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Now.See.Hear!: A Visual Conversation Tool for Trauma-Informed Practice with Justice-Involved Youth

Tamara Blakemore^a, Susan Rayment-McHugh^b, Karen Menzies^a, Elsie Randall^c, Louise Rak^a, Meaghan Katrak Harris^a, and Shaun McCarthy^a

^aUniversity of Newcastle, Newcastle, Australia; ^bUniversity of the Sunshine Coast, Sunshine Coast, Australia; ^cJustiz Community, Newcastle, Australia

ABSTRACT

This article introduces Now.See.Hear!(NSH!), an innovative visual conversation tool for trauma-informed practice with justice-involved youth. Developed through a collaborative process involving practitioners, researchers, and young people, NSH! addresses gaps in existing trauma assessment tools by providing a developmentally appropriate, engaging method for understanding young people's experiences that prioritises cultural safety. The tool comprises photo cards, conversation prompts, and a reflective conversation map. Initial testing with 235 culturally diverse participants across various settings indicates high acceptability and potential utility in youth justice contexts. Now.See.Hear! offers a promising approach for enhancing trauma-informed practice and improving engagement with justice-involved youth.

IMPLICATIONS

- Now.See.Hear! provides social workers with a practical, engaging tool for trauma-informed assessment and intervention with justice-involved youth.
- The tool's visual and narrative approach may enhance engagement and disclosure, particularly for young people who struggle with traditional verbal assessments.
- Now.See.Hear!'s design promotes culturally safe practice, making it particularly valuable for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth.

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Trauma-informed Practice; Youth Justice; Visual Methods; Assessment Tools; Cultural Safety; Social Work; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth; First Nations Youth

Positionality Statement

The authors simultaneously hold numerous identities: grandmother, mother, sister, daughter, father, environmental activist, social worker, psychologist, lawyer, caseworker, counsellor, manager, CEO, chairperson, volunteer, and artist. This article, like the project, is a collaboration of Aboriginal and ally authors. Readers will note our writing style intentionally embraces a conversational and reflective voice. We choose this approach to honor the trauma-informed and culturally responsive aims of our work,

CONTACT Meaghan Katrak Harris  meaghan.katrakharris@newcastle.edu.au

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recognising that knowledge sharing, like healing, happens best through genuine connection and shared understanding.

For the purpose of this article, we respectfully use the term Aboriginal, as is commonly used in our geographic location. We also use the terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous, and First Nations in accordance with original sources. We pay our respects to the traditional owners of the lands on which we work, spanning the lands of the Awabakal, Bundjalung, Yaegl, Nyangbul, Darkinjung, Darug, Wurundjeri, and Larrakia Peoples.

The Now.See.Hear! (NSH!) visual conversation tool was designed to address an unmet need for trauma-informed, culturally aware ways of working with justice-involved young people. Young people are disproportionately perpetrators and victims of crime, often in the context of violence, abuse, and trauma (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2023; Gómez et al., 2021). We define trauma as the experience and ongoing consequences, not the event itself, recognising that trauma describes our embodied response to something outside of our normal experience, which in isolation, or accumulation, overwhelms our capacity to cope (Herman, 1992; Krupnik, 2019). Robust evidence substantiates high rates of trauma among justice-involved youth, which may include actions (child maltreatment, parental illness, incarceration or substance use, acrimonious divorce), incidents (natural disaster, war, terror attacks and community violence), and accidents (associated with vehicles, transport, or sports), but also disadvantage, and/or historic.

