

An Exploration of Two Different Models of Leadership for Youth Justice Reform

Luke Butcher^a , Andrew Day^{b,c}  , Catia Malvaso^d , Mellanie Fernandez^e

^a Charles Darwin University

^b University of Melbourne

^c Swinburne University of Technology

^d University of Adelaide

^e Department of Human Services, South Australia

ABSTRACT

Youth justice in Australia is at a crossroads. A series of recent reviews and inquiries have called for major reform of the sector and identified the need to develop and deliver new and different ways of working. And yet implementing change in youth justice has proven difficult, with an absence of strong and effective leadership identified as a particular issue that constrains progress. In this paper we describe two different models of public service leadership – a ‘transformational leadership’ approach that is widely used in healthcare, and a ‘coherence leadership’ approach developed specifically for use in education. We use these to illustrate how youth justice leaders and leadership teams might approach the task of conceptualizing and delivering an agenda for reform and continuous improvement. We conclude by arguing that it is only by adopting a strategic approach to organizational and cultural change that leaders will be able to successfully engage and equip the workforce to deliver effective justice services for children and young people across Australia and elsewhere.

KEYWORDS: Leadership, Organizational Change, Reform, Implementation

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INTRODUCTION

Both across Australia, and internationally, calls to reform the youth justice sector are loud and persistent. There is, for example, an emerging consensus that service providers should move away from approaches that are based primarily on monitoring and

managing risk (Clancey et al., 2020) towards those that are based more on an understanding of the rights of young people, or what is sometimes referred to as ‘child first’ (Day, 2022) or ‘trauma informed’ (Branson et al., 2017) youth justice. In addition, there is a growing recognition of the need to better accommodate understandings of cumulative disadvantage

(e.g., National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022; Malvaso et al., 2020; Zane et al., 2022), especially in relation to service delivery with First Nations children and young people or communities of color (e.g., Blagg, 2012; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022). This is widely considered key to efforts to reduce the continuing mass over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Australian criminal justice services (see Cunneen, 2020).

Calls for reform are, in essence, based on an understanding that current practice unhelpfully ‘labels’, ‘responsibilizes’, and ‘adultifies’ justice-involved children and young people and, as a result, leads to service responses that have a detrimental effect on health and wellbeing while also impacting only minimally on rates of re-offending (e.g., Case & Haines, 2014; Goldson & Muncie, 2012; Kemshall, 2008). An alternative, it is suggested, involves wholesale organizational change based on models of care that are more participatory, strengths based, and that share power between leaders, practitioners, and young people (see Day et al., 2023). This may offer a more developmentally appropriate - and potentially more effective - means to address the needs of children and young people in ways that will best help them to realize their future aspirations and become productive members of the community. And yet, despite a legislative and policy commitment to reform, most jurisdictions still operate under a risk management philosophy that is derived from an adult correctional model of service delivery (e.g., Brogan et al., 2015; Clancey et al., 2020), with significant shifts in practice proving hard to achieve. In fact, in some jurisdictions concern has been expressed that, in the name of reform, old practice is simply being re-badged with new rhetoric adopted, but little substantive change. Day (2022), for example, has described “resistance and reticence” (p. 9) among youth justice practitioners in the UK when they were asked to move away from risk-based models of

practice. And, at times, it seems that new child-first processes and programs are simply overlaid on top of existing ones, leading to confusion and inconsistency in both policy and practice (Woodman et al., 2022). This is arguably compounded, in Australia at least, by more systemic barriers to practice reform such as the limited availability of specialist training pathways that equip youth justice practitioners with the requisite knowledge and skills to work in new ways, and continuing investment into established ways of working (such as in relation to how the legal system operates through children’s courts; see Sheehan & Borowski, 2018).

It is in this context that managers of youth justice services are expected to deliver significant reform, with strong leadership often identified as key to any improvement process (e.g., Bergman, 2022; Earl & Myers, 2019; Schwartz & Cunneen, 2016). Elwyn et al. (2017), for example, have described how a prerequisite for the successful implementation of the Sanctuary model (a trauma-informed approach) in a juvenile justice center for girls and young women was the “commitment and ability of leadership at several levels to sell the model to staff and make concomitant changes in every aspect of organizational function” (p.116). There may also be a need to overcome resistance to change from external stakeholders, whether this relates to the competing priorities of other agencies or broader political concerns about the preferred directions for youth justice service delivery.

