NVivo for a second phase of coding. Initial codes (from Word) were cross-examined using NVivo. Some segments contained multiple ideas and were coded to reflect this (Saldana, 2015). Each focus group was coded sequentially, and codes generated in the first focus group were then compared and used to analyse the following focus group (and so on in the third), with additional codes added that did not exist.
Phase 3: Initial theme generation	Moving from coding to theme generation involved identifying broader patterns and commonalties within the dataset, establishing a 'central organising concept' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 589). This process was iterative and required returning to codes and refining several.

Phase 4: Developing and reviewing themes	After aggregating codes into themes, I began a process of developing and reviewing themes. As part of this, I refined themes, resulting in some being broken down into subthemes, and others being removed entirely.
Phase 5: Defining and naming themes	In this stage, I aimed to be explicit about perceived underlying power and systemic issues and developed a conceptual framework (see figure 3 below). At this point, I was influenced by Braun and Clarke (2023) paper and endeavoured to name and define to represent 'a meaning-based interpretative story', rather than a summary of the topic (p. 5).
Phase 6: Producing the report	The final stage of TA involved writing up. This is a recognised vital stage of analysis that supports understanding the area of inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Findings and discussion

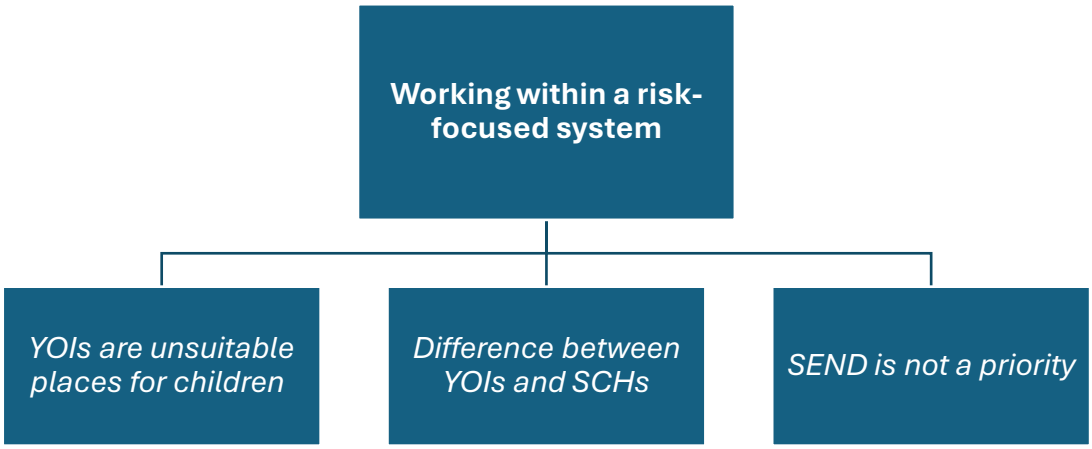
Using a critical approach to reflexive approach to TA, 123 codes (see appendix D) were generated from the transcripts. Within some participants' responses are tensions and contradictions – this is reflective of the complexity of nuanced, human experiences. Several subthemes were constructed, which were grouped into five themes. Themes reflect central patterns across the data which are meaningful to the research aims. Subthemes represent a core aspect of the theme, related to it as a broader whole. Figure 3 below illustrates (conceptually) the overarching five themes, which are situated within power structures and discourse.

Figure 3: Conceptual Framework



Theme 1: Working within a risk-focused system

This theme reflects participants' experiences of operating within a prevailing risk-focused culture. Several subthemes are included.



Subtheme: YOIs are unsuitable places for children

> *"that's where you're living as a kid, in that [YOI] environment…I can't imagine how horrific that is".* (FG1)

This subtheme pertains to the inappropriateness of YOIs as places of accommodation for children. Across the three groups, most participants reflected on the extent of violence within YOIs, and the traumatising (and retraumatising) nature of these environments.

> *"you know, you say fight and flight. There is no flight, really. It's fight. It's fight, fight, fight…there's so many of our kids that have lived with domestic violence. You're then putting in the same environment because there's nowhere to run."* (FG2)

Due to the prevalence of violence within YOIs, desistance-based work was deemed unrealistic for children, as safety and protection took precedence. Whilst overwhelmingly critical of this environment, some participants acknowledged that certain YOIs operate better than others. Several explained this in relation to the culture of specific YOIs, whilst others highlighted differences in individual professional approaches. Although infrequent, there were some contradictory ideas about how YOIs should run, and how children should experience them.

> *"I'm not saying…I mean it shouldn't be positive experience necessarily going to custody…There should be that I want to don't want to come back, but you can't do any of this if they don't have periods of stability"* (FG2).

The incongruence of this may be symptomatic of navigating a supposed dichotomy between risk-based and desistance-based practice (Day, 2023; Hampson, 2018). Simultaneously, it could also be seen as reflective of wider societal ideas about crime and punishment and the notion that prisons *should* be unpleasant places to deter crime and reoffending (Garland, 2002). This view is contrary to the concept of rehabilitation, restorative frameworks and desistance theories which emphasise moral redeemability (Maruna, 2016; Maruna & King, 2009). Though, for the most part, participants voiced concerns with the YOI environment, and seemed frustrated towards the system they and custodial staff were operating within.

Subtheme: Difference between YOIs and SCHs

Whilst predominantly risk-focused, there was some suggestion of desistance-focused practice in the YSE, namely, in the secure children's home (SCHs). Across the three focus groups, participants reflected on the stark differences between YOIs and SCHs.

> "*You've got one punitive, very punitive model. Then you've got something which is therapeutic."* (FG2)

The notion of YOIs being based on a punitive, risk-focused model, and SCHs a therapeutic, child-first model was present across all three focus groups. Within focus group one, there was reflection on etymology and the purposeful distinction between the two types of secure accommodation.

> *"guess it's in the name isn't it? One's a secure children's home for children, one's a young offenders institution."* (FG1)

Highlighting differences, the physical environment, types of activities on offer, prioritisation of education and family visits, and the treatment/approach of staff towards children and visitors were all raised. On several occasions, participants reflected on their experiences visiting SCHs, the ease of accessing these establishments, and the welcoming approach of staff – a seemingly stark comparison to YOIs.

> "*You create an environment that looks cold and it looks sterile. And it's, yeah, you know it's not a nice place to to be in. Whereas you go into like [SCH] and you get offered a brew."* (FG3)

YOIs and SCH were further demarcated through a gender lens:

"you have one [YOI] which is a very stereotypical male environment" (FG2)

As demonstrated in table 7 (see p. 55) boys overwhelmingly make up the YOI population. Rather than critically reflecting on the disparity of males to females in secure settings, the participant seems to highlight the existence of entrenched gender norms in shaping these environments. Although others did not explicitly label YOIs as stereotypically male spaces, discussions frequently centred around experiences of working with boys in these settings. As an example, multiple participants referred to the bravado of young males in YOIs, recognising this as a way to navigate the pervasive violence of custody. The "stereotypical male environment" may be reflective of both gender-normed behaviours, as well as the coping mechanisms of young males who overwhelmingly reside in these environments.

Comparatively, SCHs were highlighted as places where children could be distanced from the violence of YOIs and engage in therapeutic activities, as well as receive some level of support whilst on remand.

> *"[SCH] in my experience, they still offer decent support when the people are on remand, whereas everywhere else you always get they're on remand, we can't do this we can't do that".* (FG2)

Whilst participants were mostly positive about SCH, some recognised the challenges that children may encounter in this environment, especially when moving from a YOI to a SCH. Nevertheless, there seemed to be a general enthusiasm across focus groups towards SCHs, and a drive towards supporting children to access these establishments due to being better suited to their needs.

Subtheme: SEND is not a priority

Across groups, participants reflected on the challenges of supporting children to understand and participate in the legal processes of resettlement.

> "*with a young person who's not being taught how to emotionally regulate, you know…how on earth do they cope? And not only that, they've not even understood 90% of the court process.*" (FG3)

As well as challenges understanding legal/sentencing processes, the inaccessibility of legal documentation was referred to. Pre-sentence reports (PSR) were critiqued for being "*so waffly longwinded, unnecessarily long*" and "*vague*". One participant inferred ameliorating these barriers by adapting documents to support case managers practice and children's understanding.