Many justice-involved young people belong to a cohort referred to as “crossover youth” reflecting their dual involvement in both child protection and youth justice systems. Almost two-thirds of young people under youth justice supervision during 2022–2023 had an interaction with the child protection system in the previous 10 years (AIHW, 2024). A reflection of legacies of settler-colonialism, First Nations children and young people are overrepresented as crossover youth. In Australia approximately 76%, or 3 in 4 First Nations young people under youth justice supervision during 2022–2023, had an interaction with the child protection system services in the previous 10 years (AIHW, 2024, p. 7). First Nations young people experienced initial previous charges at a younger age, and a greater likelihood of convictions for violent offences (Baidawi, 2020). For this cohort, impacts of trauma have rarely been considered in efforts to prevent them becoming entrenched in crime (Baidawi & Sheehan, 2019). Successful access to justice and effective rehabilitation for crossover youth fundamentally relies on workers’ appreciation and understanding of trauma-related contexts of young people’s justice involvement (Grace et al., 2019; Fernando & Bennett, 2019). In response, universal “trauma screening” has been advocated as a critical feature of justice (and youth justice) responses worldwide. This has resulted in a proliferation of trauma screening and assessment tools aimed at gathering information relevant to potential diagnoses, treatment, and support by identifying and enumerating trauma exposure and trauma symptom clusters (Conradi et al., 2011; Eklund et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2021; Whitt-Woosley, 2020).

It should be noted, while there is development in this curriculum space, historically social work education has had a westernised perspective that has not provided a grounding in culturally safe or trauma-informed practice (Gatwiri & Mapedzahama, 2022; Walter & Baltra-Ulloa, 2019). This article sketches the background and development of NSH!, the tool being a fundamental tenant of the relational underpinning.

Literature Review

Development of the NSH! tool commenced with a synthesis of existing evidence to understand the extent, forms, and considerations of culturally sensitive, trauma-informed methods of trauma screening for justice-involved young people in Australia. A comprehensive review of academic and grey literature on trauma assessment tools for justice-involved populations in Australia over the past 10 years was conducted by the authors, identifying 20 sources describing trauma assessment or screening tools for known trauma-impacted cohorts in Australia. These sources included three quantitative, nine qualitative and two mixed-method studies; five literature reviews; and one study protocol.

Review of the evidence regarding tools used for trauma screening identified what Kerig (2013) summarised as a focus on:

- (1) the experience of trauma
- (2) the presence of symptoms
- (3) whether symptoms (if in evidence) meet criteria for diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

These tools typically fall into one of two categories: self-report or “information integration” type tools that collect information from a range of sources such as police reports, teacher interviews, case file review, and behavioral observations (Conradi et al., 2011, p. 137). Information is then applied to a standardised “question and answer” type proforma. Scoring usually occurs in a “yes” or “no” format, or via a short Likert scale using a scoring system comprising 0, 1 or 2 scores to indicate the extent of the trauma type of exposure or symptom (Conradi et al., 2011). Tools identified were often brief in nature, offering time efficiency in application and identification, broader accessibility for practitioners, and suitability across contexts (Conradi et al., 2011; Evans et al., 2021).

The lack of sensitivity to complex trauma is one problem with identified trauma screening tools, also the dynamic influence of risk and protective factors, and their failure to respond to child developmental capacities (Evans et al., 2021). A reliance by most existing tools on verbal or written formats presents potential comprehension obstacles for young or complexly traumatised youth (Evans et al., 2021; King, 2015). Insensitivity to such factors risks lack of detection and response to trauma, while omitting relational health overlooks understanding of contextual risk and protective factors (Evans et al., 2021). In both method and delivery, existing ways of screening for and understanding experiences of trauma often seem distinctly lacking in trauma-informed ethos and approach (Levine & Kline, 2006; Scott et al., 2021). This is never more so than when we consider the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohorts. Addressing the trauma underlying overincarceration is necessary to “break cycles of family and cultural disruption” (Menzies, 2019, p. 152). Yet, despite being one of the most studied populations in Australia, few trauma screening tools have been normed or developed for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people (Hamilton et al., 2020).

Phase 1: Design Process

Now.See.Hear! was developed as a tool for practice, guided by the principles and ethos of the Name.Narrate.Navigate (NNN) program, which works to break cycles of justice involvement

for young people aged 12–18 years who have used and experienced violence. NNN focuses on psychoeducation and skill development, is trauma-informed, and prioritises cultural safety. NNN has been developed and is continuously improved through an iterative, reflexive process of action research guided by Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing. With appropriate ethics approvals (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS]: EO107-14012019, University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee [HREC]: H-2018-0468), the development of Now.See.Hear! leveraged the iterative, reflexive process of action research established for the development and continuous improvement of NNN.

