

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

The 'In-Between Space' of Peer Research: Sharing the Lessons Learned From a Study With Young People

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Keywords: peer research, young people, co-creation, trauma-informed

<https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.167271>

Journal of Participatory Research Methods

Vol. 7, Issue 5, 2026

The use of a participatory approach to research concerned with children and young people, where they act as peer researchers working as part of a research team, has been both promoted and critiqued in the literature. Drawing on the challenges and solutions identified by Bradbury-Jones and Taylor (2015) in participatory research with children, and the notion of a “space in between” (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009) regarding academic and community expertise, this paper shares reflections from a research team featuring academic and peer researchers and their host community organisation who together undertook two studies over a period of three years. This paper offers a practice-based framework for how peer research can be supported under real-world constraints. We note the importance of trauma-informed practice in research, beyond safeguarding protocols, and the need for flexible participation models, such as Franks’ “Pockets of Participation” (2011), which can support engagement without overburdening peer researchers. We find that a relational infrastructure is a structural necessity to meaningful collaboration and the need to reframe what counts as expertise. The contributions of peer researchers helped shift the research from a more extractive to a more relational and contextually grounded process in which real-world change becomes more possible. We share key learnings and recommendations for research practice, commissioning and practice.

Introduction

Participatory research carried out by or with children and young people has become *de rigueur* in health and social science research (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018). The rationale for conducting research from within this participatory paradigm is that it holds potential for children and young people to be the narrators of their own lives, rather than their lives being portrayed vicariously through an adult lens. As Schweiger (2024) suggests, it enhances the quality and authenticity of research on childhood. Correspondingly, there have been several published reflections and critiques of participatory research with children and young people (Bennion & Rutter, 2024; Duggan, 2021; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Page et al., 2023; Warritch et al., 2024). Within these, a critical agenda has evolved that questions the ethical implications and

methodological complexities of such research. For example, Bradbury-Jones, Isham and Taylor (2018) pointed out that the involvement of children and young people who may be considered 'vulnerable' or 'marginalised' has been slower to become mainstream in participatory research. They highlighted how disabled children and young people or those affected by abuse or neglect are particularly at risk.

The risks of tokenism, misrepresentation, or unacknowledged power dynamics have also been well-documented. Erwin et al. (2024), in a rapid review of co-production in health and social care research with vulnerable young people, call for critical reflexivity and transparent negotiation of power — underscoring that meaningful involvement requires more than methodological intent. Warritch et al. (2024), in their umbrella review, identify persistent barriers to adolescent engagement in health research, including structural gatekeeping, extractive research cultures, and limited organisational capacity to accommodate young people as co-creators. Bradbury-Jones and Taylor (2015) highlight six challenge areas in participatory research — including balancing insider/outsider roles and navigating entrenched hierarchies — and propose solutions. Their framework informed our own reflexive processes as we examined how to work equitably with peer researchers without reproducing top-down approaches that prioritise institutional privilege and academic authority over the lived knowledge and structural realities of marginalised communities.

Much of our learning centred not only on these challenges, but also on a deliberate effort to inhabit “the space in between” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) — the relational terrain bridging academic robustness and community-rooted expertise. This enabled us to co-produce more grounded, responsive, and structurally attuned forms of knowledge. Drawing on Dwyer and Buckle’s (2009) conceptualisation of this space as a fluid, reflexive position between insider and outsider roles, we extended the idea into a practical methodology. In our study, the “space in between” evolved from a conceptual stance into a negotiated zone of collaborative knowledge generation — scaffolded by horizontal leadership, shared reflexivity, and intentional asset sharing among peer researchers, academic teams, and our grassroots community partner.

This space was not static; rather, it was dynamic and relational — shaped by shifting identities, mutual learning, and the ethical tensions of working across difference. As Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue, occupying this in-between space requires humility, attentiveness, and a willingness to embrace ambiguity. For us, it became the foundation for a thoughtful and adaptive approach to co-production, one that moved beyond fixed roles and prioritised relational accountability and epistemic inclusivity. What follows is not a claim to have resolved all the tensions inherent in peer research. Rather, it is an honest account of how we navigated them in the real world — and how, in doing so, we glimpsed the potential for lived and learned knowledge to meet in mutual recognition.

This paper contributes beyond existing critiques of participatory research in three ways. First, it provides a practice-based account of how tensions around power, safeguarding, competence and insider–outsider positioning were negotiated within two peer research projects involving young people. Second, it demonstrates how Dwyer and Buckle's (2009) concept of the "space in between" can be operationalised in practice through collaboration between peer researchers, academic researchers and a community organisation. Third, it offers a practice-based framework for thinking about how peer research can be supported under real-world constraints, identifying the relational and organisational conditions that enabled meaningful peer researcher involvement within a commissioned research context.

These contributions are developed through a reflective and practice-based analysis of the processes, dynamics, and relational practices that shaped the research.

Background and Methodology

We reflect on and share our insights from experiences during two funded evaluations of a mentoring intervention for children and young people, provided by an organisation that we refer to here as 'UB' for the purpose of anonymity. Early in the preparatory phase of these studies, UB raised the challenge of whether academic research teams could engage effectively with participants and so advocated for the inclusion of graduates from their mentoring programme as peer researchers. Three peer researchers were involved in the evaluations, all of them young men aged 18–20 who had graduated from the UB programme.