> *“So I've taken the licence conditions away…either the case manager will sit down with them with the former one and the accessible one and go read through it so they understand it. Or I've done it myself. And you can see that they understand it a lot.”* (FG1)

All three groups reflected on undiagnosed SEN. Within groups one and two, there was discussion on the limitations of current screening processes used to assess needs. One implied that the AssetPlus (a tool used by YOT practitioners to assess needs and risks) was ineffective without prior information from other services:

> *“How are we identifying health needs in our asset and putting that in part of our plan if we've not even got that information?”* (FG1)

Missed diagnoses following specialist assessment processes were also raised by two participants, leading to questions surrounding the suitability of assessment tools.

In relation to support from Educational Psychologists (EPs), participants seemed to view the EP role as primarily related to the statutory assessment process. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the limited capacity for EPs to work in alternative ways due to funding constraints and burgeoning statutory requests (Gumbs, 2023; Cosma & Mulcare, 2022; Lyonette et al., 2019). There was also a sense that Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) are not understood, or meaningfully communicated to staff on release to the community. One explained, *“we just get told they’ve got an EHCP.”* As for how EHCPs support CYP in custody, it was implied that these are largely ineffectual:

> “*one went in with an EHCP and then there was a review due. And they just said, oh, we'll just do it when he comes out so it's all done…they're not bothered about that he’s got ACE’s or an EHCP*.” (FG1)

Whilst the Code of Practice (2015) states that appropriate educational provision should be employed whilst detained, and any ‘provision outlined in the EHCP, where possible, should be available to CYP during their custodial sentence’ (DfE, CoP), the implementation of provision is largely unknown (Cosma & Mulcare, 2022).

Overall, consideration for SEND in the YSE was highlighted by several as lacking due to the prioritisation of risk management. The implications of supporting CYP with SEND, particularly those with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, were implied.

> *“They're [YOI staff] not considering things like trauma informed or anything else, they're thinking how do I deal with this immediate situation”.* (FG1)

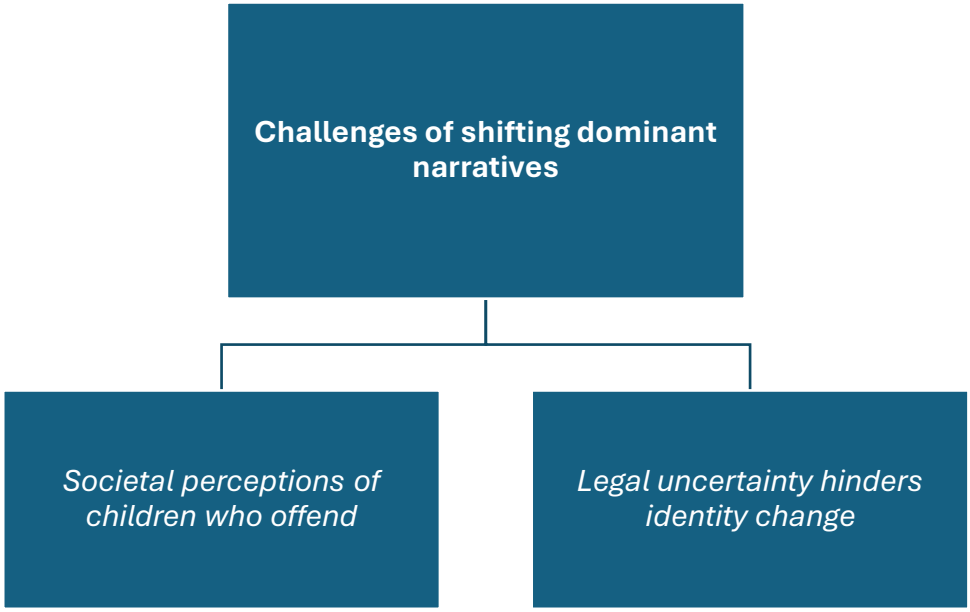
Uncertainties were also expressed regarding the implementation of Child First practices in custodial settings. In contrast to risk-focused approaches, Child First, according to YJS/YJB policy, is 'the guiding principle for the youth justice sector' (YJS, 2024, p. 7). Within the community YOT context, participants seemed to imply that Child First practice was both evident and attainable. One described how a Child First model can be implemented without compromising risk:

> *"it's not that we take that [Child-First] as a priority over public protection, we don't."* (FG2)

This leads to questions surrounding the balance between ensuring necessary risk-management protocols, whilst also supporting staff to work in ways which are needs and rights led.

Theme 2: Challenges of shifting dominant narratives

This theme captures the challenges articulated by participants of reframing narratives and supporting identity change among custody experienced children (CEC). This was informed by societal perceptions of children who offend, and challenges relating to the courts and legal system.



Subtheme: Societal perceptions of children who offend

In all groups, there were discussions surrounding societal perceptions of children who offend, and how these views exacerbated disenfranchisement. Several participants reflected on the challenges of working with schools and education providers who held perceptions of custody experienced children.

> *"You know, if they [education] was more aware of, like, risk, I don't know, would they be more willing to work with our young people and not just like, say, push them to the side?"* (FG1)

Others discussed supporting schools to better understand CEC and reinforcing the notion of schools as a protective factor. EPs are well placed to support schools and organisations to consider needs, provision and adaptations to support the inclusion of children (Beal, 2014; Cosma & Mulcare, 2022). However, experiences of working in EPs in this capacity seemed limited. One participant described a positive encounter with an EP who seemed to work collaboratively with the YOT practitioner to identify strategies:

> *"I had a helpful experience with [EP]...we worked together to think about strategies in their report...and there's also that influence that comes with it."* (FG2)

The mention of "*influence*" indicates the possible importance of EP involvement, implying the role as extending beyond considering strategies, to shaping decisions and practice. Within a statutory context, EPs play a central role in identifying needs, support and provision for CYP, influencing the redistribution of resources within local authorities. Concurrently, and more generally, influence transpires through EPs 'dissenting voices' – challenging structures, systems, oppressive practices and stigmatising views at varying levels (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2022). This influence and challenge is significant and relevant to the local (and broader) YOT/YJS context, as participants highlighted stigmatising views and stereotyping from a range of other non-education professionals, including the police, prison, probation service, and social workers. One referred to the existence of professionals across teams/agencies who seemed to be "*waiting for children to fail*". This implies broader cultural issues surrounding the treatment of children who offend.

There was recognition for how these perceptions hindered children's capacity to consider alternative futures. In focus group three, participants reflected on the low expectations professionals (including themselves) hold about children known to YJS, and the subsequent impact on children' self-concept:

> *"sometimes they think are all like all I can ever do is go into construction because that's all I know and that's all anyone around me is doing. But also what we put on them on them as well in terms of like, oh, there's this really easy course that you can get on to and then you know…we limit them massively, and they limit themselves."* (FG3)

These low expectations and self-limiting beliefs may contribute to children's ambivalence towards reoffending. As discussed in the SLR, this ambivalence often related to an absence of alternative pathways and better options for CEC, which related more broadly to socio-political and economic disenfranchisement. Participants' accounts also suggest that certain pathways and trajectories are imposed on children, rather than explored with them. This is counter to the 'goal-directed' and 'future-oriented' approach that HMPPS and YJB policy propose (Case & Browning, 2021).

The notion of imposing certain pathways and identities onto children was discussed across the three groups, particularly within the third. One participant reflected on and critiqued

discourse surrounding children's 'pro-social identity' development, implying the need for a contextualised understanding of individuals.

> *"It puts them in a box that suggests that that is their entire identity and their entire life. And you forget that they're relating to people really positively all the time…It just for me suggests that we oversimplify an idea that somebody is prosocial or pro criminal."* (FG3)

They then went onto highlight issues of class and power within dominant discourse:

> *"even the idea of kind of like living a pro social life, it feels quite middle class or upper class or like, it feels quite projective."* (FG3)

Others critiqued common ideas about what is 'best' for children known to YJS, similarly indicating that work is often done to, and not with them. In discussion on the seven pathways to resettlement[1], one participant posed a critical view surrounding education, implying this often takes precedence:

> *"and we're focused on…this person needs education. You need education!"* (FG3)

In another group, there was discussion surrounding children's limited input into resettlement planning and implications on autonomy:

> *"a lot of the time they get called in and they're getting told that this is what we're doing, that's what's happening and it's their life, where's that autonomy?"* (FG1)

Government funded research on resettlement highlights the need for strengths-based and person-centred practices to support individuals to consider alternative futures away from crime (Case & Browning, 2021). Participants' accounts contradicted this and illustrated how societal perceptions, discourse and policy had implications for meaningful identity work in practice.