Stakeholder Consultation

Consultation with the NNN stakeholder consortium was led by an Aboriginal Elder, using social yarning (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010), which identified that “what the tool asks about” *and* “the way it asks about it” were both important design considerations for the proposed tool. Cross-cultural yarning within our consortium acknowledged that no one held all the required knowledges but valued the use of yarning as a reciprocal exchange that creates new knowledges (Walker et al., 2013), which can, for Aboriginal justice-involved youth, make sense of lived realities, experiences, and challenges. Theoretically, this approach to thinking about young people’s justice involvement provides an ecological understanding of youth crime and potential for addressing gaps in current responses to adolescent and domestic and family violence (DFV) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cox et al., 2016; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022).

Risk and protective factors are understood to be dynamic, emerging, or becoming more salient at different points across developmental trajectories, with their cumulative experience being more crucial than any one factor (Cox et al., 2016). For those working with justice-involved young people, understanding what they think about the world around them is critical to understanding the context of their justice involvement and the needs and responsive factors that should be considered by intervention efforts, such as understanding how attitudes and world views can influence a young person’s choices and behaviors. Our research (Blakemore et al., 2024; Blakemore et al., 2018) suggested the link between who we spend time with, what we do, and how that relates to justice involvement is often complex and can be contextualised by young people’s efforts to communicate needs and find connection.

Tool Design

Once the function of the tool was established, consultation turned to the form the tool should take, deciding on a design comprising three components: photo cards, conversational prompts, and a conversation map.

Photo Cards

Photographic cards (photo cards) were decided on as powerful prompts for engaging and the sharing of stories of justice-involved young people in narrative conversations. A set of 100 cards capturing images of various aspects of young people’s lives and experiences were developed, initially using royalty-free images to assess what type of visual stimuli were most useful, engaging, and meaningful for the young people.

Consultation with the NNN stakeholder consortium explored potential sensitivities around the use of photographic images in some Aboriginal communities. Guidance provided from Aboriginal Elders and consortium members involved in the tool's design emphasised that the use of the tool should always be scaffolded as a conversation, used with informed consent, and underscored by community consultation as to its appropriateness in context.

Consultation affirmed the observation that in many contemporary contexts, photographs are a common way of documenting and describing the social world (Carrabine, 2012; Fitzgibbon & Stengel, 2018; Pauwels et al., 2017). They are at once a familiar and shared way of seeing and showing, but their interpretation and meaning embodies a way of seeing that is uniquely our own (Berger, 1992). Photo-based methods can offer unique avenues for exploring personal experiences, memories, and emotions, and can help young people articulate difficult experiences or emotions in safe and supportive ways. They also remove the potential barrier of limited literacy or language that written tools require and provide opportunities to share nuanced perspectives that young people may struggle to articulate verbally (Banks, 2007).

Transitioning from generic to genuine throughout the design phase, we integrated photos taken by young people from the photovoice activities in the NNN program. Members of the NNN youth consortium were invited to contribute their own photographic work. By capturing their surroundings, relationships, and pivotal moments, these young photographers provided insights into their world, allowing the practitioners to see through their eyes. Finally, our professional photographers, Milly, a proud Ngiyampaa, Murrawarri, Kooma woman and Katherine, a social worker/photographer, brought to the project their commitment to the power of visual storytelling encompassing cultural and practitioner/researcher world views. All photos produced were considered by the NSH! project team and the NNN stakeholder consortium for feedback and consideration for inclusion in the final set of photo cards. The cards chosen wove a tapestry of real-life scenes and emotions and, we felt, carried a lasting imprint of the young people who inspired and contributed to their creation.

Conversation Prompts

A series of conversational prompts were developed to be used alongside the photo cards. Crafted in collaboration with the NNN stakeholder consortium, these conversational prompts weren't merely questions but gateways to empathy, understanding, and change. A total of ten prompts were developed, loosely mapping three key domains of experience that practitioners need to know about when working with justice-involved young people. Consistent with the trauma-informed and culturally responsive ethos of our work, these domains are described in plain-English format in [Table 1](#).