In this paper we review competing models of public service leadership and seek to apply them to the task of service reform across Australian youth justice settings. What follows is intentionally conceptual, aimed at promoting further reflection and discussion about the best way to support continuous improvement in youth justice systems both in Australia and around the world. Our starting point is to note that a range of public service leadership and capability frameworks are now available that

describe the variety of requisite business, technical, interpersonal, and operational skills senior leaders and executives should possess to drive organizational change (see, for example, NSW Public Service Commission, 2022; Office of Commissioner of Public Employment, 2022a, b). Our focus, however, is on two different approaches that have been used in other parts of the Australian public service and which, we suggest, have the potential to be usefully applied to youth justice reform.

First, we discuss the transformational approach to leadership that is widely used in health care services to enhance patient safety and quality of clinical care (see Clinical Excellence Commission, 2020; Fischer et al., 2021). We then introduce an approach used by State Departments of Education that aims, primarily, to strengthen the coherence of services (see Lusiani & Langley, 2019; Stosich et al., 2019). Transformational leadership is primarily concerned with developing and leveraging the personal qualities of the leader, whereas the coherence model focusses more on developing a clear model of practice that is embraced across all levels of an organization. We illustrate how each approach might be applied to youth justice service development and conclude that elements of both approaches should be adopted if systemic reform is to occur. We begin, however, by briefly describing the service delivery context in Australia.

Youth Justice in Australia

In Australia, responsibility for the provision of youth justice services is devolved to the respective State and Territory governments. The Commonwealth does, however, also require each jurisdiction to report on key performance indicators (Report on Government Services [ROGS], 2022) as well as setting targets to reduce the rate of First Nations young people (in detention, by at least 30% by 2031) through the Closing the Gap (2022) initiative. Typically, youth justice services are responsible for

responding to young people who are aged between 10 and 17 years (although some jurisdictions are now moving towards increasing the age of criminal responsibility to at least age 12) and who are in contact with the legal system. The number of young people who receive services is relatively small when compared, for example, to the number in receipt of healthcare or education. On an average day in 2020–21, for example, there were 4,695 young people (aged 10 years and over) who were subject to youth justice supervision across the country, with the majority (84%) supervised in the community and the remainder held in detention (AIHW, 2022).

The general profile of youth justice populations across Australia has been well-documented. It has been established, for example, that First Nations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) young people are significantly over-represented (and much more likely to be held in detention) and disproportionately affected by social and political determinants of crime, such as poorer access to and involvement in education and employment, poorer mental health, housing stress, substance use, poverty, and cultural dislocation (Cunneen, 2020). There is also a complex intersection between child protection and youth justice service delivery, with more than half of those under the supervision of the justice system in receipt of a child protection service at some time in the previous five years (e.g., Baidawi & Sheehan, 2019). In South Australia, for example, 84% of young people under Youth Justice supervision have been shown to have had contact with child protection (Malvaso et al., 2020). Other Australian studies have documented the high prevalence of adverse childhood experiences (including maltreatment and indicators of household dysfunction), trauma symptoms, neurodisability, and substance use problems among young people under youth justice supervision (e.g., Malvaso et al., 2022).

Two Approaches to Leadership and Leading

The need to respond more effectively to the broader social, human, and wellbeing needs of children and young people requires leaders of youth justice agencies to rethink the operations of their agencies, including their purpose, values and vision, as well as the scope of services and programs offered (be they criminogenic and/or welfare focused) and how services are administratively positioned within machinery of government (such as in correctional services or in human services departments). Thus, while calls for reform typically focus on the need to provide ‘better’ programs (see Clancey & Metcalfe, 2022; RCPD CNT, 2017), there has been less consideration of how leadership approaches can overcome the implementation challenges that often stifle change (Case et al., 2020). It will not be until new models of leadership practice are developed, trialed, and evaluated that we will know ‘what works’ best, but to do this first requires an organizational change process that will inevitably require strong leadership. In the following section we describe two different approaches to leadership that may help to guide the conceptualization and delivery of such an agenda for the reform of youth justice services in Australia.

