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“It Makes Me Feel Alive”:

The Socio-Motivational Impact of Drama and Theatre on Marginalised Young People

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Abstract

An in-depth, longitudinal, idiographic study examined the impact of theatre and drama involvement on marginalised young people. Semi-structured interviews, at three separate time points over two years, were conducted with four young people (15-21 years of age) involved in a theatre project. Interpretative phenomenological analysis suggested that drama and theatre create space and support for the authentic self, and provide optimal conditions for promoting growth and resilience through voluntary engagement in a positive activity. In particular, the analysis highlighted the pivotal role of interpersonal relationships and a nurturing environment in re-engaging young people. Some participants' accounts also suggested that drama provides a uniquely engaging and therapeutic way to reflect on, express and explore experiences. The results are discussed in relation to core psychological processes underpinning self-development and key directions for further research.

Keywords

Drama and theatre; marginalised youth; school-exclusion; self-determination theory; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Word count: 8,988

Though now severely curtailed against a backdrop of austerity and local government cuts, the UK government's 2005 Green Paper for Youth (*Youth Matters*) led to policy initiatives which encouraged alternative ways of engaging with and supporting those at risk of social exclusion (DfES, 2005; Steer, 2000). These in turn resulted in a welcome increase in interest in, and evaluation of, interventions targeting youth at risk (Arts Council England (ACE), 2005; Jermyn, 2001). However, despite these promising forays into the question of what impact participation in creative arts and sports interventions has for marginalised young people, our understanding of how specific interventions may successfully re-direct the pathways of those growing up facing multiple challenges including economically disadvantaged circumstances, school-exclusion, and scarce social supports (Burchardt, Le Grand, & Piachaud 1999; Thompson, Russell, & Simmons, 2013) is lacking.

In particular, our understanding of how drama and theatre practices – which have for many decades been employed to promote social and individual change (Blatner, 1997; Boal, 2002; Holmes, Karp & Watson, 1994) – may positively impact the lives of marginalised youth, has been little explored. However, some encouraging recent examples of relevant inquiries with marginalised youths may be seen in work by Daniels and Downes (2014) and by Tawell, Thompson, Daniels, Elliott, and Dingwall (2015), which highlight how drama can provide an opportunity to reflect on and explore identities and perspectives, leading to personal transformation. Supportive evidence can also be found in the rich ethnographic study of young people in drama classrooms in urban high schools by Gallagher (2007). Researchers and practitioners have drawn upon a number of theoretical frameworks regarding drama and theatre, from the use of Theatre of the Oppressed with disempowered groups (Boal, 2002) through to Psychodrama with groups including offenders (Harkins, Pritchard, Haskayne, Watson, & Beech, 2011), as well as early explorations by Courtney (1993) of the

impact of drama and theatre on the cognitive development of young people. Close scrutiny of this work suggests that interventions using such approaches may confer additional benefits above and beyond those common across arts-based projects (Blatner, 1997; Boal, 2002; Holmes et al., 1994).

Indeed, there is some limited recent evidence to suggest that drama and theatre activities may confer unique benefits that emphasise personal development. For example, a study by Harkins and colleagues (2011) that examined the impact of a theatre project on offenders found changes in measures of participants' self-efficacy and motivation, and improved confidence in skills including self-control. However, despite these encouraging findings, our understanding of the psychological mechanisms that underpin individual changes and growth purported to result from drama and theatre involvement remains limited. This study was therefore designed to help us begin to address the question of how and why drama and theatre activities 'work'.

Psychological dynamics of drama and theatre activities

Inroads into exploring psychological mechanisms underpinning the impact of drama and theatre come from a small number of studies which have explored the impact of drama and theatre activities on young offenders, and other groups of vulnerable young people (Bradley, Deighton, & Selby, 2004; Daykin, Orme, Evans, & Salmon, 2008; Harkins et al., 2011; McArdle et al., 2002; Turner, 2007). For example, a randomised control trial by McArdle and colleagues (2002), involving 122 children at risk for behavioural and emotional problems, found better outcomes (e.g., scores on a measure of internalising and externalising behaviours) for children taking part in drama-group therapy compared to no intervention and a curriculum studies control. These kinds of investigations have drawn on theoretical frameworks such as Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and Vygotskian ideas about

learning development (Vygotsky, 1978) as explanations for diverse positive outcomes, including more pro-social behaviours, positive identity changes, increases in self-belief, self-efficacy, motivation, confidence in social skills, and personal agency (Bradley et al., 2004; Daykin et al., 2008; Harkins et al., 2011; Turner, 2007). For example, an in-depth exploration of the relationship between Vygotskian theory and drama and theatre approaches is provided by Davis, Ferholt, Clemson, Jansson, and Marjanovic-Shane (2015). However, notwithstanding the importance of this work, these analyses cannot adequately explain the specific socio-motivational mechanisms by which drama and theatre projects may work to re-engage disaffected and socially marginalised young people. Here we highlight core theoretical frameworks concerning self-determination, self-discrepancy, and achievement which may provide a useful framework for understanding the impact of drama and theatre experiences on subjective experiences.