The conversational prompts can help us develop a deeper understanding of young peoples' experiences. For example, some give us insight into young people's time use and peer associations; the security, safety, and stability of their housing; and the size and quality of their social networks. The photos young people select and the stories they share in response to these prompts give important clues to how they see themselves and how this self-awareness is contextualised by the world around them.

Other prompts explore things that have happened in the young person's life and how that's impacted them. Here we are careful to emphasise that it is common in the work we

Table 1 Domains of Experience Covered by Conversational Prompts

What's happened in my life	Where I am, who I'm with and how I see the world	The skills I have to navigate the world around me
What I think you need to know about what's happened and how that's impacted me	Who I spend time with, what we do, and what it's like there? What I think about the world	Who I am, what I'm good at, how I feel, and how I know what others feel and why

do to meet young people who have experienced adversity and its impact(s), and, also, that what we are interested in here is what the young person thinks is important for us as a worker to know about. This gives the young person autonomy, power, and control over the aspects of their stories they want to share. As we gained confidence in using the photo cards and the accompanying conversational prompts, it became apparent that we needed a tactile way of mapping what we saw and heard in our conversations with young people when using the tool. This meant putting down in words the internal process we (as practitioners) do in our heads as we make meaning of our interactions with the people we work with and use that meaning to inform our interventions.

Conversation Map

The map serves as a reflective way to fine-tune the focus of the work that follows with justice-involved young people, ensuring interventions are person-centred, prioritise cultural safety, and are contextually relevant. At the heart of the NSH! tool and the conversation map is the principle of deep observation and listening. Practitioners are encouraged to take note of the nonverbal cues young people give, such as their interest in particular photo cards—those they engage with or distance themselves from. We find these actions are as communicative as words, often revealing underlying unspoken experiences, perspectives, needs, and knowledge. To facilitate this, the NSH! cards are numbered, assisting practitioners to record and track images that resonate with young people and develop, over time, a dynamic and evolving understanding of their experience. The conversation map draws our attention to the importance of narrative repetition and omission. Stories that young people repeatedly tell or consistently avoid may indicate areas of significance to them and may be important in shaping the focus and form that our work takes.

It is important to emphasise that the conversation map is not designed to count, tally, or score experience. This approach respects the complexities of personal narratives and avoids the reductionist trap of scoring human experiences. Further, it is important to note that the conversation map is not intended for direct use with the young person. It is designed to be used by workers to help them to develop a comprehensive, contextual understanding of the young person's experience and plan for effective casework, intervention, advocacy, and support. The tool respects the story-telling process, values the storyteller's pace, and focuses on the quality of information rather than the quantity. The map is about understanding the layers and textures of a young person's experience.

Phase 2: Tool Evaluation

The evaluation of the NSH! tool was designed to explore its potential efficacy, cultural appropriateness, and utility across different practice contexts. During an 18-month test

and trial phase, qualitative data were collected using a participatory method to examine engagement, accessibility, and impact on practice. The evaluation framework was developed in consultation with Aboriginal Elders and practitioners alongside members of the NNN stakeholder consortium to ensure trauma-informed principles and cultural integrity were maintained throughout the process.

Participants

The evaluation engaged 235 participants (115 young people aged 12–18yrs and 120 practitioners) through 35 consultations across both community and custodial justice and education settings. These consultations spanned lands of the Bunjalung, Yaegl, Nyangbul, Awabakal, Darkinjung, Durug, Warundjeri, and Larrakia people. Participants were recruited for the evaluation via the already established NNN stakeholder consortium, networks of professionals working with justice-involved young people, and the young people themselves. Written consent for their participation was gained and the young people involved in NNN were given clear information around the voluntary nature of participation. Seventy percent of participants identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander with a gender distribution of 65% female and 35% male. Most of these young people were actively involved in the justice system, either through community-based orders or in custodial settings. Participating practitioner roles spanned youth justice, education, child, family and domestic violence support, youth work, policing, child protection, mental health, disability, and housing. Practitioners worked in both Aboriginal Controlled Organisations, government, and nongovernment agencies; some held simultaneous roles, such as Aboriginal Elders. Practitioners reported experience ranging from less than one year to more than 20 years in their respective fields.

