

Being Other: The Effectiveness of Arts Based Approaches in Engaging with Disaffected Young People.



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Overview

Too many young people find themselves on the margins of education or excluded from school. Secondary schools, in particular, report that many of their pupils struggle to cope with the twin demands of a results driven education system and the difficult transitions that they have to negotiate in their personal and social lives.

Much of the research suggests that marginalisation in education has negative long-term consequences for young people in terms of social engagement in the wider world, academic attainment, emotional development, and future employment (e.g. Ball, 2006; Duckworth & Schoon, 2012; Lumby, 2013; Stamou et al., 2014). Arguably many of these young people have become estranged from forms of schooling that they find difficult to navigate. Within schools the remedy offered to those who struggle to engage with an academic curriculum has traditionally been to offer more of what has failed in the first place.

However, there is a growing recognition that emotion and imagination are central aspects in the development of young people's ability to self-regulate, empathise with others, and work collaboratively (e.g. Fleer & Hammer, 2013; Hughes & Wilson, 2004). In contrast to the rest of the curriculum, drama and arts programmes offered outside of the school environment may offer temporary respite for some young people through the creation of 'negotiated' identities and culturally mediated relations of power and control. The creative arts can offer some young people who are perhaps most at risk of becoming disaffected a powerful set of tools for creating contexts that may provide them with the opportunity to re-negotiate identities and hence re-engage with school (Daniels & Downes, 2014; Wallace-DiGarbo & Hill, 2006).

Through being 'Other', in role as artist or actor, the young people work in collaboration with peers and adults to free themselves from the fear of failure and the constraints of their current interactions with the social world (Wright & Rasmussen, 2001). Cooper describes this as a process of resignification:

'Resignification involves the development of new and positive identities as a consequence of relationships and experiences which undermine the pupil's original negative view of self, by revealing evidence of desirable, positive qualities.' (1993:139)

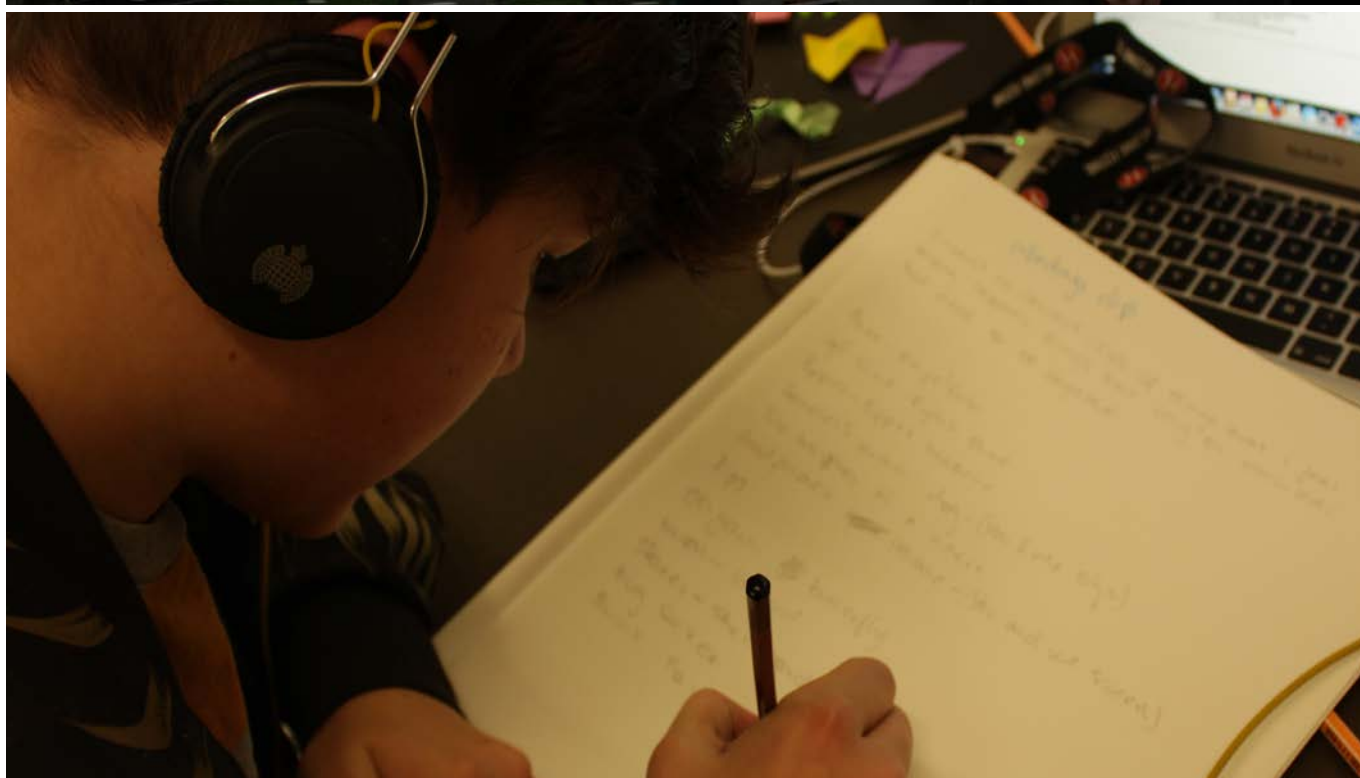
As researchers in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford, we were approached by two local arts based organisations that provide alternatives and supplements to mainstream education for young people who are experiencing difficulty in engaging with schooling or society. Pegasus Theatre, in the east end of Oxford, and OYAP Trust, working across Oxfordshire, asked us to examine the effectiveness of their creative arts and theatre programmes that are designed to offer alternatives for marginalised young people.

In this short report we provide an overview of the accounts we have gathered of young people's experiences of participating in the drama and arts events that these two organisations offer. Here we present analyses of these data alongside verbatim accounts in order to help further the understanding of the benefits of such provision for some of the most vulnerable young people in our society. The quotations from the young people are chosen to illustrate particular issues and experiences that run through the data. The names of the interviewees have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Our research team observed several projects in each organisation during the academic year 2014-2015 and talked to both the young people involved in the programmes and the professionals who they work with. The accounts reported here represent snapshots of the projects working with particular young people in a specific period of time. However, they also offer both a glimpse into the workings and objectives of the arts based projects as well as the responses and experiences of the young people as they begin to project a more positive trajectory for themselves. For some young people these changes are often profound.

The activities run by these two arts based organisations aim to enable young people who find it hard to work with others to work as a team, learn negotiation skills, and develop the ability to listen to and appreciate other people's contributions and points of view. One way they do this is through the experimentation and reflection involved in completing an Arts Award qualification (Howard, 2015).

Arts Award

The Arts Award is a national qualification accredited by Trinity College London in association with Arts Council England. Awarded at different levels (Discover, Explore, Bronze, Silver and Gold), the Awards support young people to develop as both artists of all types and arts leaders. A Gold Award gives 35 UCAS points. Arts Awards are widely used in youth arts work, and young people on both OYAP and Pegasus programmes work towards them.



Pegasus Theatre

Introduction to Pegasus Theatre

Pegasus is a community theatre in East Oxford with young people at its heart. It has a history of over 50 years of community engagement, theatre and dance performances and supporting new and emerging artists, as well as providing training, education and career paths. In working with young people, their objective is to give them the tools to explore who they are, what powers they have and what their responsibilities are in a rapidly changing global world. Their work with young people aims to highlight issues that impact on the way people behave in society. Each year a theme is chosen for the young people to base their performances on. During the observed period, the theme was: 'What would you stand up for?'

In addition to the programmes we discuss here, Pegasus provide trainee and apprenticeships, community activities for all ages, a venue for theatre companies and a hub for cultural participation in East Oxford. The theatre has a Members Committee made up entirely of young people, who amongst other things, help organise various events, create newsletters and sit on interview panels for new staff members. Two of the members are also trustees of the theatre and have full voting rights. In 2010 the theatre re-opened after a £7.4 million revamp. The new structure has been built around the original auditorium with the idea of preserving part of Pegasus's essence and history; the incorporation of the young people's design ideas can be seen throughout the theatre, particularly in the innovative Green Room. This professional space is at the centre of everything that Pegasus do.

The three programmes we report on below are *Looking Forward*, *Added Extra* and *School Plus*. For *Looking Forward* and *Added Extra*, as for Pegasus's other ongoing programmes, every effort is made to get to know the young people and provide personalised provision for each of them. For example, they will provide taxis with female drivers where appropriate, liaise with the young

people through their preferred method of communication, and think carefully about the particular needs of individuals. Additionally, a Pegasus staff member meets with or talks to each young person who is referred before they start attending a group, to work out where they would be best suited. Pegasus also holds two registration days a year, where young people and their families are invited to meet the staff and find out more about the programmes at Pegasus. This personalised approach helps to foster a strong sense of inclusivity within activities and community identity through the theatre.

The following quotations from two of the Pegasus staff articulate the theatre's goals and the developmental potential of drama for the young people:

"...our aim is to create fully rounded young adults who go out into the world and have confidence, they're young leaders, they're confident they have a voice, they're confident they can be listened to and they can perform, they know that creativity is what will help them to do it, that's our aim."