As such, the peer researchers in these studies were not children but young adults, aged over 18 years. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, we have been guided by the internationally recognised and widely used definitions of children and young people as laid out by the UNICEF and the United Nations. Hence, a child is a person under the age of 18 years (unless a country's laws set the legal definition of childhood as younger) (UNICEF, 1989). Whereas, for people aged 15–24 years, the terms 'youth', 'young adults' or 'young people' are used (United Nations, 1981).

The two studies were granted ethical approval by the ethics committee of the University leading the project and from where most of the academic research team are drawn (reference numbers ERN_22-0091 and ERN_22-0091A). Throughout the studies the safeguarding of both the participants in the intervention studied (all of whom were under 18 years old) and the peer researchers was a key consideration. Actions taken in this regard included delivery within a supervised, youth-work setting led by UB, continuous presence of trained adult UB staff during research activity, formal safeguarding training for peer researchers through UB, alongside research-specific ethical preparation from the academic research team, structured opportunities for immediate debrief and escalation and clearly defined safeguarding and escalation pathways, alongside the academic ethical governance structure.

During 2022 we conducted a feasibility study, which was followed in 2023/24 by a pilot study. On completion of the projects, the academic research team, one of the peer researchers who had worked across both projects and UB staff, convened several meetings to reflect on the experience of working together and specifically the experience of being and working with peer researchers. This consisted of a series of online discussions during the Summer and Autumn of 2024. Data gathered during these discussions were analysed using thematic analysis. Collection and analysis of these qualitative data was an iterative process, with both occurring in parallel – enabling emerging themes to be investigated in later discussions. Analysis also considered comparison of perspectives across the research team, and revisiting field experiences, with particular attention to points of overlap and tension between academic, community, and peer researcher perspectives.

The reflections presented in this paper are based on a series of structured and informal post-project discussions involving academic researchers, the partner organisation (UB), and one peer researcher who participated across both phases of the study. While several peer researchers were involved during delivery, only one was available to participate in the post-project reflection. These discussions were supplemented by insights shared by UB staff, who maintained close ongoing contact with the wider group of peer researchers and were able to reflect on broader patterns of experience across the cohort.

The outcome of these discussions and our lessons learned are the basis of this paper and we share several key learnings and recommendations that we hope will be of interest to those interested in undertaking or commissioning peer research with young people. The sections which follow are broadly based on the challenges and solutions in participatory research with children identified by Bradbury-Jones and Taylor (2015).

The competencies of Peer Researchers

The competence of children and young people to conduct research with their peers has been widely debated (Kellett, 2005, 2010, 2011; Kellett et al., 2004). Critics have argued that peer researchers may lack the technical skills, decision-making capacity, and ethical awareness needed for effective research, especially when balancing dual roles as insiders and data collectors (Curtin & Murtagh, 2007). These concerns often ignore the right of peer researchers to influence research and obscure the unique strengths that young researchers bring to the process, particularly their ability to establish rapport and trust with their peers as research participants. Conversely, proponents of increased youth leadership and participation highlight its alignment with the rights articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) and children and young people's competency as social actors (James & James, 2012; Lundy et al., 2011; Martin et al., 2024). Peer research serves as a practical mechanism to realise these rights in action, with many studies underscoring young researchers' unique ability to build rapport and connect with their peers effectively.

In the case of our research, the lived experiences of the peer researchers provided them with unique competencies to navigate many cultural and social dynamics effectively. The CEO of UB emphasised the importance of ensuring that the research felt relatable and resonated with participants:

“Having a peer researcher, who is from the same community and with similar experiences created a better chance of levelling up power dynamics with Black and Brown participants and getting authentic responses. This process would be compromised if someone was interviewing and was unfamiliar and came from a different class, standing, and background.”

Reflections from one peer researcher, supported by observations from UB, suggested that shared lived experience also helped enable more natural connections with participants:

“...like me being from the same place and environment and going through similar things.” (Peer researcher)

This researcher also reflected on the increased engagement and openness this relatability encouraged:

“I’m a bit more recognisable to them [...] Can maybe speak a language that is a bit more familiar to them, and I look like them. So, [...] it doesn’t feel like [...] some sort of interview. [...] It’s a bit more natural [...] I feel like a lot of people engaged with me that might not have engaged as much with one of you guys [academic researchers].” (Peer researcher)

This ability to connect fostered richer and more authentic data collection, as the peer researcher concluded:

“[I was] ...able to get that information that may otherwise not have been [...] retrieved, I guess, [it’s...] definitely [...] a good [...] big win. I think.” (Peer researcher)

These reflections were echoed through academic research team observations, which noted high levels of participant engagement, more natural conversational dynamics, and openness in peer-led interactions. It was for these reasons that the academic research team followed the strong guidance from UB, drawing on their experience that racially minoritised young people in this context were unlikely to engage as openly with unfamiliar academic researchers entering what was understood as a safe, community-held space. Transcribed interviews also indicated increasingly confident use of probing and follow-up questions over time, suggesting the progression and fluency of interviewing skills through practice and support.

Table 1. Attributes for Effective Engagement (Tier List)

S-tier (Deal Breakers)	Ethnicity and socio-economic background.
A-tier	Age, gender, and educational experiences.
B-tier	Locality and postcode awareness.