Transformational Leadership

This is a model of leadership that has been widely used in healthcare settings and shown to strengthen organizational culture, increase patient safety, and improve efficiency - while also increasing employee self-efficacy and motivation (e.g., Clinical Excellence Commission, 2022; Fischer, 2016; Kranabetter & Niessen, 2016). At its core, the aim is to inspire organizational change by identifying ‘change priorities’ and then establishing and executing a clear vision, while helping every member of staff to succeed by developing leaders who are energetic, enthusiastic, collaborative, trustworthy, and passionate (Fisher, 2016). In essence then, this approach is primarily concerned with harnessing and applying certain personal characteristics and attributes into a leadership ‘style’ that promotes psychological safety

- the ability for staff to take interpersonal risks without fear of retribution or negative consequences. Robust conversation (i.e., interpersonal risk taking) about the quality of care, and examining the resourcing of multidisciplinary teams (custodial, program, and community staff) is considered essential for reform efforts to be successful - an absence of psychological safety and/or fear of conflict is thought to stifle such conversations and lead to disengagement with team processes and, as a result, serves only to maintain the status quo (Fischer et al., 2021).

More specifically, transformational leadership has been characterized in relation to four key dimensions that describe how effective leaders should work (Bass, 1990; Clinical Excellence Commission, 2022; Fischer et al., 2021):

- i) Idealized influence which requires the leader to develop trust and respect with their staff, and to act as a role model by behaving in a manner that is aligned with organizational values and vision. This encourages staff to internalize the relevant values and emulate the transformational leader’s behavior at work;
- ii) Inspirational motivation requires leaders to have a clear, articulate vision, and to show optimism and enthusiasm about goals, capability, and the future;
- iii) Intellectual stimulation requires leaders to challenge status quo and established ways of working by encouraging creativity, critical reflections, and reframing problems and solutions; and
- iv) Individualized consideration requires leaders to be engaged with the individuality of staff, to support open and psychologically safe communication, and to recognize the direct contributions of each staff member.

Importantly, there is evidence that the skills and competencies of transformational leadership - such as empowering others, facilitating growth and learn-

ing, developing and translating evidence into practice, critical reflection and problem solving - can be taught and developed over time through education and professional development (Fischer et al., 2021). Thus, leadership is not viewed as a personal trait or attribute that some people simply have, and others do not (Fischer, 2016), but rather as something that can be developed through professional development programs for new and aspiring leaders (Clinical Excellence Commission, 2022).

The application of transformational leadership to youth justice has, however, yet to be fully articulated (see Nissen & Merrigan, 2011). Accordingly, in Table 1 we illustrate how key components of this approach might translate into more concrete tasks for senior leaders and executives. For example, in relation to the ‘critical reflection’ component of the key dimension of intellectual stimulation, leaders might purposefully seek to develop a reflective practice framework that is supported by continuing professional development and policies that integrate supervision into weekly working practices.

Table 1: Transformational leadership and illustrative associated tasks

<i>Key component*</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Relevance to youth justice</i>	<i>Leadership task in youth justice</i>
Intellectual Stimulation	Challenge the status quo	Calls for the development of new models of practice (e.g., trauma-informed practice)	Commitment to sharing research and evidence-informed information about different models of care and ways of working and encourage staff discussion and debate
	Encourage creativity	Practice is constrained by operating procedures, compliance focused thinking and mitigating risk	Develop codesign capabilities within the service to ensure participatory mechanisms for children, young people, community members, and staff; Ensure mechanisms are in place for services to be informed by cultural knowledge holders in service commissioning and provision; Embrace diversity and lived experience
	Translate evidence into practice and practice into evidence	Syntheses on current evidence about effective practice in an Australian context should guide reform and should involve knowledge from those who deliver and receive youth justice services	Develop a cohesive, organizationally aligned research agenda, disseminate, and translate findings and apply to ongoing service development; Promote action learning and action research within services
	Critical reflection	Supervision practice is underdeveloped and inconsistently implemented	Lead the development of a reflective practice framework for practitioners to engage in a critically reflexive manner on the interventions provided, rather than compliance driven supervision; invest in ongoing support and development of the workforce with opportunities for training and upskilling