"...I think what's really useful in terms of theatre, is... its ability to allow subjective exchanges... I think it's there that we begin to see... a real sense of who we are. We stop objectifying and we start communicating those things that can't be seen in the objective. We start to see the emotions, the feelings, the opinions, those things that are difficult to communicate because they are so subjective. By playing another role, by creating somebody else, we create a platform for that intersubjective exchange where we're taking on the views of another person and actually thinking about what they mean for us or communicating our views through performance and sharing those through performance and kind of creating again a way of sharing the subjective with our audience..."



Looking Forward

Looking Forward is an ongoing weekly group for vulnerable young women, ranging from secondary school to post-school age. Each session lasts one hour. Group leaders and young women work to produce a piece of theatre and dance to present to family and friends in the Pegasus Performance Platform. They utilise a collaborative approach to create a piece ready for performance. It is a space in which the young people are supported by each other and create strong ties to the group leaders.

The leaders aim to help young people achieve something through drama and to build their self-esteem through collaboration and performance:

"Ultimately I think the aim is that those young people feel like they've achieved something in those sessions and they go home feeling proud, I think often in their other environments there's no achievement or there's very little success, or they're not praised very often and you'll see it in some of the young people, giving compliments is just something that they're not used to and their reaction is often to shy away from those compliments..." (Leader)

"Yeah just making sure that they go home feeling really good about themselves and from that slowly over the course of the project it's about building their self-confidence and their self-esteem. I think that's a very unique thing about Pegasus, is that it's not focused on the product at the end, it's the journey and that for us is the most important thing." (Leader)

Throughout the time of observation the group of young women were creating a piece of drama and dance for the biannual Performance Platform based on women's rights. They explored the history of the women's rights movement including Rosa Parks and The Suffragettes. The topic of strong women standing up against injustice resonated strongly with the stated aims of increasing the young women's self-awareness and confidence. In addition, the participants incorporated modern day music that supported the rights of women. In this way, the young women's personal understanding of women standing up for their rights was linked to the historical theatrical performance. The young women along with the group leaders shared ideas and from this developed the various dance and drama pieces that eventually came together as one piece. The group consisted of between six to eight young women at the beginning with a few participants leaving whilst another joined.

During the period October 2014 to February 2015 (15 sessions), attendance ranged from seven to 14 sessions, with seven out of eight of the participants attending more than half of the sessions. The average number of sessions attended was ten.

Stated goals

- To increase self-esteem and confidence in participants;
- to enhance their ability to cope with and manage feelings;
- to improve their ability to positively interact with others;
- and provide an opportunity for achievement and success.

The young people's experience

Looking Forward was perceived by the participants as a safe space in which they were able to be themselves without being judged. Both the environment at Pegasus and the people in the group contributed to this. The young women trusted each other because they had been through similar experiences:

"...it's just easier for us to be the way we are in the group, whereas outside we are meeting people we don't know. You know we're walking round, you can walk round the streets, and there are loads of people you don't know, so you just put up that barrier and you know... having a barrier up tires you out a lot easier than just being yourself. So doing this it's less tiring, and it's just easier on us, and it makes us feel better, because it's actually people that want to support us and people that understand what we're going through." (Lisa)

"We wouldn't dare or dream of to like judge." (Jade)

"That's what I love about this group because we know each other and we can trust each other." (Hannah)

"[You have]...more freedom, like you can express yourself in your own way, not like in the school way, because you're told to be... a certain way aren't you? And you have to be that person, but here you can just let yourself out and do it. So I found that [I have] much more space." (Hannah)



They also valued their relationships with Pegasus staff members, attaching importance to their caring and non-judgmental attitudes. The girls learned to trust each other and the staff members, and some developed more positive relationships with people outside of Pegasus as well:

"Since I've been here I've learned to trust people a lot more and that's including my own dad and my own brother." (Lisa)

"Well since I've started coming here, I've calmed down a lot, I'm not so angry all of the time so I have become closer to my family, and I go out with my friends more than I used to. And all because I've got that confidence to want to go out and do things, and just have a laugh when I can." (Lisa)

Through their participation in the sessions, the young

women developed their confidence to perform a role. For them this had different aspects. They saw the role that they adopted for a performance as an opportunity to be someone else for a period of time, as a break from themselves:

"Cause you get to be something else, instead of yourself, with all the stress, and everything that goes on outside of the building." (Laura)

"[You get]...a lot of education in a way don't you, because you are playing someone different, and you put yourself in their shoes. So you live your own life, and putting yourself in their shoes, you can see exactly what goes on." (Hannah)

"But also playing roles that's not you, it's someone you're portraying so no one is ever seeing the real you." (Hannah)



However, they also saw that role as something that they could adopt in public in order to protect themselves; the role became a mask they could put on, which enabled them to interact differently (more positively) with those around them:

"See I use acting stuff from here in my general life because before people could read me like a book but now I've sort of learned an acting skill so nobody can actually tell now that I've just had a terrible day." (Laura)

This group also identified the usefulness of the programme in developing their skills to prepare them for the world outside of school and theatre, such as communication and the confidence to speak in front of others:

"It helps to build your confidence." (Rosie)

"Like I have more confidence to say answers out in front of people." (Shelley)

"There's also a way, like the bossiness, I know they're not doing it to harm us but it's to help us get along with life and realise what actually is needed in adulthood. When they tell you to do something straight away that's what you have to do in the future and you have to learn when you have a job." (Lisa)

"I think it helps us grow as a person." (Jade)

Barriers and solutions

- The young women were very committed to Pegasus and as a result attendance was generally good, but there was some variation in the specific make-up of the group from week to week. The irregularity of the cast meant that difficulties could arise in terms of rehearsal for the performance. Pegasus encouraged the young women to attend by providing transport to and from the theatre and through telephone reminders.

Recommendations

- The programme worked well and all the young women observed clearly benefitted from the experience.
- The young people could be encouraged to attend theatre performances and other events at Pegasus, through free or subsidised tickets, to increase their sense of identity and attachment with the space.

Hannah

Hannah was a 16 year old student who completed Year 11 in 2014-2015. Hannah was referred to Pegasus and had been attending *Looking Forward* for at least eight years. She had experienced difficult times in her life, but since participating at Pegasus, had been on a significant journey of development.

During the observed period, Hannah attended all but one of the sessions and contributed to discussions even if at times she did not physically participate or appeared to be disengaged. She had a fabulous memory and was able to remind the leaders of the movements and sequences for the piece that the young women had been working on. She was also able to remember everyone's lines. Hannah felt part of the group and she adopted a key drama role as both a prompter and unofficial director.

This positive active engagement with other young women and the adult group leaders suggests that Hannah had learned how to cooperate with others and build positive relationships. She also developed into a confident young person. In her interview, Hannah had a mature understanding of the benefits gained from attending *Looking Forward* in relation to her future. She saw that her communication skills, confidence and self-discipline had developed through the sessions. In addition, the ability to empathise with others developed Hannah's awareness of the 'Other' and of being 'Other'. These skills have enabled her over time to enjoy her schooling and to benefit from it. In relation to school Hannah said: *"I love it, I love school, I really enjoy going."* She went on to say:

"The lessons I've learned here, about being out in the world, having certain roles, and what you need to be like... I've taken that into school... I've used it as work and as communication..."

Hannah also suggested:

"It's to help build confidence as well and express yourself in a way that you wouldn't before... and making a future."

Added Extra

Added Extra is run each term as an ongoing weekly group for young people, aged between 12 and 18 years, who are drawn from both vulnerable and less

vulnerable groups. The young people also range in terms of their exposure to theatre and their drama and dance experience. The programme goals are directed at the



vulnerable group and the inclusion of more experienced young people from the theatre serves to support their development. Each term group leaders and participants work to produce a piece of devised scripted theatre to present to family and friends. They utilise a collaborative approach to create a piece ready for performance, drawn from a stimulus such as *Macbeth*. Sessions last for an hour and a half. At the end of each term the young people are invited to take part in the next *Added Extra* performance or are signposted to join a different programme at Pegasus.

During the observed term, the group created a modern interpretation of *Macbeth*, through which they explored themes of relevance to the young people's lives, including, peer pressure, bullying and school exclusion.

The target group size for *Added Extra* was 12 young people. At the beginning of the programme there were eight participants, however, after the first six weeks this number decreased to six regular attendees. Of the six, three were identified by Pegasus as vulnerable or challenging young people and the other three as less vulnerable, 'model' peers. Attendance figures were collected for the three vulnerable young people only.

During the period November 2014 to March 2015 (14 sessions), two out of the three young people attended all of the sessions and the third young person attended nine sessions.

Stated goals

- To enable participants to manage their own behaviour and emotions (assisted by peer role models);
- to empower young people through an inclusive process which gives them a sense of success;
- to value the participants and treat them as professionals;
- to enable change and change the perceptions of young people;
- and help young people to build self-confidence and self-esteem.

