

How Can Writing Give Voice to Youth Theatre Members and Why is That Important?

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ABSTRACT

Youth Theatre for many is an entry point into the theatrical world but some may find participation and/or engagement difficult because of external factors. These factors may remove the ability to have confidence in the stories they wish to tell by not having the ability to see where and how those stories can and do fit into the wider theatrical ecology. This quantitative case study looks at a discrete writing workshop which was part of a larger series of workshops initiated by York Theatre Royal with the specific aim of giving voice to a targeted cohort. Using a contextualising ethnographic approach and pre- and post-workshop questionnaires, this study argues that through writing and storytelling, voice and agency can be emboldened, aiding young people in overcoming barriers to participation in theatre.

KEYWORDS

Youth Theatre; Writing; Widening Participation; Agency; Young people.

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INTRODUCTION

York Theatre Royal is a producing house in the North of England, that "believes theatre and creativity have an incredibly important role to play in all our lives" (York Theatre Royal, 2022, n.pag). Several strands of their work tilt toward talent development and young people; this work is overseen by the Creative Engagement department. The theatre has an impressive history of putting young people in the driving seat with schemes such as TakeOver, which turns the theatre over to the under 26's for a fortnight. Previous participants of this scheme have gone on to have flourishing and tastemaking careers in the arts. Charlotte Bennett, now Co-Artistic Director of critically acclaimed new writing company Paines Plough, once held the same role as a young person during the TakeOver festival (Hickling, 2009).

Youth theatre offers space for young people to hear, interact with, and tell stories. In collaboration with their peers and engaged facilitators, these groups allow young people to explore their personhood and their place in society in a way that is not always possible in a formal education setting. "Youth theatre has long been perceived to have important personal and social impacts on young people" (Hughes and Wilson, 2004, p.58), arguably because of the unique way in which theatre storytelling allows for embodied understanding. In performing stories, young people have the ability to 'try out' scenarios in a fictional world which can free them from the 'constraints of roles they play in their day-to-day lives [giving them an opportunity] to explore, practise, experiment with and extend their awareness of self and the world around them' (Hughes and Wilson, 2004, p.69-70). Offering the ability, in youth theatre settings, to write those stories themselves, arguably allows for more agency and/or self-guided specificity in their learning and understanding of that world; knowing *how* to offer this ability, within a youth theatre context, is of paramount importance. It must be recognised, however, that in the UK such opportunities do not present themselves to, and for, all young people to take part. Against the background of the cutting of arts provision in UK schools and formal education settings, the gateway to such opportunities is in danger of becoming the preserve of those who can afford it financially. The creation of a sense of ownership and belonging to theatre and the performing arts could erode irrevocably for those less able to pay for it. It is reported that "in 2019, 38% of the richest individuals in TV, film and music attended private schools as did 20% of pop stars" (Ashton and Ashton, 2023, p. 495), this is disproportionate, especially when we consider that just 3.35% of the entire UK school-aged population (Green, 2023, p. 2) attend such schools. This is a political position evidenced by the assertion that "[s]uch reductions have primarily been reported in countries commonly recognized as influenced by a revived New Right movement in the early 2000s and 2010s" (Lilliedahl, 2021, p. 166) and further emboldened by cuts and augmentation to the professional theatre world. This narrowing of who it is in our society that can tell stories narrows the ability for there to be a story that is coherent and inclusive. This is acutely felt at the margins of society. For a young person already at the margins, a sense and creation of engagement and understanding is a pre-requisite for becoming an engaged, informed, and interested member of the adult workforce – you get out what you put in.

The theatre employs 'Community Connectors' like Lydia Crosland, who are tasked with listening "to people from a range of communities and ask what they would like to be involved in and what would make them feel more connected to York Theatre Royal" (Crosland, 2023, n.pag). From this active engagement with the community, Crosland and her team realised that their 'Access All Areas' strand of work, a

“referral programme aimed at removing the barriers that stop young people aged 12-16 from engaging with the arts” (York Theatre Royal, 2021, n.pag) could be the umbrella under which to work with young people who may have mental health challenges. The strand is being used to offer creative sessions directly through the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) to “introduce all aspects of theatre in an environment where all young people had a shared experience” (Crosland, 2023, n.pag). This thinking led to the theatre securing funding from the Benenden Health Community Fund to offer workshops in various facets of theatre-making to young people whom CAMHS had signposted directly to the theatre. These workshops were grouped under a project name ‘CAMHS Creative Socials’ and first ran during the spring and early summer of 2023. Over the course of six sessions (spread across three months), participants were offered workshops and sessions on practice (including set design, writing, movement direction and devising drama), meetings with directors and York Theatre Royal staff to integrate participants into the theatre’s community, and free group trips to see shows including those made by York-based Pilot Theatre Company, who create award-winning theatre for young people.