The post-delivery reflective sessions with one peer researcher, UB staff and the academic team produced a tier list of key attributes for effective engagement, inspired by video game culture, (see [Table 1](#)). The list breaks down the unique assets brought to the project by peer researchers by tier, from S-tier (the most important) to B-tier (less important). It demonstrated the significance of shared cultural and social factors in fostering participant trust, reaffirming the unique relatability strengths of peer researchers.

Key learning 1

Peer researchers bring culturally grounded and relational competencies that enhance the quality and credibility of research, particularly with structurally excluded groups. In this study, their shared lived experience supported greater participant engagement and openness, contributing to richer and more contextually grounded data. Their involvement in interpretation and analysis further strengthened the validity of findings by ensuring that emerging themes were shaped by lived experience as well as academic interpretation. Peer researchers therefore contributed not only to data collection, but to the depth, credibility, and explanatory power of the research.

From the perspective of the academic research team, the competency and value of peer researcher involvement was evident not only in participant engagement but also in the quality and depth of data generated. The content of the interviews demonstrated a richness and nuance in participants' accounts, reflecting both the relational ease of peer-led interactions and the ability of peer researchers to explore topics in culturally meaningful ways. In addition, the involvement of peer researchers in joint analysis provided a shared interpretive lens through which emerging themes were discussed and refined, contributing to the development of recommendations that were both contextually grounded and analytically robust.

Protection of young people

Where children and young people work as peer-researchers, the matter of protection is particularly salient, because although all those working on a research study require protection in some way, the need to protect children and young people is of paramount importance (Larkins et al., 2021). Our research programme focused on ensuring that with UB staff and peer researchers.

This was especially challenging given the long-standing tensions in UB's local social environment, where postcode-related violence had created deep divisions between young people. The UB programme was intentionally designed to mitigate these dynamics — working across schools affected by

these divides and creating a safe, relational space where young people from different areas could come together, build trust, and engage in shared learning. The closely developed and managed UB intelligence and support infrastructure was vital in providing the essential security and protection framework for the peer researchers. We are clear that this support infrastructure was not only essential, but also beyond the capacity of the academic research team to provide alone. For instance, one peer researcher had to withdraw due to escalating concerns for his personal safety — concerns that emerged outside his research role but required sensitive, responsive support that only a trusted community organisation like UB could offer. In the case of this peer researcher, it was UB who both identified the issue and took action to remove and protect the individual while keeping the academic researchers informed.

More generally, the presence of experienced and trusted staff on the UB bus and in the wider community was essential to providing the protective scaffolding for the peer researchers and for the young people involved in the project. This is where the close 'arm in arm' working relationship between academic researchers, intervention deliverers and peer researchers, is not just an important check-list criteria, but is critical in protecting young people involved as peer researchers. That relationship needs to be carefully developed and clearly set out from the outset and constantly checked back on with all the parties to ensure that it is dynamic and fit for purpose as the research progresses and the community and delivery environments change.

A useful finding from our experience is that this approach can be unusual for academic research ethics committees. Current research ethics frameworks were developed in the footprint of biomedical, experimental research and present several pitfalls when applied outside these environments (De Poli & Oyeboode, 2023).

As part of ethical approval, safeguarding considerations were central to the design and delivery of the study, particularly given the involvement of young adult peer researchers working with participants aged under-18 years in a context characterised by local postcode rivalries and associated risks. To mitigate this, research activity was embedded within the supported and familiar environment of UB and delivered alongside their staff whose role involved maintaining awareness of community safeguarding risks.

Safeguarding was also supported through structured preparation and supervision. As part of their preparation, peer researchers completed UB safeguarding training, ensuring they were familiar with recognising risks, maintaining appropriate boundaries, and understanding established safeguarding procedures within the community setting. This complemented additional research-specific training provided by the academic team, which focused on ethical awareness, confidentiality, and managing their dual role as both insiders and researchers.

During the first phase of the study, concerns were escalated through UB staff being present at delivery; in the second phase, this was further formalised through a dedicated UB research programme liaison role linking into the academic team. This aligns with existing literature emphasising the importance of adult supervision, structured support, and preparation in peer research (Rees et al., 2025).

Ongoing communication and reflexive practice were also central to safeguarding. Regular contact between peer researchers, UB staff, and the university team — including reflective discussions, supervision meetings, and informal check-ins — created space for concerns to be raised and addressed collaboratively. This reflects wider evidence highlighting the importance of sustained support, communication, and reflexivity in participatory research with young people (Rowland et al., 2024).

At the same time, our reflections emphasised the importance of balancing safeguarding responsibility with peer researcher autonomy. While adult oversight was essential, efforts were made to ensure that this did not undermine the agency or relational role of peer researchers. Safeguarding therefore operated not only as a procedural framework, but as an ongoing relational practice requiring active negotiation of roles, boundaries, and power within the research process.

Key learning 2

Protecting children and young people involved as peer researchers is vital and requires both robust safeguarding procedures and strong relational infrastructure. In this study, safeguarding was achieved through close collaboration between academic researchers, the intervention provider, and peer researchers, ensuring that research activity was embedded within existing support systems. This combined approach enabled protection to be maintained while also supporting peer researchers' involvement as active contributors to knowledge production.

