Original Research Article

The Sounding Out project: Why pedagogy matters in supporting care experienced young people

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Abstract:

This paper shares the story of a group of four care experienced young people who participated in an arts project in Aberdeenshire. The research was an evaluative case study which gathered the views and experiences of the young people and the arts educators. The findings showed that by adopting a pedagogical approach to arts education, which was participant-led, a climate of trust and mutual respect was supported. The young people developed a growing sense of their potential as creative individuals and an awareness of possible careers in the creative industries, which previously had not been on their radar.

Introduction

The importance of recognising children as agents leading their learning has been widely acknowledged (Baldry & Moscardini, 2010; Cairns, 2014; Hart et al., 2004; Henley & Barton, 2022). In Scotland this aspiration is reflected in the design principles of the curriculum, Curriculum for Excellence (CFE), specifically through the concept of personalisation and choice (Scottish Government, 2008). However, the extent to which many children and young people experience authentic opportunities to lead in their learning remains questionable, with Curriculum for Excellence having been described as primarily a mastery curriculum rather than a process driven one (Priestley & Humes, 2010).

Giving voice to care experienced children and young people is at the heart of the Independent Care Review's 'The Promise' (ICR, 2020). The rationale for a student-led approach to learning is based on the premise that it builds a sense of independence and self-confidence, developing empathy and supporting relationships (CMCH, 2004). Listening to children and young people, and learning from them, is a challenging, yet essential, process if trusting

relationships are to be nurtured (McLeod, 2007). The implications of this for care experienced young people are significant.

Pedagogical approaches which are respectful of the capabilities of the learners (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1992), and which are built on principles of trust and agency, support the inclusion of all learners (Hart et al., 2004). Nussbaum (2010) presents a compelling argument for the arts in education as a fundamental human activity which helps children to understand both themselves and others. Engagement in the arts potentially gives voice to care experienced young people, which in turn may lead to better outcomes (Mannay et al., 2019).

This paper reports on a group of care experienced young people's engagement in a community arts project which focussed on the process being led by the students. It draws from the findings of an evaluation of Sounding Out, an interdisciplinary photography and film, sound design and music project involving a group of care experienced high school students in Aberdeenshire. It was funded by Creative Scotland through the Youth Music Initiative.

Access to arts education

It is widely recognised that children and young people in care achieve poorer educational outcomes than those not in care (Mannay et al., 2019; O'Higgins et al., 2015; Sebba et al., 2015). Educational outcomes in this context signify more than attainment and relate to the opportunities which exist for care experienced children and young people to engage in artistic activity. The decline in the arts and humanities at all levels of education globally has been articulated by Nussbaum (2010) as a significant concern. The Cultural Learning Alliance briefing paper from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (2019) stresses that participation in the arts supports social mobility and argues that equality of access to arts and culture is the right of every child.

Experience of the arts has significant value for care experienced children and young people. Key findings of an exploratory literature review (Peeram, 2016, p.3) indicated that arts education with care experienced children supported their emotional resilience, allowed them to express themselves in alternative ways, encouraged friendships, and allowed for sharing of experiences through meeting children with similar life experiences. Lack of family and peer support were significant barriers to participation.

There are calls for the development of arts education in all its forms as a means of giving voice to care experienced young people (Mannay et al., 2019; Nugent, Glowa & Shaw, 2022). Taking a holistic view of educational experiences and acknowledging the right for all children to engage in artistic activity, poorer educational outcomes in this context signify more than attainment and relate to the opportunities which exist for care experienced children and young people to engage in artistic activity. A recent study of music education in primary schools

in Scotland (Moscardini et al., 2021) found that many children in Scottish primary schools do not have the opportunity to engage in musical activity and learning on a regular basis; fifteen percent of the respondents in the study (n=437) reported music education in their primary schools as either non-existent or practically non-existent. This was three times more likely to be the case in areas of significant deprivation. This finding was replicated in parallel studies looking at dance and the visual arts in primary schools (Moscardini et al., 2022). These findings should be treated with caution as it was not possible to extrapolate figures for care experienced children. However, there is a growing concern about diminishing opportunities for children to engage in artistic activity. Given the potential lack of family and peer support, as identified in Peeram's (2016) study, this issue clearly applies to care experienced children and young people.

