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Community-based performing arts and young people's transitions into adulthood: developing policies for young people

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Introduction

Performing arts is just one of many interventions which policy-makers and practitioners champion to provide 'pathways' for disaffected and disadvantaged young people into education, training and employment to improve their life chances. Research studies have identified, however, that the years immediately after post compulsory education are complex and designing policy initiatives to improve the experiences of young people as they move from childhood to adulthood is challenging and with uncertain consequences (Jones 2005; Roberts 2009).

A paucity of empirical studies makes it difficult to assess these claims and at a time when public expenditure in the UK is being cut and youth unemployment has risen to over one million, decisions about how best to allocated decreasing resources for the

benefit of young people becomes even more challenging. This paper draws on the experiences of young people aged 16 to 25 years who participated in performing arts programmes run by community-based organisations. It argues that policies which have prioritised an instrumentalist position and conceptualises performing arts as a route to further education, training and employment has served to undermine supporting community organisations in ways that are most valued by, and of benefit to, young people during their 'transitionary' years.

Community-based performing arts and transitions

Many UK government sponsored reports during the 1990s explored an instrumentalist approach to the arts and variously claimed that they have the power to: transform lives and communities by facilitating self-determinism and fostering social inclusion and social cohesion (Coalter 2001; Ludvigsen and Scott 2005; Arts Council England 2006; Jermyn 2004; Comedia 1996; Long et al 2002). It has been argued that the arts draw on the inherent creativity of youth cultures and therefore appeals to many young people (Willis 1990), and that creativity is synonymous with the arts and as a learnt and engaging skill is attractive to reluctant learners and the most disaffected (Jermyn 2001, 2004; Craft 2001; Jeffery 2005).

From this perspective, social, economic, and community improvements are explained by the ability of arts to increase self-confidence, self-esteem, and social interaction that enables participants to learn, find work, enrol on a training course, feel healthier, and assist with improvements in local areas (Landry et al 1996; Matarasso 1997; Jermyn 2001, 2004, 2005; Long et al 2002). Programme outputs and outcomes include numbers of socially excluded young people engaged, formal educational qualifications gained, and numbers entering employment, in an effort to make good the failings of institutions and based on an assumption of creating 'pathways' into adulthood.

Counter arguments have claimed that the 'social desirability' of participating in arts has clouded the judgement of researchers who have overlooked collecting data on possible negative impacts of participation (Merli 2000), failed to demonstrate that increased confidence leads to neighbourhood renewal or social inclusion (Shaw 1999; Long et al 2002; Belfiore 2002), and have not questioned if arts programmes can remove structural features related to class, inequality and disadvantage (Merli

2000; Buckingham 2003). Further, creativity relies on social endorsement and underplays the significance of 'a learnt acceptance of particular aspirations and boundaries, roles and positionings …. beset by quite real inequalities, hierarchies and prejudices' (Banaji et al 2006:13 & 22). Only when audiences recognise exceptional talent are performers able to effectively negotiate a change in social conventions that limit opportunities enabling them to 'break out' (Becker 1982). Similarly, achieving excellence has been described as life-changing (McMaster 2008:10).

Findings from youth transition studies identify how trajectories have become more complicated, not necessarily age-specific, longer for those living in poverty, and characterised by chance and 'fateful moments' (Giddens 1991; Wyn and White 1999; Johnston et al 2000; Côté 2002; Jones 2005; Wyn and Woodman 2006). A class-based 'youth divide' has been identified with increased polarisation between those who gain higher level educational qualifications and find well-paid work, and those who leave school at aged 16 and experience unemployment and low pay, and are further disadvantaged by the shrinking youth labour market which no amount of educational qualifications or training will alter (Johnson et al 2000; MacDonald and Marsh 2001; Brynner et al 2002; Jones 2002; Webster et al 2004). Gender, ethnicity, culture and place also structure experiences and limit opportunities (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Evans 2002; Jones 2002; Thomson et al 2003; Lehmann 2004; Walkerdine et al 2001; Roberts 2009). Entrenched poverty and persistent lack of social mobility in the UK reiterate the strength of structural constraints and demonstrate that it is difficult for young people to successfully negotiate overcoming these barriers (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Dorling 2010).

