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'It's like exercise for your soul': how participation in youth arts activities contributes to young people's wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Active participation in organised youth arts activities is generally considered 'good' for young peoples' social and emotional wellbeing. There is, however, less known about *how* youth arts participation helps to create wellbeing benefits. This paper details a retrospective narrative study that sought to understand not only what wellbeing benefits 17 participants attributed to youth arts activity, but more specifically, how these outcomes occurred. The concept of liminality, within a spaces of wellbeing approach, is used as a framework to explore and understand participant's stories of their time at Corrugated Iron Youth Arts, in Darwin, Australia. A pattern of transformation involving three phases emerged through an analysis of participant stories. This involved (1) joining in, (2) developing skills and gaining experience, and (3) becoming a 'real' performer. These stages have strong resonance with contemporary conceptualisations of liminal experiences, and provide further evidence for the value of youth arts activity as a space for the development of social and emotional wellbeing.

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Introduction

Participation in organised youth arts activity has been found, for the most part, to improve aspects of young people's social and emotional wellbeing. Wellbeing benefits have been associated with dance (Gardner, Komesaroff, and Fensham 2008; Oliver 2009), theatre (Bradley, Deighton, and Selby 2004; James 2005) singing (Hampshire and Matthijsse 2010), as well as combinations of these and other art forms (Grunstein and Nutbeam 2007; Hadland and Stickley 2010; Karkou and Glasman 2004; South 2006; Wright et al. 2006). Youth arts activities are thought to contribute to self-confidence and self-esteem (Bungay and Vella-Burrows 2013), 'emotional/mental health, family reintegration, employment options, suicide prevention and crime prevention' (Mills and Brown 2004 in Houbolt 2010, 48).

There is however, less understanding of how wellbeing benefits occur in youth arts participation. In this paper we present a qualitative study using narrative methods to explore the processes of participation in youth arts activities (theatre and circus) in an attempt to understand how wellbeing benefits occur. We have embraced a 'spaces of wellbeing'

approach to frame our understanding, and within this adopt Atkinson and Robson's (2012) use of the concept of liminality to explore how youth arts activity can generate spaces of wellbeing. These concepts are explained and literature on the benefits of youth arts participation is overviewed. The narrative research method is described before we present our findings as a three-part 'process' story. We consider our findings in relation to the literature, and the concept of liminality before returning the idea of youth arts as a space of wellbeing.

Background – youth arts and wellbeing

The role of the arts in the wellbeing of individuals, groups and communities has been increasingly described and debated over recent decades. While there is ongoing concern about what constitutes evidence in the field, (Clift 2012; Fox 2013; Matarasso 1997; Raw et al. 2012) there is a cautious acceptance that participation in arts can be good for you. Multiple studies have highlighted the positive effects of community arts participation (Daykin et al. 2008; Elphick 1980; Kay 2000; Lowe 2000; McHenry 2009). These include increases in self-esteem, confidence, artistic skills, communication skills, the creation of positive social connections, feelings of belonging and sense of identity and community.

Similar benefits can also be found in youth specific arts participation (for example: Beare and Belliveau 2007; Cassidy and Watts 2004; Hager 2010; Mattingly 2001). Building on earlier work by Daykin et al. (2008), Bungay and Vella-Burrows (2013) reviewed 20 studies that explored the effects of participation in extra curricula creative activities (music, dance, singing, drama and visual arts) on the health and well-being of children aged between 11 and 18 years. They found positive effects 'on behavioural changes, self-confidence, self-esteem, levels of knowledge and physical activity' (Bungay and Vella-Burrows 2013, 44). Structured youth arts activities have also been found to provide supportive relationships, a sense of belonging, and a commitment to school or group (Barrett and Smigiel 2007; Kemp 2006; Traves, Harré, and Overall 2012). A shared love of performing can forge strong bonds between young people and create meaning in their lives (Barrett and Smigiel 2007).

How and why these positive impacts occur is less well understood. Some argue that the possibility of creating and/or co-authoring stories is a key element of transformative youth arts projects. In youth arts there is potential for relationships between power, authority and voice to be exposed and utilised in identity formation and re-formation through story. Projects that open up space for meaningful, creative expression and that incorporate 're-authoring and co-authoring of alternative stories and preferred identities (with the potential power of audience as witness', can change the way young people see themselves and others (Stiles 2004 in Houbolt 2010, 48). The re-constructing of personal and group identity through activities promoting self-expression, reflection and self-understanding has been noted by authors in the USA and UK as a key element of increasing self-esteem in young people (Kemp 2006; Nathan 2013).

Youth arts activities have been found to offer young people emotionally diverse experiences (Larson and Brown 2007; Sinclair 1997 in Traves, Harré, and Overall 2012, 156). These can be particularly intense, providing emotional highs or 'hot spots' which are characteristic of a performing arts environment (Dworkin, Reed, and Hansen 2003; Hansen, Larson,

and Dworkin 2003; Larson and Brown 2007). As Trayer, Harré, and Overall (2012, 157) assert, these experiences 'tend to be highly appealing to young people', and can create strong and lasting connections. Being treated like an adult, having a sense of freedom and control are also elements of arts participation which may appeal to young people. Trayer, Harré, and Overall (2012, 156) point out that 'Several studies have shown that structured youth activities provide a powerful context in which young people can develop the competencies needed for adulthood'. The desire to be challenged artistically and physically and striving for 'professionalism' are also aspects of structured youth arts activity that are associated with promoting wellbeing (Barrett and Smigiel 2007; Trayer, Harré, and Overall 2012).