A capability approach

The capability approach was the conceptual lens through which the experiences of participants were considered. It provided a useful framework to evaluate the extent to which individuals are able, or have the capability and freedom, to lead a fulfilling life which they value. Nussbaum (2011) conceptualises well-being in terms of functionings and capabilities, with functionings described as the beings and doings a person values. Capabilities are the individual's opportunities and freedom to achieve these valued functionings.

In a capability-based evaluation of a music project which used electronic and computer technology to support disabled people in music creation and performance (Watts & Ridley, 2006), the researchers invited participants to share the functionings they valued and the freedoms which they had to achieve these. The evaluation concluded that the disabled musicians lacked the substantive freedom, or capability, to make music and to come to be identified as musicians. However, through that project they were able to achieve those 'valued doings and beings' or functionings (Watts & Ridley, 2006, p.105). Given that engagement in artistic activity is a right in terms of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31) (UN, 1989), and consistent with the philosophy of the Promise (ICR, 2020), consideration of the capabilities and the valued doings and beings of care experienced young people in engaging in artistic activity would seem highly relevant.

A pedagogy of inclusion

The social and educational inclusion of all learners is set out in international human rights frameworks, namely the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the United Nation Convention on Persons with Disabilities (2006). These rights have been incorporated into Scottish legislation and policy. However, inclusion, as a principled approach, is driven by what people do, and its development occurs when adults and children and young people work together,

connecting their values and beliefs to practice (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). In this respect, pedagogy matters. Inclusive pedagogical practices are tied up in the values and beliefs of practitioners and the pedagogical moves which they make (Ainscow et al., 2006; Azevedo et al., 2012; Webb et el., 2013).

Inclusive pedagogy rests in a complex interplay that involves teachers' knowledge and beliefs about individual learners, teaching, and self-efficacy, and the pedagogical decisions and actions which ensue (Lalvani, 2013). In the Learning without Limits study, which analysed the practice of classroom teachers to determine what supported the inclusion of all learners, the researchers identified transformability as a distinguishing feature of the teachers' approach (Hart et al., 2004). The core idea of transformability is that what happens in the present has a formative effect on children's learning capacity and thus their future development and outcomes (Hart et al., 2004, p.116). An inclusive pedagogical model founded on the core idea of transformability is underpinned by three pedagogical principles: Everybody, Co-agency, and Trust (Hart et al., 2004). The principle of everybody is based on the idea of an integrated community in which teachers' responsibilities lie in their commitment to acting in the interests of all, and in which young people value their own contributions and those of others. Co-agency involves the teacher and young people working together for change; there is a shared responsibility in the learning process with tasks left open to support the active engagement of learners. The researchers in the Learning without Limits project found that the teachers approached their role from a position of trust. This was connected to the teachers' belief that the children would engage if conditions were right (Hart & Drummond, 2014, p.449).

The poor educational outcomes for care experienced young people are well-documented. The educational and social inequalities which they experience can lead to disengagement and may have significant implications for their sense of self-efficacy and consequently their career prospects. Participation goes beyond simply being there. It requires the collaboration and active engagement of all participants. The learning process is seen as one of collective activity where participants' voices are heard and valued (Engstrom & Sannino, 2012; Frost, 2006). Creative activities can support the meaningful participation of care experienced children and young people (Mannay et al., 2019) and bring a sense of belonging, hope, and trust (McGregor & Macauley, 2009). This relational approach has been described as autonomy within an ethos of care (Cefai, 2008, p.118) and is consistent with evidence that when relationships are sensitively built on trust, reliability, consistency, and freedom from judgement and blame, the results for children's development and progress has been notable (Baldry & Moscardini, 2010; Marmot, 2015).

Aims

The central aim of the Sounding Out project was to support the development of positive relationships amongst and with a group of care experienced young people and to build their confidence and sense of empowerment. This was in the context of a student-led arts project which also sought to develop the participants' skills in photography and film, sound design, and music.

The aim of the research was to evaluate the Sounding Out project with a view to determine any aspects which might usefully inform future projects through the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS), and, in particular, further care experienced projects in the northeast of Scotland. The research required developing an understanding of the process used by the arts educators. It involved learning about the arts educators' experiences and practice during the project as well as learning about the experiences of the young people and school staff involved.