The young people's experience

Similarly to *Looking Forward*, *Added Extra* was perceived by the participants as a safe space, where labels were removed and all participants were treated as equals. Working with new people from different backgrounds and different ages created a feeling of inclusiveness and produced an environment where the young people felt free from judgement. The small size of the group and the

ongoing collaborative process helped the young people to build trust and positive relationships with the leaders and fellow participants. The young people did not feel pressured to reveal everything about themselves, but felt comfortable communicating with each other. They felt able to say what they wanted to say:

"...You can just speak about anything... it's just more comfortable to be able to speak up... you don't have to talk about your whole life." (Lola)

The young people valued the autonomy and control that they had over the performance. They placed importance on being able to contribute to the script and discuss things that were of significance to them in their own terms and voice:

"...although we had the stimulus with Macbeth, we were writing Macbeth. It means it was our words, it was what we wanted to say, how we wanted to say it." (Millie)

The structure of the sessions aided their ability to contribute, as the participants were free to interpret the stimulus in their own way, and reflect on and incorporate ideas based on their own personal experiences:

"...I think it worked really well, I mean they found the balance between telling us what to do, but was more like constructive feedback than telling us what to do, and always getting us to figure out what we needed to do by ourselves. So no one felt like 'Oh I'm being told what to do'." (Millie)

"...because of the setting... a school and like set in these days, I think that allowed us to have more contribution because we pulled on personal experiences and what it's like being in school and stuff like that." (Millie)

The participants also discussed the therapeutic value of attending the group. By taking on different roles the young people were able to get away from the stress of their personal lives and be someone else for a little while:

"I think one thing that acting definitely helps you do is, you can have all this, all these problems going on in your own lives, and have all this stress, but if you take on another character, that can all go for a little bit, and it's a good way of relaxing yourself, and taking your mind off it, because if you're in school the entire day, and say your minds not quite on the school work, it's more on problems, they stay on the problems, it kind of gets worse, but if you come and just do any kind of hobby, but acting I think especially completely takes your mind off it because you're thinking right, this is a



new person, taking that person's thoughts on to get rid of your own it's quite a nice way of kind of cleaning the slate and getting yourself in a better mind state." (Rashid)

"...it might be that it just makes you forget for a little while about the things you have to do outside of this space. Like when you've got lots of coursework and stuff." (Henry)

For some of the young people, particularly the more vulnerable, acting in role also helped to make them feel less likely to be judged. By acting as someone else, they were able to experience being someone else - someone who was not pre-categorised or pre-defined by their past labels or experiences:

"...the audience don't know you at the end of the day, and you can kind of become a different person... They don't get to know you for who you are like they can judge you on like 'Oh my god, she's rubbish at acting', but they won't know what you are actually like... it makes you feel more comfortable, because they are not going to actually know you for who you are." (Lola)

In combination, the flexibility of the sessions, the chance to reflect on past experiences and the opportunity to try out new roles helped the young people to discover more about themselves, including the way in which they learn best. In this sense, the experience of being 'Other' constituted a form of resignification for the young people. Through being in role, they were able to imagine a new identity and way of dealing with problems.

The group also helped the participants to develop self-confidence and self-esteem, particularly in being able to communicate to outside audiences, and the performance provided them with an opportunity to experience success. The group identified all of the above as skills that could be transferred and used in both their school environment and in the future:

"[You learn]...strategies for life... because you learn to understand and how to cope in more situations like if there was a certain amount you didn't want to say, you push yourself to say it and then you succeeded... It made you think, 'Wow, I can say more than that next time'. It's just I think the whole thing was a big motivation, it just pushed us and made us all like closer..." (Lola)

"...to be able to find out, like in a group like this, how you learn, so for example like you find out that when you're up on your feet and acting you learn it a lot more than if you're sat at a desk reading about it, it's going to help you when you go on to learn... if you do A Levels,

or go on to university. It's going to help you with that." (Rashid)

Barriers and solutions

- The target size for this group was not met, with only six of a possible 12 attending regularly. However, the young people seemed to benefit from the small group and felt that they would not have been able to contribute as much in a larger group.
- For the young people attending the groups at Pegasus, getting to the theatre can be problematic. The Pegasus staff work very hard to encourage participation each week, by giving each young person a reminder phone call or message before the session and by arranging transportation for them. This effort is rewarded by high attendance and engagement, and helps to build close relationships.
- The range of young people, in terms of their theatre experience, was a particular strength of this group. The more experienced young people provided support and encouragement during the initial stages of the programme, which helped to boost the confidence and engagement of the less experienced. By the end of the programme there was a real sense of collaboration and friendship in the group, with all of the young people providing ideas and supporting each other. One of the leaders commented:

"It's great that they have bonded as one group. They are not two separate groups anymore."

"They speak without you having to facilitate it."

Recommendations

- Maintain a small group size of six to eight participants.
- Maintain the mixed group.

Lola

Lola was a Year 11 student who was referred to Pegasus by an early intervention hub. Before attending *Added Extra* she had been involved in another Pegasus project. Lola had experienced difficult times in her school life and held quite negative views towards school when she started *Added Extra*. During the first *Added Extra* session she felt anxious and reported that she found the leaders 'full-on'. Lola was unsure if she wanted to continue with the project, but following some encouragement agreed to give it another chance. During the programme, Lola became increasingly engaged. She was actively involved in the collaborative process and provided ideas and support to fellow participants. She valued the relaxed atmosphere and having the opportunity to contribute:

"...when you're in school they are more full-on, and when we come to a group outside and it's like you're still learning, but it's more fun. Like they're more relaxed and you feel like you can interpret more and you don't feel so pressured."

She often acted as a prompt in the sessions and the leaders commented that she had *"an eye as a director."* Lola was very committed to the performance and Pegasus, and prioritised attending the sessions over other events in her life. Her mother commented: *"[She's] loved it."* She offered to source props for the sessions and performance and elected to stay after the sessions to complete an Arts Award. At times during the rehearsals she could feel frustrated, however, she was able to overcome this frustration and did not let it prevent her from participating. She grew in self-confidence and self-discipline and built positive relationships with both the other young people and the leaders. Through performing in *Added Extra*, Lola said that she matured and became more independent. During the rehearsals she sought clarification when she was unsure what was happening or if she needed a term explained. Her confidence to speak in front of groups of people also improved and this in turn helped her participate more in school lessons:

"I've become more able to speak, like before... I wouldn't speak in front of... more than three people. So in a classroom I always had... to put my opinions in at the end because I couldn't speak in front of people, but now I can speak up in front of a few more people, not like a whole class, but it's improved my confidence to be able to speak up in front of a few more people..."

She went on to state that this growth in confidence:

"...help[ed] like with my levels, my grades and everything because I'm interpreting more and it's making me want to learn..."

Through the creation of the play, Lola was also able to reflect on her school experience, and by the end, her view of school appeared to have changed. One of the scenes in the *Added Extra* performance involved Macbeth setting his school on fire. When this scene was first devised, Lola commented: *"You can set my school on fire"*; however, whilst practising the scene in a later session and after a few discussions about school, she said *"I think if my school burnt down I would cry. All that work for nothing."*

For Lola, being involved in a drama group also provided her with time and space to escape from the stress of her everyday life. Through adopting a different role for an hour and a half a week Lola felt that she could clear her thoughts and go back to other tasks with a more positive frame of mind:

"Like if you've got an essay due... it takes your mind off it... you think I've got this to do, I don't have to sit there thinking I should probably start. You sit there thinking I'm just not going to worry about it. It just completely takes your mind off it and then when you get out of here [the theatre] you can just be like right."

All in all, Lola believed that being involved in *Added Extra* had provided her with skills and experiences that would help her to access further opportunities in her future.

School Plus

School Plus is an eight to ten week drama-based intervention programme with a partner secondary school, working with Year 7 students chosen by the school. Each session lasts an hour and a half. The programme begins with drama-based games and activities, and works towards participants completing the Bronze Arts Award.

Over the observed period two *School Plus* groups were observed. The two groups were distinct: one comprised Year 7s on the 'young carers' list (Group A), a broadly interpreted category, but who were for the most part suffering from shyness and lack of integration; the other was composed of Year 7s who were in care or who had been identified as showing challenging behaviour and were at risk of becoming disengaged (this group also had poor school attendance, which improved over the course of the intervention – Group B). Group A met in school; Group B met initially at Pegasus, but later sessions took place in school. Group A began with six participants, two of whom left the school mid-programme; the other four attended weekly. Group B had eight participants. During Group B's seven sessions, the average number of sessions attended was six.

Stated goals

- To increase confidence of participants and to increase their positive engagement with others and the school, to enhance their focus and self-awareness, as well as gaining an Arts Award.
- To increase their engagement with the school environment through improved attendance and participation, through the development of basic skills to participate in school (listening, trust and teamwork).