Finding a safe place to 'be yourself' is another reason why youth arts activities are beneficial to young people (Trayer, Harré, and Overall 2012, 174). Being able to create art with others requires the ability to be open, spontaneous and embrace playfulness (Karkou and Glasman 2004, 61). The creation of a welcoming environment, with a clear programme structure and a non-judgemental atmosphere, is also thought to enhance feelings of safety and encourage creativity and participation (Karkou and Glasman 2004, 61). Others have highlighted that youth theatre can create an environment of risk-taking, and freedom to explore the 'the socially unacceptable and tiresome elements of 'teenhood'' (McDonald 2006, 8).

While literature about youth arts mostly assumes a positive association between wellbeing and participation, some authors have highlighted more challenging aspects such as stress, boredom, anxiety, and conflict (Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin 2003). Hampshire and Matthijsse (2010) looked through the frame of social capital to provide a more complex understanding of *who* benefits from participation in youth arts. Using insights from critical theory (specifically the work of Bourdieu), Hampshire and Matthijsse (2010, 708) found that young people with 'relatively privileged backgrounds' (particularly females) had positive experiences, gained new friends and increased confidence. For others the experience of participation was more complex, and could involve the risk of isolation from existing peer groups and social networks.

Others have pointed to problems with research and evaluation about arts programmes. It has been argued that too strong a focus on positive outcomes has thwarted a serious consideration of the 'pathways and processes' through which youth arts participation might impact wellbeing (Daykin 2007). Raw et al. (2012) argue that a preoccupation with debate over definitions and acceptable evidence in the arts and health field, has led to a lack of descriptions, analysis and theorising about the mechanisms of practice. In summary, it is generally accepted that participating in youth arts can be good for young people, yet there is less knowledge about *how* benefits occur.

In this paper we seek to understand the wellbeing benefits people attribute to their participation in youth arts activity, and how any attributed benefits occurred. Our interest in the topic derives from a number of experiences. Gretchen has been a performing musician and song-writer for over 30 years and as academic has been interested in community arts and wellbeing for ten years. Jane has been the executive producer of Corrugated Iron Youth Arts (CIYA) for the past decade and has been delivering arts projects with a focus on active community participation and supporting young people and early career artists for over 25 years. Our research partnership stemmed from a mutual seeking of knowledge for practice improvement and theory development.

Defining key concepts

Youth arts

Youth arts is an extra-curricula activity that involves young people aged 12–26 years. Activities focus on creating, participating and/or engaging in facilitated artistic or cultural activity. The activities explored in this paper are drama and circus; involving skills training workshops, story development and script writing, rehearsals, performances, direction, light and sound set up and operation, stage management, publicity and promotion.

Wellbeing – A spatial and relational approach

There are multiple approaches to defining wellbeing, with most definitions encompassing the physical, emotional, social, economic and spiritual aspects of life (Hamilton and Redmond 2010). Atkinson (2013) argues that many contemporary conceptualizations of 'components approach' (Atkinson and Joyce 2011; Atkinson, Fuller, and Painter 2012). This approach has three problematic features. 'Identification and theorization of the independent elements that comprise wellbeing', an understanding that wellbeing is 'a quality that inheres to the individual' and a growing use of the term as a 'synonym for health' (Atkinson 2013, 3–4). A conceptualisation of wellbeing as situated and relational is posited by Fleuret and Atkinson (2007), developed further by Atkinson (2013) and later Atkinson and Scott (2015). In this approach, subjective 'effect of complex relations, constituted and constitutive of both place and time, as assemblage and as always becoming' (Atkinson and Scott 2015, 3). Wellbeing is an effect of the spaces we inhabit, the elements and entities in the spaces, and the relationships between these. This conceptualisation of wellbeing informs what Fleuret and Atkinson (2007) call the 'spaces of wellbeing' approach. Such an approach has four 'interrelated spaces of resource' within which the work of a range of theorists and researchers can be integrated: 'capabilities (Nussbaum 2000), social integration (Putnam 2001; Wilkinson and Marmot 2003), security (Shaw 2004) and therapeutic processes (Conradson 2005; Smyth 2005).' (Atkinson 2013, 7).

In an exploration of how positive wellbeing benefits were attained through young people's participation in arts programmes, Atkinson and Robson (2012) proposed that Turner's theory of liminality could provide a useful frame for analysis, particularly when taking a 'spaces of wellbeing' approach (Atkinson and Robson 2012, 1348). We have followed Atkinson and Robson's (2012) example, and adopted the concept of liminality as a way to help us understand what occurs in the youth arts space in enhancing wellbeing.

Liminality

Liminality originally described the middle phase of a three-part 'rite of passage' process that is key to individual social or spiritual transformation. The idea was first articulated by van Gennep (1908/1984) who proposed that such transformations start with a pre-liminal phase in which a separation from usual social life occurs. This is followed by the liminal phase where transition occurs through formalised rituals and process that bring disruption and challenge. The process ends in a postliminal phase of reincorporation of the transformed individual into daily life. The middle, liminal stage, was further developed through application to post-industrial societies by Turner (1969, 1974, 1982, 1994).