Firstly, self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) emphasises the crucial role of social environments in supporting or thwarting the basic psychological needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy, which in turn leads to differential motivational outcomes. Warm relationships and support for autonomy – as opposed to relationships that are controlling – are likely to be crucial for pursuing the development of the self-determined or ‘authentic’ self¹ because of their support for intrinsic growth processes and autonomous behaviour (Deci & Ryan, 1990).

In addition, qualities of the environment, such as warmth and acceptance, are thought to be assimilated and internalised such that environments that are supportive and accepting of

¹ We use the definition of self put forward by Deci and Ryan (1990; p. 238): “the self is not simply an outcome of social evaluations and pressures but instead is the very process through which a person contacts the social environment and works toward integration with respect to it.”

the individual lead to self-acceptance and the authentic expression of the self (Deci & Ryan, 1990). This is paralleled by theory and evidence regarding the importance of the role of arts practitioners and having a ‘supportive context’ – including feeling accepted – if interventions with young people are to be successful (Hughes & Wilson, 2004; Kinder & Wilkin, 1998; Wilkin, Gulliver, & Kinder, 2005).

Secondly, Hughes and Wilson (2004) have highlighted how drama and theatre activities may be usefully described as liminoid activities as they provide a space that exists “outside of normal routines” in which unfettered self-expression is encouraged, where new perspectives may grow, and new roles and identities explored and experimented with (Hughes & Wilson, 2004, p. 69). Liminoid spaces, like liminal spaces, are spaces of transition and transformation where new realities, roles and identities can be formed; but rather than being found in ritual they are found in voluntary activities such as arts-based programmes (Schechner, 2013). This conception ties in well with research which has highlighted that drama and theatre can be beneficial by providing the self with the space and freedom to be authentic, thus allowing for self-knowledge to deepen (Hughes & Wilson, 2004; Tawell et al., 2015), as well as the opportunity to experiment with different imagined roles for the self so that new ways of being are learned and internalised (Daniels & Downes, 2014; Hughes & Wilson, 2004; Kellermann, 1992; Turner, 2007). In addition, increases in self-esteem and self-efficacy have been found in participants involved in drama and theatre projects (Harkins et al., 2011). These points converge neatly with theoretical frameworks and models of engagement that highlight the important role of self-construals, including self-worth, but also more specific representations of possible future selves and reflections on discrepancies between one’s ‘actual’ self and one’s ‘ideal’ self (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, 2008; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008).

Furthermore, the emphasis placed on enjoyment (ACE, 2006), inquisitiveness and play (Schechner, 2013) – considered to be at the heart of drama and theatre – map onto other frameworks that explain variations in motivation and well-being. These have highlighted the value of opportunities to experience intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), an orientation to curiosity and mastering the task, rather than competitive performance outcomes (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), and an attributional style whereby one feels in control over events, rather than feeling helpless (Covington, 1992; Thompson, 1994; Zuckerman, Kieffer, & Knee, 1998). Together these frameworks set an agenda for, and foreground our orientation to, analysing the impact of drama and theatre work on the socio-motivational trajectories of young people.

The Present Study

We aimed to explore the participants' experiences of long-term involvement in drama and theatre work from an idiographic, phenomenological perspective, and to consider the young people's narratives in relation to the psychological mechanisms identified by our model of disaffection/engagement. We employed a qualitative longitudinal (QL) design in order to capture change and continuity of experience for the duration of the participants' involvement in the drama and theatre project. QL methodology offers a rich way of understanding the lived experiences of participants, going beyond the limited 'snapshot' a cross-sectional study could provide (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003, p. 190). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was deemed the most appropriate approach as it is concerned with exploring and understanding the lived experience of each participant and is dedicated to idiographic enquiry, with the researcher's interpretative work considered key to understanding individual participants' accounts (Smith, 2004; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Method