The Sounding Out Project

The project was one of a series with care experienced and estranged students developed by the fair access department at RCS over a period of five years as part of its commitment to improving its work in this area. One of the authors of this paper, Jesse Paul, developed projects in various locations around Scotland in collaboration with arts educators alongside care experienced and estranged people in those areas. Each project was unique and supported variously by partner organisations, local authorities (including schools), and grant-making charities and funders.

Sounding Out was an arts project run by two community arts educators from Wildbird, based in Moray Scotland, and involved working with a group of care experienced young people attending the same Aberdeenshire secondary school The project ran for nine weeks from January to March 2022. The project also involved the guidance teacher at The Gordon Schools and Aberdeenshire Council's virtual head teacher as liaison people. Six young people who attended The Gordon Schools took part in the project. It should be noted that The Gordon Schools is only one school, with the designation of the plural, schools, in its name being historical. All the participants were care experienced at the time of the project and were between 14 and 16 years of age.

The project involved a series of weekly sessions which focussed on supporting the young people in the development of skills relating to film-making and sound production. These sessions were student-led following students interests and initiatives. The Sounding Out project concluded with the participants' film and sound production being shared at a community event at Huntley Castle where the work was projected onto the castle walls (Roger, 2022).

Research design

The purpose of the research was to carry out an evaluative case study of the Sounding Out project. This was an intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995) which involved learning about the young people's experiences of the project, as well as the experiences and practice of the arts educators and the teacher who liaised throughout the project. This case study would inform the development of subsequent projects involving care experienced young people in the northeast of Scotland.

Data collection involved interviews at the end of the project with four of the young people who participated, the two community arts educators, and the guidance teacher at The Gordon Schools. All six young people participating in the project agreed to take part in the interviews, however only four young people were available at the time for interviewing. The four young people were interviewed in pairs. The two community arts educators were interviewed together, and the guidance teacher was interviewed individually.

Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcription data underwent a process of reflexive thematic analysis in which all data were read several times prior to coding. Coded data were clustered to develop initial themes which were revised and refined, leading to the development of the final themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Ethics

The study conformed to the requirements of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland Ethics Committee. Consent for participation was approved by the local authority and school, both of which wished to be identified in the write-up of the project. All participants were provided with information sheets outlining the details of the research study and the nature of their participation and gave individual consent. The young people involved in the study specifically requested that their own names be used. The other participants also requested that their anonymity should be waived.

The stories they told...

The young people expressed their experiences of the project in very positive terms. These positive experiences were clearly connected to the processes and pedagogical practices of the arts educators. Their accounts have been structured around three themes which were developed through the process of reflexive thematic analysis of the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The first theme – *Serious work wrapped up in humour* – reflected the aims of the project and highlighted that the project was carefully considered, informed, and intentional from its inception, with the aim of engagement being achieved through building relationships and making the whole experience an enjoyable one for the young people.

The second theme – *New horizons* – reflected the changes that occurred over the course of the project and indicated opportunities that the young people became aware of as a consequence of their participation.

The third theme – *Where next? 'Go big or go home...'* speaks to the ambitions the young people had for themselves as well as their views on how the Sounding Out project might be developed further.

The Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2011) provided a conceptual lens for evaluating the extent to which the participants were able to achieve the functionings which they valued. In this respect the findings of the Sounding Out project reflect those of Watts and Ridley (2006). As evidenced through the young people's interviews, the idea that engaging in the creative industries and developing their skills and knowledge in ways that might open up career opportunities was not on their radar. The project was transformative in this respect and thus reflected the findings of Peerum (2016). It brought previously unknown and unimaginable experiences to the young people, along with the realisation of their capacity to function as individuals, and as a team, in this new milieu. They came not knowing what to expect, and left with aspirations of what might be possible and new friendships.