Subtheme: Legal uncertainty hinders identity change

> *"I don't feel like that, like [participant] said, that they feel empowered to...to make a change to their identity, especially if their identity is going to be continually thrust upon them by legal processes."* (FG3)

[1] The 'seven pathways', or 'pathways' to resettlement was introduced by the YJB to describe core aspects or areas that are significant to a successful resettlement. The seven areas include: accommodation; education, training, and employment; health; drugs and alcohol; finance, benefits, and debt; children and family; and attitudes, thinking, and behaviour (HM Inspectorate of Prisons & Youth Justice Board, 2011).

Participants commonly discussed issues with the legal system, particularly how remand and release under investigation (RUI) caused uncertainty, hindering children's identity change and desistance-focused work. In FG1, remand was described as "*no man's land"* due to the lack of provision and support for children during this period. As highlighted earlier (see pp. 57 – 68) remand has been critiqued for its overuse, particularly with minority groups (Yeebo et al., 2022). Less known, however, is how remand is implemented, and its impact on children – both to those sentenced to custody, and the majority who are released (Hampson & Day, 2025). Also under researched is RUI – a police-led investigatory process (introduced through the Policing and Crime Act in 2017), used instead of bail when suspected of a criminal offence. Presently, there are no limits on how long an individual can be under investigation. This has been criticised at the House of Commons for placing 'those accused of crimes effectively in a state of limbo' (UK Parliament, 2021). This state of limbo was implicit within participants' accounts on RUI.

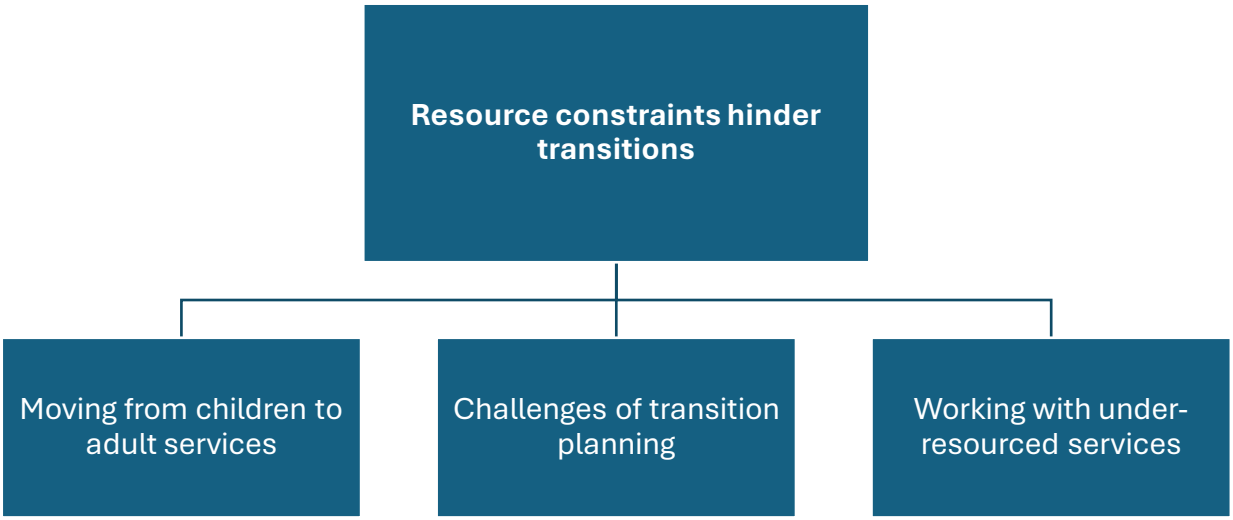
> *"I think that the common theme I found with young people is that they're consistently looking over their shoulder as to whether they're going to be reconvicted for things that yet they have come to the come to light."* (FG3)

Overall, these legal processes seemed to add an additional layer of instability and uncertainty, incumbering children's motivation to begin conceptualising, let alone implementing change.

Theme 3: Resource constraints hinder transitions

The theme reflects how limited resources, related to wider systemic barriers, hinder efforts to supporting children through key transition periods and resettlement.

> *"there's so many initiatives I've heard there's so many good ideas. There's so much blue sky thinking, but unless there's the infrastructure to, to actually keep to those things it doesn't work."* (FG3)



Subtheme: Moving from children to adult services

Across groups, participants referred to challenges surrounding the continuity of care and transition from children to adult services. Of note were implications on access to support during resettlement.

> *"it gets very tricky around eighteen…sometimes they have an eighteen cut off so with CAMHS and other things."* (FG3)

Issues surrounding the transition age and change from CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) to adult mental health services are widespread, affecting not only those known to YJS, but children more broadly (Hendrickx et al., 2020). Regarding resettlement, participants highlighted how the legal reclassification of children upon turning eighteen impacts on timely and effective joined-up support.

> *"Coordination can be quite stifled…we had a young person who was released like three weeks before his eighteenth birthday. So he had one set of professionals and then three weeks later it changed. And then he moved. So within eight weeks, he'd had three lots of professionals."* (FG3)

The multiple professional changes during this transition seem to reflect broader issues surrounding fragmentation between YJS and adult/probation services. Furthermore, it was implied that work completed in the YSE is not meaningfully considered in the transition to probation. This procedural approach to moving from children to adult services risks diminishing progress and desistance-focused efforts.

> "*but I even think with probation they don't care what you've done in prison anyway…it's tick boxes*." (FG1)

Overall, participants' accounts elucidated how CEC are expected to adapt to an adult system, regardless of developmental age.

> *"he just didn't know how to function…people were saying…you're an adult, you're an adult. And he was like, I don't feel like it."* (FG2)

Arguably, the changing perceptions and treatment of children by the criminal justice system at eighteen is symptomatic of broader issues surrounding the adultification of children known to YJS, contradictory to Child First principles (Davis, 2023; Pitts & Williams, 2022; Burton 2007).

Subtheme: Challenges of transition planning

Participants reflected on common issues associated with preparing children for release. Frequently, this seemed symptomatic of the limited opportunities for joined-up working between custody and community. Though, barriers surrounding limited available housing and challenges with ETE (education, training and employment) also informed the subtheme. Regarding ETE, participants described the pressures of finding suitable ETE in a timely manner. Some also implied that time dedicated to planning for ETE (post-release) is limited in custody:

> *"so what would happen is that when the kids are released, the officers would set up an appointment to meet me. But you've got to think you're starting from kind of scratch. You're getting to know them, their interests, courses. By that time there's no course available."* (FG3)

The notion of starting from 'scratch' in the community was described by others. Additional pressures from last-minute arrangements, including new referrals and writing of licence conditions, were also highlighted. These common transition challenges were implied as avoidable with improvements to coordinated working. To alleviate challenges, participants proposed having a resettlement worker to oversee the planning for release, co-ordinate and bridge the custody-community gap, and advocate for children.

"whether it was in custody or out in the community they [resettlement worker] would tap into the provisions and make sure that everything's in place…they would actually go to the meetings if kids were getting kind of kicked out that she was fighting for them. She was making sure that all the education stuff was being completed within custody". (FG1)

The benefits of having a professional to bridge between the two environments was reiterated in groups two and three. Participants in FG2 reflected on an externally funded resettlement pilot programme which provided a link between YOI and YOT staff, as well as support for families in the community. Given the recognised risks of family relationship breakdowns during custody, this role seems significant (Hampson, 2016).

Accomodation was a common frustration and barrier to effective planning. Participants referred to children returning to unsuitable placements, but more frequently, the limited available housing and implications on planning for release.