Power differentials between academic and peer researchers

Power differentials between academic and peer researchers are well documented in the literature, particularly in commissioned research where academic teams often hold institutional authority, control over funding, and responsibility for outputs (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015). Some authors argue that involving peer researchers within an academic team, risks reinforcing hierarchical dynamics, positioning them as junior contributors (Northcote & Phillips, 2019). Others see this as a way to democratise the research process (MacKinnon et al., 2021). In the case of this research, UB had bid for funding to run the intervention, which mandated an independent evaluation. UB also advocated for the inclusion of peer researchers. In doing so, they held a form of gatekeeping power — controlling access to participants and shaping the research environment (Berg & Lune, 2004). The academic team employed the peer researchers, who were graduates of the UB

intervention and retained responsibility for the evaluation. However, the research could not have been delivered without UB. This mutual dependency created a more balanced foundation for collaboration.

In these studies, peer researchers contributed to the design and interpretation of the research. Their insights were visible in the final outputs, reinforcing that they were not simply involved, but influential. This visibility helped mitigate the risk — highlighted by Pincock and Bakunzi (2021) — that peer researchers are used to legitimise top-down processes. Instead, the partnership fostered what both UB staff and peer researchers described as “cross-leadership” and “horizontal leadership”:

“It never felt to us like there was an imbalance in power. It just felt like cross leadership and horizontal leadership that everyone could contribute to.” (UB CEO)

“Definitely it’s a cross-leadership approach and learning from each other and cohesiveness rather than ‘We’ll tell you what to do and you do it our way’... and we definitely appreciated that.” (Peer Researcher)

This sense of “horizontal leadership” did not mean that power differences disappeared in practice. Rather, they were experienced and navigated in ongoing and sometimes subtle ways.

One area where power dynamics became visible in practice was in the use of topic guides. While academic researchers worked traditionally with structured guides to ensure consistency, ethical rigour, and comparability across interviews, peer researchers initially experienced these tools as constraining, culturally distant, and at times alienating for participants. This reflected a broader tension between methodological expectations and lived experience expertise.

To address this, the research team engaged in dialogue to explore and explain the purpose of topic guides, while also adapting how they were designed and used. This included revising language to better reflect participants’ realities, avoiding terminology perceived as institutional or triggering, and supporting flexibility for peer researchers to translate questions into more conversational, youth-relevant forms. In this way, academic requirements for structure were retained, but reshaped through peer insight to make them more contextually appropriate.

A further tension emerged during early data collection, where peer researchers tended to prioritise covering all questions in an interview, rather than engaging in exploratory follow-up of participants’ responses. This was addressed through interim reflective sessions, where transcripts were reviewed and the role of curiosity and probing was revisited. These sessions created a space for shared learning, enabling peer researchers to develop interviewing depth while retaining their relational style.

These examples illustrate that power was not simply redistributed but actively negotiated through ongoing interaction — with decisions shaped through discussion, adaptation, and mutual learning rather than top-down authority.

Our approach reflected a form of real-world pragmatism — working within existing structures to create a space of mutual exchange and learning, and in doing so, tilting those structures incrementally toward justice rather than attempting to dismantle and rebuild them entirely. While not a perfect solution, it was a deliberate and ethically grounded effort to redistribute power, deepen understanding, and make the research process more inclusive, reflexive, and responsive.

Despite these efforts, structural power differentials remained — including institutional control over funding and reporting, the academic team's authorship authority, and broader epistemic hierarchies that continue to privilege traditional forms of knowledge over lived experience. In this study, these dynamics were also potentially shaped by racialised and socio-economic inequalities, including the potential privileging of white academic perspectives and the relative marginalisation of Black voices within institutional research settings. These forms of power were not always overt, but emerged during discussions of trust, language, and when exploring the perceived legitimacy of different lenses and different ways of knowing. As Nowland et al. (2022) note, without explicit strategies to address these dynamics, participatory research risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative. Acknowledging these tensions is essential to sustaining integrity and accountability in collaborative research.

Key learning 3

Academic researchers need to be mindful of the power they hold, especially in contracted research projects. However, they also need to consider the power and influence held by the peer researchers, who can provide (more, better, any) access to research participants. In this study, more balanced working relationships were supported not by removing power differences, but by recognising and actively negotiating them — through shared decision-making, reflexive dialogue, and adapting research practices in response to peer researcher insight. This suggests that effective co-production depends not on achieving equality of power, but on making power visible and working with it relationally throughout the research process.

Balancing Insider and Outsider Perspectives

The balancing of insider-outsider perspectives underscores many of the complexities associated with participatory research, particularly when working with marginalised groups. Insiders—those who share lived experiences with participants—offer relatability and credibility that foster trust and agency (Berkovic et al., 2020). In this study, as highlighted earlier,

the insider nature of peer researchers, combined with their shared community experiences, was also considered empowering to child participants and equalised power dynamics more effectively.

Peer researchers' familiarity with participants and with their setting helped them *'blend in'* and proved advantageous, as one peer researcher noted:

| *"... a lot of them recognised me already."*

However, reliance on insider perspectives also raises valid concerns. Critics caution against potential over-identification with projects being evaluated, as well as the risk of diminished objectivity (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Merriam et al., 2001). Ethical concerns emerge when child participants in programmes may not fully comprehend that insider researchers, who *'blend in,'* are still fulfilling the role of data collectors. It can be a significant challenge for peer researchers to navigate their dual responsibilities as both members of the community and ethical researchers adhering to institutional standards.