The Young People's Experience

The experience of the programme benefitted all the participants in terms of better engagement and communication with adults and other young people. Having time out from their everyday school and personal routine allowed them the space to become someone different to the persona that they had either adopted or been given, for example 'young carer' or 'disengaged young person'. Some participants were also able to articulate specific benefits they had gained from the programme. For these young people, participating in *School Plus* was of significant value. They were able to demonstrate an increased meta-awareness of their

behaviour, interaction and personal abilities, and used this to navigate school and relationships more successfully:

"...at the beginning because like I [didn't] know everyone and everything, I was a bit shy, but then when I got used to it... and I knew everyone, I told them everything..." (Jemma)

Many of the young people were able to continue to use these new relationships in the school environment outside of the intervention:

"[Before]...I wouldn't really want to talk to them because I'm too shy or something, but now because I can like express my feelings with this Pegasus thing, I can go and say hi." (Jemma)

"Because I barely used to talk, I barely talked to any of those people, but now I kind of like talk to them." (Mohan)

Attending the sessions provided the young people with the time and space to build positive peer relationships and trust. By working in a different dynamic to the school environment, they were able to try new things without the fear of being judged, which in turn reduced their fear of failure. The participants were able to transfer this skill to their school lives, for example, some were able to have a go at answering in lessons:

"Like say if I got the question wrong, I don't really mind, because I know I tried." (Jemma)

The young people also gained a sense of success from being able to share their work in the form of an Arts Award. Although both groups started working towards the Arts Award only Group A completed it, as the school felt that Group B had already achieved the aim; according to the school, they had become more engaged in lessons and their attendance had improved.

Group A

For the young people in Group A in particular, being in role contributed to the ability to experiment and try new things:

"You don't have to worry about doing something wrong that you wouldn't normally do because it's not technically you doing it, because you are doing it for a performance." (Anisah)

For some young people, participating in this group led to an increased confidence in talking to people and a sense of being valued:

"I think it was like the group gave me confidence to be myself, and let all my expressions and emotion out."
(Debbie)

This increased confidence also improved their ability to empathise. They developed a self-awareness about the need for appropriate behaviour and turn taking in classroom settings:

"Yeah because I used to be very very loud, I used to be like, I used to not use my confidence in the... way I should. So I used to have a loud voice, talk a lot, now I, as you can tell already, I have a quieter voice, and I don't talk as much as I used to... I have learned to not

stand out, stand out in the crowd, but not stand out in the crowd too much, so give someone else a shot."
(Debbie)

Group B

The sessions for Group B were centred on developing listening, trust and teamwork skills.

Unlike Group A, Group B attended Pegasus Theatre for their sessions and were thus introduced to a new social environment for learning. The walk to and from the theatre provided an opportunity for open communication between the young people and school staff.

Being in a different space was important for the group who were based at Pegasus because it allowed them to



get away from their negative perceptions of the school environment and interact with adults in the new context of the theatre. The young people valued having choice and control over their participation in the activities:

"I mean like no one's forcing you to do anything that you don't want to do. You get to decide if you want to do it." (Mohan)

For some of the more challenging young people, attending the sessions helped them to reflect on and change their behaviour and consequently the school reported that they had received fewer behaviour sanctions:

"Like we have to take care of other people because like if they're looking out for you then there's no point in you just being rude and disrespectful because they're basically using up their time to spend time with us..." (Danielle)

Building a positive relationship also improved some of the young people's engagement with the normal school curriculum. The school project leader stated that:

"...they have actually been attending lessons which is a great thing and I think they know me and [another staff member] a bit better now so they've got definite people to go to... also, having that bit of extra trust has built up a confidence thing and they also know that if they do behave they're going to get another opportunity to do some more stuff like this..."

Barriers and solutions

- The commitment of the host school makes a great difference to the efficacy of this kind of programme. Several weeks were cancelled because of foreseeable school events. One child was timetabled for a different intervention at the same time in alternate weeks. Other double bookings also occurred. Additionally, the nature of the participants meant that their school attendance was often erratic. Incidents at school also prevented some participants from attending sessions.
- The contrast between the structures and the expectations of the school and the theatre created some friction. There was in particular a tension between the school's desire for a clearly outlined pre-planned programme and the arts-based approach taken by Pegasus, which adapts to the needs of participants by means of a flexible curriculum, and supports developing pupil autonomy.

- There was also a tension raised by the dual goals of the programme: for students to achieve an Arts Award and the more intangible outcomes of increased confidence and interaction with others. At times these two goals were in conflict; in particular the highly structured nature of the Arts Award with its focus on specific assessment criteria has the potential to interfere with some of the mechanisms by which the participants are gaining other benefits, such as the freedom from fear of failure.
- With one group, behaviour management was a particular challenge. The drama leaders from Pegasus expected the school representative to maintain discipline, but his role in school was one which did not include behaviour management, and he was reluctant to take this role, expecting the drama leaders to deal with the challenging behaviour of the group. A lack of clear expectations about roles and responsibilities was partly responsible for this challenge.
- There were a number of issues relating to timing, particularly with Group B, who travelled to Pegasus for their sessions. The selection of Monday morning as the timeslot for these sessions had a negative effect on the potential impact of the sessions. Events at the weekend, particularly for vulnerable students, had a major impact on their receptiveness on Mondays. In addition, the choice of period was crucial; as might be expected a number of the participants were recipients of Free School Meals, who were delayed in leaving for the theatre due to the school-provided break time snack.

Recommendations

- To improve the impact of the programme, schools should think carefully about issues surrounding timetabling. Schools need to be aware that their commitment to the programme makes a material difference to the outcomes for their students. This is a valuable intervention which needs support from the host school. A written agreement with the school might help to formalise the commitment required, and ensure the efficacy of the programme. Such a commitment might include a separate time outside the programme sessions for students to complete their Arts Award booklets, which would reduce the pressure on time in sessions. It could also make clear the expectations of both parties to avoid future tensions.
- For programmes in which sessions happen at the theatre, it would be advantageous if funding could be found for transport between school and theatre to minimise the time spent in transit.

Jemma

Jemma was a shy girl but also attention-seeking. The school had moved her from one half of the year group to the other at Christmas, which meant that she did not know many people in her classes, and was rather lonely. She was very keen and enthusiastic in the drama sessions, but did not always know how to channel that enthusiasm.

At the beginning it was very important to Jemma for her ideas to be the ones that were used and she was prone to speaking out of turn. However, as the weeks progressed she was more aware that other people might also have ideas which needed to be incorporated. In particular, working with Anisah as a pair to prepare a leadership activity, on two separate occasions Jemma stopped herself and said *“but only if you agree”* or *“unless you want to do this bit?”* She had become aware of her own behaviour and was working to change it, making a specific effort which would improve her working with others. The leaders linked this change in Jemma’s behaviour to a change in her performance in the beanbag game – she had moved from throwing the beanbag at people’s faces to getting the hang of working together (as she herself noticed).

Jemma was also nervous of answering in class before the intervention, although she would call out or talk inappropriately. In the final interview she reported feeling more confident in class, more able to have a go, but also said that she called out less. She said that she had made friends in her side of the year group, and was now more confident to talk to new people:

“...I’m not scared anymore to tell people... like my thoughts, and like in class I put my hand up and tell them because I don’t really care what the others think...”

Anisah

Anisah was a very quiet student, with long hair that she hid behind on a regular basis. She was a member of the young carers’ group, who was very shy and found participation in lessons difficult. She was, however, extremely concerned for others, and caring. In an early session trust game involving ‘blind’ participants being directed across a circle and caught by other group members, every time she caught someone she would say very quietly to them *“you’re safe.”*

Anisah was highly engaged in sessions, taking part in all activities. Although she did not push herself forward or take a leading role, she did speak and contribute to sessions. She particularly enjoyed working with adults, although she also established good relations with other students. She said that she enjoyed the sessions and one of the main benefits was the opportunity to talk to people she didn’t normally encounter. Over the sessions she visibly gained in confidence, and was able to identify this change in herself. In a school drama lesson, she said, she had been able to lead a group performance successfully, whereas *“before in the middle of things I would sort of zone out and get shy.”*

During the sessions Anisah also developed a strongly reflective streak. She engaged thoroughly with the post-activity reflections run by the leaders and was able to transfer this to *“reflect in other lessons and outside of lessons.”* She applied this reflection to herself, identifying that the drama activities had the advantage of being:

“...a way of taking your mind off stuff, because you can become someone else that you wouldn’t actually be.”

“Normally I wouldn’t stand up and say for instance, act something out, but now after the sessions I can easily just get up and do it, because I know they can’t exactly judge you for it.”

For Anisah, these sessions revitalised her confidence in interaction with others, and changed the way she was able to participate in school life and lessons.

Summary

The drama activities made available to disengaged young people by Pegasus Theatre, offered participants both protection from and tools for engaging with the world. Participants in these drama interventions clearly benefitted from the experience of being placed at the crux between the imagined and the real. They particularly valued the way in which it created a space for them to trial being 'Other' than the people they had been, who were often constricted by their history and their lack of emotional regulation. Boal (1995:43) argues '*the scene, the stage, becomes the rehearsal space for real life*'. This was the case for these young people who, through engagement in drama activities found ways to bring that 'Other' from the space of the drama studio out into their lives, allowing them a certain separation from their performance within the arena of classroom or family. This helped to give the young people the space to try out lived experiences safely. For many of these participants, this rehearsal space enabled them to perform in role as other people. This increased confidence resulted in some young people reporting improved attendance and engagement at school.