Studies have explored problems created by these structural constraints and how young people have responded to, and negotiated their position. Some have found that complex 'transitionary' experiences 'scar' young people who are increasingly prone to depression and mental health problems, particularly amongst young women because they make sense of structural inequalities by blaming themselves (Brynner et al 2002; Lee and Wright 2011; Platform 51 2011). This 'epistemological fallacy' has damaging effects on their decision-making and life chances (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Thomson and Holland 2004; Jones 2005). Those raised in the most disadvantaged communities are least able to adapt as they grow up, increasing their

chances of having negative outcomes in adulthood (Schoon and Bynner 2003), and life courses have become more uncertain as young people are left to own devices due to 'disjunctures among institutional networks', compounding their harm (Côté 2002; 118). Others argue that young people no longer expect jobs for life and construct different biographies in response to current economic and social conditions which they perceive as normal (Wyn and Woodman 2006). Periods of unemployment, part-time work and under-employment are coherently integrated by young people into their biographical narratives in ways which make sense to them (Devadason 2007; Roberts 2009: 199). Through a process of individualisation young people actively negotiate their own transitions, yet, typically, they remain in a similar economic and social position. This paper explores the affect of participating in performing arts in community-based organisations on these processes and draws out the implications for policy-making.

The study

Six diverse community-based organisations in four contrasting areas were selected. Some ran vocational courses, others hired experienced performers as tutors, some had a youth-centred ethos whilst others focussed on young people as performing artists. Across the organisations they offered a range of performing arts courses including slam poetry, music production, dance, and acting and we purposefully selected these different art forms. This selection procedure enabled us to gather data on a wide range of young people's experiences to obtain a better understanding of possible outcomes.

We invited all the participants from selected courses to participate in the research, a total of 207 young people. Interviews were conducted with 168 young people and took place between June 2007 and September 2009. The 81% response rate makes us reasonably confident about the representative of our sample and our ability to generalise from our findings. We ran focus groups (11), undertook over 80 observations of classes, and attended six performances. Ninety young people were interviewed once, 68 were interviewed twice and 10 were interviewed three times. Of these young people 96 were young men and 72 young women, just over two thirds were under 20 years and just under a third over 20 years old, 50% were white British, 25% black African, black British and black Caribbean, 14% were dual

heritage, and other young people were Asian, South American and Middle Eastern. The ethnic diversity and age and gender mix of our sample contributed to the richness of our data, as these young people had a wide range of experiences, were drawn from different classes, and some had no educational qualifications whilst others attended college and universities which typically offered vocational courses. Whilst many studies have researched either the most privileged or the most marginalised this research included a broader range of young people and our findings are applicable to the majority of young people (Jones 2005). However, most in our research sample were neither academic high achievers, nor exceptionally talented performing artists with families from a modest economic background who were nurses, taxi drivers, and shop assistants.

We explored young people's experiences using themes to allow the interviewee to discuss feelings and experiences important to them and when they preferred, we set up group discussions. Observations of classes and attending performances gave researchers insights into tutor/student and performer/audience relationships. We were particularly interested in finding out how participating affected decisions made by young people. During the research we took into account Jarvie's proposition that a person may find they need to choose between several different options in their pursuit of certain aims, and that meanings and emotions have an important role in understanding why particular decisions are made rather than others (Jarvie 1972). We asked young people about the effect of performing on their feelings and emotions and how participating affected their motives as motives enable us to understand their decision-making processes. To interpret the decision-making processes of young people we used the Popperian concept of 'situational logic' to analyse the data; that is, we analysed the data from the perspective of the young person, taking into account the meanings they gave to performing, and how they experienced performing as a solution to any of their difficulties (Popper 1969). This enabled us to understand if as a result of participating in performing arts, a young person re-assessed their situation, and if this re-assessment had any bearing on their decisions about their future plans.