Participants

Participants in the current study were four young people (3 female; 1 male) who made up the participants of a drama and theatre project for young people who had experienced school-exclusion. All of the young people had experienced permanent school-exclusion or multiple temporary exclusions from school due to behavioural incidents. Three of the four young people were attending or had attended a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU)². Table 1 shows the age, education and occupation of the participants across the three time points. At the first interview, the young people were aged between 15 and 21 years ($M = 18.25$, $SD = 2.75$). Participants were British with a mixed ethnic profile: two of the young people were mixed race, two were black. All participants had experienced additional challenging life experiences, such as unstable home environments, poverty, domestic violence, substance misuse, and involvement with the criminal justice system. The names of the participants have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

Theatre process

The drama and theatre project was run by a charitable theatre company in an urban location in the South-East of England. The two theatre practitioners – the artistic director and the producer – each had several years' experience of working with young people facing challenging circumstances. The aim of the theatre project was to create a theatre production based on the life experiences of marginalised young people, with parts acted by the young

² A Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) is an alternative education facility in the UK designed to cater for school-excluded pupils, among others.

people. The young participants were aware of the goals of the workshops prior to taking part and took part on a voluntary basis.

Initially the project comprised of a six-month period of weekly or bi-weekly drama workshops which focused on improvisation using a wide range of scenarios and roles, as well as improvisations based on the young people's life stories and experiences. Thereafter, a process of devising scenes and parts for the production began, culminating in a semi-improvised production which ran for three nights at a London theatre venue. Following a period of time in which sessions were run only sporadically, there commenced a 12-week phase of intense rehearsing of a newly scripted version of the production. This work culminated in a three-week run of the production at a different London theatre venue (approximately one year after the previous performances).

The theatre project was run independently from the researchers' input, with the director and producer of the theatre company organising all matters relating to the theatre project including the recruitment of young people for the theatre project, workshop content and schedules, and duration of the project. The producer of the company was an experienced PRU drama teacher and had worked with three out of the four young people in that capacity prior to the current theatre project. He had also worked with the fourth young person on a previous drama project. However, as none of the young participants were current students of the producer, nor were any participants attending the PRU at which the producer was a practitioner, there was no crossover for the duration of the theatre project. Whilst all of the young people had some amateur experience of taking part in drama and theatre workshops previously – through previous short-term PRU-based projects with the producer and a previous director – none of the young people had met each other prior to taking part in the current theatre project.

Interview schedule

An interview schedule was developed which served as a framework for exploring the young people's experiences of the theatre sessions and production. Questions covered the following topics: why and how the young people had come to be involved; their motivation for attending the sessions; their experience of the sessions/performances; their relationships with the theatre practitioners and other young people; and the character they played in the production. Adaptations were made to the interview schedule at each time point to allow for contextual changes such as adding questions about upcoming or recent performances. It should be noted that the interviews were semi-structured in their design in order to provide participants with the space and opportunity to express their views on topics that arose which were relevant to, but not covered by, questions in the interview schedule (Burman, 1995; Smith, 2004).

Procedure

Prior to recruitment and data collection, ethical approval for the current study was given by the relevant internal institutional ethics committee. All four of the young people taking part in the theatre project were approached at theatre workshops by the lead researcher (first named author), informed about the study and invited to participate in in-depth individual interviews about their experience of the theatre project. Each participant was interviewed by the first author (a white female researcher) at three time points over 22 months: first, when the young people were just beginning to attend theatre workshops; then following the young people's first performance of the co-created theatre production; and finally, following a three-week run of the production. Interviews were held either in a private room of the building where the theatre workshops took place, or in a café. The length of interviews varied depending on participants' responses, with the shortest lasting 38 minutes

and the longest 74 minutes (T1 $M = 50.25$, $SD = 16.17$; T2 $M = 66.75$, $SD = 5.85$; T3 $M = 47.75$, $SD = 0.96$). Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder.

Informed consent was sought anew from participants at each interview, and parental consent was additionally sought prior to the first interview with one participant who was under 16 years of age. Interviewees were made aware that they could terminate their participation at any time, for any reason, and that they could choose not to answer particular questions, without it affecting their involvement in the theatre project.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed by the interviewer (first named author) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as outlined by Smith and colleagues (2009), was applied to the resulting transcripts. To ensure that the principles of IPA were followed – such that the voice of the individual and their attempts to make sense of their experiences remained the focus of our analysis (Smith et al., 2009) – each case was analysed separately and without reference to other interviews. Furthermore, analysis of a single case across the three time points was completed before moving on to the next case. The process of analysis itself involved a number of stages which were adapted from Smith and colleagues (2009) and Smith and Osborn (2007) for longitudinal analysis.