Drama participation, led by skilled practitioners, also offered these 'at-risk' young people the opportunity to free themselves from the constraints of their current interactions with the world by giving them the opportunity to practise being 'Other' when dealing with difficult situations and emotions. Through drama activities participants developed the ability to move in and out of character and to manage the emotional reaction which the interaction stimulated. In so doing, the drama projects at Pegasus offered some young people:

- an opportunity to role-play through previous difficult experiences, either through scripted performance or devised script;
- a changed attitude to learning and, in some cases, school;
- a set of tools to enable them to interact positively with other adults and young people;
- a safe space in which to take risks;
- an increased confidence in themselves and improved participation in their social worlds;
- and a pathway back into societal participation.



Introduction to OYAP Trust

OYAP Trust (formally Oxfordshire Youth Arts Partnership) is an arts organisation that works across Oxfordshire in partnership with communities and local organisations. As well as running projects that are open to all young people, OYAP provides specialised arts projects designed to reach out to the county's most vulnerable young people: those at risk of isolation as a result of disadvantages such as poverty, special learning needs, school exclusion, mental health problems and family breakdown. Their projects are intended to enable young people to realise their own personal, social and leadership skills, grow in confidence and build self-esteem and resilience. They make sure that there are opportunities for young people to enjoy “small victories”, so that they come to understand what success feels like. They enable young people to commission their own cultural opportunities and lives.

Although OYAP is nominally based in Bicester, they seek out appropriate venues to host their programmes where

there is need; they currently run projects in Banbury, Bicester, Oxford and other locations in Oxfordshire. In addition to the programmes we discuss here, OYAP run a diverse range of Young Arts Leader development programmes, short term creative community projects, school-based arts schemes, and other ongoing *Youth Action Teams*. They are also a training agency and a lead information, advice and guidance agency for the Arts Award (see introduction) in the South East.

The programmes we report on below are *Kick Arts* (two groups - Oxford and Banbury), and one *Youth Action Team*. The common theme that links OYAP's creative projects for young people is that they are all intended to strengthen communities and bring people from all ages together. OYAP seek to give all people, especially those that are vulnerable and ‘at-risk’, the opportunity to learn and develop resilience, confidence and skills. They aspire to do this through high quality professionally led creative projects.



Youth Action Teams (YATs)

Youth Action Teams (YATs) are run for young people aged between 11 and 20 years old. YATs are about giving young people the support, encouragement and skills needed to lead positive social change in their communities through the arts. The teams are supported by artists to run creative, inclusive events that celebrate the areas where they live. YATs aim to help young people to explore cultural opportunities within their own lives. The groups are built on the ethos of being 'Visible, Creative and Kind'. As part of YATs, the young people can opt to undertake an Arts Award. In 2015 OYAP was awarded The Cherwell Community Award for the Most Innovative Community Project for its *Youth Action Team* projects.

For this evaluation, the research team focused on one particular *Youth Action Team (YAT)*. Sessions at the YAT are held fortnightly and last for an hour and a half. The YAT is attended by young people in the local community, many of whom are vulnerable to the challenges associated with disadvantage. There are 27 young people on the YAT register. Attendance at the YAT is voluntary and the project is designed to engage young people at particular stages, such as planning and delivery. During the observed period the YAT participants were invited to take part in other projects run by OYAP, including, a songwriting, vocal performance technique and recording project, and a photography workshop.

Stated goals

- To make creative change happen in their community;
- to generate pride in their community;
- to challenge the perception of young people as 'troublemakers';
- to raise aspirations;
- to increase employability;
- and to provide the opportunity to gain an Arts Award accreditation.

The young people's experience

In this area, there is a dearth of opportunities for young people. Consequently, the YAT was regarded by its participants as a pivotal service as it provided them with a safe and stimulating space to interact with their peers and engage in new creative activities. They valued the opportunity to build friendships and positive relationships with fellow participants and staff members:

"I come to these sessions because when I have nothing

to do at home, I think I can go and meet new friends and come and join with the YAT and do fun things with the members of staff here." (Vicky)

"Yeah it's... fun to like get out and actually do something rather than staying in and just being bored." (Isla)

Caitlyn also stated that it allows:

"Time with friends without being on the street."

Many of the young people who attended the YAT faced various difficulties in their everyday lives and for some, the YAT sessions offered them *"time away from certain things."* (Caitlyn)

One of the YAT leaders commented that the *"open culture"* and space at the YAT is very important for some of the young people as *"they don't get space at home."*

As well as providing respite, particular sessions attended by the research team seemed to help the young people to show empathy with others and to reflect on personal experiences and problems. Through poetry and songwriting masterclasses the young people were able to explore themes including bullying, love, friendship and hidden identities.

Nicola said that writing poems provided a *"...relief from stress... it's just something to take my mind off and keep my imagination going, creativity and things like that."*

Dear Diary
I'm in primary
They are trying to find me
I am crying and I'm flying
Just to find a place to hide me

I am smarter
I am stronger
I will take this no longer
I have feelings
I'm a person
I will live life with purpose!

(Song lyrics written by Isla during workshop)

For many of the participants, YAT also enabled them to visit new places and try new things that they otherwise would not have had access to. For example, as part of the Arts Award, the YAT went to see a pantomime performance in a local theatre and took part in a photography workshop. Isla described how through these opportunities:

"...you learn things that you never thought you could do and then you realise you can do it. It's like a new experience, like you've actually learned something that you never thought to do before."

Another important aspect of the YAT was their aim to run inclusive community events. By running events in the community, the young people experienced working with new people and consequently built strong bonds and positive relationships:

"...You get to interact with more people like the elderlies. I never thought I would actually do anything like that, like you wouldn't actually sit with people and eat or do craft with them or talk or do anything to be honest..." (Isla)

"[I]...just like helping people... we did this... thing, we went to... [a] centre and we had dinner with really old people... and I sat with people I didn't even know and, it was just really nice, because I had an injury and I had to have crutches, they were helping me, which I should be helping them. But it was kind of the other way around..." (Willow)

One community event that the young people took particular pride in, was a project where they completed a kindness mission every day for one month. By working with different artists the participants were able to build their skills and voice and put both of these back into the community. One of the YAT leaders commented that this project helped the community to come together as a collective "we" and left a "legacy for change." Through the event, the YAT participants learned about and developed a sense of pride in both themselves and their local community.

The young people also stated that by being involved in the YAT activities their confidence had improved:

"Yeah it's given me a lot of confidence to like get my head down into things that I never thought I could actually do." (Isla)

"I think my communication between strangers and people that I'm not that keen, that I don't know, I'm a lot more forward in talking to them willingly..." (Nicola)

Through all of the cultural experiences provided at YAT, the young people discovered new interests and talents, which in turn raised their aspirations. They learned about opportunities both within and outside of their community. By working with a variety of people they gained new role models and began to see that they can achieve. For Nicola, attending YAT had inspired her to train to become a youth worker:

"I've always wanted to inspire and influence young people into the right path in life... it's all about making choices and I want them to feel like they can look at things in a different perspective and hopefully pick the right choice and not go down the wrong path."

The completion of an Arts Award also helped to strengthen the feeling of achievement and pride within the young people. Those who had completed the award commented on the importance of the award for their future.

Arts Award passes

Since the formation of the YAT two years ago, seven young people have completed a Discover Arts Award. During the observed period, two young people passed their Bronze Arts Award and one went on to finish their Silver Award.

Barriers and solutions

- The young people valued the opportunity to undertake an Arts Award; however, in this instance the length of the sessions (1.5 hours) and attendance issues, due to external and ongoing challenges, hindered the process. To try to overcome these issues, the leaders occasionally started sessions early to give the young people time to work on their awards.
- The structure of the sessions varied according to the activity and the lead artists. The most successful sessions that were observed happened when an external artist came and ran an activity that was structured, but flexible enough to accommodate the preferences of the young people. The participants benefitted from having a focus, instructions, a timeframe and time for reflection. The poetry and songwriting sessions were particularly powerful.
- The working dynamic and culture of the host centre where OYAP organise YAT sometimes resulted in communication problems leading to double bookings. However, when the host centre and OYAP were synchronised, collaboration was positive.

- Following a constructive experience with a particular group in the community, the young people found it hard to look beyond this group, and see other opportunities.
- The majority of sessions were run by highly experienced artists, however, on occasion, due to staff shortages the sessions were run by artists with little experience of working with young people. Every effort needs to be made to ensure that trained artists are recruited in time for the events.
- The young people benefitted from being able to use technology and equipment for their Arts Awards, however, the number of laptops and cameras was not sufficient when the sessions had a large number of participants.

Recommendations

- Extend the sessions to allow for time to be spent on the Arts Awards.
- Produce a clear plan for each session.
- Allow time to reflect on experiences and issues that the young people draw upon and create in the sessions.
- Clear communication is vital between the partner organisations working with the YAT, to ensure that every opportunity is realised and that sessions run smoothly.
- Continue to build new links with different groups in the community.
- Overall we recommend that OYAP runs a series of planning sessions which lead to the production of schemes that can be shared by all leaders.



Paige

Paige was 12 years old and had been attending the YAT for two years. She self-disclosed that in the past she had experienced anger-management problems. During the period of observation Paige was taken out of school by her parents due to issues surrounding bullying, but according to the YAT leaders, was due to return in September 2015.