Quotes from young people have been selected to illustrate the range and variety of accounts given by young people. Identifying the full range of possible responses or

themes and using them in our analysis has created a more inclusive approach to understanding the possible impacts of performing arts for young people.

Recognising the limitations of an instrumentalist approach

We analysed the data to assess if there were any characteristics particular to performing arts that systematically accounted for how socially and economically marginalised young people might overcome structural inequalities and failings of social institutions. Participation was voluntary, except for a small minority for whom attendance was a condition of a criminal justice community sentence. Young people were therefore a self-selecting group and comprised of those who were interested, willing and able to attend. These young people were willing to conform to the regulations of the organisation such as no swearing and using pro-social song lyrics. They were neither the most disengaged such as those heavily involved in 'gangs' or drug-related violence nor those using music as a resistance strategy (Bennett 2000; Johnston et al 2000; Green and White 2007,2008; Kintrea et al 2008). Some young people were prepared to 'give it a go' but if, subsequently, they were not comfortable adhering to the rules of the organisation, empathetic to its ethos and to other participants or tutor, young people simply stopped attending.

For those with deep-seated social problems forming social relationships continued to be difficult and they did not experience performing arts as inclusive. One young man explained:

> "I feel that even though this place is really friendly, it is very friendly and everyone gets on, there's still, I feel, a few people that don't really like me and it kind of shows …I pretty much keep myself to myself… Because... I really, really like my privacy… I'm reluctant to ask people for help, I'm reluctant to be people's friend and I don't really know what to expect from people, 'cause people haven't always treated me that good." (male, 22, black British)

Young people often enjoyed participating but this did not change their circumstances, and their enjoyment lasted whilst they were attending sessions. Courses with short-term funding and those which adopted a school structure with terms and long holiday periods could be harmful, particularly for the most vulnerable. One man's experiences were typical of others:

"In the summer I was real happy man, I used to just get up and … first thing I'd just look forward to coming... when I'd leave the hostel it's like I was going to a different planet… at least I can get away from it, maybe not for good but for a little while, for the day... I could get into a routine... I don't like it when I haven't got a routine… 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, 22, black British)

Homeless young people also reverted back to their old life-styles once courses had finished:

"...but now I'm just how I used to be, just the same... back to the same things I was doing, back on the streets..." (male, 18, dual Heritage)

Similar to findings from other studies the circumstances of young people significantly influenced their decision-making and we found systematic variations in ways young people planned ahead (Brannen and Nilsen 2007). Particularly when they were 16 and 17 years old many had 'plan A', to be a rich and famous, but as they became older 'plan A' became finding work with performing as a hobby. Most notably, the most affluent held on to 'plan A' for the longest. For many, a realism evolved when they had a better understanding of creative industries, with its over-supply of labour, limited labour market prospects for those with few educational qualifications, and practices of informal recruitment and unpaid work gave that them few prospects (Oakley 2009). One woman summed up this realism:

"But I mean <laughs>, I don't think that modern society really offers that many jobs where you have real scope for creativity and also to lead any sort of normal life. <Laughs> I don't really want to be a starving artist of some sort <laughs>, so." (female, 23, white)

Repeatedly we found that economic circumstances were most influential in young people's decision-making. Without a certain level of financial security young people were not able to attend. This young dancer's comments were typical and explained why he had stopped attending dance classes:

"... it's not the dance that will make me happy, it's just life the reality of life and bills and tax and all them things… the other things about life will always be there, like family problems and money issues and all them things, they will always be there..." (male, 19, black Caribbean)

Even when a young person was recognised as particularly talented they explained their success on chance moments and lucky breaks (Giddens 1991; Thomson et al 2002):

"And then one night I was on the dance floor and I got offered a job to tour round the UK and it went from there… George approached me, and said, 'We really think this would be beneficial to you to go onto the National Diploma.' And I checked out the price and it was £2,000 and I just said I couldn't afford it… [he said] they'd do it for free." (male, 22, white British)