Results

This section presents three recurrent themes – ‘A nurturing space’, ‘Something for myself’ and ‘Changing the story’ – and the principal subthemes nested within them, using extracts from the accounts and the analyst’s interpretations. These themes are centrally concerned with the factors which facilitated the self-development of the young people

through the drama and theatre project, and their experience of that process of reflection and change.

In quoted extracts, the following indicates editorial elision by the author: [...]. At the end of each quoted extract the participant quoted and the interview time point is indicated in parentheses with the participant's pseudonym followed by T1, T2, or T3 according to the interview time point.

A Nurturing Space

This theme captures the strong sense of trust, support, encouragement and belonging brought out within the accounts of relationships built between staff and young people during the theatre project, as well as foundations of clear structures and boundaries upon which positive relationships could develop and personal growth occur.

A nurturing space: Supportive boundaries.

This theme captures the various ways in which the approach used to run the theatre project laid the foundations upon which it was possible for positive relationships to develop and personal growth to occur. The participants described this approach as one that was characterised by an authoritative style where the commitment of the theatre practitioners was made clear from the start. It was also described by the young people as helpful by virtue of the fact that it meant that expectations were made clear. This extract from Alisha captures this sense of authority and clear structures well:

He [the director] was like: This is what we need to do, this is what I want to achieve. [...] He was always on time. He always showed up. He never missed a session. And y'know, if we had a director that only came sometimes, or didn't turn up on time, you'd be like: 'Well, he's not taking it seriously, so we're not going to take it seriously'. He took it very seriously. (Alisha, T2)

It is interesting that this structured time and space was a welcome one for the young people particularly considering the creativity and freedom inherent in drama. Perhaps creativity within a known and established structure gave the young people the scope to explore and enjoy drama whilst still being ‘held’ within the safe boundaries of known expectations.

Coupled with this strictness and authority were descriptions of a friendly and playful theatre environment. This cropped up in all the accounts, but is illustrated well in Alisha’s statement at the second interview that: “[The director] was friendly, and you can talk to him, but he just didn’t take no crap”. This sense of being ‘held’ by the theatre environment through of the consistency of its structure, boundaries and expectations, is also felt in the young people’s descriptions of the theatre project as a positive and comfortable environment where their confidence and exploration could flourish:

In the workshops I just felt comfortable, obviously because of the people I was working with and I just felt confident because [the director] is a good director [...] he’s supportive as well so, yeah, I just felt confident. (Chloe, T2)

A nurturing space: Growth of trust and being valued

Accounts from participants illustrate that for most of the young people trust was a vital aspect of the relationship between them and the director, both in the sense of having trust in the director and being trusted by the director. During the second interview most of the participants acknowledged their initial scepticism about the project and their fear about whether the next mooted performance would happen. This extract from Alisha captures this scepticism:

At first it was hard to think, believe that this [the performance] was gonna be the outcome of it [...] So I was thinking: ‘Oh, this is never going to happen. [...] Oh, they’re giving us false hopes, getting our hopes up.’ (Alisha, T2)

Being prepared to be let down, if not expecting to be, was common in these accounts. The persistence of this anxiety might suggest that being let down was not a new experience for these young people.

By the second interview all of the young people had been working with the theatre company for at least seven months – time enough for strong relationships to be established. Therefore, alongside this acknowledgement of a fear or expectation of being let down is a growing trust in, and respect for, the director based on their experience of him being consistent, fair, and true to his word. Alisha illustrated this in the following statement of her belief in the director's reliability.

I feel like he's [the director is] someone I can definitely rely on. When he tells me this is gonna happen and this is what I'm trying to achieve, I believe him. (Alisha, T2)

Not only was trust in the theatre practitioners an important feature of the developing relationship between the practitioners and young people, but the young people's sense of being trusted and believed in also featured strongly in accounts of these relationships. Alisha's account of how the director stood by the young people – when unforeseen circumstances meant that the first performance was likely to be cancelled just days before they were due to begin – illustrates this feeling well.

He didn't give up on us. [...] I'm not gonna lie, if I was a director or something, I'd probably give up on us cause we're people from backgrounds, never done acting before. [...] So he took a risk with us, and he believed in us. [...] It feels good to, for someone to actually put their trust in us... someone that come from the PRU. (Alisha, T2)

Her account is notably accompanied by a sense of surprise that someone bothered to believe in them. She highlights how not being trusted or believed in is perhaps part and parcel of the fallout from experiencing school exclusion, so for the director to see something other than

failure and worthlessness in the young people and to “put their trust” in the young people “feels good”.