It has been described as a social limbo (Turner 1982) in which 'specific spaces of betweenness' are created (Moran 2013, 342). While original conceptualisations of liminality involve one long period of separation from the norms of everyday social life, evolving understandings have shifted to make room for the transformations that can occur through consistent participation in short, repeated separations. This allows for an analysis of the transformative processes that may occur more gradually, over extended time periods (Atkinson and Robson 2012).

Turner identified the time of liminality as 'anti-structure' (1974). Social structure is an observable, regular, uniform patterning of actions that are well understood in a given society (Turner 1974). Anti-structure is a time where such patterning is no longer certain, and assumptions about the world are challenged. This dissolution of the known way of things is disorientating, creating a fluid, unknown situation which provides space for new ways of being and doing. Anti-structure is the 'threshold of change across which we step and over which we move' (Elliot 2011, 97). Within the liminal time and space, the concept of 'communitas' is critical. This involves the spontaneous creation of new ways for people to relate to one another based on trust and equality, rather than on pre-existing social roles and rules. Communitas is disruptive because it involves the formation of relationships that are 'free from the culturally defined encumbrances of (his) role, status, reputation, class, caste, sex or other structural niche' (Turner 1982, 48). Strong bonds are formed on the basis of the shared rituals and processes. Communitas may be short-lived, but is critical to the liminal experience.

Recognising the differences in social structures and processes between the pre- and post-industrial societies, Turner (1974, 1982) developed the idea of 'liminoid' as a way of understanding liminal-like experience 'in settings where entry and participation are optional' (Atkinson and Robson 2012). Liminoid 'resembles without being identical with 'liminal'' (Turner 1974, 64) in that liminal qualities are retained, with the concept of anti-structure being particularly highlighted. The key differences are that liminal experiences are traditionally a ritualised, socially structured part of a compulsory rite of passage. In the associated post-liminal phase an individual is reintegrated into a social system both expecting, and accepting of, this change. A liminoid experience on the other hand, is not part of a ritual sequence but a matter of choice (perhaps a leisure or play activity that may still have transformative value) (Thomassen and Balle 2012).

Liminality has been used to understand the processes of participation of young people in youth development programmes (Foster and McCabe 2015; Nolas 2014). In the arts arena, it has provided insight into the processes of change that occur for artists in and through the creation of their art (Elliot 2011). In a consideration of how we might 'confront the drive for evidence' for the wellbeing value of arts practice, Raw et al. (2012) discuss the potential of the concept of liminality (highlighting the work of Atkinson and Robson later published in 2012) for building theory about the function of art making in relation to health.

Method

A qualitative, narrative method that allows for a deep exploration of stories about youth arts participation (Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach, and Zilber 1998) was selected for this study as it is effective in developing a rich understanding of experiences. Kohler Riessman

(2008) advocates narrative analysis as a way of conducting case-centred research where understandings of human agency, identity and culture are sought. We have taken a retrospective or 'looking back' approach, so that participants were able to reflect on at least two years of youth arts activity in order to be able to understand a process of participation. Retrospective qualitative research has been used to study experiences of young people who are now older (in some cases many decades older) in a range of contexts (for example: Baker 2005; Chama and Ramirez 2014; Spencer et al. 2016). Ethical approval to conduct the research was received by the Charles Darwin University Ethics Committee.

A research partnership between Charles Darwin University and Corrugated Iron Youth Arts (CIYA) provided access to potential participants. CIYA has been operating for over 30 years, and is the only youth arts company in the 'Top End' of the Northern Territory of Australia. CIYA provide an annual workshop programme in drama and circus skills, school holiday arts programmes, community outreach arts and theatre programmes, as well as producing a range of large and small performances (theatre, circus, comedy) each year.

A combination of purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used (Tranter 2010). This provided access to a diverse range of adult participants who participated in CIYA projects for at least two years when there were between the ages of 12 and 26. Jane, who is the Executive Producer of CIYA, used the organisations' networks to contact people who had participated in CIYA at different time periods (from the 1980s to the present time) and for whom current contact details were available. Information about the study was also included in the CIYA newsletter. A total of 23 people initially expressed interest in being interviewed; due to availability issues, 17 were interviewed by Gretchen. Only people over the age of 18 were able to participate, as they needed to be able to reflectively 'look back' at their time in youth arts. We acknowledge that this sampling approach is likely to provide participants who are still connected with the youth arts sector in some way, and therefore may be more likely to have had positive experiences.

Most interviews took place in person, with five occurring via Skype or telephone. Interviews were unstructured, with five topic areas used to elicit a range of stories (how and why people joined youth arts activities, stories about change or development, things they attribute to their time in youth arts, what stories might they tell others about the benefits and challenges of participation, what are the standout memories). Interviews ranged from 40 to 75 min in length, they were audio recorded and later transcribed. Participants were emailed a copy of their interview transcript to check for accuracy.

Analysis

A categorical content approach to narrative analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach, and Zilber 1998; Sarvimäki 2015) was considered appropriate for this study as it allows for the consideration of multiple texts (or cases) concerned with a particular phenomenon. This approach involves searching for themes across many people's stories (Kohler Riessman 2008) to formulate a common story. The analysis involved a process of reading and re-reading the transcripts with two main questions in mind. What were the stories about outcomes of participation in youth arts, and what were the stories about the processes involved? Outcomes identified by participants were documented from all interviews,

and coded thematically. Process or 'how' stories were drawn inductively from each interview then compared across interviews. Emerging themes, then an emergent common story, were developed. The common story was emailed to participants to check that it resonated with their own experiences. Participants were asked to let us know if they had any comments or feedback. Ten participants responded with positive comments, agreeing with our analysis. Two participants requested clarification around remaining anonymous, and five did not reply.