Through attending the YAT, Paige stated that both her behaviour and her ability to relate to and work with others had improved:

"I think I've gained a lot of confidence... I'm really more like kind with other people, because normally I used to have anger problems and I used to be really horrible and now... I'm OK with other people, new people, people that I don't know and everything..."

Paige associated these improvements with a number of different factors, namely gaining respite, positive relationships and new opportunities. By participating in various YAT workshops, Paige was able to work with different people and try new things. She valued working with other people:

"I'm sick of the same people, it's just like... if I worked with my sister all of the time, I get bored of her and all her ideas, so like I'm not saying they're bad or anything... it's [just] actually nice to go and work with other people."

"[At a songwriting event]... I was working with different age groups so that was pretty cool, because I didn't know who these people were, they were like 16 or so, and I'm 12 now, and I was 11 when that happened..."

Paige came to take pride in being the first to opt to work with new people and in providing ideas during the sessions. She built high quality relationships with fellow peers, staff members and people in her local community. She also developed a strong interest in photography and viewed the artists that she worked with as role models:

"I got it [camera] for Christmas, because I took pictures here and I like it now."

Paige was impressed by the confidence of a female vocal coach:

"I like that she is really confident... She is really good at what she does and is prepared which means she is a good influence on many people – someday I would like to be like her."

This new found interest and inspiration helped to raise her aspirations:

"...I'm hoping that I will stay with my dream and I will become a photographer."

Through her involvement in YAT, Paige also gained access to other provisions run by OYAP. Paige completed a Bronze Arts Award and after being taken out of school worked one-to-one with a number of members of OYAP staff on her Silver Award, which she subsequently completed. One of the leaders commented:

"...I had a really fruitful conversation with Paige in the car yesterday, you know because... she's now at a point where she feels quite comfortable with us and is building relationships, but also where she can say 'Could we do that?', 'What do you think about this?'... You know there's this kind of relaxed environment where she is not getting frustrated..."

"...When... her Bronze Arts Award was moderated, she immediately wanted to start her Silver... she spent all of yesterday, she spent all the morning starting on her folder, and then she spent the afternoon doing her arts challenge... which she decided she wanted to be learning to sew and make a cushion and she's like so excited about it..."

Additionally, Paige was involved in other groups held at the host centre, which strengthened her bonds with the local community. The value and care shown to her by the staff members helped Paige to develop a more positive self-image, which in turn gave her a renewed confidence.



Kick Arts

Kick Arts is a 12 week creative flexi-school programme for 11-16 year olds. Sessions are held during school time and last for five hours. Young people are referred to *Kick Arts* for a variety of reasons, including school refusing, high levels of exclusion and disengagement, or home schooling. *Kick Arts* begins with a two-day creative residency. OYAP artists and young leaders from the *Stepping Up* programme work intensively with participants, showcasing a wide range of art forms to spark young people's interests. A Lead Artist Educator and support workers identify each child's particular learning style, interests and talents. Based on these, OYAP bring in relevant artists to run workshops and mentoring sessions. At the end of the programme an exhibition is held to showcase the young people's work. The programme encourages collaboration between artists and participants whilst also aiming to be "*young person specific*", with the young people having autonomy, ownership and control over their own education. The Arts Award is also integrated into the *Kick Arts* model.

During the observed period (January 2015 to May 2015), *Kick Arts* was delivered in two different localities (The

Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford and a community centre in Banbury) with two different groups of young people and leaders. Both groups were attended regularly by all participants.

In the Banbury group, there were up to 11 participants, who had mostly been referred due to school refusing and/or high levels of exclusion and disengagement. Five young people attended 13/13 of the sessions, two attended 12/13, one attended 11/13, one attended 10/13 and one attended 9/13. The final participant withdrew from the programme due to moving schools, but had attended six sessions.

In the Oxford group, there were up to seven participants, two of whom were home schooled. The other participants had been referred due to the same reasons as the Banbury group. Different starting points (due to recruitment problems, late referrals and the entry of one participant from the Banbury group), meant that the number of sessions available to the young people ranged from ten to 14. Taking this into account, the attendance rates ranged from 73%-93%.



Stated goals

By allowing young people to choose their own curriculum, shaped and focussed by professional facilitators, the groups aim to help disengaged learners feel ownership of their own education. By visiting inspirational cultural venues and using newly learned creative skills, they develop a portfolio of work resulting in them achieving an Arts Award. Portfolios are displayed to teachers and parents at the end of the programme, providing opportunities for celebration and praise. Peer-to-peer learning is encouraged, improving confidence and self-esteem.

Other aims are to:

- reduce persistent absence;
- reduce exclusions from school;
- improve attendance and attainment of school refusers;
- and increase partnerships between schools and the cultural education providers.

The young people's experience

The Banbury and Oxford participants perceived the *Kick Arts* programme in similar terms, although the Oxford group discussed the additional advantage of being part of a smaller group. The benefits of having a smaller group size will be discussed briefly below.

A strong theme that emerged from interviews with the young people was the idea of respite. The groups seemingly provided respite to the young people in two ways.

Firstly, the young people described how the groups provided them with a time out from school, where they could work in a more relaxed, stress-free and open space:

"Sometimes you just need space, like you don't always need to be kept in one room. In school, they'll keep us in one room, but here they let us go outside and stuff." (Tony)

Secondly, the young people discussed the therapeutic qualities of the arts:

"It's almost like sort of therapy, like meditation of some kind of form, just being able to sit and get on with something you really love to do. And just you feel really good, and anything bad goes out of you." (Stefan)

"It [art] helps me distract myself from being anxious." (Maddie)

For many this feeling of respite was also linked to having the freedom to explore and experiment. The young people talked about being able to do something that they wanted to do, instead of a pre-set task. They gained autonomy and control over their education and were able to choose the activities that they wanted to participate in:

"...it can be quite a relaxing experience to be at Kick Arts, because you're just able to do whatever you want..." (Molly)

"You are free to do what you want to do, like in school if you wanted to do something, they'd be like 'OR you do this', but here if you want to do something they don't say, or you do this or try and persuade you to do something else they encourage you to do what you said you wanted to do." (Tony)

In connection with this, the young people valued the encouragement and support that they received from the leaders and the positive relationships and friendships that they were able to develop. The young people appreciated the non-judgmental atmosphere at *Kick Arts*, in that the participants were not pre-categorised or defined by former labels such as being a 'troublemaker'. One young person adopted a new name during the programme. Taken together, respite and positive relationships provided the young people with relief from the circumstances and labels that sustained their problems:

"...just being able to do what you want, being able to say like, be how you want and no one's really going to sort of say anything about it, 'cause like at school you'll come in wearing something different or with a different haircut, and you're inevitably going to get a bit of sort of someone sort of taking the mick a bit, or something like that. But here you can just be who you are. And I think everyone sort of gets that, and they are not going to say anything, because like I said no one wants to cause any bad vibrations in the atmosphere." (Stefan)

The young people talked about being treated as equals and spoken to "normally." They were able to find and use their own voice and talk to people in a new way:

"...the helpers here are different to teachers at school because you can kind of talk to them more..." (Felix)

"...we got more freedom, we can speak differently than we do in school, and here we speak in a different way..." (Chris)

The participants were respected and trusted and in turn learned to trust and respect others. This fostered a feeling of "acceptance" within the group:

"...I think I have picked up some people skills, just being able to talk to them [other young people], and trying not to be scary and judgmental..." (Molly)

This was felt most strongly in the Oxford group, where there were fewer participants. In the Oxford group the leaders ran team warm-up activities, which helped to foster a strong sense of 'group'. The small group size also enabled the leaders and artists to spend more time working intensively with the young people, often on a one-to-one level. The young people appreciated the calm environment that this created and enjoyed not *"[having] to share mentors as much."* In comparison, the larger group size in Banbury, made working intensively/one-to-one with the young people difficult. The leaders tried to overcome this by each adopting three to four young people to support, however they agreed that a smaller group may have been more manageable and potentially more beneficial for the young people.

Nonetheless, both groups provided a neutral space and opportunities for the young people to try new things. The leaders encouraged the young people to explore new ways of learning by adopting a "yes let's" attitude. The freedom to experiment paired with the non-judgmental attitude from the other young people and leaders removed the fear of failure that these young people often felt in school:

"At school you have to do a set thing and you can't do what you wanna do, and it has to be perfect. [At Kick Arts it]...doesn't matter what it turns out like." (Daisy)

"There's no right or wrong with art." (Daisy)

The chance to experiment also helped the young people to discover more about themselves and others. One of the leaders commented that experimenting with art provides an opportunity for:

"...experiencing yourself and seeing your impact on the world, on the materials around you, and on the people around you..."

The young people were able to act in a new way and try out being someone different to the person they were at school. Using different mediums of art, the participants learned to express their feelings and themselves:

[Film making] "...You can express, kind of like how you feel, and try out new things that you've thought. Like use your imagination." (Maddie)

This was further reflected in a comment from one of the leaders who said that the programme offered:

"...an opportunity to sort of take on a different role rather than being in the subordinate... they get a bit more chance to make decisions and lead a bit..."