"where there is lack of accommodation, I think it really influences that coordination, not because it's not through lack of trying at that point" (FG3)

Whilst there were multiple challenges, there was reflection on good resettlement practice. In FG2, several factors were highlighted which contributed to this, including time dedicated to preparing for release whilst in custody, use of ROTL (release on temporary licence), and effective coordination with education. It was also implied that dedicating time to working with other services, as well as understanding children's educational aspirations, can enable staff to respond promptly when faced with possible resettlement challenges.

"even though the education plan went wrong last minute because [college] then withdrew their offer, we were then able to put something else in place." (FG2)

Subtheme: Working with under-resourced services

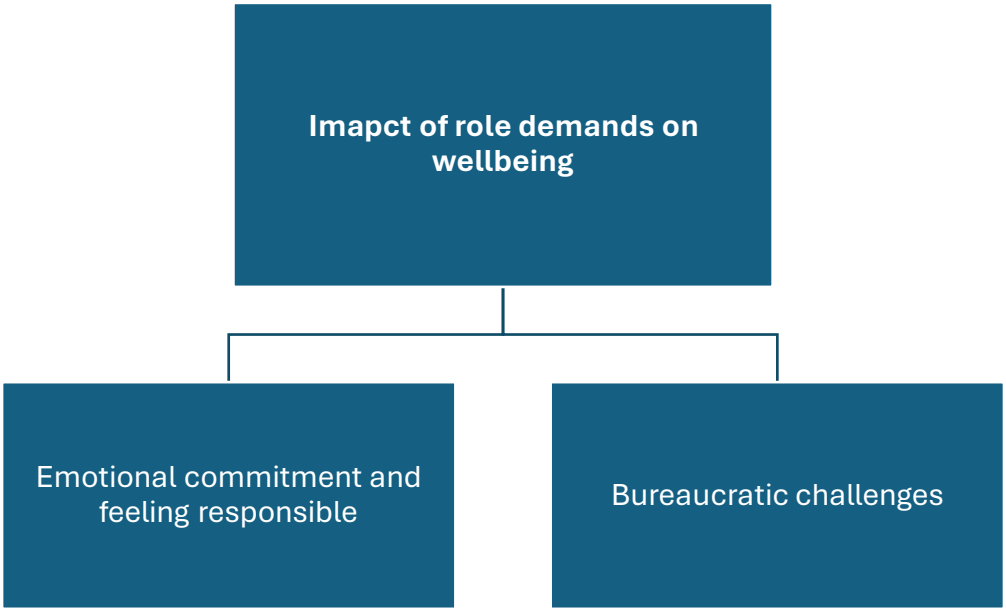
Across the three groups, participants reflected on the limited capacity of other services within the current sociopolitical context, and its impact to effective resettlement practice.

'they [services] have their own kind of pressures, their own agenda, each service is trying to push. So I think that's where the difficulty lies with that and in terms of like the partnership working and stuff…it's dependent on the person rather than the agency and it's about whether people have that same level of passion as you do." (FG3).

Whilst acknowledging the pressures on public services, this places responsibility onto individuals. Arguably, this contradiction is reflective of dominant neoliberal discourse which promotes individual self-sufficiency, undermining the importance of addressing fundamental structural issues (Garrett, 2009).

Other participants highlighted issues with access to support from services when sentenced to custody. Several referred to challenges with social services and social care thresholds, with cases being closed despite high levels of need. In multiple accounts, there was reference of children being "*dropped*" by services, and YOTs picking them up. This may reflect pressures experienced by YJS professionals, linking to the next theme on wellbeing.

Theme 4: Impact of role demands on wellbeing



Subtheme: Emotional commitment and feeling responsible

Participants' emotional commitment to the children they worked with was implied, to the extent that it seemed they often felt personally responsible for them. Reflecting on their emotional commitment, one participant highlighted how professionals *"come into this type of work wanting to fix and rescue."* Evidence of fixing and rescuing may be seen through other accounts surrounding maintaining contact with children in the evenings and weekends, outside of contracted hours.

> *"you just feel like you just need to be there to support them as much you can, even if that's in the evening or weekends…I think over 9 years I've never had my phone switched off."* (FG2)

This contact seemed commonplace and somewhat normalised among participants. Though, concerns were raised about professional boundaries and practitioner wellbeing.

> *"And you answer the phone on Saturday and Sunday and then eventually you realise that your own mental health has actually gone down."* (FG2)

The need for support in the role and for pressure to be eased was implied across groups. Whilst some recognised the benefits of receiving support for their wellbeing, finding the time to access it remained a challenge. One participant highlighted the difficulties of utilising the clinical supervision available at the YOT.

"Like when am I going to think 'OK, I'll definitely block out an hour there to go for supervision?'" (FG2)

This lack of time related to experiences of high caseloads, demand and pressures in the role. This was particularly noticed among case managers and those overseeing children on ISS (intensive supervision and surveillance), who discussed managing more than is traditionally their role.

"But it's just the general expectation that, oh, OK, case managers will do it." (FG1)

Similar to other themes, this reflects – and exists in tension with – dominant ideologies and discourses that place increasing demands on individuals and services, while cutting funds and resources (Garrett, 2009).

Subtheme: Bureaucratic challenges

Additional grievances about bureaucratic processes, which detracted from the essence of the role, were shared across the three groups.

"…the processes are just killing me. They're just a nightmare." (FG3)

Repetitive meetings and challenges relating to CARP (custody and resettlement panel)[2] were especially evident. Key issues raised surrounded inadequate review procedures and the limited contextual understanding of children among senior managers (due to CARP often not being locality specific). Also raised were issues surrounding the structure of the process, and lack of presence from secure establishments. Overall, CARP seemed to be lacking meaning in its current form and was referred to as a "tick box" exercise.

"CARP, I'll be totally honest and say that I take very little away from them…I'm getting nothing out of this. I'm leaving with nothing... I've never walked out and thought 'god I feel way better about this now', I leave thinking, done." (FG1)

However, there was recognition that CARP has been, and could be, meaningful with the appropriate professional presence. In FG1, participants considered children's participation and presence at CARP, and whether their input would instil meaning to the process. This idea was challenged in group two and participants maintained that improvements would stem from CARP being locality specific.

[2] For context, CARP is a locally implemented resettlement process designed to bring professionals from the YSE and the community/YOT to discuss resettlement planning for children in the YSE. CARPs tend to use the seven pathways to resettlement (HM Inspectorate of Prisons & Youth Justice Board, 2011) as a framework to structure panel meetings.

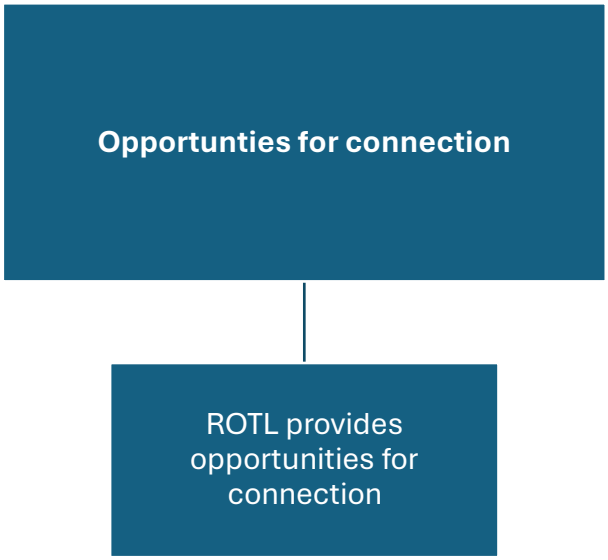
Challenges associated with bureaucracy and local processes seemed tied up in organisational politics and power dynamics.

> *"They don't listen to me. I'm only [role]. They don't listen to me."* (FG1)

This particular quote exemplifies broader issues relating to power – whose voices are valued and included, and how certain roles (administrative or those perceived as non-specialist) may be excluded (Kincheloe et al., 2017). Self-determination theory highlights the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). An absence of these psychological needs may lead to disengagement, reduced morale, and strained team collegiality, ultimately affecting organisational culture. In contrast to these challenges, the below theme identifies opportunities for connection which seem to facilitate practice.