Serious work wrapped up in humour

The aim of the project was expressed as focussing on confidence building, relationship building, and empowerment. The community arts educators were clear that this should be achieved by concentrating on the process rather than the product. This was described by one of the arts educators as a process of enjoyable engagement,

> The main aim was to have a lovely time and build good relationships. Also learning really good skills through photography and film, sound design and music.   Graeme

Learning was not overlooked; there was an eye on the development of skills, and knowledge and understanding, crucial to any transformational change. In a very real sense, the young people developed specific skills and valued 'beings and doings' or functionings (Sen, 1992) through the project. The serious nature of the work was evident through detailed accounts of highly effective communication and collaboration, across practitioners from various agencies

(education, social work, and community arts) which supported the development of those functionings. It was described as a 'really joined up' approach in which everyone worked as a team. Notably, this collective sense of being part of a team was also reflected in the young people's accounts of their experiences of the project. One of the students explained,

> …before (the project) it was more like we were strangers and didn't know each other… and then after the group we were all really close, so that one term really brought everyone together. Emma

A word which permeated every single interview was fun, however, this does not belie the serious nature of the work. It was this relaxed yet purposeful ethos which supported the engagement and learning of the young people. It was evident that the young people had developed strong and mutually supportive friendships. They had also developed significant new knowledge and specialist skills of which they were proud. Stephen summed this up nicely,

> … the interactivity with the community and people coming together and doing things, like we made the video and that was good, that was evidence of putting effort into something and getting a result.

The young people felt valued, and the relaxed atmosphere helped to create a feeling of trust. They worked with professional quality film and sound equipment, and they were very aware of this. One of the community arts educators explained,

> …we gave them all really good equipment, that's a big part of it, getting a £5000 camera and told off you go. And if something goes wrong no worries, like the time the camera fell off the Steadicam rig (laughs), I'm like, 'it's fine, it's okay'.

It was not only the young people who underwent transformation. The arts educators identified transformation in their own practice through their subsequent engagement with the Sounding Out project. They were aware, from past experiences, that their approach was not always commensurate with the results-driven agenda of some schools and that effective collaboration with teachers was 'fundamental.'

> They [teachers] maybe want to change what you are doing but not on this project. They've got to trust you and get to the end, and they are like 'ah got you now'. So, one thing we do is also get the teacher laughing then we know it'll work. Dave

By adopting a relational approach, the Sounding Out project successfully developed an integrated community made up of young people, community arts workers, and teachers. Tasks were deliberately open and influenced by learner

choice. This led to commitment and engagement because the conditions of the learning environment were appropriate. Adaptiveness, empathy, and respect were key drivers in planning activity. Hart and Drummond (2014) state that this 'willingness to listen and try to understand how the world looks through the eyes of young people' (Hart & Drummond, 2014, p.448) provides a space where young people are more equipped to explore beyond conventional learner boundaries. This was reflected in the achievements of the participating young people.

Throughout the project, an environment of listening and trust was developed through reliability. Constancy, free from judgement or blame, was provided by the multi-agency gatekeepers involved. This was a refreshing and encouraging approach to the pedagogical design of the project. Listening to, and hearing, young people effectively are not always synonymous. McLeod (2007) argues that listening can be particularly challenging when dealing with disaffected young people. They suggest that perhaps the biggest barrier to effective listening is when adults do not really want to hear what children have to say (McLeod, 2007, p.285). The opposite approach was taken in the Sounding Out project, where multi-agencies worked together to ensure that participants in the care project were listened to effectively. In effect, the Sounding Out project took an adaptive and responsive approach that enabled freedom of learning because listening and trust were embedded into the project's core values and, consequently, the design.

The community arts workers were openly flexible about workshop content. This seemed to encourage the care group participants to make decisions about what they wanted to learn, communicate how to request it, and reflect on their learner journeys. The participants took agency in their learning in a unique enabled environment that sat outside of conventional curricula. Frost (2006) suggests that the content of the curriculum has been largely taken out of the hands of teachers and students. However, in the hands of a relational community that included community arts workers, participants' curriculum choices were supported, embedded, and celebrated.

New horizons

The success of the project, in relation to its aims, was evidenced on every front. Supportive and valued friendships, which have continued beyond the duration of the project, were developed,

> It was cool because…walking round school, I would never have thought of talking to you but actually I've made friends in the group.

There was a strong sense of camaraderie and being part of a team. In their interactions during the interviews the young people supported each other, recognising and praising each other's achievements.

> 'I did a lot of things, but things that weren't needed.'
> 'No, your contribution was great, like you still put something into the group.'

The development of specialist knowledge and skills led to the young people recognising their ability and potential. Toby worked on sound:

> '…as soon as I got doing it was just really interesting for me. I've got really bad hearing; I don't really care about listening to stuff. For me to do that is actually huge.'