Being believed in means that the practitioners saw something in them – a potential or talent – beyond their past experiences of violence, crime and school failure. This is illustrated in the following extract from Chloe:

I think all of them [theatre staff] is just like proper: ‘I see something good in you.’
(Chloe, T1)

That an adult sees “something good” in them, and believes in them, is clearly a significant experience for the participants. Indeed, in later interviews there is a sense that even though they had perhaps lost sight of their own potential, the experience of being consistently valued by a respected adult makes it easier for them to internalise this sense of being valued. This is demonstrated well in an account from Chloe:

From young that’s [study theatre at college] what I wanted to kind of do, but I’ve never really had the confidence to be like ‘Yeah, I can go in there, and do it, and I can get it.’ But, like, obviously with the help from [the director and producer] of saying, ‘Yeah, you, you’re really good, like, you’re, you’re really good, you should go for it’... So I did. (Chloe, T3)

Here, the practitioners’ praise for, and belief in, Chloe’s ability, together with their encouragement, gave her the confidence and belief in herself to pursue a lifelong dream which she had stopped believing in. The preceding extract encapsulates this experience of internalisation that many of the participants articulated.

A nurturing space: It feels like we’re all a family.

The importance and depth of the relationships between the young people and theatre staff became evident during their second interviews. Interestingly, most of the young people described to the theatre practitioners as important male figures in their lives, even referring to them as “father figures” and “uncles”. This is illustrated in an extract from Chloe:

It's [the relationship has] been really good. [...] Obviously my dad's not around, yeah, I'm not going to say, yeah, [the director is] my dad or nothing, [...] but he's really like a person, like, there's only, like, a good two people, [...] my brothers [...] they're like male figures in my life, yeah, but they're like, more brother figures innit' [...] (Chloe, T2)

The young people were quick to emphasise that the producer and director were in no way replacements for the male family members in their lives, however absent, but they each described them as welcome older male figures in their lives who filled a vacuum left by largely absent fathers – whether physically or emotionally.

The word 'team' appeared in a number of accounts of the experience of involvement in the theatre project, accompanied very often with the participants' description of feelings of belonging. This is particularly well illustrated in an extract from Jordan at his second interview:

It feels like a whole team thing innit', [...] It feels good man. It's good to be part of something. [...] It means I'm not a nobody. (Jordan, T2)

Here Jordan describes how good it feels to belong to a group and how this sense of belonging gives him meaning and an identity, which in turn impacts his self-esteem and pride telling him that he's "not a nobody" but instead is worthwhile and valued. At the third interview Jordan described a similar sentiment, if stronger, with his comparison to feelings of belonging to a "family":

The best part of it was just ... it's almost ... [...] it feels like we're all a family. (Jordan, T3)

The use of the word 'team' also conjures feelings of equality and a sense of shared experience which was common in many of the participants' accounts by the third interview:

Everything is always spoken amongst us, it feels like we're a team more than like they're the producer and the director and we're just the actors and we just come in and whatever, like, like we're separate [...] This is more like together. (Chloe, T3)

This extract describes the sense of equality which characterised participants' accounts of relationships with the director and producer. Here the practitioners are not only adult figures in positions of authority, but also equals in a team where mutual respect is evident.

Something for Myself

This theme captures participants' recurrent accounts of how the theatre production was an experience of space-giving for the self – space to express and explore the authentic self, to do something intrinsically motivating, to enrich their lives with a sense of hope and opportunity, and to fill their time with a positive, constructive activity.

Something for myself: A positive activity to fill time

This theme brings together accounts from the young people that described their involvement in the theatre workshops and performances as, at a very basic level, a positive activity that filled their time. The value placed on this activity because of its positivity is not to be taken lightly here as the accounts make it clear that the theatre project represented possibly their only way to escape from the emptiness, or temptations, of stretches of unscheduled time.

[I] started to focus on things that I actually love to do, and then it [drama] just channelled all that energy that I was putting in on being that hard rude girl [...] into now doing what I actually wanna do, and it's constructive [...] (Chloe, T3)

Like Chloe's account here, the other participants repeatedly emphasised how for them involvement in theatre was not only a positive activity to do, but also a welcome way to avoid becoming drawn into the downward spiral of other anti-social activities which had occupied them in the past. Instead, involvement in theatre generated positivity in their lives by providing an opportunity for the experience of engagement in an intrinsically motivating, enjoyable activity – something that they “actually wanna do” – and one which significantly they attend voluntarily, allowing them to flex their agentic muscles in a “constructive” way.

The word ‘constructive’ brings to mind the words productive, effective and valuable – words that are in sharp contrast to the sense of failure and uselessness often expressed by school-excluded pupils.