In assessing the possibility of pursing an arts career young people discussed how opportunities were not necessarily connected to talent, and how societal stereotyping could limit their prospects. They felt unable to change influential stereotyping which they thought was common and pervasive, suggesting perceptions of strong structural impediments (Merli 2000; Buckingham 2003). Young white men talked about how it was harder for white, rather than black people to succeed as rappers as rap is traditionally a 'black' music genre. Actors reflected on how more women competed for fewer roles, which gave men an advantage, and aspiring black actors reflected on how they had only been offered roles as criminals. According to young women, the rock industry was dominated by men who attached prejudices to women playing musical instruments, and held a belief that women were simply not as good as men:

"...I do think there's still an underlying thing of girls aren't any good at playing instruments and being in a band..." (female, 23, white British)

We also found that young people were not necessarily motivated to progress into higher education or to improve their employment prospects, and their increased aspirations were not about achieving high status employment or material gain, rather their priority was to improve their quality of life. These young people's motivation to participate was explained by a different set of social values to those which inform an

instrumentalist perspective, and our research findings demonstrate that the assumed progression links into training or employment can be weak or nonexistent.

Many young people described how they had enjoyed music, dance and acting from an early age and how they expected it to be a life long interest. They talked about the pleasure they gained, and explained that they were activities worth investing in:

"… no doubt of that I will always be making music…That's one thing I love doing and I'll never stop loving it… that's one way I've always been able to express myself throughout the whole of my life despite what I've been going through and I don't see why it should stop." (female, 20, dual heritage)

A typical 'quality of life' comment was:

'my aspiration isn't to have a lot of money, it's more to be happy and doing what I really want to be doing, that's more important to me.' (male, 21, white British)

Young people also wanted to enjoy the 'hear and now' and make the most of their current opportunity. One woman's opinion was typical:

"… it's just about… not always have all burden on your shoulders, just being… fine in what you do and just enjoying the moment, enjoying the fact that… I have a possibility to be learning what I want, yeah it's great!' (female, 25, black African)

How community-based organisations can affect young people's lives

Having identified that community-based organisations could make no special claim to engaging with the most disaffected, nor to routinely enabling young people to overcome structural inequalities, we analysed our data to assess the potential of performing arts to contribute to easing 'transitions' for young people. We found that they often used local community organisations as places to escape, and used the performing space that 'belonged' to them to cope with their anxieties and address their problems. The positive energy generated from performing was described by young people as an 'adrenaline rush' and gave rise to optimistic feelings, and occurred in our study irrespective of skills level, aptitude or talent. This reflects

research findings that have found physical activity is a reliable predicator of well-being (Argyle 2001).

Escapism

Young people sought out community organisations with a 'cool' reputation: ones which were relaxed, friendly and safe. Organisations located in rundown places, where work was difficult to find, and young people felt unsafe on the streets were particularly valued. One important characteristic of local organisations was their easy and free access, particularly for those on low incomes. One young person explained how without it he would not be doing anything:

> '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, white British)

Whatever their class, gender or ethnicity, young people felt valued where the use of studios was free. Several described how this contributed to their motivation to improve:

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

Organisations provided space to 'escape' from the negativities in their lives; through performing young people released their negative emotions and this enabled them to cope better, reducing the possibility of a downward 'out of control' spiral (Webster et al 2004). One dancer explained:

> "… I just enjoyed myself, went into my own little world. Like if ever I get frustrated, go to the studio, do a bit of dancing and cheer myself up… I completely zone out, it's like my getaway. I was having problems at home with my dad about money and that lot and I'd just get up in the morning, get ready, have my breakfast, get out of the house, come down to [name of organisation], start dancing, take my mind completely off of things… I go into my own little bubble, it just releases everything." (male, 18, white British)

Mood swings, rejection, anxiety, anger, jealousy and depression are all feelings associated with 'transitory' years and were described by young people. They explained how performing, and improvisation in particular, enabled them to work through these problems. A musician explained:

"… like I used to have really serious anger problems, but anytime I feel sad or feel down I just pick up a saxophone, draw some notes – it may not have sounded great but it was a stress release, it was a form of releasing the anger and the frustration that I'd built up… So that's what kind of got me through.., doing music... I think improvisation is just releasing emotion." (male, 18, black African)