Key component*	Description	Relevance to youth justice	Leadership task in youth justice
Individualized Consideration	Reframing problems and solutions	Incident debriefs and review processes are in place and offer opportunities for problem-solving	Develop practitioner-led community of practice to support professional development and engagement; ensure processes are outcomes-focused
	Support and encouragement of staff	High levels of staff stress, vicarious trauma, workers compensation issues, cynicism, confusion, and institutionalized practices	Develop and implement strong orientation package for new staff; Ensure that all staff have current professional development plans including professional supports and supervision; Develop and tailor workforce development strategy that all staff have the opportunity to participate in
	Role clarity	Tension between justice and welfare approaches to case work	Develop a recruitment strategy that explicitly considers organizational values in selection and recruitment; ensure each employee understands how their role contributes to the organization achieving its vision
	Psychological safety	Assess and monitor a risk averse practice culture	Support psychological safety through professional development and supervision programs for frontline staff and senior leaders; ensure debrief and review processes are action-oriented and outcomes-focused
Inspirational Motivation	Articulated vision	Review outdated policies, with conflicting values and philosophies of practice; enhance or create new policies that are evidence-informed	Provide a summary of mandatory responsibilities and guiding legislation that guide service delivery; clearly articulate service values, vision, and philosophy; understand the needs (both criminogenic and welfare-related) of young people accessing the service, and configure services appropriately to meet these needs through evidence-informed policy and practice
	Optimism for the future	Mistrust in leadership and low engagement with service reform in institutional settings	Socialize and celebrate metrics for success and outcomes (rather than outputs) within teams; invest in evidence-informed reform that can be continued despite changes in leadership
Idealized Influence	Role model	Variability and turnover in service managers	Leadership training in consistency in decision making and communication
	Trust and respect	Low levels of confidence in leadership teams	Increase visibility through ‘intentional rounding’/ staff walk arounds; Focus on personal integrity; Develop credibility and subject matter expertise

Note * - see Bass (1990); Clinical Excellence Commission (2022); Fischer et al. (2021).

Coherence Leadership

Coherence leadership offers an alternative model of leadership developed for use in the education sector (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). It focusses not so much on the characteristics and skills of individual leaders, but on the importance of developing a shared depth of understanding about the very purpose and nature of the work and a shared vision of what success will look like. In short, coherence leadership is concerned with developing a consistency of purpose, policy, and practice that has been identified as lacking in Australian youth justice (Armytage & Ogloff, 2017), and is predicated on the assumption that organizational success follows when people have a deeply understood sense of what needs to be done and can see their part in achieving this.

For Fullan and Quin (2016), coherence is about focusing on what they call the “right drivers for whole of system reform” (p. 3). They describe four main components: focusing direction; cultivating collaborative cultures; deepening learning; and securing accountability. These contrast with what they previously identified as the ‘wrong drivers’ for improvement, such as a reliance on punitive accountability, individualistic strategies, technology, and ad hoc policies. Focusing on the right drivers, they suggest, will result in better outcomes for children and young people.

Stosich et al. (2020) have recently reviewed research to show that those leaders who set a vision for instruction, promote teacher learning around that vision, and foster organizational conditions for teacher collaboration and growth are more successful in improving the quality of instruction and student learning. Nonetheless, they also identify a number of challenges to the delivery of professional learning programs that aim to facilitate this, such as leadership approaches that only target school principals (rather than teams of leaders) or are conducted off-site rather than embedded in schools. As Chrispeels

et al. (2008) have argued, school principals cannot be expected to lead alone and a team approach is essential to any substantive improvement process. Nonetheless, it is also clear that simply increasing the knowledge of school leaders in relation to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, will be insufficient without the direct involvement of all staff (i.e., teachers and school support staff) in these core areas. Accordingly, the success of the coherence approach depends on collectively improving teaching and learning through collaborative professional learning and a shared commitment to instructional improvement.

A useful way to think about this style of leadership is in terms of ‘strategic coherence’, or what has been described as the development of a system of mutually compatible meanings among stakeholders about desirable organizational directions (Lusiani & Langley, 2019). While coherence can emerge across senior and executive management through strategic planning activities, much less is known about the contribution of other stakeholders to this process, including those who actually deliver and receive services and pro-grams. This is despite recognition that no strategy will succeed unless there is some alignment (Vilà & Canales, 2008), connection (Angwin et al., 2009), integration (Jarzabkowski & Balogun, 2009), and coordination (Grant, 2003) across all levels, units, and parts of an organization. It is here that consultation, coproduction, and the codesign of policy and practice becomes important – ideas that have been identified as important to any improvement process in youth justice (Day et al., 2023).