They also recognised potential study and career prospects which previously had not been on their radar. Brooke described how doing camera work has given her new perspectives,

> 'It changes the way you look at things and whether filming might be a good career. I think it would be quite cool.'

> Toby supported her, 'I do see you doing that.'

Toby has also gone on to work on sound in music and drama at school.

Stephen has changed his course selection at school to do a National Progression Award Photography,

> 'Yeah, (the project) was kind of like one of the main kickers.'

Emma recognised the possibilities that her newly acquired skills had to offer,

> 'I was quite surprised at how good I was at taking photographs… I haven't decided yet but I know how to work cameras and all that sort of stuff so I can obviously take pictures for people.'

The project represented a form of affirmative action which was necessary to afford the young people opportunities which they would not have had otherwise, and which led to a realisation of what they could do and be. Policies and guidelines, and legislation, including the incorporation of the UNCRC, provide frameworks for practice but, in themselves, cannot guarantee practice. Children's experience of arts education in schools is dependent on teachers' knowledge and confidence in particular areas, but it is also increasingly a matter of privilege, determined by children's social and cultural capital, which precludes children from more disadvantaged backgrounds (Wilson et al., 2020).

Humes (2011) argues that 'one of the reasons why the arts are so important in education is that they recognise the unique character of every human being'

(Humes, 2011, p.12). This seems vital for care experienced learners whose voices must be heard (see ICR, 2020; Manny et al., 2019). The project encouraged individuality through creative activity in a safe and nurturing environment. By adopting a pedagogical position that required listening to and valuing participant engagement in the activities, transformation took place in the form of learner confidence and possibility. The project culminated with the participant-led Huntly Castle Projection (Roger, 2022), where the young people shared future iterations of the project, and crucially, discussed making informed decisions about pursuing their new-found interests. In the interviews conducted at the end of the Sounding Out project, the participants' ability to critically reflect and identify their future aspirations suggests that designing process-strong activities can enable purposeful learning to take place.

Where next? 'Go big or go home....'

The enthusiasm to continue with the project in some form or another was conveyed by everybody. There were two aspects to 'where next?' which were highlighted. There was the personal component, and there was the wider aspect of how projects of this nature might be developed more widely. The young people's experiences of the project, and their thoughts about what might happen next, were inextricably linked to the positive relationships which they had developed with community arts educators. They were all keen to be involved in similar work. Emma commented,

> 'I would like to, obviously very excited to see them again Dave and Graeme…because obviously we've grown a bit of a bond with them.'

The sheer joy that everyone had throughout the project and the desire for this to continue was evident,

Stephen: 'I mean we did the projection video and it seemed quite productive. I say we go and do a full-scale movie and put it on the big screen…we are going big we're going mainstream.'
Ellie: 'Go big or go home.'

There was a strong sense that other young people should also benefit from the experience which the young people had had. Toby suggested that we should, 'try and convince schools and groups like this to give it a go.'

Holly Robertson, guidance teacher, stressed the value and importance of collaboration across the various professional agencies as a pre-requisite for a successful project and suggested that scaling up would benefit from co-ordinated support at the local authority level. While recognising the challenge in scaling up, particularly in relation to maintaining the ethos and philosophy of the original project, Dave Martin suggested that it might be beneficial to 'try to encourage people to look at what they are doing in a slightly different way.' He argued that rather than being focussed on the product and the perfection of that, by

focussing on the process and quality of engagement the outcomes will happen. Lessons learned from the project have informed the development of the work of the fair access team at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.
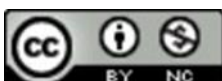

Conclusion

The Sounding Out project highlighted the transformative potential of working to a pedagogical model which focusses on process rather than product and within a culture of trust and listening to care experienced young people. This challenges the idea of a product-driven approach to education in which pre-determined outcomes direct the content and structure of teaching. Evidence from the study indicates that working responsively afforded the young people the opportunity to develop skills and understandings which potentially could lead to positive career decisions. These new ways of doing and being, or functionings (Nussbaum, 2011), are a consequence of the affordances of this approach. The Sounding Out project was small-scale and the findings in this paper are particular to it. Whilst they are not generalisable, they may help to inform how teaching artists and arts educators might continue or begin to develop pedagogical approaches that are respectful of the needs of care experienced learners participating in the arts.

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