In practice in our research, these risks were evident in more subtle ways. Peer researchers' familiarity with participants and settings sometimes meant that interactions could feel informal, with a tendency to prioritise relational ease over explicit role clarity. For example, as peer researchers blended naturally into conversations, there was a risk that participants might not always distinguish between everyday interactions and research activity. Similarly, shared experiences could lead to assumptions of mutual understanding, reducing opportunities to probe further or critically explore participants' accounts. These dynamics illustrate how insider positioning, while enabling trust, also introduced the potential for blurred boundaries and unexamined assumptions within the data collection process.

To address these dilemmas, training promoting reflexivity was provided by the academic researchers, which included debates on the benefits and drawbacks of insider and outsider positions, alongside the complexities of delivering research and conducting participant observations. As part of this peer researchers developed a short narrative to introduce the research and explain informed consent in a way that reflected their own communication styles. This enabled them to clearly signal their role as researchers - distinct from other members of the UB team - while maintaining a conversational and relatable approach.

Reflecting on his experiences, the peer researcher noted how this was a particular risk in participant observation sessions:

| *"It's not like I stick out or anything like that. So, obviously [...] they're told. [...] that I'm going to observe."*

Beyond initial training, these risks were managed through continued reflection and dialogue throughout the research process. Ongoing check-ins and review of transcripts enabled peer and academic researchers to identify

where familiarity might be limiting depth or clarity, and to adapt practices accordingly. In this way, insider risks were not eliminated but actively managed through ongoing reflexive practice.

Participatory research often involves blurred lines between insider and outsider roles. Merriam et al. (2001) emphasise that these boundaries are rarely clear-cut, and Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue that positionality on this insider-outsider spectrum is not a fixed status but a dynamic, shifting experience. Researchers often move fluidly between insider and outsider roles depending on context, relationships, and the stage of the research process.

Conversely, outsider researchers may provide methodological rigour, technical expertise, and adherence to ethical frameworks. However, as detailed earlier, they may struggle to build trust or fully grasp the lived experiences and structural reality of participants. In this study this included issues such as engagement with the police and offenders in local neighbourhoods, and the experience of attending school locally. Their external position can reinforce traditional power dynamics, privilege and inequalities, potentially undermining inclusivity and limiting the authenticity of findings. In our case, it was agreed with UB and the research funder that we would combine the strengths of both insider and outsider researchers for a more equitable and impactful research approach.

Key learning 4

Navigating insider–outsider roles requires reflexivity, ethical awareness, and collaborative negotiation amongst research teams, and with funders during the course of the research. The strengths and limitations of both roles are important to consider for individual research projects and the composition of research teams.

A Collaborative, 'In-Between' Approach

To address the challenges presented by both insider and outsider perspectives, this study adopted a collaborative “asset-sharing” or “in-between” approach, drawing on Dwyer and Buckle (2009), Milligan (2016) and Olsen, Stensung and Kvello (2022). While this concept is often used descriptively in the literature, we conceptualise the “in-between” here as a relational research practice characterised by the deliberate combination of experiential (peer) and technical (academic) forms of expertise across the research process. This involved different members of the research team contributing in complementary ways to the generation and interpretation of knowledge, iterative negotiation of authority, and shared responsibility for meaning-making.

These included, first, during the preparatory phase, the inclusion of peer researchers was a co-produced decision with UB, who identified peer research as essential for securing authentic engagement and access. Second, peer researchers were actively involved in shaping research tools and approaches, including refining language and framing to ensure cultural resonance and avoid re-traumatisation. Third, during data collection, roles were

differentiated but complementary: peer researchers led participant engagement, drawing on relational proximity and shared lived experience, while academic researchers provided methodological and ethical oversight. Fourth, analysis was conducted as a joint, iterative process, with the peer researcher contributing to theme development and interpretation, ensuring that experiential insight informed not only data generation but also meaning-making. Finally, this approach was sustained through an ongoing relational infrastructure, including trust-building activities, regular reflective sessions, responsive communication channels, and post-project debriefs, which enabled continuous reflection, negotiation of roles, expectations, and emerging challenges.

These practices made the “in-between” position observable in the research process rather than simply aspirational. For example, peer researchers reshaped interview language to avoid terms associated with policing or surveillance, which they identified as potentially triggering for participants, directly influencing the quality and openness of data generated. Similarly, their involvement in analysis surfaced themes—such as the role of toxic masculinity and experiences of neurodiversity—that may not have been interpreted in the same way by academic researchers alone.

The “space between” insider and outsider status can therefore be understood as a productive and reflexive zone, one that is actively constructed and maintained. It requires humility, curiosity, relational awareness, and ongoing negotiation. While peer and academic leadership was at times partial or constrained by commissioning structures, safeguarding considerations, and practical realities, we found that this collaboratively enacted “in-between” approach enabled a way of producing knowledge that neither insider nor outsider position could achieve independently. Rather than occupying static roles (e.g. institutional vs. community, expert vs. peer), the research process became iterative and relational, co-producing insights that were both contextually grounded, rich and analytically robust.

This approach aligns with participatory and relational research traditions that seek to challenge hierarchical, extractive models of knowledge production. In this study, working with a Black community organisation and predominantly with racially minoritised young men, the importance of non-hierarchical, trust-based relationships was not only methodological but contextually necessary — reflecting histories of marginalisation and mistrust toward institutions that shape participation in research. As our findings demonstrate, this required actively attending to language, building trust, and recognising lived experience as valid knowledge, rather than assuming that research methods are neutral or context-free

Key learning 5

There are tensions and ethical dilemmas that arise when peer researchers are both part of the community and acting as researchers. Capacity building and transparency are therefore important when working as a mixed, academic

and peer research team. The “in-between” space can be a productive zone for co-constructing knowledge and amplifying marginalised voices while maintaining ethical rigour.