Findings

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants and the findings. The table is ordered according to the decade participants began their involvement with CIYA. Outcome and process theme codes are listed for each of the 17 participants. Seven participants were male and ten were female. They were aged between 10 and 22 years when they were involved in CIYA activities and their involvement occurred from the mid 1980s through to 2012. The average number of years of participation was five, with a range of two to ten years. Participants had been involved in regular theatre workshop programmes and all had participated in at least one large production. Some participants were also involved in circus, clowning or dance workshops and performances. Participants' ages at the time of interview ranged from 18 to 45 years and none were attending CIYA activities at the time of interview. As **Table 2** demonstrates, 11 of the 17 participants (64%) have continued their participation in the arts, either as a career or recreational activity. **Table 2** also highlights that current participation in the arts is less for those who were involved in youth arts longer ago (in the 1980s) while the four participants who were involved most recently, are still engaged in the arts.

The benefits participants associated with participation (outcomes)

Participants felt that involvement in youth arts generally provided beneficial outcomes. These six outcomes, presented in order of how many participants discussed them, are listed below. The number of participants who expressed each outcome is included in brackets, and direct quotes are in italics.

- (1) Social connection (14 people). A '*feeling of belonging*' and a '*sense of community*'. The formation of '*lifelong friendships*' and '*support*'.
- (2) Confidence (13 people). Gaining '*self-confidence*' and '*social confidence*'.
- (3) Self-knowledge/identity (11 people). A sense of '*self-development*', '*realising my capabilities*', critical thinking skills, recognising their '*unique identity*' and for some, forming '*a clear direction*'.
- (4) Interpersonal skills (10 people). The development of '*leadership skills*', '*empathy*', '*creative thinking*', and '*communication skills*'.
- (5) Improved mental health (7 people). The experience of '*reduced anxiety*', '*emotional health*' and a feeling of '*satisfaction and aliveness*'.
- (6) A new 'physicality' (4 people). Experiencing '*physical fitness*', and gaining a positive '*body awareness*'.

Table 1. Participant overview.

| ID. | M/F | Type of activity | Time/length of Participation at CIYA | Age of participation | Process codes | Outcome Codes | Current participation |
|-----|-----|--|--------------------------------------|----------------------|---|----------------|-----------------------|
| 4 | F | Clowning, Acrobatic, & Theatre workshops. | 1980s (4 years) | 14–18 years old. | Phase 1: A. Phase 2: D, E, G, H, I, J. Phase 3: K, L. | 1, 3, 5. | No |
| 9 | M | Theatre & circus Productions. | 1980s (2 years) | 16–18 years old. | Phase 1: A, C. Phase 2: D, F, H. Phase 3: K, M. | 1, 3, 4, 5, 6. | Yes |
| 12 | M | Theatre workshops and productions. | 1980s. (3 years) | 16–19 years old | Phase 1: B, C. Phase 2: D, E, F, G, H, I, J. Phase 3: K. | 3, 4, 5, 6. | Yes |
| 13 | M | Theatre and circus workshops and productions. | 1980s–1990s. (8 years) | 7–15 years old. | Phase 1: A, B, C. Phase 2: D, E, F, G, H, J. Phase 3: K, L. | 1, 2, 4. | No |
| 17 | F | Theatre and circus workshops and performances. | 1980s–1990s. (4 years) | 14–18 years old. | Phase 1: A, B. Phase 2: D, E, F, G, H, J. Phase 3: K, L, M. | 1, 2. | No. |
| 1 | F | Theatre workshops. Theatre productions. | 1990s (2 years) | 16–17 years old | Phase 1: B. Phase 2: E, I, G, Phase 3: L | 1, 2, 4. | No |
| 2 | M | Theatre workshops. Theatre productions. | 1990s–2000s (4 years) | 13–17 years old | Phase 1: A, C. Phase 2: D, E, F, H. Phase 3: K, L. | 1, 2, 3. | Yes |
| 3 | F | Theatre & Acrobatic workshops. Theatre productions. | 1990s (8 years) | 12–20 years old | Phase 1: A, B. Phase 2: D, F, G, J. Phase 3: K, L. | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. | Yes. |
| 5 | F | Theatre workshops. Theatre productions. | 1990s (5 years) | 11–16 years old | Phase 1: A, B, C. Phase 2: D, F, G, I. Phase 3: K, M. | 2, 3, 4. | No |
| 7 | F | Theatre workshops Theatre production | 1990s. (2 years) | 10–12 years old. | Phase 1: C. Phase 2: D, G. Phase 3: K. | 3. | Yes |
| 6 | M | Circus and theatre workshops Theatre and circus productions. | 2000s (6 years) | 10–16 years old | Phase 1: A, B, C. Phase 2: E, F, J. Phase 3: L, M. | 1, 2, 3. | Hobby |
| 11 | F | Theatre and dance workshops and productions. | 1990s. (8 years) | 12–20 years old | Phase 1: B, C. Phase 2: D, E, F, H, I. Phase 3: K, L, M. | 1, 2, 5. | Hobby |