Where organisations were able to 'suspend' inequalities and class boundaries by focussing on performance, young people felt liberated:

"You meet different people, different races, I never thought I could be friends with someone like that... I've experienced racism yeah in other places, but here never, never at all, you'd never get racism here… it's not even an issue at all – you feel equal, you don't feel better than anyone, you don't feel like you're on top of anyone, you just feel the same. It's like you're on the same level, it don't matter if you're rich, poor or you're in the middle class, you're just the same. It's just one of them places where… like your status don't even matter..." (male, 17, black African)

Out of work young people were typically demoralised and bored, and those in employment were invariably in unrewarding low paid part-time work that required few skills but which they found stressful, a scenario that is characteristic of young people's employment (Roberts 2009). Performing arts organisations with a professional yet friendly atmosphere were appreciated by young people. The following comment reflected this pleasure:

"… sometimes I have a stressful day at work... and I just wanna go home and sleep. But when I'm in the rehearsal room I just love it… there's such a professional attitude... And there's such a wicked atmosphere in that rehearsal room, and the work we're producing is gonna be brilliant,

hopefully… Yeah, I'm well happy, I'm buzzing afterwards, walking home happy." (male, 23, white British)

Another aspect of escapism was the ability of organisations to act as a 'safety net'. Young people used organisations when they were between acting work, looking to improve their skills further, and if they had financial difficulties. In these situations young people's attendance enabled them to respond constructively to difficult times and to benefit from constructing a coherent biographical narrative (Devadason 2007; Jones 2005). The value of providing a place for young people to which they were able to return was that it accommodated 'transitions' which were not a linear progression. An actor explained:

> "... it's been a part of my journey… And so I was working my ass off to try and just get out of my overdraft and stuff, and the [name of organisation] gave me something to look forward to every week. It was really quite important for me as a thing to keep me going. So what it did was that it helped keep me going until I could kind of find my next thing." (female, 25, white British)

Creating a valued place

Where an organisation provided a space for young people to escape to and where they were treated as young professionals, young people felt good about themselves. Many commented on their feeling as they entered:

> "Every time I step in here there's just this crazy confidence, it just comes. I've got confidence already but it's like 'Yeah, this is my playing field, I'm Beckham here.'…. 'Yeah, soon I'll be up there with Daniel Craig.' So, yeah, it does affect you personally." (male, 19, black African)

Young people were careful to explain that inspirational places were not elitist and that aspiring to professionalism did not necessarily mean they wanted to work in creative industries. The affect of attending a place with a good reputation was to generate positive feelings:

> "... I think it's made me more positive, just because... this place it's like suddenly it's a font of inspiration, a hotbed of ideas and youth... I think it makes me more inspired, it's almost like an intense atmosphere here without

actually being either professional or a stage school, it's almost intense but without being over pressurised..." (female, 22, South American/black Caribbean)

Young people routinely referred to the importance of tutors' professionalism. Professionalism included: artistic skills, currently performing, knowledge of their industry, and respectful attitudes and dispositions. The exchange of practical information and learning dispositions enabled young people to re-assess their social position using cultural capital that was more typical of privileged classes (Sullivan 2007). This reassessment arose from mutual respect and in pursuit of excellence, unconstrained by prescriptive curriculum or a teacher/pupil relationship. Young people attached great importance to continuing to learn and to improving. When tutors fell short of their expectations, many stopped attending and moved to other organisations. A young man identified some professional characteristics of a slam poetry tutor that he and many others admired:

"... he's always on time, and he hates anyone being late, and all his clothes are really pressed, his afro's immaculate… he really cares about other people's writing… he really enjoys other people's work as well at which he's just brilliant... definitely inspired me to want to go on and do more courses… especially if it's up to this standard." (male, 24, white British/black African)

Many courses were run by tutors who were themselves successful musicians, dancers or actors and in these situations young people were respectful towards them and willing to learn. It mattered to young people that tutors were experienced, talented, and knowledgeable about their industry. Even if they did not think that they would become professional artists they wanted to learn about how to work professionally and to learn from someone who had done it themselves. One young man explained:

"… they also have experience in the actual music industry. So I was able to talk to my tutor, and he helped, he gave examples of what he's done and... basically showed you what it takes and what kind of ambitions you should

have and how you can go about… maybe taking it to another level…" (male, 16, white dual heritage)

Young people appreciated support that was unrelated to performing arts. One organisation employed qualified youth workers whilst in other organisations support was 'ad hoc' and from managers and an uncertainty existed about referring young people to social services or mental health agencies, as well as blurring professional boundaries. Yet young people felt that they benefited from such support. The following account was typical:

"… [name of youth worker] was sitting down and having chats with me, it's the social aspects. Before I come here I was such a little shit… I've matured coming here and having chats and talking about life…" (male, 18, white British)

Some community-based organisations employed young people as teaching or workshop assistants, and as administrators to give them the opportunity to learn a broader range of skills, but these opportunities were limited by the lack of apprenticeships available to community organisations. Middle class young people worked voluntarily, but for the less privileged this was not an option. A desire for paid work was typical:

"I'm hoping that, yeah come summer then, yeah maybe I might go fulltime here for like a contract job innit, so just like throughout the summer I've got a job 'cause I'll be here anyway… so hopefully that'll happen". (male, 16, black British)

For many young people their experiences of attending community organisations gave rise to a strong sense of gratefulness and loyalty. A young dance tutor expressed these feelings:

"... I'd love to stay there, I think it's certainly somewhere that I feel a huge loyalty to and it's somewhere that I enjoy going." (male, 20, white British)

How change occurs though performance and performing

Many young people's anxieties and insecurities were private matters and performing provided an invaluable public context where they learnt to express their feelings. This social space enabled them to reassess their self-perception, and through greater self-awareness began to inhabit a different social position (Elmer and McNamara 1996; Thomson and Holland 2004; Thomson et al 2004; Jones 2005). A key feature of this process for those who typically felt inadequate and had not been high academic achievers at school was the opportunity to participate in an activity they enjoyed and could improve at. Learning by trial and error was well-suited to young people's transitory experiences; they took risks by trying out new music or dance sequences, had more autonomy and control over their learning, and were inspired and further motivated to keep experimenting, leading to further improvements. Learning through expression, interpretation and interest situated them in a context where things were neither 'right' nor 'wrong', nor pressured them to achieve a particular grade or target. This provided an opportunity for young people to invest in dispositions and behaviour arising from a positive interest in performing arts, rather than from feelings of inadequacy and incompetency which are often related to class, gender and ethnic differences, and perpetuates inequalities (Willis 1977; Atkinson and Kintrea 2004; Archer et al 2007; Walkerdine et al 2007). Within this context young people were able to develop and strengthen a sense of self-worth which has the potential to improve the quality of young people's lives across their different social worlds. The following findings elaborate on this context and processes, and draws attention to how changes in young people's lives were situated and maintained by performing in a professional setting.

A young person explained how writing about personal experiences is a way of achieving self-reflection and awareness through the release of emotions:

> "... quite often in [name of tutor]'s classes, some of the poems, we have to write very personal stuff, and for those poems, it really opened me up emotionally, so I am kind of emotionally vulnerable for those sessions, which is a weird feeling, but also a fun feeling as well. Because I never knew I felt like that.., it sets you back a bit. It's interesting because you get to learn more about yourself, for example, that sort of stuff." (male, 16, black Caribbean)

When tutors encouraged young people to express themselves this gave them new insights that led to greater self-awareness and enabled them to respond to their own difficulties. A young woman described how through self-expression she had improved her ability to deal with her depression:

> "Especially if you are in a depression or whatever, something like that and you're doing something like drama and expressing yourself, it gets it out of you so it's easier to handle and stuff like that" (female, 17, white British)

Drama also helped young people to see their problems from different perspectives, to find their own solutions, and become more self-reliant:

> "You can kind of get a different perspective on it 'cause you've stepped away from the problem and you just can think totally outside the box, where as if you're really involved in it you're just like, 'Oh I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do.' ... And you come out of drama and you think, oh that's really simple actually, I can just do this" (female, 17, white British)

Learning to perform was learning by doing with a tangible end product and young people described this process as exhilarating and rewarding as well as giving them social recognition. This young man's excitement and pride was typical:

> "I just love that buzz, I've just got that energy… the whole company has worked on something and there's that feeling like you're about to show what you've done and it's a communal vibe almost which is so beautiful. And it's a feeling that can only be created if you're about to show a piece… when you've got something you're proud of and you've worked hard, 'cause I always wanna try and work as hard as I can, and to share it with other people is an amazing feeling…" (male, 23, white British)

Young people found making tangible improvements motivating and this gave them a sense of achievement:

> '... dance… it was just enjoyable… I could sort of gauge my achievements… I could see myself developing.' (male, 20, white British)

Through experimentation young people were more willing to try new things, to learn new technical skills and to practice. These activities led to identifiable improvements and gave them a sense of agency that enabled them to construct their social identities from their strengths (Schoon and Bynner 2003; Jones 2005). A common interest in performing arts bought young people together and made it almost natural and effortless to bond socially. A young man attending a music production course commented:

> "... we've come in contact with various people that are doing projects... and we've really found people that are interested in the same stuff we're interested in. And that's already an icebreaker so you don't have to go through the process of getting to know what we like, so we already know that everyone in this building, they've got something to do with creative arts." (male, 20, black African)

Performing had a key role in explaining how friendships formed. Young people 'connected' through experimenting together, described as forming 'special' associations:

> 'It's like, 'cause you're with other people that you might never have played with together, but somebody will lay down a beat and then someone will like, OK, they'll build on that. And you're throwing ideas around and sparking off each other, like maybe a little riff will inspire something that I sing, and it's kind of … I don't know, it just makes you really happy 'cause you're connecting to people on another level that you might not have before…' (female, 23, white British)

Similarly, the experience of attending courses with a diverse group could generate a new open mindness, greater tolerance and respect for others. These changes in social values gave rise to new friendships (Thomson et al 2003):

> '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, white British)

Sharing a passion for music also enabled young people to overcome their social differences and develop positive relationships:

> '… 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)

Being part of a community of shared interests enabled young people to express who they were. Young people found this reassuring:

> "I always got really hurt with what people said to me and I'd always take it really seriously… I was scared to express myself … Coming here, it's made me realise… that I was OK, because there was other people like me" (female, 17, White British)

Whilst these personal and social developments were clearly linked to performing and performance, less clear was when these changes were transferred to other situations. Confidence was often used by staff and by some young people to describe how benefits arising from performing were used in other social settings. Our research suggests, however, that similar to self-esteem, confidence is a complex concept with variable consequences (Elmer 2001). It was often bounded and contingent, and its transferability dependent on how it was conceptualised by young people.

Where young people's confidence relied on approval from others it was dependent on young people being the 'centre of attention':

> "I just love being in the spotlight… I don't know, it's just so great, it just … fills you up really, it's just like this feeling that, I don't know, this awesome feeling, you just like it, and that you just like to be good at something… that's why I like performing 'cause loads of people will be there to see you, to see me so yeah." (female, 16, black African)

A young dancer described how her confidence varied depending on situational circumstances:

"... it is so hard, it is really, really hard… some days I feel optimistic about it; some days you think, oh I can be the best at anything, like why is that person better than me? And then other days you're like, oh no, I'm awful, like when I watch some dance programmes I'm like, oh no." (female, 22, white British)

Self-confidence appeared to be transferable where young people were motivated by a sense of self-worth or self-belief, rather than improved self-confidence. A young person described how he performed his poetry to convey a message to the audience, rather than to draw attention to himself, and this suggested that he believed in the value of his ideas:

"I'm not a performance poet,... But, I don't know, sometimes I write, sometimes I have real gems and I wanna perform them 'cause I feel like the message needs to be out there. I don't write for the glory, I mean I don't perform for the glory, I perform just to put some ideas in people's heads." (male, 19, white British/Russian)