Data Collection

Qualitative methods of data collection were selected given the exploratory nature of the evaluation and the desire to capture rich, contextual insights into how the tool was experienced by both young people and practitioners. Previous research with justice-involved young people (Smithson et al., 2021) and the practitioners that support them (Haight et al., 2014) demonstrated qualitative methods and participatory approaches allow for deeper understanding of lived experiences that may not be readily captured through quantitative measures alone.

Data from practitioners were collected by demonstrating the tool in use, giving them an opportunity to review the tool and provide their reflections using a “Practitioner Feedback Form”. This standardised form (adapted from that used in the NNN program) sought feedback on tool utility, perceived cultural appropriateness, engagement effectiveness, practical implementation, and observed outcomes through narrative, open-ended responses. In contexts where appropriate, social yarning led by an Aboriginal Elder was used, exploring prompts from the standardised form. The use of ethnographic and narrative approaches to capture practitioner feedback aligns with Indigenous research methodologies (Kennedy et al., 2022) and enabled exploration of cultural appropriateness in ways that honored a participant’s voice and story-sharing traditions.

Data from young people were collected through collaborative conversations conducted by trained NNN facilitators, typically lasting 30–45 min, in settings where the NNN program was delivered. These conversations were scaffolded around the use of the tool

with the young person, exploring the young person's experience of the tool as a useful way to tell their story; their interest and engagement in the tool's format and function; and whether they found it reflective of settings, situations, and scenarios in their daily lives. Where appropriate, these conversations were led by an Aboriginal Elder using a yarning framework to allow for narrative exploration while maintaining cultural protocols. Documentation occurred through real-time notation by a trained NNN facilitator, with participant permission, which was later verified with participants for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Data from young people and practitioners were analysed through a process integrating Indigenous and Western methodologies, namely social yarning (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) and thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012). Guided by Kennedy et al. (2022), an iterative approach was undertaken where the research team first familiarised themselves with the data through shared reading sessions. Through social yarning circles, led by an Aboriginal Elder, initial codes were generated leading to preliminary theme identification. Themes were then refined through consultation with Aboriginal Elders, practitioners, and researchers, ensuring multiple perspectives informed interpretation. Validation occurred through member checking with participants and regular consultation with Aboriginal Elders for guidance on cultural interpretation. Findings were then summarised through collaborative writing that privileged Indigenous ways of knowing. This collaborative approach enabled nuanced understanding of the data while maintaining cultural safety throughout the analytical process.

Findings

Young people and practitioners alike reported finding the NSH! tool engaging, accessible, and sensitive to cultural, contextual, and trauma-related factors. Identified themes in the feedback included acceptability, cultural sensitivity, practitioner utility, engagement, and reflective practice.

Acceptability

Young people expressed a preference for NSH! over traditional assessment tools they had encountered in justice and service settings. Key factors included the nonlinear approach to storytelling and the ability to control the pace and depth of disclosure. Young people particularly valued the absence of formal questioning, with one participant noting "Heaps easier to tell my story" (Justice-involved young woman, 16 years old). Consequently, many reported feeling more comfortable and engaged when using the photo cards to guide conversations: for example, "It doesn't feel like you're being tested or judged" (Justice-involved young man, 14 years old).

Cultural Sensitivity

The tool's cultural sensitivity was evidenced through specific design elements influenced by feedback from Aboriginal Elders, community members, practitioners, and young people. These included incorporation of connection to Country imagery, representation of diverse family structures, and the use of circular and reciprocal, rather than linear and

unidirectional, story-sharing approaches. Aboriginal practitioners consistently rated the tools cultural appropriateness highly. The narrative-based approach aligned with traditional storytelling practices, while the diverse imagery enabled young people to see themselves and their communities reflected in the tool. Specific feedback during development, as can be seen in the following quote, led to adaptations such as including more imagery reflecting positive family connection, land, and community: “These pictures are good, but where are the ones like us having fun with our cousins at the beach and stuff? We need stuff like that in here” (Aboriginal female, 14 years old).