Building the Conditions for Trust and Co-Produced Knowledge

While navigating insider–outsider dynamics was fundamental to our methodology, it was the relational infrastructure — built through early familiarisation meetings, training, reflection, and shared authorship — that enabled us to move toward a mutual learning space for collaborative knowledge generation. This was not a fixed destination, but a dynamic process shaped by trust, flexibility, and a deliberate effort to centre lived experience alongside academic rigour. The early phase of the project — where we got to know each other, built trust, and agreed how we would work together — was crucial. As the host organisation, UB played a vital role in this phase: not only recruiting peer researchers but also providing the emotional and logistical support that enabled them to participate safely and confidently during research delivery days. This initial period was more than a skills handover; it became a shared space for building relationships, developing mutual understanding, and laying the foundations for ethical, inclusive research.

We found that the relational “space in between” only worked well when it was built on a foundation of mutual trust, flexibility, and relational care. Several interconnected practices helped make this possible which we list below.

These practices were not only relational or ethical in orientation; they had direct implications for the quality and validity of the research. Specifically, they enhanced access to participants, authenticity of data, and depth of interpretation. The ongoing reflexive and collaborative structure also strengthened credibility and trustworthiness, enabling assumptions to be surfaced, interpretations to be challenged, and blind spots to be reduced. In this sense, the relational infrastructure acted as a methodological resource, improving not only participation but the robustness and explanatory power of the findings.

1. Collaborative Tool Design and Shared Language

Peer researchers co-designed the research tools and process, refining language to avoid re-traumatisation and ensure cultural resonance. Their lived experience was critical in helping identify terms that could alienate or distress participants — particularly Black and Brown young people disproportionately affected by surveillance and criminalisation (Fraser, 2022).

“That [word...]’s going to raise anxieties, so I’d try not to mention the police but still get the answer you are asking for.” (Peer Researcher)

One peer researcher also highlighted the need to avoid the term “research interview” — a phrase used on consent forms and by the research team that, while seemingly neutral to academics, was experienced by some participants as triggering due to its association with police interviews. In response, peer researchers adapted both the language and the delivery style to make the process feel more informal and conversational, while still ensuring that participants understood their voices were contributing to a formal research study.

“White middle-class people won’t know the PTSD links of talking about the police... avoiding words like ‘crime’ or ‘interview,’ which sometimes makes you think of the police station.” (Peer Researcher)

During training, peer researchers also talked through and clarified their preferred style of engaging in research conversations with participants:

“I was able to kind of do it in a way that was comfortable for me... it allowed me to get information a bit more naturally.” (Peer Researcher)

This linguistic reflexivity was not just about tone — it was about power, positionality, and the ethics of engagement. Ultimately, this contributed to stronger data quality by reducing participant anxiety and enabling more open and detailed responses.

2. Relationship-Led Training and Support

Peer researcher training needed to be delivered flexibly and relationally, recognising that peer researchers were balancing multiple responsibilities (e.g. employment, college attendance and care responsibilities) and that this paid peer researcher role was not their primary responsibility. Sessions were interactive and strength-focused with academic and peer researchers sharing and learning from one another.

This mutual learning fostered what one peer researcher described as a “cross-leadership approach,” where knowledge flowed in both directions and confidence was co-constructed.

3. Shared Space and Informal Rituals

Trust was not assumed — it was built over time through early design workshops, shared meals, informal rituals, attending wider UB events and through regular reflective, joint trouble shooting and learning sessions. These moments helped shift the dynamic from transactional to relational.

“[Eating together...] feels less formal or less like it’s a meeting... it helps build that connection and that trust.” (Peer Researcher)

Such rituals — including shared meals — have been highlighted in other studies as important to building trust and sustaining effective peer research relationships (Larkins et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2024). In our context, they helped shift the research from a task to a shared endeavour, reinforcing the relational and collaborative ethos at the heart of the project. This trust-building was critical in supporting participant engagement and openness, particularly in a context where institutional mistrust might otherwise limit openness.

4. Reflexivity on All Sides

Reflexivity was embedded throughout the process — not bolted on at the end. Academic researchers reflected on their positionality and power, resisting over-instruction. Peer researchers also reflected regularly on their roles within their communities and the ethical tensions that emerged from being both “of” and “apart from” participants they were researching. Structured and informal reflection sessions created space to surface assumptions, adjust practices, learn about what was being missed and build shared accountability. This process strengthened analytic rigour by allowing interpretations to be questioned, refined, and grounded in multiple perspectives. Reflexivity, in this sense, was not a personal exercise but a collective practice of accountability and care.

5. Flexible and Sustainable Participation

Drawing on Franks’ (2011) “Pockets of Participation” the team proactively supported variable roles, allowing peer researchers to opt in and out of stages based on capacity, confidence, and interest. This flexibility was rooted in awareness of the burden of the research task for those juggling multiple other roles and aimed to protect wellbeing while sustaining involvement over time. We learned that it was essential for academic teams to keep the offer to engage open — allowing peer researchers to shape their own participation, rather than imposing predefined limits.

