

The value of community based performing arts organisations for young people



Preliminary findings: September 2009

Background

Central and local governments have championed performing arts as a solution to urban problems on the basis of little evidence from young people themselves. So who are the young people participating in community organisations? Do young people engage in performing arts to find employment in the creative industries or are they attracted to performing arts for other reasons?

The research

This study funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council took place in six community-based organisations in four contrasting localities in different geographical areas. A total of 258 interviews were conducted with 168 young people aged between 16 and 25 years old who were participating in a range of different art forms including drama, music production, dance and slam poetry. Of these young people, 96 were young men and 72 young women, 50% were White British, 25% Black African, Black British and Black Caribbean, 14% Dual Heritage, and other young people were Asian, South American, and Middle Eastern. Participation in the research was voluntary and all young people received vouchers.

Tutors, managers and policy makers in the local areas and some national organisations were interviewed to gain a better understanding of the activities provided and how policies were working in practice.

Profile of young people

The majority of young people identified themselves as coming from working class backgrounds. Where parents were employed they were typically nurses, security guards and construction workers. Some young people were middle class with parents who were bankers and lawyers. Young people with learning and physical disabilities, young offenders, young people with health problems, including mental health issues, participated in the research.

Many young people had difficult family relationships, bad experiences at school and few achieved higher grades at GCSE or A levels. As a result, young people typically had poor relationships with adults, a dislike of formal education, and feelings of social inadequacy and often rejection. In two localities in particular young people felt alienated in their local area and some were involved in the local 'gang' culture. Yet in the context of performing arts these young people were resourceful, committed, productive, and were more motivated to pursue expressive experiences which were socially rewarding, than being driven by materialism.

Researchers

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Engaging young people

Community-based performing arts organisations can be unique places for young people; they provide a safe space for young people to work through, and resolve, many problems which includes feelings of rejection, social pressures, & depression.

'I used to get really aggressive.. if I come and dance I just release the pressure.. when you've released all the pressure it really helps you.' (female, 16, B. African)

Performing art forms are attractive to young people; music is 'in the blood', dance and acting can be 'cool' and the celebrity culture inspirational. Young people therefore want to learn through performing arts;

'... it's a way to get street-cred... it is very cool... you say to anyone, if you say you're a break dancer they'll say that's cool full stop.' (male, 22, W. British)

Experimenting with different art forms and mixing art forms is integral to personal and professional development;

'I wanna integrate music and dance together... I need the music to fuel me, it's my petrol.' (male, 21, Middle Eastern)

'..versatility is something that's very attractive as an artist.. then you can appeal to more markets on a mainstream level.. and more markets means more sales really..' (male, 16, B. Caribbean)

Having fun is highly valued, attracts young people and creates an atmosphere which stimulates learning:

'We always have fun, we'll do our work and it's just a really great day.' (female, 17, White Irish)

For some young people who feel undervalued and have low self-esteem performing arts surfaces hidden talents. One young man who was offered a main part in a play surprised himself; *'Amazed that I can do other things, other than*

sitting at home doing nothing...I just feel awesome' (male, 16 years, W. British)

A local and free performing arts organisation is invaluable in several respects; for its accessibility, as a place to escape, and a place where young people are trusted and where they can progress in a world that is typically hostile:

'... it would be a place to get away from the shit at home... I'll probably come here quite a lot to get away from what's going on.' (male, 16, W. British)

'I was going to go into the second year of college but... it would have cost me £40 a week to get there and I didn't have any money... That's why I came here 'cause if I didn't I wouldn't have had anything else to do.' (male, 17, W. British)

'... to be trusted with that type of technology... it's a big honour... And because you feel like you're trusted you feel respected, so... yeah I respect you back for respecting me.' (female, 18, B. Caribbean)

'Coming here.. does push you, it gives you more drive.. because it's a free studio.' (male, 21, B. Caribbean)

How young people learn and the significance of performance

Intrinsic to performing arts is an opportunity for self-expression, and improvisation and 'free styling' are sources of inspiration. Through performing arts young people are better able to understand themselves and their stressful environment. They use performing arts to find solutions:

'I think because.. a lot of people go through life struggling, not being able to tell people how they feel, struggling expressing themselves. I think perhaps being able to do it through dance then helps you' (female, 21, W. British)

'I think the bullying and the depression knocked me back tenfold, and coming here

I've been able to speak about it and been able to accept it... I've become more aware of my own feelings.' (female,18, B.Carib.)