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

| ID. | M/F | Type of activity | Time/length of Participation at CIYA | Age of participation | Process codes | Outcome Codes | Current participation |
|-----|-----|---|--------------------------------------|----------------------|---|----------------|-----------------------|
| 15 | F | Theatre workshops and a production | 1990s. (5 years with breaks) | 10–15 years old. | Phase 1: A, B, C. Phase 2: D, E, H. Phase 3: K. | 1, 2, 4. | No. |
| 16 | F | Theatre workshops and productions | 1990s (8 years) | 10–18 years old. | Phase 1: A. Phase 2: D, E, F, I, Phase 3: K, L, M. | 1, 2, 4, 5, 6. | Yes |
| 8 | M | Theatre workshops. Theatre productions | 2000s. (7 years) | 11–18 years old | Phase 1: A, C. Phase 2: D, G, I. Phase 3: K, L, M. | 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. | Hobby |
| 10 | M | Circus, acrobatic, dance and theatre workshops and productions. | 2000s (10 years) | 10–22 years old | Phase 1: A, B, C. Phase 2: D, E, F, G, H, J. Phase 3: L, M. | 1, 2, 3, 6. | Yes |
| 14 | F | Theatre workshops and productions | 2000s (4 years with breaks) | 10–14 years old. | Phase 1: A, B. Phase 2: D, E, F, G, H, I. Phase 3: K, L, M. | 1, 2, 3, 4. | Yes. |

Process Key:

- A 'Finding my people'
- B Exposure to different others
- C Fun
- D Freedom, safety, risk
- E Treated 'like an adult'
- F Physical spaces to explore
- G Intense/challenging relationships
- H Body learning
- I Different skin
- J Shared achievement
- K Realising you have 'real skills'
- L 'Exercise for you soul'
- M Eyes of others.

Outcome Key:

- 1 Social connection
- 2 Confidence
- 3 Self-knowledge/identity
- 4 Interpersonal skills
- 5 Improved mental health
- 6 A new 'physicality'.

Table 2. Decade of involvement and current arts involvement status.

| Decade CIYA participation began | Number of study participants | Current involvement in performance arts (career or hobby) |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| 1980s | 5 | 2 (40%) |
| 1990s | 8 | 5 (62.5%) |
| 2000s (to 2011) | 4 | 4 (100%) |
| Totals | 17 | 11 (64%) |

While an analysis of relationships between variables (such as gender, age, length of participation) and outcomes was not the focus of this study, there are some notable linkages raised in terms of the outcomes seen in Table 1. Two participants (7 & 17) appear to have experienced only one or two beneficial outcomes, while seven participants experienced four or more, even though they were involved for similar timeframes. It is also noteworthy that the benefit of ‘social connection’ was discussed by all but three participants (two female and one male). This may be an effect of the narrative method (as participants were not prompted to discuss particular outcomes), but potentially raises the question of why social connection may be an outcome for some, but not all.

How arts participation creates benefits for young people

The ‘how’ findings are presented as a story with three broad phases. The phases were developed inductively from the initial coding of the themes and reflected the structure of each participant’s overarching narrative of their time at CIYA. Each phase includes multiple themes drawn from these narratives. While each participant story included at least one theme from each of the three phases, none included every theme. Stories did not always step through each phase in a linear fashion, but sometimes moved back and forth across phases. The phases are therefore best considered broad parts in the common story, which usually occurred in the order presented here.

Themes are coded with letters (which correspond to Table 1) and ranked within each phase in order of how many participants discussed them. The number of participants associated with each theme is noted in brackets. All participant quotes are in italics.

Phase one: joining in

A. ‘Finding my people’ (13 people)

Participants talked about finding a place where they ‘*fit in*’ and ‘*felt less strange*’ in contrast to others areas of their lives such as school. The importance of finding others (including instructors) with whom bonds of ‘*common purpose*’ were formed was discussed. The following quote highlights the way theatre brought people together quickly:

‘I think acting and drama does that, it creates a sort of rapid, you know, more quickly than perhaps in other social situations, creates a group dynamic of trust and comfort.’

B. Exposure to different others (11 people)

Access to ‘*different*’ others, who excited, challenged, inspired, and sometimes ‘*changed*’ participants, was discussed. Difference was discussed in terms of age, ethnicity,

knowledge, sexuality and politics. Access to relationships that were not managed or mediated by parents or other social controls were viewed as important.

C. Fun (11 people)

Being '*silly*', experiencing '*fun times*' through warm-up games and being allowed to '*play*' was important. The non-competitive and low-pressure environment was often contrasted with other aspects of young people's lives such as sporting activities.

Phase two: developing skills and gaining experience

D. Freedom, safety, risk. (15 people)

Freedom from everyday '*social hierarchies*' was important for participants. Freedom meant '*not being embarrassed*', being able to use '*imagination and dreaming*' to create with no judgement of '*right and wrong*', and feeling able to '*make your own choices*' artistically. Balancing risk and safety involved understanding that such freedom came with risk. Risk might be physical (injury) or social and emotional, described as being placed in '*the uncomfortable zone*', or '*feeling the fear and doing it anyway*'. Yet participants felt '*safe to create*' and '*pushed in a supported way*'. A sense of safety was created by experienced and positive instructors, who were seen as role models and mentors who were '*really pushing boundaries but in a safe environment, encouraging the kids to really push their comfort levels in performance*'.