In addition to supporting flexible roles during the project, the academic team and UB made ongoing offers to connect peer researchers with emerging research opportunities beyond the UB study. These included invitations from the academic researchers and UB to contribute to other youth-led research initiatives, research advisory boards and to co-author future publications. Inserts for CVs and the offer of reference letters were also provided, recognising the value of their contributions and supporting progression. These efforts helped strengthen relational accountability — ensuring that participation was not extractive or time-limited, but part of a longer-term investment in peer researchers’ growth and visibility.

6. Interpretive Insight, Meaning Making and Thematic Depth

Peer researchers also played a vital role in shaping the thematic analysis, helping the academic team interpret participants’ experiences through a lens grounded in lived reality. Drawing on their structured research conversations

and participant observations, they raised themes that may not have emerged as clearly without their insight. This enhanced the analytic depth and validity of findings by ensuring that themes reflected lived realities rather than external interpretation alone. For example, peer researchers highlighted how some young people were excluded from school for using offensive language yet were never supported to understand *why* their words were harmful. This pointed to a lack of space for critical dialogue in schools — and raised important questions about whether a trauma-informed approach should extend not only to behaviour, but also to how we engage with language, meaning, and intent. Indeed, during their research conversations UB participants themselves said they valued the opportunity to reflect on these types of issues with mentors and staff in the UB space. Peer researchers also identified the influence of toxic masculinity on some marginalised boys via social media, noting the absence of safe spaces to unpack these messages with trusted male role models — again, something boys felt UB provided. Another key theme was the systemic failure to support neurodiverse children, where unmet needs often led to exclusion rather than adjustment, adaptation and other ways of learning. These peer researcher insights enriched the analysis and ensured that final themes reflected not only what was said, but how it was experienced — through the eyes of those closest to the context. Peer researchers were not just data collectors, but co-analysts and meaning-makers — central to the epistemic depth of the project.

Collectively, these practices demonstrate that co-produced, relational approaches do not weaken methodological rigour and can enhance it — particularly in research with communities where trust, representation, and cultural understanding are central to meaningful participation.

7. Post delivery reflection

Post-delivery reflection is a vital yet often overlooked phase of peer research (Larkins et al., 2021). Some of the richest learning emerged not during delivery, but in the post-project phase — through informal, reflective conversations involving peer researchers, the host organisation, and academic partners. These discussions offered space to explore how the process felt for those involved, surfacing insights that formal evaluation tools might miss. If arm-in-arm working has been achieved, this is often the moment when the frankest, most insight-rich conversations can take place. Yet these spaces are rarely funded or prioritised. We suggest that informal yet systematic reflection on the peer research partnership — including emotional, relational, and ethical dimensions — should be recognised as a vital part of the research cycle.

Limitations and Structural Constraints

Despite our shared commitment to horizontal leadership and mutual learning, several limitations constrained the full realisation of a mutual learning space. Chief among these was the nature of the research commissioning process itself. The studies were commissioned with predefined aims and partial methodological scaffolding already in place, which limited

the extent to which peer researchers could shape the research agenda from the outset. While we worked to mitigate this through co-design, shared authorship, and visible influence on outputs, the structural power differentials remained — including institutional control over funding, authorship, and reporting. As Nowland et al. (2022) caution, without explicit strategies to address these dynamics, participatory research risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

These constraints also reflect broader epistemic hierarchies that continue to privilege academic knowledge over lived experience. Although our approach sought to tilt these structures toward justice through asset-sharing and relational practice, we recognise that true epistemic equity requires research to be shaped and led by those most affected from the very beginning — a condition rarely met in the current landscape of research commissioning and institutional accountability.

A further limitation raised during peer debriefs was the absence of gender diversity among the peer research team. All peer researchers were young men who had graduated from UB's programme — a composition that, while reflective of the demographics of participants, limited the potential for gender-responsive research practice. Including female and non-binary peer researchers in future studies would more effectively support the engagement of girls and other underrepresented genders, helping to elicit perspectives that may otherwise remain obscured. This aligns with critiques by Gong and Wright (2007), who argue that achieving representation in peer research requires attention to intersectional identities and an understanding that "peer" status is not uniformly experienced.

This limitation also underscores the importance of designing research teams not only for relational access and trust, but for epistemic inclusivity — that is, intentionally creating research processes that value and incorporate different ways of knowing, especially those rooted in marginalised or historically silenced communities. Epistemic inclusivity goes beyond methodological diversity; it involves asking who gets to produce, interpret, and validate knowledge — and whose lived realities are recognised as legitimate and authoritative within the research. In this sense, inclusion is not just about participation in method, but participation in meaning-making.

We recognise that the reflective insights presented here draw primarily on the experience of one peer researcher who participated in post-project dialogue. While this limits the extent to which these reflections can be taken as representative of all peer researchers, they are complemented by the perspectives of the partner community organisation, who retained close ongoing relationships with the wider peer research cohort, and by the observations of the academic research team. The intention of this paper is therefore not to generalise, but to offer a practice-informed account grounded in this specific research context.

Conclusion

This paper explores what becomes possible when peer researchers are not just included, but meaningfully embedded, in the research process — shaping tools, guiding interpretation, and co-authoring knowledge. Working in the “space in between” allowed us to navigate the tensions of insider–outsider roles, institutional power, and lived expertise with care. It was not a perfect model, but it was a deliberate attempt to redistribute power, deepen understanding, and make research more responsive to those most affected.