Practitioner Utility

Practitioners reported the tool would be useful in their work and young people expressed a preference for this tool over others they had encountered across systems of service and support. They reported NSH! facilitated deeper, more nuanced conversations about young people’s experiences, resulting in stronger engagement compared to traditional methods. The tool was reported to facilitate conversations about complex experiences, with practitioners noting increased disclosure of important information, including insights that might not have emerged through traditional assessment methods. Practitioners particularly valued the tool’s flexibility, for example, “It gives kids something to focus on instead of looking at you if they don’t want to. They can come to the answers in their own time, their own way” (Aboriginal Elder).

Engagement

The visual nature of the tool proved particularly effective with young people who had previously struggled with engagement. Practitioners reported young people engaged quickly and stayed engaged for longer using the NSH! tool compared to other assessment or screening tools they routinely used with one practitioner observing “So easy to use, I can’t get over how quickly the young people engaged with the cards” (Female Youth Justice caseworker). Young people with trauma histories reported feeling more in control of their narrative, with the ability to communicate without direct eye contact noted as particularly helpful: “... the cards and pictures made it easier for me to talk about my shit, better than straight questions, like I could pick what I did and didn’t want to talk about, way easier” (School student, 13 years old).

Reflective Practice

The conversation map component emerged as a crucial tool for practice development. Practitioners used this framework to synthesise information across multiple domains, leading to more comprehensive case planning. The visual mapping process supported identification of patterns and connections that might otherwise have been missed. Integration with existing case management frameworks was supported through alignment with key assessment domains while maintaining flexibility for individual narrative approaches. Practitioners reported increased confidence in their understanding of the young person’s experiences and in their ability to craft more person-centred and culturally informed case plans as a result, as articulated by one Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) Practitioner: “I’m so surprised. I know this kid’s story but hearing her telling it with the cards like this—such an eye opener—I feel her experience in a really different way now and will work with her differently” (DCJ Practitioner).

Limitations

We recognise that there is work still to do in establishing the tool's validity and viability for broader use. Development of the tool to date has primarily focused on acceptability and perceived utility, rather than measuring specific outcomes or comparing NSH! to other assessment tools. Further research is needed to establish the tool's validity, reliability, and impact on practice outcomes, considering, as identified by Day et al. (2023), that the success of working in a trauma-informed way should not be judged using recidivism data alone, but rather we need to identify key indicators of the effectiveness of any trauma-informed approach (p. 1). Additionally, while efforts were made to include diverse perspectives in the development and testing process, the sample size and geographic spread of participants may limit generalisability and highlights the need for further exploration of place-based findings. The adaptability of the tool makes the development or inclusion of place or culturally specific images or new sets of images an obvious extension, the importance being the interactive process of sourcing appropriate images with young people and those that work alongside them.

Discussion and Concluding Comments

Given the discussion of the process of the development of the NSH! tool has been woven throughout this article, the authors present the following concluding thoughts as a summary of work to date. We believe NSH! addresses several key gaps in existing trauma assessment tools for justice-involved youth. Its visual, narrative-based approach aligns with recommendations from literature on trauma screening, particularly for populations who may struggle with traditional verbal or written assessments (Evans et al., 2021; King, 2015). The tool's recognition of the need for cultural safety and sensitivity is a significant strength, especially given the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in the justice system. By incorporating diverse imagery and allowing young people to lead conversations, NSH! reflects the aspirational principles of culturally safe practice outlined by researchers such as Hamilton et al. (2020) and Chamberlain et al. (2020). The positive feedback from practitioners regarding the tool's ability to facilitate deeper, more nuanced conversations aligns with the broader literature on the value of visual methods in social work practice (Switzer et al., 2015). The combination of photo elicitation techniques with guided narrative prompts appears to create a safe, engaging space for young people to share their experiences. We suggest NSH! represents a promising innovation in trauma-informed practice with justice-involved youth.

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