Theme 5: Opportunities for connection

Participants reflections indicated opportunities for connection within the role. This was through supporting children to connect – to a purpose, values, professionals, and systems. Simultaneously, supporting connection and building relationships with children seemed to bring meaning and purpose to participants – a possible facilitator of practice. Additional opportunities for connection through ROTL (release on temporary license) were a distinctive, core aspect of the theme.



Participants described their work as entailing supporting children to connect with a better view of themselves. Some described this as a goal or motivation in the role.

> *"I'm less interested in terms of like the rehabilitation and stuff for me, what my think my kind of goal is each person I'm working with is just to have a better belief of themselves"* (FG2)

Whilst some discussed improving children's sense of self, others reflected on the importance of supporting children to connect with their values.

> *"What I think what you want people, young people to do, is connect with the values that they have had and most of them have…you end up hearing that they have some very, very firm values*" (FG3)

Meaningful, trusting relationships with professionals were perceived as crucial in enabling these connections. One participant described the transformative impact of supporting a child to engage in exploring their values and to recognise the systemic barriers and adversity that had influenced their offending. However, the same participant also highlighted the role of internal motivations and personal moral frameworks for ceasing offending:

> *"we cannot give the reason to cease offending. That has to come from the person themselves, and ideally it comes not from a regulatory process or a legislative process…it comes from a moral that they connect with*." (FG3)

This perspective aligns with elements of tertiary desistance theory which elucidate the notion of ceasing offending due to a moral transformation (McNeill, 2016). Whilst acknowledging the influence of social relations, tertiary desistance has been critiqued for its focus on personal transformation, downplaying relational and structural factors (Weaver, 2019). As suggested above, practitioners potentially have opportunities – through meaningful, established relationships with children – to explore and support narratives of change.

Simultaneously, the values that underpin participants' work and sustain them in practice were discussed. Opportunities to emotionally connect with children seemed to provide meaning and purpose for some participants. Reflecting on professional and personal values, several participants highlighted relational moments, whilst another implied wanting to 'do good' and make a difference.

> *"I think for me it is, it's the, how likeable and fun a lot of the young people are… And I think that those are the moments that, like, make it enough when you are relating to a young person"* (FG3)

> *"I want to be conscientious and I care about people so, so you know, that's the thing that keeps them keeps me going."* (FG3)

Subtheme: ROTL provides opportunities for connection

> *"you know, really, really basic things [on ROTL] allowed him to to picture it to then reduce his anxiety"* (FG3)

Whilst less prevalent, two participants discussed the positive impact of ROTL (release on temporary licence) on experiences of resettlement, implying how this enabled children to connect to or "picture" life post-release within the community. This has been interpreted as an opportunity for connection, and a facilitator to supporting resettlement. In dialogue on effective resettlement practice, there was discussion surrounding the implementation of ROTL and value of using it as part of a child's resettlement experience:

> *“they just kind of completed ROTL in terms of kind of getting him accustomed to that to that area… and so he went and did some food shops because he'd been in custody since he was very young and it was over kind of a lot of his formative years, so that he would just like some really, really basic, practical stuff.”* (FG3)

This implies that ROTL can offer important opportunities for children to familiarise with new areas, engage in everyday activities (that they may be unaccustomed to) and develop life-skills – all of which can promote confidence and independence upon release. Having these opportunities to connect with life in the community appears to facilitate good practice and contribute to an effective resettlement experience.

Conclusion and implications

This research has explored the perceptions and experiences of professionals who support children through the resettlement from custody to community. Using focus groups to support individual reflection and group dialogue, I have identified five overarching themes which exist in tension with power structures and discourse. These themes provide insight on the barriers and facilitators to supporting the resettlement process, and the possible role of the EP within this. I explore this below.

Several barriers to resettlement practice were perceived surrounding working within a risk-focused system, the challenges of shifting dominant narratives, resource constraints, and role demands on practitioner wellbeing. Evidence of a sustained risk culture is contrary to YJS/YJB aims and corresponds with research findings on the bifurcation between risk-focused and desistance-focused practice in YJS settings (Day, 2023; Hampson, 2018). Ongoing contradictions between political discourse and practice surrounding implementing desistance-focused and child-first practice were recently highlighted by Day (2025a). Based on the perspectives of professionals implementing constructive resettlement in YOIs, Day (2025a, p. 3) argued that YOIs 'continue to mirror the adult estate', while 'Child First Justice seeks to recognise that children are developmentally different from adults and should be treated as such'. Relevant to issues surrounding children's rights, I have also highlighted a pervasive culture of violence in YOIs within this research. This all seems to continue to hinder desistance-focused, Child-First, needs-led practice. Combined, these findings suggest that YOIs are not only developmentally unsuitable places for children, but physically and psychologically unsafe, reinforcing wider proposals for structural change (Willow, 2015; Hampson et al., 2024; Day, 2025a). Comparatively to YOIs, opportunities for different (seemingly more desistance-focused) ways of working were perceived within Secure Children's Homes (SCH). However, caution should be taken on viewing SCHs as the ideal model.

While experiences working with EPs on resettlement processes in this research were limited, EPs have the skillset to work with organisations to support systems change, and at a group level to upskill staff through training (Jane, 2010; Wyton, 2013; Parnes, 2017; Rayfield, 2021). This research indicates several possible areas where EPs could offer support through training. Issues identified surrounding the implementation of EHCPs and systemic overlooking of SEND is of particular relevance. In line with existing research, EPs can work in partnership with YJS and multiagency professionals (including those from

education, health and social care) to consider needs, provision and necessary adjustments (Rayfield, 2021; Parnes, 2017). This input has the potential to support children's inclusion in custody, and as they transition to the community (Cosma & Mulcare, 2022).

The current research also highlighted the challenges professionals experience in shifting dominant narratives about CEC. Societal perceptions seemed to exacerbate disenfranchisement, posing a barrier to practice, as well as children's self-concept, prospects and societal inclusion. Additionally, issues with the legal system (especially RUI) seem to often leave children (and the professionals supporting them) in a state of limbo, restricting them from reimagining alternative futures. While unable to alter the legal system, EPs can advocate for strengths-based, person-centred approaches and challenge views and practice which risk forming or upholding harmful narratives (BPS, 2018; HCPC, 2023). Existing research also highlights how consultation can be used to encourage alternative ways of thinking and promote inclusive educational practice (Parnes, 2017). Whilst this study focused on working with professionals, there is a role for EPs to work directly with CEC (Ackland, 2018; Hall, 2013; Ryrie, 2006). Life-story and narrative approaches have been used with CEC and may be worthwhile in supporting children to adopt alternative, empowering narratives (Ackland, 2018). In working with children, Hampson et al (2024) propose that establishing mutual trust and addressing power imbalances are essential for meaningful participation and collaboration.

The hindrances of resource constraints to practice, particularly on transition planning, were another perceived barrier to practice. Whilst it is not within EPs sphere of influence to change the economic landscape, they can support organisations to explore these challenges and use consultation approaches (e.g. solution-focused) to consider steps towards change (Ajmal, 2004; de Shazer, 1991). With regards to the impact of role demands on wellbeing, EPs can similarly work with YOTs and the YSEs, using consultation and reflective supervision to support practitioners to navigate emotional demands and role tensions. While the emotional labour of working in youth secure environments is recognised (Perry & Ricciardelli, 2021), this research suggests that it is important to consider competing practitioner demands and their capacity (time, physical and emotional) to engage in support.

Finally, I identified opportunities for connection as a facilitator of practice and perceived the connection between children and practitioners as having a mutually beneficial impact. Furthermore, time dedicated to connecting with children seemed to bring meaning and purpose to practitioners, while simultaneously enabling children – through dialogue centred

on trust – to explore their histories (including adversity and challenge), connect to preferred selves, and values. Having this relational understanding and exploring what is important to children's lives aligns with Child-First principles which emphasise children's meaningful participation (Hampson et al., 2024). As Ackland's (2018) doctoral research indicates, EPs can support YJS practitioners on implementing narrative approaches with CEC and provide organisational support/training on the theoretical bases of this approach.

ROTL, while less frequently discussed, was also perceived as an enabler to good practice, and providing important opportunities for children to connect to society, and to life post-release. This aligns with evidence on the benefits of using ROTL for custody-community transitions and should be prioritised as part of Child-First resettlement practice (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2011).