The idea of coherence leadership seems apposite to any discussion of the need to strengthen leadership in youth justice given the number of reviews, inquiries, and investigations across Australia that have called for greater ‘clarity of purpose’ as they seek to balance justice and welfare models and perspectives of practice (e.g., Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994;

RCPDCNT, 2017; Armytyge & Ogloff, 2017). Table 2 illustrates how some of these ideas might be applied in youth justice. For example, utilizing the key driver of coherence ‘securing accountability’ will

involve ensuring robust human resource and performance reporting frameworks are in place, with trustworthy complaints process and external oversight of practice.

Table 2: Coherence leadership and illustrative associated tasks

<i>Key drivers*</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Relevance to youth justice</i>	<i>Leadership task in youth justice</i>
Focusing direction	Ongoing engagement with stakeholders	Transparency and accountability, including coproduction and codesign with key stakeholders, including young people and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities. Ensure engagement is an iterative and on-going process, rather than based around discrete pieces of work	Consultation and governance mechanisms in place with young people, staff, and external stakeholders to develop vision and direction
	Setting goals that impact (transparent, clear) strategy	Managing services and service priorities according to an agreed agenda (e.g., State plans, Aboriginal Justice Agreements)	Developing a clear logic for service delivery with identified activities and short- and long-term outcomes
	Clarity of strategy (skills for change, commitment)	Develop practice frameworks in areas such as case management, program delivery, and workforce development, supported by policy statements that specify how outcomes will be achieved	Prepare a series of briefing papers and practice guides for internal staff and external stakeholders; update these with new evidence
	Change leadership (push and pull, vertical and lateral)	Processes for monitoring improvement and reviewing performance Ensure engagement of executive and senior leaders to ensure consistency of messaging	Industrial consultation, engagement with unions, restructure of staffing, investment in professional staff learning and workforce development Managing staff performance (and poor performance)
Cultivating a collaborative culture	Culture of growth	Ongoing opportunities for shared working across different levels and groups in the organization	Provide funded opportunities for continuing professional development, in both theory and practice

<i>Key drivers*</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Relevance to youth justice</i>	<i>Leadership task in youth justice</i>
Cultivating a collaborative culture	Modelling learning, intentional design of programs	Programs are underpinned by a strong theory of change Consideration of how evidence is applied in local contexts, rather than importation of bespoke interventions that may lack ecological validity	Ensure program theory and program logics are available to guide selection of programs, investment in research and knowledge transfer, and allow meaningful evaluation to occur
	Common knowledge and skill base	Foundational training in key ideas (e.g., trauma-informed practice)	Short courses offered and new staff induction materials relating to developmental and life course criminology, cultural safety, and case work skills
Deepening learning	Solving problems	Staff supervision and critical incident debriefing processes are embedded and feed into improvement processes	Mechanisms are in place for shared problem solving and responding to practice scenarios
	Instructional systems	Guidance and support available that articulates what practice should look like	Practice frameworks developed and implemented (e.g., case management manuals, program delivery manuals)
	Capacity building	Clearly articulated brokerage arrangements and MoUs in place	Engagement with external services and programs (government, non-government, and Aboriginal community-controlled organizations, and oversight bodies such as Children's Commissioners and Guardians offices), staff upskilling and learning opportunities
Securing accountability	Internal accountability	Strong human resource and performance reporting frameworks	Clinical governance and systems of audit and quality assurance; establishment of performance dashboards related to key metrics in service
		Rigorous complaints process and procedural fairness	
	External accountability (stakeholders)	External oversight and governance processes in place	Advisory groups, including collaboration with those with statutory oversight (e.g., Children's Commissioners, Guardian's Office) and liaison with community

Note * - see Fullan and Quin (2016).

DISCUSSION

Our aim in writing this paper was to explore different ways that leadership has been operationalized in Australian public service settings (healthcare and education) in order to consider how these ideas might apply to youth justice reform. This is one area of the government that is widely recognized as in need of significant improvement, with strong and effective leadership often identified as a critical driver of organizational change. We considered two different approaches to leadership that have been utilized in other parts of the Australian public service (e.g., NSW Public Service Commission, 2022): the first, transformational leadership, is used widely in healthcare delivery and is best characterized as a model for developing effective ‘leaders’; the second, coherence leadership, is used in educational settings to draw attention to the importance of leadership teams and a global alignment to a philosophy of practice and set of underlying values. Both approaches, however, identify generic core components and/or personal qualities that might be considered in efforts to strategically lead a public service agency. And so, in this paper, we have tried to illustrate how each might be applied to youth justice. These suggestions are necessarily preliminary but, in a context in which youth justice services have struggled to respond meaningfully to the recommendations of a number of external reviews and inquiries, do offer a framework that leaders and leadership teams can build on to develop intentional strategies for systemic reform.