'.. I went through this big process of going through the art forms.. 'till I found my thing.. I needed to sample lots of different things to find what I really wanted to do.. I don't think anything is a waste because it makes you who you are.' (female, 23, WB)

Constructive criticism gives young people a feeling of being valued, encourages them to move outside their 'comfort zones' to develop their skills, and a realisation that working hard is a route to success:

'... I would rather the criticism than telling me I sound good and I know I don't.'... I'd rather the criticism to push me that bit further...' (female,18, Dual Heritage)

'Getting that little bit of feedback, it can make a big impact on yourself, 'cause it does give you confidence to do more, it definitely does.' (male,21, B. Caribbean)

Young people find making tangible improvements motivating and learn that giving support and praise accelerates learning:

'... dance... it was just enjoyable... I could sort of gauge my achievements... I could see myself developing.' (male,20, W.Br)

' being able to write with other people I think is really interesting and really, really nice.. because you get other perspectives... you grow as a poet definitely...' (female,18, dual heritage)

Performance encapsulates young people's learning, enthusiasms, energy, sense of achievement and further encourages and motivates them:

'I just love that buzz... that energy... that excitement... and it's a communal vibe almost which is so beautiful... you've got something you're proud of and you've worked hard... and to share it with other people is an amazing feeling' (male, 23, W. British)

How young people progress

Pride and sense of achievement improves young people's self-worth;

'It feels good when you've completed it... the track... when you complete it and it sounds good then you feel proud of yourself.' (male, 16, B. Caribbean)

Increased energy and a more optimistic outlook are common benefits. A dance student commented: *'I feel I'm more enthusiastic ..more optimistic.. even in school I've got more energy to do work and stuff..'* (female,17, Indian).

A new-found open-mindedness and a willingness to try new things:

'... the first week of dance and we did ballet, I was a bit embarrassed 'cause... I had to wear tights and ballet shoes, but... I got better... better at ballet...' (male, 20, W. British)

'I'm confident more... like I will try something new that I wouldn't think I can do, I will do that.' (female,17, B. Caribbean)

One woman reflected on the broader benefits of contemporary dance: *'.. it works with your body.. you can connect things.. you're able to do that with other aspects of your life as well...so develop things further...'* (Female, 20, W. British)

Improved social skills, greater tolerance and respect for others;

'When I first came into a workshop... a part of me didn't like it... like I've never been round people like this before, this is really weird... And the more you come back... you realise how closed your mind was and... you learn to appreciate just people for people and their differences... it really just opens up your mind.' (female, 18, W.B)

Most young people's hearts are in performing arts but for financial reasons have 'boring' part time work;

'... I have a few performances, I teach dance and I work at the spa... that's probably what I'm going to be doing for my whole life... I'll still have to work probably a normal job just a few hours a week 'cause I have to pay bills...' (female, 22, W. British)

A few received occasional pay from performing and some harboured dreams of performing full time:

'It is like a hobby... but I don't really want to keep it as a hobby. I wanna try and make it professional.' (male, 21, B. Caribbean).

Policy agendas and contributing to young people's development

Broadly speaking a mismatch between policy intentions and young people's desire to develop and thrive was apparent and any positive policies, apprenticeships for example, are experiencing implementation difficulties. Constructive policies for young people typical of the research participants would include:

Enabling more community-based performing arts organisations (CPAOs) to offer pathways to more formal educational institutions by recognising that they are able to inspire young people through performing arts and offer a friendly, informal and relaxed environment that fosters learning:

'... school is to teach you what they want you to know... here, you are being taught to know what you want to know... that's the big difference for me... it's your own freedom, it's your creativity... Whereas in school... they want to teach you what everyone else knows so you can fit in their system...' (male, 20, B. Caribbean)

'... if I didn't come here I would never have done the [university] course, the dance degree for uni. I never thought I'd get into that...' (male, 20, W. British)

Offering financial rewards for work placements as a route into the creative industries and to provide incentives to expand placement opportunities. In three local organisations young performers are given work opportunities which they valued:

'... my first job it wasn't fun... so I left that and then I come here and Sara happened to offer me a job. Very pleased about that... get on my feet and start to be responsible.' (male, 20, Dual Heritage)

Supporting existing CPAOs to provide continuous activities (7 days a week, 52 weeks a year) rather than regularly creating new short-term initiatives and setting up new partnerships. As a result of this policy securing sufficient funding is time-consuming, full of uncertainties and funds usually fall well short of running costs. Cost savings include running courses for six weeks at a time and then closing for several months, and stopping courses completely even when there is a waiting list. The negative impact on young people is widespread and clear:

'... when [name of project] was on it was on every day, so I could get into a routine... I don't like when I haven't got a routine, because... it's going to give me chance to sit and puff... when I'm on my own... I start to think about all the disrespect I'm getting, all the things in my life that didn't work out so well... it's very, very hard for me to start to think positive...' (male, 18, Black British)

Prioritising the intrinsic value of performing arts for young people's self-worth and well-being, their ability to give audiences pleasure (wider social benefits), and its potential to improve social relations.

A young bus driver who danced commented: *'... I'll just keep it as a hobby... it makes me feel a lot happier because I was saying to myself at one point, oh I'm gonna have to go down the gum...start getting fit, but. .when this come up it give me something better to do 'cause it's something I enjoy.'* (male, 25, W. British)

'... just a few weeks ago I was saying to myself I hated this guy... and all of a sudden I'm sitting right next to this guy making a beat with him... just because we share the same passion with music... we can... build a relationship.' (male, 20, Dual Heritage)

Postscript: in particular we would like to thank all the young people who have participated in this research and have shared their experiences with us.



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