Limitations and future research

This was a small-scale research project based in one local YOT. With more time and resource, I would have recruited participants working in the YSE as well as the YOT. While several participants had direct contact with the YSE (often visiting these establishments), the input from those working operationally (and non-operationally) within secure environments was not present in this research – this could have provided meaningful insight. Additionally, given the barriers identified surrounding the join-up between the YSE and YOT, future research should explore working in partnership with community and custodial practitioners. Not only could multi-perspective input lead to fruitful dialogue and the co-construction of knowledge, but it may also act as a bridge between these environments.

Another limitation surrounds the sustainability and implementation of learning beyond this project. While underpinned by transformative principles, this project was exploratory. As such, it is beyond the scope of this research to ascertain its broader impact – future opportunities for feedback, reflection and dialogue with the YOT as I continue in my practitioner role will be meaningful. Additionally, while there was some 'common ground' between participants (relating to knowledge of the topic and organisational commonalities) (Hydén & Bülow, 2003), it is difficult to know (if at all) how participants experienced the focus groups, and how particular group dynamics impacted on dialogue. I hope voicing an acceptance for alternative views, modelling empathy and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1963) established a level of trust within the group at an inter and intra-organisational level (Morgan, 1997).

Conclusion

From three focus groups with eleven professionals at a local YOT, five themes were constructed surrounding perceptions and experiences of supporting the resettlement process. These themes were contextualised within power structures (and tensions) and dominant discourse, highlighting contradictions between policy and practice. In line with existing research, the findings indicate a need for change and a commitment to rights-based and Child-First justice (Hampson et al., 2024; Hampson & Day, 2025). Additionally, the research has contributed to understanding the ways in which EPs can support the resettlement process. While I have outlined opportunities to input at an individual, group and systems level, the EP role remains largely unknown in research and practice. Perhaps the EPs 'dissenting voice' (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2022) is a valuable first step in understanding the role and supporting change.

Chapter 4: A personal and professional reflection

Abstract

This chapter is a personal and professional reflection of the research journey which explores the ongoing implications of conducting this research. I begin by discussing how navigating uncertainty and aligning with a critical constructivist (CC) philosophical orientation was a turning point in this research. As part of this, I reflect on language, discourse, and research as a form of resistance, highlighting the impact and influence on my practice as a TEP and future EP.

Word count: 2,063

Introduction

In this final chapter, I reflect on the research process and how it has influenced and changed me as a person, researcher, and Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). I firstly discuss how sitting with uncertainty and aligning with a critical constructivist (CC) philosophical orientation was a turning point in elucidating the significance of axiology in research. Relevant to my CC position, I reflect on language and adaptations made during the research to challenge dominant discourse, which continue to influence my practice. Finally, I consider wider implications, including how research can serve as a form of resistance and dissent (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2022).

My developing philosophical position: Sitting with uncertainty

For several months, I experienced tension and uncertainty surrounding paradigmatic boundaries and methodological congruence (Creswell, 2023). This was particularly apparent as I discounted action research (AR) as a methodology, having been initially drawn to participatory research designs and (as discussed in chapter 2) wanting to work in ways which aligned with community psychology values and principles (Burton et al., 2011; Jordan & Kapoor, 2016). The decision to discount AR was largely a pragmatic one, based on an understanding of contextual factors at the YOT and challenges that I anticipated may come from cycles of AR. Initially, this felt like a compromise of values for pragmatism and resulted in some dissonance between myself and the research.

Coming to terms with my CC position, and recognising that I could retain participatory principles without employing a participatory methodology, was significant in easing these tensions and progressing. Robson and McCartan (2017) propose that the *style* and *ethos* is of primary importance to researchers employing participatory principles, rather than the approach itself. Moreover, I recognised how my philosophical stance and values-based praxis were inherently rooted in participatory principles and would be present within the research. At this point, I moved away from the idea that a particular method or methodology was the 'right' approach and viewed my decisions as contextualised, whilst remaining underpinned by values. Critical theorists describe 'bricolage' research – pluralistic, multi-perspectival, multi-theoretical and multi-methodological approaches to qualitative inquiry (Rogers, 2012; Kincheloe, 2021). Rogers (2012, p. 5) states: 'a methodological bricoleur respects the complexity of the meaning-making process by allowing contextual contingencies to dictate which data-gathering and analytical methods to use'. Also highlighted is an element of 'making do' within interpretive processes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Rogers, 2012). In some ways, using focus groups felt like 'making do', as I discounted

methodologies that I had been initially drawn to (but nevertheless influenced by). This is not to imply that decisions made were the only or easy way forward, but to highlight an acceptance I established – this coincided with making sense of my critical stance. Having spent time wondering about how my focus groups could be conceptualised, I came to view them as a tool for facilitating group reflection and knowledge co-construction, where I could begin to understand (through a critical reflexive approach to thematic analysis) how 'power enters into the interpretive act' (Kincheloe, 2021, p. 20). Below, I reflect on an example of how language and discourse influenced the research, prompting reflexivity, reflection, and adaptations that I now view as intentional acts.

Language, discourse and intentional acts in research

Of relevance to critical constructivists is critical hermeneutics – 'how power inscribes the word and the world to shape the nature of how human beings make sense of it' (Kincheloe, 2021, p. 20). As part of university requirements to conduct a systematic literature review (SLR), I made decisions on terminology and inclusion and exclusion criteria to generate papers. While helpful in managing the number of papers to review, I experienced a sense of disconnect that, at the time, I struggled to articulate. This became discernible through an interaction whereby I shared project details with the Head of Service at the YOT and was asked to change the term 'young offender' to 'children and young people' within participant information and recruitment forms. The Head of Service explained the YOTs aims of moving away from punitive, to child-first language. Given my professional biography and understanding of 'child-first, offender second' (Case and Browning, 2021), I recognised how I had been influenced and drawn into the language used within the literature.

This was significant for me, both in explicating how language comes to shape reality, and in highlighting my tensions with the systematic research process. Another aspect of the SLR that challenged me was the expectation to conduct a quality appraisal (QA) of papers. As discussed in chapter 1, I decided against using a QA tool, justifying this as favouring particular logics over others, and discordant to my philosophical stance (Kincheloe, 2021). I maintain this view and argue that this perpetuates notions of 'gold standards' within research oriented toward evidence hierarchies, rather than critical, contextualised, values-based inquiry (Parker, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2024). Discussed by Braun and Clarke (2024), this can contribute towards the conflation of small q research (qualitative research maintaining positivist/post-positivist frameworks), with Big Q research, which embraces the messy, subjective, and incomplete nature of qualitative inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Of

importance to me (and Big Q researchers) is methodological congruence (Pearson et al., 2015) and reflexive openness, rather than validity and reliability (Jacobs et al., 2021).

Although tensions existed, the SLR process was meaningful in supporting my alignment with a Big Q research position. Additionally, navigating tensions between methodological conventions and personal and professional values highlighted parallels between research and practice (Parker, 2013). Going forward in the recruitment phase, I changed my terminology to children and young people in participant forms (see appendix B) and used this term within focus groups. However, from analysing the data and engaging with literature on the adultification of children in YJS (especially those from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds) (Davis, 2023; Pitts & Williams, 2022; Burton 2007), I made an active decision to change the term 'children and young people', to 'children' in all chapters apart from the SLR (as highlighted, specific terms had been used as part of a process to generate papers). This change in terminology was a deliberate attempt to disrupt and challenge a dominant narrative (Kincheloe, 2021).

Whilst aiming to challenge dominant discourse, I am shaped by it and have risked (inadvertently) perpetuating it by engaging in this research (Henderson & Esposito, 2017). As an example, until late into the project, I aligned with discourse on supporting working towards secondary desistance (a permanent cessation from crime and establishment of a non-offender identity) (Maruna, 2001; 2004). This a priori influence is especially evident in my SLR. Having used a critical reflexive approach to TA, I came to view the problematic nature of, as one participant described, "*thrusting identities*" onto children known to YJS. Whilst I believe in supporting others to develop empowering narratives (White, 2007), I recognised issues with (seemingly progressive) desistance-focused approaches focused on identity change. My purpose here is not to suggest that ceasing offending because of an identify shift is undesirable, but to highlight how, through its politicisation, desistance-focused approaches risk being another predefined pathway for children known to YJS. This is contrary to child-first YJS policy (Case et al., 2024) and a relational approach and understanding of children.