This study demonstrates that high-quality peer research emerges not from the simple inclusion of lived experience, but from the deliberate creation of conditions in which different forms of knowledge can interact, challenge, and refine one another. New knowledge is produced through negotiated, relational tension, not fixed roles. Working in the “in-between” space revealed that the value of peer research lies not in resolving insider-outsider tensions, but in engaging with them productively through reflexive, relational practice. Peer researchers contributed not only to access, but to the quality, depth, and interpretation of the data, while also bringing distinct risks that required active management through structured support, ethical clarity, and ongoing dialogue. At the same time, structural inequalities - including institutional authority, authorship control, and racialised and socio-economic power dynamics — continued to shape what was possible. In this context, co-production is best understood not as an achieved state, but as a continuous process of negotiation, requiring investment in relational infrastructure, transparency about power, and a willingness to work within and against existing constraints.

To summarise our key findings:

1. Co-production is not a role — it is a relational practice

Co-production worked not because peer researchers were included, but because relationships, trust, and shared ways of working were actively built and maintained over time. It is something that needs to be *done*, not something that simply *happens*.

2. The “in-between” space is productive, but only if actively managed

The space between insider and outsider positions is where the richest insights emerged, but only because it was supported through reflexivity, dialogue, and negotiation. It is not inherently beneficial; it becomes valuable through intentional practice.

3. Power cannot be removed — it must be made visible and worked with

Power differences (institutional, racialised, epistemic, organisational) persisted throughout. What mattered was naming them, being alert to them and actively negotiating them in practice

This is what enabled more equitable knowledge production, even within constrained systems.

4. Peer researchers contribute to *quality*, not just participation

Peer researchers did not simply increase access, they improved engagement and openness, enabled more culturally grounded data and strengthened interpretation and meaning-making. Their contribution is methodological and epistemic, not just ethical.

5. Insider positioning brings both strengths and risks

Shared lived experience enabled trust and relatability, but also introduced risks including blurred roles, assumptions, reduced probing and ethical ambiguity.

Effective peer research depends on structures that balance closeness with clarity (e.g. role signalling, reflexive review, training).

6. Safeguarding must be contextual, relational, and structured

In volatile environments, safeguarding cannot rely on standard practices and policies alone. It requires embedded community knowledge, supervision and clear protocols, peer researcher training, and ongoing relational monitoring. Protection is not just procedural—it is relational and situational.

7. Good peer research requires infrastructure, not just intent

What made this work in our research was not just values, but investment in infrastructure including: training, supervision, reflective spaces, communication systems, and community partnerships. Without this, co-production risks becoming superficial or extractive.

8. Co-production is limited by existing research systems

Even well-designed participatory work operates within pre-defined funding structures, academic accountability and authorship control. The aim is often not full transformation, but incremental shifts toward greater equity.

9. Reflection is a critical (and often missing) stage of research

Some of the most important insights emerged after delivery, through reflection because it reveals tensions, surfaces learning and improves future practice. Yet it is rarely funded or prioritised.

10. Knowledge production is strongest when different forms of expertise meet

The most valuable findings came from the interaction between: lived experience (peer researchers), technical and analytical expertise (academics), and contextual knowledge (community organisation). The ideal point is not any one position, but in their interaction.

Finally, drawing our learning together, we propose a number of recommendations targeting research practice, commissioning and policy (see [Table 2](#)).

Table 2. Recommendations

For Research Practice • Embed reflexivity as a shared, ongoing practice — not only for peer researchers but for academic teams, to surface privilege and create time and relational space and trust for structurally excluded voices to shape meaning. • Recognise peer researchers as co-analysts and meaning-makers, not just data collectors. Build in time and support for their contributions to thematic analysis and interpretation. • Adopt flexible participation models e.g. Franks' "Pockets of Participation" (2011) that allow for sustainable, negotiated involvement over time. • Ensure trauma-informed practice extends to language, relational dynamics, and interpretive processes — not just safeguarding protocols.
For Research Commissioning • Fund relational infrastructure as a core component of participatory research — including time and spaces for trust-building, shared reflection, and co-design. • Involve community partners and peer researchers in shaping research questions and design from the earliest stages, not just delivery. • Build in flexibility to accommodate evolving roles and responsibilities, especially for peer researchers balancing multiple life commitments. • Prioritise post-delivery reflective spaces that allow all partners — including peer researchers and host organisations — to explore how the process felt, what it meant, and what could be improved. These conversations often yield the most honest and transformative insights yet are rarely funded or formalised. Commissioners should resource this phase as part of ethical and relational accountability. • Acknowledge and address structural power differentials that persist even in well-intentioned participatory research. These include institutional control over funding, authorship, and reporting, as well as broader epistemic hierarchies that privilege academic knowledge over lived experience. Funders and research leads should build in mechanisms — such as shared authorship agreements, co-governance structures, and reflexive evaluation tools — to surface and mitigate these imbalances (Nowland et al., 2022).
For Policy and Systems • Recognise the value of peer research in uncovering insights that traditional methods may miss — in our research this included issues including exclusion of neurodivergent children and young people, identity, and systemic harm. • Invest in long-term capacity building for community-rooted organisations to lead or co-lead research. • Create pathways for peer researchers to move into sustained roles in research, policy, or advocacy — including through training, authorship, and recognition.

Funding

The two studies referenced in this article were funded by the Youth Endowment Fund under their 'Another Chance; grant round.

Submitted: December 18, 2025 EDT. Accepted: June 29, 2026 EDT. Published: September 18, 2026 EDT.



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