E. Treated 'like an adult' (12 people)

Having ideas taken seriously, being responsible and having the opportunity to do things without parental involvement or judgment, were all seen as ways in which young people were treated '*as adults*'. Participants felt CIYA was '*a space where you felt listened to and able to make contributions that were actually really valid and important to you at the time*'. This was often contrasted with school or family life where '*you wouldn't feel as listened to*'. Trusting that young people could handle '*adult themes*' and concepts was also important. Developing and performing productions considered '*hard-hitting*', '*socially relevant*', '*controversial*', and that '*really dug pretty deep into the youth experience*' had a big impact on young people. The experiences of travelling and performing away from home, often at night, was also considered important in terms of learning, growing and becoming a more '*adult self*'.

F. Physical spaces to explore (12 people)

The physical places where workshops, rehearsals and performances took place were highlighted. '*The botanical gardens*', '*a shopping centre*', '*up a Banyan tree*', in an '*old jail*', '*an old produce market*', '*an airport*' and a '*sports stadium*' are examples. These places were important because they symbolised '*escape from the drudgery of school routine*' and provided a '*dynamic space to explore creativity*'. Some discussed their '*love*' of a particular theatre where they first performed, noting it's '*feel*' and sound. A particular rehearsal space held

special meaning for some, because the space looked and felt *'like real theatre'* with its large wooden floor, huge mirror and light filled space.

G. Intense/challenging relationships (11 people)

Intense, creative, collaborative relationships and moments were also part of the story. The drama and intensity of performance was sometimes mirrored in interpersonal relationships. At times young people felt over-worked and upset with an *'angry'* producer or a *'frustrated'* instructor. At other times participants felt *'excluded'* or *'ostracised'* by their peers for periods of time. Because participants were involved in CIYA for an average of five years, their stories of anger, frustration and exclusion tended to have enough time to resolve positively, with remarks like *'I won them over in the end'*. Yet these challenging dynamics highlight the critical role of the instructors in facilitating positive group interaction and the previously mentioned balancing of risk and safety in emotionally charged environments.

Some participants grappled with the *'star system'* that could occur in a small organisation. This had varying impacts upon *'the stars'* themselves, who expressed feelings of guilt at frequently being selected in lead roles, and also on those who did not get chosen. One participant noted *'some times of sadness in there. Because you're a kid and like you're learning your lines and [wondering] whether you're good enough or, you know?'* A connection between this *'star system'*, class, social and cultural capital, was made by one participant, who observed: *'Kids of parents who are in the arts community – I think that they're always going to be more welcome in arts things than kids who are not'*.

H. Body learning (10 people)

Getting to know and learning to use their own bodies through performing was an important element of the stories. Being *'incredibly active'* and learning to use *'physical expression'* helped some to gain knowledge and awareness about their own strength and power. For others, it helped with issues of negative body image. One participant pointed out: *'it gave me confidence in my own body and I guess began to break down some of those body image issues I had when I was pretty chubby'*.

Yet, there were struggles; rapidly changing bodies could cause confusion and embarrassment. Four participants talked about their difficulties in having to wear revealing or particularly unflattering costumes, three people *'hated'* their shape and size at the time. One participant had to get changed down to her underwear on stage, which was *'pretty confronting'* because *'there was all of that kind of weird, adolescent, kind of sexual shame'* and the tension between *'wanting to be grown up and wanting to be able to do all of those things, but also being really terrified'*. Some situations appear to have been handled better than others by the people involved, highlighting the links with the previously discussed theme of *'freedom, safety and risk'*, as is made clear in the follow quote:

there was something about having to don the costumed body and having to present yourself in an intimate way in a public space as a lover onstage, or it might be a revealing costumed body, rather than whatever it is that you wear to hide ... It was a good thing to be pushed outside of that comfort zone because that's what live performance and the arts entails. There was an element of, I suppose, controlled risk involved at an age where boys and girls are very sensitive to issues like body image and sexuality and those sorts of

things. I suppose, it was not always comfortable to be pushed, but it was the best possible forum in which to be pushed.

I. Different skin (8 people)

Taking on different roles, wearing costumes and masks, writing and performing characters who were '*different aspects of yourself*' was another element of the story. The expressions '*trying on different skin*' and '*stepping into different shoes*' were used in stories about the experience of creating and inhabiting '*whole different worlds*'. One participant discussed how this allowed them to

start to see yourself differently and your place in the world differently ... in theatre you get out of your skin, you get out of your shell, and in that process you become more confident.

Engaging with new and/or challenging subject matter (such as HIV, youth suicide, and aging) provided participants with a window into other lives, allowing them to safely '*try out*' aspects of themselves and see how they might fit. The following quote explains further:

Stepping outside your ordinary patterns of existence and the effort to take on a character or whatever, suddenly it's like having another language ... [it] gives you insight into your own [life].)

J. Shared achievement (8 people)

Sharing the highs and lows associated with creative development and performance helped to create a sense of group identity and belonging, and could also be a very intense and emotional experience as the following quote demonstrates:

The most important thing is collaboration. The performing arts nurtures collaboration and team building and for the time that one is involved in a production, then that production and the people in it become like family and a bond is created. It is a very intense experience.