The Application of Transformational Leadership to the Youth Justice System

When considering how the transformational approach might be applied in youth justice settings (Table 1), a number of concrete tasks can be prioritized by leadership teams. For example, concerted efforts might be made to identify new and different ways of working through the sharing of research, by encouraging staff discussion and debate, and by

strengthening codesign and consultative processes with stakeholders. These initiatives could be supported by the development of a local research agenda and a reflective practice framework. Addressing high levels of staff stress through stronger recruitment and retention processes and workplace supports might also be considered key to any reform process. Finally, the transformational approach would involve presenting a clear vision for the service through a range of activities such as by providing guidance for staff about their mandatory responsibilities, the values and philosophies of the service, and data that speak directly to successful practice outcomes. And finally, there is a need to strengthen the skills of leadership teams, to promote workforce confidence in leaders, and for leaders to have visibility in the workplace.

The Application of Coherence Leadership to the Youth Justice System

Efforts to implement coherence leadership in youth justice settings (Table 2) would emphasize a slightly different set of tasks. These would include strengthening consultation and governance mechanisms (with young people, staff, and external stakeholders) to promote transparency and trust. This would be supported by the sharing of program logic models and practice guidance, as well as substantial investment in staff development activities to promote a strong, collaborative professional culture. Finally, the coherence approach emphasizes the need to promote accountability through systems of audit and quality assurance, along with the use of performance dashboards related to the outcomes of the service.

Common Ground

There are obvious similarities between the two leadership approaches we have described, especially around the need to develop knowledge, relationships, motivation, and to model good practice. It should be relatively easy for youth justice leadership teams to develop some of the illustrative activities that we have described in this paper into a concrete plan for service improvement. This will always be contingent

on first developing a clear vision (or operating philosophy) for a youth justice agency (e.g., Risk-Needs or Trauma Informed Practice), the collection of evidence about the current capacity (e.g., audits of institutional cultures and staff knowledge and values, population needs profiling), the allocation of appropriate resources (e.g., for workforce development programs, consultation and the writing of new policy), and setting up systems to collect data that can speak to the effectiveness of any new approach. This latter point, concerning the importance of collecting evidence to show that new ways of working are being implemented with integrity and do actually result in better outcomes for children and young people, is critical.

Transformational leadership emphasizes the importance of intellectual stimulation (a knowledge-based component of leadership), individualized consideration (a relational component), inspirational motivation (an emotional component), and idealized influence (a modeling component). The coherence leadership approach focusses on four key drivers of change: focusing direction (a knowledge component); cultivating a collaborative culture (a relational component); deepening learning (embedding within actual practice); and securing accountability (a governance component). The main difference with the coherence approach to leadership then is that it brings more of an organizational and administrative focus to the task of leadership by more explicitly encouraging the development of policies and procedures, logic models, practice guidelines, and governance mechanisms. The coherence approach is also, we would argue, more collaborative in nature given that it relies heavily on the knowledge, experience, and expertise of all key stakeholders to drive change. For youth justice agencies this will include staff members, children and young people who receive services, and external stakeholder groups (such as representatives of First Nations communities).

Both models also have clear implications for training, for the measurement of performance of service directors and leadership teams, as well as for the implementation of new processes and programs. With regard to training, for example, there have been some reports of the need for, and the effects, of specialized leadership training programs for youth justice managers. Earl and Myers (2019), for example, have described how leadership training can build the capacity of present and future leaders as agents of change in Connecticut, US. Research such as this that helps to demonstrate the actual impacts of training and of adopting different leadership approaches will be important going forward. At the same time, a recent review of healthcare leadership programs by Burn and Waring (2023), concluded that ‘leadership’ is conceptualized in different ways across different programs, leading to a lack of consistency in what can be evaluated and which methods are used. They identify a need for leadership training programs to be clearer about their ‘theory of change’ and assumptions about how programs are expected to support leaders to affect change within complex systems.