Arts Award

Completing *Kick Arts* and an Arts Award also provided the participants with an opportunity to feel success. Sixteen young people achieved the award (2 Silver, 13 Bronze and 1 Discover). These were clearly valued:

"...I have a shiny certificate that I get to show off to my friends, make them a bit jealous. But I think it [will] be, kind of like, the award of it is going to help in later life, maybe on a CV, 'I got an Arts Award you know, I was 11, yeah 11, well I was 12 on the day but oh well, I was around 11'. I just think it will maybe help, if I get into programming, or art teacher or something like that." (Maddie)

"That I've got an award for it, and, and it's going to be something that colleges, university will be looking at to see like what I've done." (Harriet)

The exhibition held at the end of the project celebrated the participants' development and commitment to the programme. Parents, social workers and teachers were able to see and praise the progression of their children and pupils. They learned more about the children in their care and how they learn. This was also a time



when parents, teachers and social workers were able to provide feedback.

Taken together, these factors seemed to lead to what Cooper (1993:139) termed 'resignification'. Through interactions with the leaders, some of the young people at *Kick Arts* were introduced to positive images of themselves. These images were affirmed through constant praise and encouragement. The young people were able to reflect on past behaviours and problems, and began to see things in a more positive light. For some, this led to a change in their attitude or approach to learning/school, and/or a change in their behaviour:

"I feel a lot different about... [school] because I'm enjoying seeing my friends, I enjoy doing the work and it's a lot easier... you have less detentions and you don't, you're no longer an enemy of the teacher." (Felix)

"[I've learned to]... just to try different things, just to experiment more, instead of just being like 'Right I'm doing this, and this is how it's got to be done', just to be like 'OK I'm going to try this instead'." (Ashleigh)

They were also provided with opportunities to learn new skills and take on new challenges. This in turn increased their self-esteem, self-confidence, resilience and ability to face adversities:

"Well I always used to get anxious about things, which meant I had to go out of lessons and then the children would come up to me and tease me about it, but now I feel a bit stronger, and that I can stand up to them a bit more." (Maddie)

For some of the young people, these changes resulted in increased attendance and engagement in school and/or a reduction in the number of disciplinary actions or exclusions:

"...I think that because I've been at Kick Arts more often, I have felt that my brain has just completely just told me like go to school more than ever. And before I wasn't going to school, my attendance was in its 40s, and now it's up into its 70s to 80s and I've changed everything." (Harriet)

Further examples of resignification are highlighted in the *Kick Arts* vignettes.

Stefan

Stefan was a Year 9 student who was referred to *Kick Arts* due to being at risk of exclusion. As reported by him and his school, before attending *Kick Arts*, Stefan had been excluded/received behaviour sanctions on a number of occasions due to ongoing behavioural and engagement issues and struggling to respond appropriately to authority. During his time at *Kick Arts*, Stefan showed commitment to the project, attending 12 out of a possible 13 sessions. He displayed focus and enthusiasm for all of the activities and brought a real energy to the group. He listened and collaborated well with others and was able to build positive relationships with fellow peers and the *Kick Arts* leaders. Stefan valued the open, therapeutic and non-judgemental space that *Kick Arts* provided as well as the autonomy that he had over his learning:

"...he said that he feels like there's room to kind of explore and feel like you know whatever his opinion is, it's valued..." (Leader)

"...it's just, you have space, at school you don't. At school there's always, you're always looking around, checking if there's someone you don't wanna see... But here, you can just be in the space, and you're in space."

"...they [leaders] get us, us kids, I guess. At school I don't think, well maybe they do, but they are not very good at showing it, but they get that we, sometimes we just enjoy being able to do what we want and I think they... try their best to be able to give us that, to give us a break from whatever we are going through, and it's really helpful with everything."

"...at school you get a lot of like bullies and get a lot of sort of people just making problems out of the smallest things, and just like looking for excuses to like find a victim... [At Kick Arts] no one does that. 'Cause I feel like it has probably happened to everyone here."

Through exploring, experimenting and trying new things Stefan was able to learn more about himself and others:

"Because you learn, you learn about sort of who you are. Who everyone else is, how the world is, and it's just a really good feeling."

He discovered a passion for photography and film and became driven to pursue a career in the arts. He gained new role models and appreciated all the support that the leaders gave him:

"...we were sat outside and he said if it wasn't for me and Kick Arts, he wouldn't know what to do and he was really thankful for it. Because now when he goes home he knows what to do and that's to grab his camera. I'll never forget those words, grab his camera and just take photos..." (Leader)

"...I'm pretty sure most of us here will probably go into some kind of future to do with the arts... But here what we learn, we wanna learn, and we care about it, and we're going to take it into the future with us, and we aren't just going to leave it behind because we don't care."

Kick Arts also provided Stefan with respite from his problems and the opportunity to reflect on his past behaviours:

"...while I've been at Kick Arts, I've felt not only just sort of peaceful, I've also sort of had, everything that I've wanted to sort of do, and get out of me, it's just sort of come out. And while I've been at school, and I've just had things on my mind and I've just been able to think about them here, I've been able to do things that I'm not able to at school. And it's just come gushing out like a waterfall."

As a consequence of the above, Stefan seemed to undergo a process of resignification. He was introduced to a new image of himself and developed resilience. He talked about how the "memories" and tools that he gained from Kick Arts will help him to face future challenges. He reported both a change in his behaviour and a change in his perspective towards learning:

"[I've learned]...a lot of life lessons... [Leader] has taught me a lot about how to like sort of be the best person you can be, and be nice to everyone, work hard, you know... And like no matter how much you don't like someone, you can be nice to them and it's not going to hurt you or them, but sort of starting an argument or not liking someone that will create a tension..."

"...Kick Arts has taught me that to learn is really important. And there's obviously going to be things that I don't really enjoy. Like there is here, I mean there are things that I don't enjoy. But there's always things that you will. And when you think about that, you just know that there's no point in being sort of moody or upset about anything because everyone is going to go through things that they don't like, but as long as you get like, as long as you're happy in the end, then... it's worth it."

"...I feel like I already have [changed perspective], just sort of everything's more positive, 'cause I look at it in a better way now, not in the old way, that I used to like, I used to only notice the bad things, but now I only notice the good things."

His change in behaviour and attitude resulted in Stefan receiving fewer behaviour sanctions at school. Stefan stated that since being at Kick Arts he had received no exclusions and fewer detentions:

"I've only got one detention in the last three weeks, I'm quite proud of myself."

Stefan gained a real sense of success from the process. He achieved a Bronze Arts Award accreditation and his progress was recognised by his family and the leaders. OYAP hoped to continue to support Stefan in his development and to invite him to act as a 'model-peer' on future projects.

His mother described Kick Arts as "A life changing experience!" and one of the Kick Arts leaders commented:

"Stefan is unrecognisable from his referral sheet... I think of all the people that have come through Kick Arts, he's the one I've found that's really found who he is, in this process. He really has found who he is."

Barriers and solutions

The following issues were raised by either the group leaders or participants as areas for future development.

Communication and referrals:

- The matching of need with provision is paramount to success in any intervention with vulnerable young people who by very definition may not be as resilient as their peers. Whilst the descriptions we provided above show examples of positive engagement, it must be noted that this was not the case for a minority. The complex needs of these young people could not be met by the provision due to personal issues outside of the project. When making referrals, schools must be fully informed about the project and take into account the interests and circumstances of their pupils. Each referred young person should as a minimum have an interest in the arts.
- It would be beneficial for organisations/interventions and schools working with the participants to liaise with each other, for example, through circulating termly updates.
- Engagement of the most reluctant participants was increased when the leaders conducted home visits, where the young people could discuss their needs. It would be beneficial for at least one of the leaders to meet with/contact each participant before the programme begins so that they have a point of contact during their first session.

Structural considerations:

- The space, group size, timing and length of the sessions and availability of resources all affected the effectiveness of the intervention. The optimum number of participants appeared to be around eight young people. The Pitt Rivers Museum seemed to provide the most successful space, as it was large, light, had good storage and excellent resources. The intervention may benefit from lasting for at least two terms.
- For some young people the Arts Award provided the structure that they needed and all were able to achieve an award. However, some young people and leaders found certain aspects of the Arts Award challenging given the time constraints. If the *Kick Arts* programme was spread over different terms, it is possible that these tensions could be removed.
- Group warm-up activities seemed to foster a strong sense of 'group'. Further *Kick Arts* interventions may benefit from the integration of such activities into the

programme, where appropriate to the needs and sensitivities of the cohort members.

Leadership:

- Due to the demands of the *Kick Arts* groups, the Lead Artist Educators were often required to adopt management or pastoral roles during the sessions. Future groups could benefit from having a trained onsite key worker/youth worker to provide pastoral care. This would ensure that the needs of the young people were being met by a suitably trained professional and would allow the Lead Artist Educators to dedicate their time to creating art with the young people.
- Debriefing at the end of sessions helped the leaders to reflect and plan future sessions. By communicating with each other they were able to source materials for following weeks and were attentive to the needs of each young person.