Phase three: becoming a 'real' performer/artist

K. Realising you have 'real skills' (14 people)

Participants stories often included realisations (some sudden, some gradual) that they had gained '*real skills*' and practical experience in various aspects of performance and production. This made people see themselves as a '*real actor*', performer, writer or producer. One participant stated: '*I got real skills. Applicable skills. My voice, stage technique, physicality, movement. And I took those on to make a career out of it*'.

L. 'Exercise for your soul' (12 people)

Bringing a live production together; the people, costumes, stage, lights, sound, props and general paraphernalia of the theatre, was '*very exciting*', '*captivating*', '*transcendent*' and often described as '*a high*' by participants. Some described the experience as '*addictive*'

The thrill of overcoming fears and nervousness, using your skills and knowledge, and working with a group of people to create '*real theatre*', provided sensations of being '*uplifted*'. One participant described the feeling as '*exercise for your soul*'.

M. Eyes of others (9 people).

The importance of having your performance witnessed by others, as well as being witness to others performances, was expressed in the stories. Watching characters '*emerge and interact with the audience*' and seeing '*other people in your class doing their thing*' provided feelings of satisfaction, capability and group pride. Simply being in a position to '*show off to your friends and family*' was an enjoyable experience. The following quote provides some understanding of why.

There is something about the immediate validation of performing ... That immediate kind of ego boost that comes with people coming up to you and saying ... "That was great" ... "You were excellent". As a teenager, there aren't many opportunities to have that kind of validation. There's something about a performance that allows for that.

Discussion

Links to processes and outcomes found in the literature

The beneficial outcomes of participation in youth arts found in this study are similar to those found in other literature. For example; improved self-confidence, gaining new skills, and increasing physical activity (Bungay and Vella-Burrows 2013), improved mental health (Mills & Brown 2004 in Houbolt 2010, 48); supportive relationships and communication skills (Barrett and Smigiel 2007; Kemp 2006; Trayer, Harré, and Overall 2012). In addition to these findings, our outcome analysis points to the need for further exploration of why some people experience fewer, greater or different kinds of beneficial outcomes than others.

The 'process' findings in the present study are not entirely unfamiliar either, as aspects of the three phases can be seen in the existing literature. The *Joining In* phase highlighted a sense of belonging also found by Trayer, Harré, and Overall (2012), Dworkin, Reed, and Hansen (2003), Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin (2003), Larson and Brown (2007), Barrett and Smigiel (2007). The attraction of fun without judgment has also been noted elsewhere (Karkou and Glasman 2004). The issue of identity formation and change articulated by Nathan (2013), Kemp (2006), and Houbolt (2010) are further understood in the present study. This is seen in the middle stage theme of *trying on different skin* and also links to the first phase theme of being exposed to *different others*. Others have also highlighted the importance of being treated like an adult (Barrett and Smigiel 2007; Trayer, Harré, and Overall 2012) risk-taking (McDonald 2006), feeling safe to express (Trayer, Harré, and Overall 2012) and the importance of the audience as a witness (Houbolt 2010). The overall story and the elements of risk, emotion, learning and achievement found in Elliot's (2011) exploration of the art-making experience also resonates with process themes articulated here.

While all participants in our study discussed at least one aspect of each of the three phases of the common process story, some interesting complexity is apparent. For

example, all but three participants (one of whom was involved for ten years) discussed the third phase theme '*realizing you have real skills*' (K). It is interesting that the same three participants experienced the thrill of arts as '*exercise for your soul*' (L), indicating that while they experienced the elation of youth arts activity, they may not have believed they were particularly good at it. Further exploration would be worthwhile to better understand the complexity of the processes.

Youth arts as liminal experience

Thinking about the findings through the frame of liminality provides a deeper understanding of the transformative elements found in the common story. The preliminal phase is where separation from the 'usual' patterns and interaction of day-to-day life occurs (van Gennep 1908/1984). In this youth arts context, the separation is not a single long-term event. It is, as Atkinson and Robson (2012) describe in their study, a series of regular and repeated separations over a long period of time. Young people enter the youth arts space and begin interacting with new, often different others. In the *Joining In* phase, the usual norms of school, family and formal activities are suspended as young people are given permission to have fun with 'different' others in non-competitive, sometimes 'silly' activities in new physical spaces. The anti-structure of liminal experience is present from the *Joining In* phase and continues into the middle phase through the dissolving of the usual ways of being and interacting with different kinds of people.

Themes from the middle, '*Developing Skills and Gaining Experience*' phase generally reflect the continuation of the disorientation and dissolution indicative of anti-structure (Turner 1974, 1982). There is a metaphorical shedding of skin, and immersion in different physical and emotional worlds. This sometimes involves subverting the usual ways places such as parks, shopping centres and airports are used; changing them into creative spaces where young people's arts activities are juxtaposed with the regular day-to-day goings on in such places. Experiences of freedom from parents and other social controls was also part of the dissolution of young people's norms. Freedom occurred through performing away from home, being out at night, delving into controversial or edgy subject matter and establishing relationships on their own terms. Being able to take risks and try out different and emerging aspects of evolving identities was critical to the creation of new and different relationships (with self and others). The strong bonds created through these shared experiences of young people is indicative of the Turner's (1982) concept of *communitas*.