There are also implications for assessing the performance of leaders and leadership teams. At present we know little about core questions such as when a different style of leadership might be optimal at different stages of service development. For example, certain approaches may be more effective following a departmental restructure or when significant changes have occurred to the local guiding legislation. Other approaches may be required when the policy direction for a service is firmly in place and the focus is more on implementation (e.g., writing practice frameworks) than on developing an operating philosophy that is shared by all staff. There is a clear need to develop methodologies to collect the type of data that is needed to establish when, where, and why different leadership approaches

result in demonstrable improvement in service level outcomes.

A Way Forward and a Research Agenda

Our personal experience in Australian jurisdictions, drawing on the findings of a number of different inquiries and reviews across the country, suggests that the immediate task is to develop more coherence to better balance the seemingly competing legislative aims of meeting welfare and justice goals simultaneously (see Cunneen, White, & Richards, 2015). However, we acknowledge that this remains somewhat speculative and the decisions about the most suitable leadership approach should be made in light of evidence about impact and outcomes. Such evidence might be derived from asking practitioners to document their experiences of leadership styles that they view as effective, as well as service level monitoring performance (i.e., client outcomes) over time in relation to changes in leadership approach. This type of research, we would argue, is needed to provide the evidence base required to answer questions about the optimal style of leadership for a particular service at a particular time. At present, however, we are left to draw on limited evidence, such as studies that present analyses of interviews with youth justice managers about policy implementation challenges. For example, Case et al. (2020) have described how policy makers in the UK view change in youth justice as constrained by contextual instabilities such as legislative change and socio-political insecurities and relational challenges within, and between, different stakeholder group. Their conclusion was that “resultant insecurities, uncertainties, and fluidities conspire (at critical moments) to impact upon organizational and occupational identities, their perceived roles and responsibilities of professional groups and their perceived capacity to exercise discretion and the willingness to collaborate with other agencies – all components that can influence the successful translation and transfer of policy requirements into the realities of the practice world” (p. 229). Future

research recommendations based on implementation of leadership models within youth justice might then focus on the measurement of improvement in staff engagement, safety quality, fidelity to reform implementation and, of course, to service user outcomes.

Considerations

This paper was written in response to a number of recent inquiries and reviews of Australian youth justice systems. Malvaso et al. (2024) have recently noted that Australia is governed by a federal system whereby parliamentary authority for enacting youth justice legislation and delivering services is devolved to each of the six States and two Territories. While this generally means that each youth justice agency has a high level of autonomy (and a legal mandate) to drive significant change, the overarching philosophy of the service will nonetheless be influenced by the political impetus of the day at the local level - as it is this that dictates funding models. Furthermore, Australian youth justice has generally developed in relation to the legal principles of *parens patriae* (that allows the State to intercede on behalf of juveniles) and *in loco parentis* (literally, to act ‘in the place of a parent’), resulting in small number of children and young people (Malvaso et al., 2024) in the system when compared to other western nations. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare’s (AIHW) Youth Justice National Minimum Data Set, for example, shows that in 2021–2022 there were only 8,982 young people aged 10 years and over under any type of supervision across Australia, and that, on an average day, 4,536 young people were subject to youth justice supervision (with most of these supervised in the community; see AIHW, 2022). This raises a question about the extent to which the success of each model of leadership will vary according to organizational size and structure (while the transformational leadership approach has been used in relatively large organizations such as health districts, the coherence approach is used more commonly in small organizational units, such as schools). It may well be that different approaches are better

suited to leading change in organizations of different sizes and structures, and this is limitation of the ideas presented in this paper.