For some of the participants the value of this activity in their lives was expressed in the strong sense of loss when the regular workshops ceased after the first run of the production, encapsulated well here in Jasmine’s account:

It [the workshops and the performance] was good fun [...] When it was finished I was like: ‘What do I do now? I don’t have anything to do with my day!’ (Jasmine, T2)

This vacuum is also evident in Jordan’s account in which he describes feeling a loss of “drive” and feeling “empty” following the ending of the performances and rehearsals. This loss of purpose and meaning in life highlights both the significant place of the theatre project in their lives and raises the question of how such impactful projects manage their ‘ending’ in ethically responsible ways.

Something for myself: Self-expression and self-exploration

Some participants described how drama provided space for the safe and cathartic expression of emotion, particularly negative emotion:

When you've got something to say, yeah, or you've got like this anger inside you [...] you just wanna, like, let it out in some way. But you don't wanna [...] go out and kill someone and start stabbing someone and let it out that way [...] with theatre, it's like you're letting all that emotion out in somebody else [...] So then, when you finish, you feel like 'Oh, my gosh, that went so good', and you feel happy in yourself (Chloe, T3)

Here, the negative emotions Chloe describes, were given a release through drama and channelled away from more negative actions and consequences. The relief experienced through ‘letting all that emotion out’ is palpable here and is repeated across participants’ accounts.

Ironically, drama provided a space where some participants felt they could be themselves and express and ‘explore’ their authentic selves without restriction.

This is how I unwind. This is how I express myself. [...] Definitely something magical happens [during theatre sessions] [...] I’ll do something that I wouldn’t usually do in my everyday life, or I wouldn’t feel comfortable doing around other people, but because I’m in that environment [...] it kind of like, relaxes me and makes me just comfortable in my surroundings. [...] say I just wanted to pick my nose, or something like that, usually in life you’d just be thinking like, who’s watching you. [...] In the workshop, I’d just do it willy nilly [...] Just let my hair down really. [...] It’s just like, you’re allowed to be ... think and act out of the box. [...] There’s no real limitations really. You just explore, and I love it. (Jordan, T2)

This extract is very striking in its use of analogy and metaphor to describe a sense of freedom and unrestricted exploration. Acting gave Jordan a space within which it was permissible, even expected, to explore who he really is and express this ‘real’ or authentic self with all its unsavoriness and without feeling exposed. The example of picking his nose is revealing. By choosing an example of something that is not considered socially acceptable and should normally remain hidden Jordan emphasised how in drama the hidden self may be revealed without fear of judgement or feeling exposed: in acting there is permission to experience freedom and step outside the ‘box’. The authenticity experienced by some of the participants through acting is captured powerfully in a statement Jordan made in his final interview:

When I’m on stage [...] it makes me feel alive. [...] My inner self, the real me, comes out. (Jordan, T3)

Here Jordan described how his authentic self was allowed to breathe and live when he was on stage – suggesting an escape out from behind the usual constraints and masks of everyday life.

Changing the Story

A final theme describes a common feature in accounts by participants involving their reflections on their past, present, and future selves.

Changing the story: My life's so different.

A number of participants felt already at their first interview that the seeds had been sown for a change in their life trajectories when they first began their involvement with the theatre project:

I came here [to the PRU], and then [the producer] was showing me about the [theatre project], and I was like 'wow, yeah, I want to get involved ...'. And all the girls [at the PRU], they was like 'no man, that's long man, I can't be bothered to do that' and I was just thinking: 'Well you can stay there and carry on doing whatever you're doing [...] but see me, I want to do something with myself, I wanna be something [...] I need to stop all of this, this is not getting me nowhere' [...] they're just not doing nothing with their lives basically, but I'm trying to do something. (Chloe, T1)

However, their involvement in the theatre project, and in particular playing themselves – or a past version of themselves – within the theatre production seemed to provide the participants with a unique opportunity for a consolidation of, and a space to reflect on, this perceived change.

By the time of the second interview, the participants each found that playing a character in the production that was closely based on their own life experiences had highlighted for them the differences between their past and current selves:

I think people that [...] don't know me very long, won't know how far I've come and how much I've changed. [...] But if you ever saw me before I was like completely two different people [...]. I think I've come a long way cause I'm more mature now, I'm more grown up, and I wouldn't ever go back that way. (Alisha, T2)

Alisha's description of having been "two different people" encapsulates well the participants' accounts of how they perceived that they had changed from previous versions of themselves and her resolve that she "wouldn't ever go back that way" also reflects sentiments expressed by other participants. The perceived differences described by the young people included changes in behaviour and attitude towards others, as well as in their sense of identity. This reflection from Chloe captures the experiences of the participants well:

I just used to feel like I [...] should be that hard rude girl [...]. Before it's like everything was, like, against me [...] I didn't want anybody around me, I just wanted to do my own thing, didn't care about nobody; whereas now, it's more like [...] I let people in more, I guess. (Chloe, T3)

Here the tough exterior Chloe used to present to others in order to protect a more vulnerable self, was no longer needed as she no longer felt that everything, and everyone was against her. This shift in self-presentation, interpretations of the world, and ultimately social relationships speaks to a process of self-reflection which allows for alternative world views and identities to emerge.