This finding has been significant to my meaning-making and illustrates how perspectives from different vantage points change the way we understand phenomena (Rogers, 2012). Overall, this interrogation of language has impacted the research and has longer-term implications for my professional practice working with YJS. Going forward, I aim to critically engage and reflect on how my language choices maintain or challenge discourses which

subtly govern the identities of children experiencing resettlement. Arguably, this is equally relevant to children known to YJS on community sentences. Below, I explore the research as a form of resistance and my hopes and plans for action and change.

Research as a form of resistance

From recognising my CC position, I have viewed my research as having a transformative aim and potential. In the earlier stages, I wondered what constituted as transformation, and whether synonymous with direct action (e.g. changes to practice or policy), or whether more subtle. As I have progressed, I have come to view small acts of resistance present within the project. My reflections above on adapting language to challenge discourse which adultifies children known to YJS is one example of this. Comparable to small acts of resistance, Rosales and Langhout (2019) highlight 'everyday resistance', which 'like other types of resistance…can undermine some forms of power and simultaneously uphold other forms' (Rosales & Langhout, 2019, p. 3). The authors propose greater interest should be taken in everyday acts of resistance, recognising them as significant and legitimate expressions of challenge, particularly among marginalised groups (Rosales & Langhout, 2019). These small and everyday acts of resistance have relevance to my practice, and to other EPs who advocate for social justice, systemic and social change (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2022; Roffey, 2015).

However, Henderson and Esposito (2017) encourage qualitative researchers to be cautious in claiming they are 'needed' or valuable in the battle for social justice. Whilst I acknowledge the need for researcher humility and thoughtful, reflexive inquiry, I also recognise the power that comes with the EP role and practitioner-researcher position (Fox et al., 2007). Rather than taking a saviour position, I recognise the opportunities EPs have to work with communities and be a dissenting voice when other voices are marginalised (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2022). Moreover, EP research and practice can arguably act as a mechanism for dissent which can influence at a systems and policy level. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) state 'the political bricoleur is aware that science is power, for all research findings have political implications' (p. 5).

As a TEP and espoused CC, I am mindful of these implications. However, I also acknowledge the gap between EP research and policy (Nichols & Berliner, 2023). Whilst I do not align with Nichols and Berliner (2023) stance on EP practice and research, their proposal for 'policy-engaged' educational psychology research' (p. 214) resonates. They highlight the need for research which is relevant to current policy, collaborative with communities affected, and disseminated in ways which 'citizens, practitioners, and policymakers might

embrace' (Nichols & Berliner, 2023, p. 219). Whilst (I believe) relevant to policy, I recognise that my research does not (nor did it aim to) fit the 'gold standards' and differs to research measuring criminogenic needs and outcomes surrounding reoffending (Hazel & Bateman, 2021). Rather, this research is a small-scale, exploratory project which has, through thick descriptions and consideration for the socio-political context, provided a deeper understanding of the process and practice of supporting resettlement (Kincheloe, 2021).

Going forward, and as part of dissemination, I aim to continue to be a part of dialogue on resettlement and post-custody practice and support. My first initial step is to share this research with the YOT, including YJS practitioners and the senior leadership team. One possibility may be to establish a community of practice – a social learning space for professionals who share a common interest/goal and wish to participate in collective, critical inquiry (Wenger, 1998). Although this research does not reflect a community of practice, it has provided space for dialogue and contributed to an understanding on the barriers and opportunities of supporting resettlement, and the possible EP contribution. In a system which seeks to explain 'what is', this exploration of 'what might be' – through reflection, dialogue, co-construction – is, of itself, an act of resistance (Camargo-Borges & McNamee, 2020).

Conclusion

Within this chapter, I have reflected on navigating epistemological and methodological uncertainty. Although initially uncomfortable, this uncertainty has been significant to my meaning-making and has elucidated the complexity of real-world research, and the deeply involved nature of the researcher – all of which has notable parallels to EP practice (Parker, 2013). Above all, I recognise the guiding nature of axiology within research; my axiological position provided the conceptual framework for this project and underpinned my critical constructivist epistemology. Adopting this position has provided an anchor throughout the research journey, supporting criticality and reflexivity on language, power, discourse, positionality, and acts of resistance in EP research and practice. Personally, this process has challenged and changed me; it has deepened my knowledge and capacity for engaging in research (and practice) which is reflexive and critical, simultaneously reminding me of the sort of EP I want to be.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Table 13: PICOSS Table

	Inclusion	**Exclusion**
Population	Young people who have experience of the youth secure estate (and are now in the community) Young people who are currently on a custodial sentence (at a young offender institution, secure training centre or secure children's home).	Non-offender population YOs who have not (at some stage) received a custodial sentence
Intervention	Any intervention broadly supporting resettlement (the transition from custody to the community). This could include structured interventions/programmes, or unstructured (e.g. dialogue/communication)	Interventions without a resettlement or transition to the community focus.
Comparison	Not applicable	Not applicable
Outcome	Attitudes/views, experiences/perceptions	Variables/constructs that have been measured and compared (e.g. criminogenic factors/needs, reoffending rates).
Setting	Any setting with access to YO population e.g. YSE, YOT/YOS, schools/colleges, residential homes	Settings with no involvement working with YOs who have received a custodial sentence
Study design	Qualitative Mixed methods – only where able to pull directly from qualitative	Quantitative

Appendix B: Participant information and consent forms

Newcastle University

School of Education, Communication & Language Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

You are invited to take part in a research study entitled: An exploration of how Educational Psychologists (EPs) may support the resettlement of children and young people (CYP) from custody to community through professional collaboration

Please read this document carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

- The study is conducted by Beth Allen from the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences (ECLS) at Newcastle University.
- This research project is supervised by Professor Jill Clark from the School.
- The purpose of this study is to explore how EPs could support the resettlement needs of CYP from custody to community through professional collaboration. As part of this, it aims to explore the perceptions and practice from a range of professionals involved in supporting CYP who have been (at some stage) sentenced to custody and experienced/experiencing the resettlement process. It is hoped that exploration through professional collaboration will support practice, and overall, the resettlement of CYP from custody to the community.
- You have been invited to take part in this study because you are a professional who works for or with Youth Justice, who works directly or indirectly with CYP who have been sentenced to or released from custody/the Youth Secure Estate.
- If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to join a focus group and/or a one-to-one semi-structured interview, to explore your views and experience surrounding supporting the resettlement of CYP from custody. Your views and experiences of working with Educational Psychologists on resettlement will also be asked.
- Your participation in this study will be dependent on what you consent to:
    - Focus groups will last between 45 – 90 minutes each. It is hoped that focus groups will provide an opportunity for professionals to explore perceptions on

resettlement. Flip chart and visual methods will be used to record key conversation points and analyse focus groups. Focus groups will also be audio recorded to support the visual component and generation of themes. Focus groups will be anonymised at data collection, using pseudonyms or codes, so you are not identifiable.

  - Individual semi-structured interviews will last between 30 – 60 minutes. It is hoped that this will provide an opportunity for in-depth exploration of your views and experiences on resettlement. All interviews will be audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised using pseudonyms or codes, so you are not identifiable.

- Once the research has been completed, I can debrief you on the main findings of the research via email, research report or another meeting if you wish.
- You are free to decide whether to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to decline to answer any questions and withdraw from the study until the point of data analysis without any negative consequences.
- Personal information (including name and signature) will be collected on the consent form, so I can arrange the meetings. This information will be digitalised and stored on a password-protected university server. This will be used and retained for no longer than is necessary. You can find out more about how Newcastle University uses your information at https://www.ncl.ac.uk/data.protection/dataprotectionpolicy/privacynotice and/or by contacting Newcastle University's Data Protection Officer (rec-man@ncl.ac.uk).
- All audio recorded data from focus groups and interviews will be saved on a password-protected university server (Newcastle University's Office 365 cloud storage, OneDrive). Your identity will be protected and anonymised from the point of data collection by using pseudonyms or codes.
- If you have any questions, requests or concerns regarding this research, please contact me via email at [redacted].