There is of course other work that also speaks to the question of how best to approach the task of leadership in youth justice, but which does not refer directly to specific approaches or models. For example, Abu-Tineh, Khaswneh, and Omary (2009), introduce the idea of enabling others to form ‘spirited teams’ as critical, with collaboration also identified as one of the most powerful attributes of effective youth justice leadership (Kratcoski, 2012). For Harris (2006), the aim is to create an atmosphere of human dignity, hope, and trust which will then allow new and more effective practice to develop. The idea of ‘servant leadership’ (or the idea of putting the welfare of those served as the highest priority; Greenleaf, 1996) has also been applied to criminal justice settings (e.g., Blasdell et al., 2022) and resonates with many aspects of the leadership models discussed in this paper. And, of course, there are useful accounts of how to drive organizational change in other related areas of service delivery. For example, Hummer et al. (2010) have described a three-stage process for introducing trauma-informed practice in ‘out of home’ or child residential care settings that might be applied across to a youth justice setting. They recommend that leaders begin by delivering an orientation to trauma for all staff, followed by a self-assessment process (the ‘learning collaborative’) that gathers relevant information and identifies implementation strategies and potential barriers. In the final module, participants are expected to understand the importance of ongoing data collection, learn about standards for practice, understand trauma-informed care from a consumer and family perspective, and appreciate issues of readiness for organizational change.

Other studies that have examined how to implement trauma-informed practice in out of home care,

such as by Black et al. (2022), have examined the impact of specific interventions such as staff training programs. We would argue, however, that the two leadership models presented here are more comprehensive, more concrete, and more inclusive of the wider research on effective leadership. As such, we believe that they are better suited to guiding leadership efforts to implement strategic systemic youth justice reform. Taken together, however, both the transformational and coherence models offer a framework for the intentional delivery of a change strategy.

There will also be features of the youth justice environment that are quite distinctive from other public services settings. For example, youth justice leaders and leadership teams will need to recognize the impact of working in high stress environments (where decision-making requires a degree of risk-related responses) on the interpersonal dynamics of the staff/client relationship. This phenomenon of ‘parallel process’ (whereby the experience of staff will impact on that of young people and vice versa) can result in similar emotional responses that produce a negative outcome for both parties. This requires leaders to be particularly sensitive to the need to help staff become more emotionally intelligent in their interface with young people (e.g., by offering opportunities for staff to become more aware of their own emotional experience or content and how that impacts on their practice). Leadership that promotes psychological safety of this type should help to circumvent burnout and compassion fatigue and is, potentially a prerequisite for any change in practice to occur.

CONCLUSION

Our conclusion from this paper is that leadership in youth justice is crucial to reform and yet remains

poorly researched and understood. There is arguably an absence of any clear leadership philosophy in youth justice services across Australia and so the immediate task is to implement an approach that inspires, that brings staff and stakeholders together to understand key common outcomes/needs of justice-involved young people, and that develops a stronger collective sense of purpose and identity. Having a clear approach to leadership can, we suggest, act as a fulcrum that balances managerialist responsibilities with the required critical professionalism to lead substantive reform. Youth justice directors, managers, and leadership teams can draw on the thinking that sits behind leadership models developed for use in other areas of government to develop local strategic plans for organizational and cultural change - and importantly, use these to reflect on their own role, responsibilities, and personal styles to drive change. An outcome of this may be an evolving form of leadership in youth justice that melds transformational coherence leadership models. This, we hope, will help to support efforts for significant reform across Australian youth justice and thereby avoid the trap that many leaders fall into of simply reacting to problems as they arise.

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Luke Butcher

Dr Luke Butcher is an Adjunct Professor at Charles Darwin University. His research interests are related to culturally safe services and rural and remote service provision and design. He is currently an executive director within a rural and remote public health service.

Dr Andrew Day

Dr Andrew Day is an Enterprise Professor in the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, Australia, and Swinburne University of Technology (Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science). His interests are in criminological psychology, especially the development of interventions to improve wellbeing and reduce risk.

Dr Catia Malvaso

Dr Catia Malvaso is an Associate Professor in the School of Psychology and School of Public Health at the University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia. Her research is informed by an interdisciplinary perspective spanning psychology, public health, and criminology. In 2019, Catia was awarded a Discovery Early Career Researcher Award from the Australian Research Council (DE200100679) to support her research into the pathways between child protection, youth justice, and adult corrections. This program of research aims to identify prevention and early investment opportunities to support better outcomes for children and young people.

Ms Mellanie Fernandez

Ms Mellanie Fernandez is the Director or Youth Justice and Exceptional Needs in the Department for Human Services- South Australia, having previously trained as a clinical psychologist and endorsed as a clinical and forensic psychologist. Her interests include system and practice reform for vulnerable populations, having worked in forensic mental health, correctional services, child protection and youth justice.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Professor Andrew Day, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, Australia. Phone: 0403064239, Email day.a@unimelb.edu.au