Discussion

The present study explored participants' experiences of long-term involvement in drama and theatre work from an idiographic, phenomenological perspective. Analysis revealed that this project provided a unique setting for the participants to engage in a self-chosen activity that provided a safe, nurturing space within which healthy relationships could be formed, and self-knowledge deepened. Also, the opportunity to experience intrinsically motivated work, both in terms of developing the theatre production and successfully performing it on repeated occasions, resulted in new achievement experiences. Furthermore, the experience of playing characters based on versions of their past selves in a theatre production gave the participants an opportunity to reflect on ways in which they had changed as well as the reasons for their past behaviour and situations, and engendered a desire to move away from past identities perceived as undesirable.

Self-development through drama and theatre

Participants' accounts in this study support the theory that drama and theatre projects offer young people what Turner referred to as a liminoid space (Hughes & Wilson, 2004; Schechner, 2013), a space outside of other school or home environments where the self is

nurtured such that new insight and self-awareness can grow and new roles, identities, and ways of behaving can be actively explored. Drawing on the work of Cecily O'Neill (Taylor & Warner, 2006), we can speculate that drama and theatre uniquely offered the young people in this study a place of spontaneity, where there was imaginative and creative freedom, but still within the structured environment of the project. Additionally, the drama and theatre activities in this study clearly provided opportunities to experience intrinsic motivation and task mastery, all of which are often absent in the experiences of youth at risk who more often encounter failure, rejection, and apathy (Gilligan, 2000; Smokowski, Reynolds, & Bezruczko, 1999; Steer, 2000).

Deci and Ryan have described self-development as “the by-product of activity that emanates from the phenomenal core of one’s experience and satisfies one’s basic psychological needs” (Deci & Ryan, 1990, p. 246). At the heart of optimal self-development is an internalisation of a social environment that is supportive of “integrative development” such that a re-connection with intrinsic values and motivation is encouraged, and the authentic or integrated, agentic self can emerge and engage with the environment in an active way (Deci & Ryan, 1990, p. 239). Accounts from participants in this study include descriptions of feeling valued and of belonging, while a sense of internalised worth may be seen in descriptions of new-found self-belief and competence which has grown from the positive feedback from theatre practitioners. The acceptance, and valuing, of the authentic self may be particularly important for young people who less frequently experience social environments in which the authentic self is accepted and valued.

Indeed, as work with the theatre project progressed, participants described feeling increasingly distant from a past self, which they felt no longer represented them. The young people’s accounts suggest that felt discrepancies between diverse selves – such as between

actual and ideal selves (Higgins, 1987) – may have reduced over the duration of the project such that the young people are moving towards a more integrated self and the attainment of hoped-for future selves (see Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, 2008).

Links between self-construals and motivational orientations are also highlighted by SDT, which proposes that interest and intrinsic enjoyment are essential for self-development (Deci & Ryan, 1990). Enjoyment, inquisitiveness and play (ACE, 2006; Schechner, 2013) are considered to be at the heart of drama and theatre activities, making these an optimal arena for self-development to take place. The experiences of participants in the present study echo these sentiments, with accounts describing enjoyment of the process of acting, as well as wider enjoyment of being engaged in a constructive activity, and of belonging to a positive group. Furthermore, the “optimally challenging activities” that the drama and theatre activities provide make possible intrinsic enjoyment and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1990, p. 242) as well as opportunities for empowering mastery experiences, personal and collaborative achievements, and feelings of competence within a non-competitive arena (Taylor & Warner, 2006).

Social relationships as a foundation for self-development

Positive relationships with adults are thought to be central to successful interventions with marginalised young people (Wilkin et al., 2005), while others have emphasised the importance of developing a climate of collaboration and trust for effective drama and theatre spaces to be created (Nicholson, 2002). Certainly these factors appeared to be crucial for establishing a space in the present study in which the young people felt secure and comfortable and where feelings of confidence, self-belief, trust, belonging, mutual respect and equality could grow. Moreover, the clear structures and expectations that characterised the approach of the theatre staff created a solid foundation upon which those positive

relationships could develop, and personal growth could occur. Together, these features echo the three dimensions – involvement, autonomy, and structure – described within SDT frameworks as dimensions by which social context is assessed (Deci & Ryan, 1990).