Middle class young people in particular talked about confidence to explain how they used skills learnt from performing arts in other situations. Typically they said, *'it looks good on your CV'*, or *'helps with job interviews'.* From this perspective young people perceived self-confidence as something which could be 'used' effectively in different circumstances, as a commodity. One young person commented:

"...I've got confidence, I can go up to absolutely anyone, talk to them and be able to approach then in a friendly way… you've gotta be confident it's crucial… if you've got confidence you can do anything, the world's your oyster… Yeah I don't know, I just love being confident really." (male, 23, white British)

Improved self-belief also benefited young people as a person, rather than just increasing skills. One young musician explained:

"I wouldn't even have spoken like this before. Now I could just talk to you like you're my friend… it's just opened me up and it's made me a better person, basically. I'm talking about that being positive and that… my heart has grown,

basically, like to love everyone so I get the love back." (male, 21, black Caribbean)

Policies for young people

The research findings presented in this paper have drawn on the experiences of young people and offer insights into policies and interventions which may be best suited to many young people during their 'transitionary' years. The findings draw attention to tensions between the pursuit of an instrumentalist approach and a quality of life perspective that many young people strive for, and suggest that the relationship between the two is not straight forward. Whilst gaining employment is most important for young people and obtaining formal educational qualifications assists young people achieve this goal, the policies and funding arrangements typically follow a formal education structure with terms and holidays, teacher/student relationships, with expected outputs as numbers achieving qualifications, attending college and finding work. Our findings demonstrate, however, that these organisational arrangements, targets and ways of working can serve to undermine what community-based performing arts organisations do best for young people, particularly the less privileged, the less academically inclined, and those with difficult and uneven transitions. Where local organisations are accessible, free, have an ethos of professional development, encouraging self-expression, improvisation and experimentation, young people feel valued, recognised, and are more able to cope and enjoy a better quality of life. A flexible and responsive approach and a shared understanding with professional tutors about what is of value, is conducive to the personal and social development of young people.

Policies which encourage organisations to improve what they do best include the provision of capital funding to enhance buildings and to buy equipment, revenue funding for performing and performances to promote excellence, and to support community based organisations as a valued and valuable local place for young people. This would require a 'light touch' with respect to targets and outcomes to maximise the scope for innovation (McMaster 2008), the use of quality of life indicators to reflect experiences valued by young people, and outcomes which assess the value of an organisation as a local social institution. Our findings also suggest that professional boundaries can become blurred and where youth workers

are employed to conduct outreach to attract disaffected young people and for counselling, these activities can complement the work of performing artists. An ability to offer apprenticeships to give young people the opportunity to gain work experience as workshop assistants or administrators, for example, directly improves young people's employment prospects. It is possible, but not explored in this study, that in the longer term participants may be better able to negotiate structural barriers using the skills and aptitudes they have gained from a quality of life perspective. Further research on how young people acquire social values that prioritised quality of life over and above a materialistic life style and, an improved understanding of confidence, when it is contingent or transferable, and how, and when, self-worth arises, would also improve our understandings of how to support young people.

On the basis of the findings from this study, it is argued that policies designed to enhance young people's quality of life can include running courses to gain formal qualifications, provided that they are accommodated within organisational arrangements better suited to the former. Learning through experimentation and improvisation are key mechanisms that explain how young people develop personally and socially and in particular how they gain a sense of self-worth, and our findings suggest that this develops best where it is unfettered by the constraints of a prescribed curriculum.

During an economic recession many young people suffer most; with a shrinking labour market, long term scarring that arises from experiences of youth unemployment, the exacerbation of the NEET problem, those not in employment, education or training, all lead to increased stress and sense of worthlessness as well as heightened risk of future redundancy (Gregg 2001; Lee and Wright 2011). Pursuing policies that aim to improve the quality of life of young people will assist limit this harm and the findings from this research suggest that community-based performing arts organisations have a role to play in damage limitation as well as improving young people's quality of life.

Acknowledgements

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