This study has been scrutinised within the processes of the School of Education, Communication & Language Sciences Ethics Committee at Newcastle University (date of approval: 20th February 2024).

Newcastle University
School of Education, Communication & Language Sciences
Declaration of Informed Consent

Project title: An exploration of how Educational Psychologists (EPs) may support the resettlement of children and young people (CYP) through professional collaboration
Declaration of Informed Consent

- I agree to participate in this study, the purpose of which is to explore the perceptions and practice of professionals supporting the resettlement of CYP from custody to community. I declare that I have understood the nature and purpose of the research.
- I have read the participant information sheet and understand the information provided.
- I have been informed that I may decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study until the point of data analysis without any negative consequences.
- I have been informed that all of my responses will be kept confidential and secure, and that I will not be identified in any report or other publication resulting from this research.
- I have been informed that the investigator will answer any questions regarding the study and its procedures. The investigator's email is **[redacted]** and they can be contacted via email.
- I will be provided with a copy of this form for my records.

Any concerns about this study should be addressed to the School of Education, Communication & Language Sciences Ethics Committee, Newcastle University via email to ecls.researchteam@newcastle.ac.uk

Date: Participant Name (please print): Participant Signature:

I certify that I have presented the above information to the participant and secured his or her consent.

Date: Signature of Investigator:

Appendix C: Reflective and reflexive boxes

Reflective/Reflexive Box 1

Having experienced challenges recruiting participants at the YOT and hearing issues surrounding staff capacity (both within FG1 and informally in conversation with staff), I decided to discount the semi-structured interview data collection phase. Initially, I experienced some discomfort with this decision, feeling that the research would not be 'enough'. However, thinking pragmatically, I recognised time constraints and needing to progress with the thesis. As well as pragmatics, I reflected on how persisting with recruitment (despite a new awareness of staff capacity issues) could be ethically contentious and impact on research integrity and consent. In navigating tension and change, I appreciated not being tied to a specific methodological approach (having initially considered using IPA, ethnography and action research) and the flexibility of TA. While experiencing initial discomfort, this process resulted in meaningful thinking on the significance of flexibility, responsivity, and ethics in practice in conducting real-world research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Dealing with unexpected changes subsequently led me to reflect on the notable parallels research has with EP practice (Parker, 2013).

Reflective/Reflexive Box 2

After FG1, I reflected on the problem-focused nature of dialogue, and whether I had facilitated enough to support participants to engage in different types of reflection. Whilst making time for the problem seemed an important outlet for participants, I felt a need to move dialogue forward, to something more hopeful. I read about Hope Theory (Snyder, 2002) and considered its relevance to the research and future focus groups. Hope Theory proposes that we enter goal pursuits with a 'learning history', containing pathway thoughts - what does (and does not) work, and agency thoughts - what we have previously been able to achieve (or not achieve) (Snyder, 2002, p. 253-254). This learning history, whilst cognitive, is emotional in nature (McGeer, 2004). In the second focus group, I tried to notice emotions in participants learning histories, to support them to explore challenge and hope. Hope theorists also propose that different levels of reflection and exploring through hope can provide 'clarity about the limitations of self and others' (McGeer, 2004, p. 124). This process of learning about the self and other was perceived, as personal coping methods and levels of tolerance were voiced, which invited others to share similar or differing experiences. Doing so seemed to create more space for exploring hope, which I aimed to bring to the following focus group. In the final focus group, I tried to incorporate questions to support reflection on pathway and agency thoughts, as well as those centred on exploring underpinning values.

Appendix D: Codebook

N.B. A codebook has been included to, as Braun and Clarke (2023, p. 6) state, 'chart the developing analysis, instead of being a tool to measure whether coding is reliable.'

systemic and power issue
challenges of shifting dominant narratives
challenges of supporting connection to values and purpose due to societal issues
influence of media on cyp perceptions of society
recognising ambivalence towards reoffending
working with police and risk culture
challenges of supporting cyp into education provision
education can support desistance
EP role to support identifying strategies
role for EP to support join-up and advocate for CYP
cyp attach to peer groups in custody for safety
family and parental support is helpful
peer influences in community impact on desistance
seeing separation from peers
idea that cyp have autonomy and choice
importance of cyp input and voice
need to support cyp autonomy
systemic - societal ideals forced on people
professionals underestimate cyp
systemic and power issue - poor prospects
recognising the value of available supervision support
staff hopes for change
staff recognizing value of reflecting
ROTL is positive for resettlement
supporting cyp to connect to a better view of self
supporting cyp to connect to values
supporting cyp to reflect
view of desistance coming from within
attaching to peers in custody for connection
importance of meaningful planning, with trusted people
importance of professionals authenticity with cyp
intervention from external agency had relational approach
mentoring system positive (city walls)
recognising importance of relationships with cyp
building relationships with cyp brings meaning to job
opportunities to support positive change with cyp
benefits of having a resettlement worker
creating further risk by expectations placed on cyp post release
lack of preparation for release
children's services are overstretched
working within a broken system
negative impact of neoliberalism
challenges of working with children's services
different approaches of professionals - some more risk-focused, some desistance
importance of coordinating with health
benefits of having a resettlement worker
challenges of cyp returning to unsettled placement on release

differences between establishments
importance of accommodation
importance of time of release
poor communication between custody and community
resettlement as a long-term process
support from custody stops once released
joined-up resettlement practice
lack of desistance practice as cyp focusing on survival post release)
systemic issue – children's services reactive not preventative
job impacts on mental health and wellbeing
lack of managerial commitment to processes
supervision for staff is not prioritised
emotional commitment and investment to cyp
feeling obliged to maintain contact over the weekend
feeling responsible for individuals whilst in custody
needing to create the right environment for desistance
need for more boundaries to protect self at work
staff compassion
idea of individual or service responsibility (systemic issue)
underfunded and overworked (systemic issue)
staff have different expectations for some cyp
staff despondence due to poor wellbeing
CARP panels lacking meaning
challenges of workload pressures and role expectations
helpful changes to release
importance of coordinating with other services
organizational politics and issues relating to social power
poor multiagency join-up
YJ professional judgement and decision making
locality specific meetings can be beneficial - joined-up
repetitive processes and meetings impact on ability to do job
staff can use a child-first model whilst ensuring risk management
interventions in custody lack meaning
issues with the legal and criminal justice system
assessment of SEN too close to release
benefits of specialist input and upskilling staff
challenges of working with complex trauma and ACEs
challenges working with other professionals who do not understand or prioritise SEND
EHCPs lacking effectiveness in custody
EHCPs not understood or utilised
issues with current screening and assessment processes (ASSET)
issues with inaccessible licence conditions and sentence reports
lack of evidence-informed resources to support cyp
SEND is not a priority, safety is
staff not utilising specialist input
undiagnosed SEN and need for assessment and screenings
hopes of supporting & improving cyp understanding of systems
challenges of distance and supporting cyp in custody
custody visits can be cancelled last minute
Physical distance of YOIs issue for cyp and families
idea of EP role as centred on EHCP process
limited understanding of EP role

age and maturity impact on desistance
balancing autonomy and putting in place boundaries
benefits of having a resettlement worker
challenges of working with those on remand
changes in treatment and support as individuals turn 18
CYP unprepared for different YJ systems
issue with legal system and courts (bailed further pend investigation) impacting on motivation to engage in desistance work
culture of violence among custodial experienced cyp
custodial staff only able to be reactive due to violent environment
custody retraumatizing to many
difference between male and female institutions
difference between YOI and SCH
lack of experience and training of officers
lack of space for desistance-focused practice due to safety and violence
staff are trained to view risk and not work therapeutically in YOIs
YOI akin to adult institutions
YOI as inhumane places
YOI designed to be punitive and risk-focused
cyp in better position for desistance in less violent secure environments
SCH can be therapeutic and child-focused
SCH provide good remand support
staff wish for CYP to access SCH rather than YOI
opportunities for education in custody
opportunities for structure in custody