The need-supporting qualities of the relationships with the theatre practitioners, as well as the sense of peer-group belonging evident in the participants' frequent use of the word 'team', provided acknowledgement, value, and respect for the hopes of the young people. The interest and feedback from practitioners, which was at first received with some suspicion, was slowly internalised with a growing self-belief and confidence (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Harland et al., 2000; Smokowski et al., 1999). This internalisation of nutrients from the social environment means that ultimately a change in the young peoples' relationship with themselves is felt (Deci & Ryan, 1990). There is a sense from the accounts that space and voice have been given to an authentic self, which finds release rather than being hidden away. The old masks of the past – the tough self-presentations and false selves (Harter, 2006), and the quashing of intrinsic interest and engagement – have been put aside and replaced with new motivation, self-belief, self-worth (Kamins & Dweck, 1999), and confidence in the capacity to reach for new possible selves (Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

Limitations and future directions

Despite the unique understanding of participants' experiences that this study afforded, we recognise that these experiences cannot be assumed to generalise to all marginalised young people, nor indeed to all drama and theatre activities for at-risk youths. Indeed it is likely that a wide range of factors beyond the theatre project influenced the psychosocial trajectories described in this report. A larger study with samples of young people from a number of different drama and theatre projects would allow for an examination of how

different experiences of drama and theatre projects relate to self-construal and motivational outcomes. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of such samples of young people would allow for an examination of how other factors external to the drama and theatre project – such as demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity), baseline levels of motivation/goals/self-construals, present life circumstances, as well as past school or home experiences – relate to outcomes.

It is important to stress that the theatre project described in the present study was framed not as an intervention, but rather as a unique, sensitive, and powerful way of developing a theatre production. Whilst this approach is appropriate for qualitative designs concerned with idiographic inquiry, there is also a need for future experimental work to explore systematically the extent to which drama and theatre activities can be used deliberately as therapeutic interventions to re-engage marginalised young people (see McArdle et al., 2002, for a randomised controlled trial of the efficacy of group drama therapy for at-risk children). Relatedly, the current enquiry did not seek participants' views concerning the benefits of their experiences during the theatre project compared to other interventions they may have received. Future qualitative work, as well as experimental work, should seek to elicit and examine the differential experiences and outcomes of theatre interventions compared to other interventions in order to better understand the unique benefits of particular intervention approaches.

Moreover, whilst the present study provides a rich account of how drama and theatre projects may promote self-development and potentially help to re-direct the negative trajectories associated with marginalised youth, isolating the specific ingredients that generated positive impacts remains a significant challenge. Some aspects of the experience are clearly applicable beyond the drama context, such as the nurture, support, and guidance

provided by the adults involved. On the other hand, it seems likely that activities specifically linked to drama and theatre – in particular those based on autobiographical reflections – provide unique contributions even beyond those that are conferred by projects employing other arts-based activities (Arts Council England, 2005; Hirst & Robertshaw, 2003; Wilkin et al., 2005). A fruitful avenue of future research could include a quantitative examination of the impact of specific drama and theatre activities – for example role-play improvisations, and improvisations based on lived experiences – on outcomes such as self-concept, emotional well-being, and social behaviour, in order to determine the unique benefits of these approaches over and above the effects of other creative projects which do not include drama and theatre elements.

Finally, our understanding of what happens when creative arts projects for at-risk young people end is little understood. Participants in the present study described feelings of emptiness and loss when activities within the project came to an end, and therefore questions about long-term resilience in participants need to be explored, as well as follow-up work to examine how long lasting the changes captured are (McArdle et al., 2002).

Conclusion

Our in-depth, longitudinal, idiographic investigation has illustrated how drama and theatre activities may provide a unique opportunity for marginalised young people to engage in a process of self-development by providing a social environment which is nurturing for the self. By illuminating the interplay of positive relationships, self-construals, and the experience of intrinsic enjoyment, mastery, and achievement our results point to the need for an integrated framework that incorporates key psychological processes concerned with social and motivational outcomes, and which draws together core theoretical frameworks concerning self-determination, self-discrepancy, and achievement. Finally, further work is now required to test more systematically the use of drama and theatre work as an explicit

intervention approach for addressing the psychosocial needs of marginalised youths. Such research will be crucial for harnessing the power of the theatre project reported here in order to promote self-development and positive trajectories within the larger population of marginalised youths.

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