Subversions of power in the *communitas* (Turner 1982) of the liminal space are seen in the relationships between young people and their instructors. We see participants recognise their power to create, and to relate differently to each other and the adults around them. In similar findings to Atkinson and Robson (2012), we found multiple stories of control being shared between instructors and young people. Participants in our study felt they were taken seriously, given responsibility and treated '*like adults*'. Stories continually contrasted feelings of being in control, of belonging and learning in the CIYA space, with the often very different experiences of interaction with the 'usual' structures of school and other institutions.

The final phase of the common story can be viewed as an integration back into the usual systems, and a coming out of a liminal phase (Turner 1974, 1982). Participants

recognised the way they had changed through evolving into a performer with '*real skills*' and/or coming to understand the role of arts as '*exercise for your soul*'. For many, this 'different someone' was reflected back to them through the '*eyes of others*' – peers, friends and family who were important to them. It appears that these changes had long term effects for many participants. Table 2 shows us that more than half (64%) of participants have continued their involvement in the creative arts, either as a career or as a hobby. This could be a result of the sampling method used (which is likely to include people still linked to performing arts). Yet it also suggests that liminal experience of youth arts activity may provide the transitional spaces needed to foster profound and long lasting change for some participants.

Challenges to liminal experience

Our research has provided us with a number of questions about liminal experience in this youth arts context. Questions centre on the influence of mainstream (often oppressive) cultural 'norms' and the way these can encroach on the liminal space. In linking our findings to the existing literature, we began to think further about '*exposure to different others*' (B), specifically questioning just *how different* the 'different' people referred to by participants in this study were from themselves. There are examples of the isolation and exclusion described by Hampshire and Matthijsse (2010) and Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin (2003) in our study, primarily seen through the identification of a 'star system'. One participant in our study made a very clear link between social and cultural capital and this star system. For three participants (1,7,12), no mention of '*finding my people*' (A) was made, and while two of these discussed social connections as an outcome, all three remained involved with CIYA for only two or three years (when the average was five). As Hampshire and Matthijsse (2010) point out, such issues raise the question of *who* youth arts benefits. No socio-economic data was collected for this study, so we cannot adequately address the issue here. However, the questions about who participates and what are the mechanisms (social, cultural, economic) that encourage or discourage participation requires further thinking. As does an understanding of just *how different* others can be in the liminal space, and how diversity may impact the dissolving and disorientation of anti-structure.

Some participant's stories highlighted times when the dominant power relationships were not subverted. Incidents involving body shame and embarrassment for example, provide a challenge to the development and maintenance of *communitas*. When dissolution is occurring, there needs to be great care and consideration about *what* things dissolve, how they dissolve, and what is created in its place. Questions of power within the fluid liminal space must be addressed or the risk of simply reinforcing existing social inequities arises.

The need to purposefully create and actively manage safe and creative liminal spaces is clear. However, maintaining a boundary around the liminal space can be difficult when participation is voluntary and intermittent. Encroachments from inequitable, unjust external systems can damage the trusting and supportive new relationships required for *communitas* and dissolve the important separation from outside that is critical to the liminal space. Participants in our study repeatedly articulated the importance of good instructors, mentors and supportive group dynamics in creating the crucial balance between risk and safety needed for this creative space.

Youth arts creating a space of wellbeing

We have conceptualised wellbeing as an effect of spaces people inhabit and create, the entities (human or otherwise) in those spaces, and the relationships between these (Atkinson 2013; Atkinson and Robson 2012; Fleuret and Atkinson 2007). Arts practice can create 'transitional spaces within which openness is enabled to explore new possibilities for identity and action, spaces in which new resources can be built and mobilised for personal wellbeing' (Atkinson and Robson 2012, 1349). Our study demonstrates a range of examples of such exploration and the associated development of resources (capabilities, social integration, security and therapeutic processes) that can be mobilised for personal wellbeing. This is evident when we consider the benefits participants associated with their participation: social connection, confidence, self-knowledge, interpersonal skills, improved mental health and a new physicality. These benefits are examples of Atkinson and Robson's four types of resources that can be mobilised for personal wellbeing (2012). As such, our findings concur with Atkinson & Robson's proposition that 'arts-based practices that can successfully generate such spaces of wellbeing' (2012, 1349).

Limitations

Participants were drawn from one youth arts organisation only. As recruitment occurred through CIYA's networks (newsletters, email contact lists, records of alumni) the sample leaned towards those still connected to CIYA, therefore more likely to be currently involved in the arts world. The participants were self-selecting and this could lead to people who had more positive experiences coming forward. The length of time between participation at CIYA and the interview was over 30 years in some circumstances, which could have implications in terms of accurate recollection. We do not wish to overstate the capacity of youth arts activity, or any activity, as a cure-all for the array of issues a young person may be faced with. We recognise that youth arts activity may provide very different experiences for each individual because of their different circumstances and contexts.

Conclusion

In this paper we have provided an overview of the wellbeing benefits 17 people attributed to long term participation in youth arts activities. In seeking to understand how wellbeing benefits occur, we found a general three phase pattern of joining in, developing skills and gaining experience, and becoming a 'real' performer and/or artist. Embracing a spaces of wellbeing approach, and incorporating the concept of liminality provided a stronger understanding of the common story of transformation that took place in the youth arts space. For most of these participants, CIYA successfully created spaces of wellbeing where they could flourish and grow. Future research focusing how such spaces of wellbeing can be purposefully created and more inclusive would add to this understanding.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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