Reflection and progression:

- As mentioned earlier, the *Kick Arts* groups provided some of the young people with time to reflect on their past behaviours and experiences. The groups could further aid this reflection process by building in time to discuss with the young people their feelings about going back to school and how they will be able to use the skills that they have learned. This could be part of the role for the onsite key worker/youth worker. Collaboration between the *Kick Arts* leaders, onsite key worker/youth worker and appropriate staff at the referring schools would be helpful to ensure that the skills and aptitudes developed by the young people are fed back and understood by their schools and teachers. This could help to ease the young people's transition back to school and ensure appropriate future provision is provided.
- Follow up sessions were run for the young people before the final exhibition. This provided time for the young people to finish their Arts Awards. For the Banbury group, the sessions took place in their schools, which may have aided the transition back into school for some of the young people.
- OYAP try to provide progression pathways for the *Kick Arts* participants and some of the participants went on to attend other OYAP programmes. The leaders have discussed inviting past participants to act as peer mentors in future sessions. Similarly, through their involvement in *Kick Arts*, the young leaders from the OYAP programme *Stepping Up* gained experience as arts educators.

Recommendations

- Maintain a strict referral process to ensure provision matches need.
 - Increase communication between all organisations working with the young people. Provide regular feedback.
 - At least one leader should meet with/contact the young people and their schools prior to the intervention. This will provide the opportunity to check whether the programme is right for them and ensure the young people have a point of contact during the first session.
 - Maintain optimal group sizes of around eight young people. This would be dependent on staff student ratios, size of space and funding.
 - Increase the length of the programme to two to three terms.
 - Establish the programme as an ongoing service provision, rather than a time-limited one-off course, with four referral points a year; and a one, two or three day a week model, offering ongoing progression routes through the Arts Award levels.
 - Develop ‘themed’ *Kick Arts*: for example, allowing those interested in building and making with tools and materials the chance to work on design and build projects with appropriately skilled artists and makers.
 - Integrate warm-up activities, where appropriate, into the programme to help the participants to build relationships and learn to collaborate.
 - Continue to provide progression pathways for the young people.
 - Funding permitting, secure a large permanent space for *Kick Arts* to be held, with ample storage and a richness and quality of materials and equipment.
- Continued links with museums and other cultural resources would also be beneficial.
 - Make sure that the leaders and young people are comfortable with the Arts Award process through providing thorough inductions and supervision.
 - If viable, employ an onsite key worker/youth worker to provide more targeted support and pastoral care. If not viable ensure that there is clarity on role definition for the Lead Artist Educators and provide further training in safeguarding etc. if needed.
 - Build into the end of the model more time for reflection.
 - Schools can benefit from drawing on the expertise of the *Kick Arts* leaders. Lead Artist Educators or key workers should try to advocate for the participants on their return to school, by helping to feedback the young peoples’ preferred ways of working and if necessary advising on future provisions. Schools must also play a role in seeking this information.

Daisy

Daisy was a Year 9 student who was referred to *Kick Arts* due to behavioural and emotional problems and low school attendance/engagement. Daisy had been through many difficult experiences in both her personal and school life and was in residential care. At the beginning of the *Kick Arts* process, Daisy was very closed and abstained from participating in the activities. She had low self-confidence and self-esteem. She often felt frustrated and displayed a negative attitude towards others and the programme. However, throughout the programme, Daisy became increasingly engaged and grew in confidence in her own ability. During the programme, she was invited to join the Oxford group in addition to attending the sessions in Banbury. She adapted well to the new group and was able to quickly build positive relationships with the leaders and young people. Daisy showed real commitment to the programme, attending 24 out of a possible 25 sessions.

Daisy valued the continued support of the leaders and their “yes let’s” attitude. She enjoyed being able to explore and experiment in a non-judgemental atmosphere. Through experimenting, Daisy learned that it is OK to make mistakes, which in turn increased her resilience and decreased her fear of failure:

“Like when you are doing art, like if you picture it and it don’t turn out like how you picture it, don’t like stress about it, it will still be good.”

She often showed motivation and determination to finish activities and on different occasions cooperated with others to successfully complete tasks.

At *Kick Arts* Daisy also developed a passion for songwriting. She worked with different musicians to produce and record a song. For Daisy, songwriting offered her a chance to express herself and reflect on things that she or those close to her had been through:

"You can express yourself... Like how you feel."

"...just like stuff that's happening in your life, you can relate to music..."

Through participating in *Kick Arts*, Daisy also gained access to other programmes run by OYAP, including an event where she was able to continue to develop her songwriting skills.

Additionally, Daisy displayed a change in her behaviour and attitude to others:

"I respect people more."

The acceptance shown to her in the groups helped her to learn to accept others:

"Just like not judging people straight away."

Overall, the sessions seemed to give Daisy the opportunity to try out being 'Other'. Through conversations and working with the leaders and other young people, Daisy was able to 'open up' and gained a more positive self-image.

Daisy also felt a true sense of achievement and pride from the programme. Due to the quality and amount of work that she produced, she was able to complete two Bronze Arts Awards. Furthermore, at the end of the programme she voluntarily wrote and performed a speech:

"We have enjoyed our weeks at Kick Arts as we have created memories and learned new talents that we didn't know we had. We have learned there is no right or wrong in art. We have made new friends. I like doing art."

She also stood and watched her music video being played, an experience that had proved too difficult in previous weeks. Moreover, Daisy gifted a piece of her artwork to a member of staff at her school, who decided to display this piece of art in her office, a place in which Daisy is a regular visitor.

All of the above demonstrate a huge development in Daisy's self-confidence and self-esteem, and indicate that she underwent a process of resignification. One of the leaders commented:

"...for me, Daisy was a bit of a stand out, if [you] think of the first week when she came, and she wouldn't talk to anyone, she wouldn't do any animation, she's standing up at the end giving a presentation and standing there when her songs playing. Yeah it was massive."

The member of staff from her school also commented:

"It's improved her self-esteem and confidence."

"At the beginning she wouldn't have stood up and given that speech."

After the end of *Kick Arts*, Daisy continued to work with OYAP by attending a *Youth Action Team*, where she took part in a film that the group produced. This further demonstrates her development and increased self-confidence.

Summary

The arts projects run by OYAP offered some young people the opportunity to see themselves as something other than they had become. Instead of labels such as being 'troubled' or 'at risk of failure' the projects allowed young people to become a success in a completely different role: a photographer, a songwriter or an artist. This involved a process of '*resignification*' (Cooper, 1993:139) where this success enabled them to re-evaluate and alter their participation and engagement in society. One of the strengths of OYAP is the diversity of activities on offer, which provide a variety of opportunities for participants to find a match for their interests. Through working with adult professional artists and young leaders from a range of arts backgrounds, young people are able to form more positive relationships with both adults and their peers. This in turn may lead some to feel more

confident in other social situations such as school, home or in the local community. Indeed some young people reported improved attendance and engagement at school as a result of their engagement in the arts projects.

The OYAP projects offered some young people the opportunity to:

- change their attitude or approach to learning and, in some cases, school;
- positively change their behaviour;
- improve their ability to face adversity;
- increase their confidence;
- acquire tools for living;
- and raise their aspirations.



Conclusion

In this study we have gathered young people's accounts of their experience of engaging in drama and other related arts activities offered by Pegasus Theatre and OYAP Trust. The young people we spoke with have personal histories of difficulty in reconciling the tensions and dilemmas that they have encountered in the social world of schooling and their communities. These collisions between the personal and the collective worlds are at one moment social and at another moment cultural and they have a cumulative effect over time. For these young people life is experienced through a complex and sometimes chaotic lens.

The interventions that the arts organisations offered young people provided alternatives to these personal, cultural and historical ways of experiencing the world. Through offering the possibility of different forms of experience, of experimenting with other identities, they provided opportunities for reflection and personal transformation. These experiences of being 'Other' offered a means of engaging in the social world through a new lens of experience. The arts based projects helped disengaged young people by replacing a difficult current social situation of development with a new social situation of development based on increased self-esteem and more positive social interaction.



Figure 1: Transforming a social situation

The arts based organisations face the dual challenge of relating to a diversity of need and the difficulty of matching need with provision particularly in larger groups. This raises issues about the importance of an effective referral process from schools and other agencies.

The organisations succeed in their aims through offering young people:

- respite from a difficult social situation;
- non-judgmental settings;
- resignification of learning and attitudes to adults/teachers;
- positive relationships;
- autonomy;
- resilience;
- and a set of emotional tools to cope with life.

We cannot overstate the importance of the process of resignification for the young people in developing new ways of being and of viewing themselves. We argue that this is captured precisely in Cooper's (1993) definition which we have cited earlier in the text.

The participants in these programmes were identified before intervention as being at risk of losing the most fundamental characteristics that enable active involvement in society: cooperation in groups; a sense of investment in a communal process; and the ability to engage productively with the societal structures which they find themselves within. Arts based projects, led by skilled practitioners in arts and pedagogy, enable these young people to acquire tools for self-transformation. Participation in these arts based programmes has the potential to change young people's lives.

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OYAP Trust website: <http://www.oyap.org.uk/>

Pegasus Theatre website: <http://www.pegasustheatre.org.uk/>