The writing workshop was chosen for this study as the benefits of storytelling and theatre in the treatment and regulation of mental wellness is well researched (Wall *et al.*, 2019; Gordon-Nesbitt and Howarth, 2020; Gaiha *et al.*, 2021; Birrell *et al.*, 2024) but is not always implemented due to funding difficulties. It is suggested that “creative activity may allow young people to feel empowered by creating a safe environment that is different from any other setting in their life” (Ferrell *et al.*, 2023, p. 684). This is to be contrasted and contextualised with the “lack of understanding of the importance of engagement in creative arts for the development of stable psychological well-being, not just as a means of discovering hidden talents and producing high-level performances” (Ferrell *et al.*, 2023, p. 685). ‘CAMHS Creative Socials’ was positioned as a means, primarily, to aid the development of mental well-being in a creative space instead of a means to find new creatives. Of course, this latter objective may, in the fullness of time, be achieved, but was not the aim. This scheme understands and embraces the finding that “[a]rts have a transformative pastoral impact, especially for pupils with low wellbeing” (Clarke and McLellan, 2021, p. 172).

Young people need to have an element of agency to make their mark on the world. Some research has focused on "an examination of how a better understanding of young people's lived experiences can reveal possibilities for young people's agency to emerge" (Spencer and Doull, 2015, p. 901). Theatre, and storytelling more generally, are perfect vehicles for this to be enacted as "storytelling is recognised as a meaning-making process" (D'Cruz, Douglas, and Serry, 2020, p. 576). It is precisely at the site of telling stories that lived experience can be, and is, articulated. "Agency is often described in the literature as being the capacity or ability to act (suggesting a power to interpretation) – thereby underscoring the individual's ability to influence those around them" (Spencer and Doull, 2015, p. 904) and it is argued here that storytelling is the framing in which this power of interpretation can reside. Since "stories emerge from someplace in the human mind which functions autonomously" (Booker, 2004, p. 543), the place that stories hold in articulating and understanding the role of our shared humanity cannot be overstated because it is innate. "Telling stories is how we make sense of the world around us. The stories that we tell explore our lived world and that world, by reflection, explores the stories that we tell" (Daly, 2022, p. 187); it is important - imperative even - that young people are empowered to contribute to the world through their stories.

METHODOLOGY

The writing workshop from which the quantitative data upon which this paper reports was gathered, was the third workshop offered in a series of six. The participants had not met the lead creative before this workshop but were familiar with the group lead and their assistant.

On entry to the space, participants were seated in a circle in order to create a semblance of equality between the leader(s) and participants as well as a tacit acknowledgement of the diversity of practice(s) in theatre - “[t]he practice of gathering together in a circle echoes African traditions where the circle represents being whole, one and communal” (Johnson and Sicre, 2017, p. 191).

Each participant was asked their name, pronoun(s), and invited to tell the group about one thing that made them happy in the preceding seven days. In order to create an environment where sharing is easy(er) and more comfortable, ease and comfort needed to be seeded. Often, this can be achieved by the lead in the space, modelling “*an* honesty and openness” (Horn, 2017, p. 84, emphasis added) before acknowledging the hierarchical positioning and making clear the need and aims of gathering in a circle before taking the lead from the group – as was done here. In light of safeguarding concerns, it is imperative to know the quality, and, in some cases, quantity of honesty offered. The National Youth Theatre of Great Britain (NYT) suggests that whilst facilitators “should develop good strong trusting relationships with the members that you engage with’ they should be ‘thoughtful about the language that [they] might be using’ making sure to ‘always remain within the boundaries of [their] professional role” (Niland, 2024, p. 29). In many creative settings, there is a wide acceptance toward the declaration of pronouns by participants (and leaders). In such spaces, this is a change that “...[is] important because they are not only inclusive of people with diverse gender identities [...], but they reduce the emphasis on gender and the gender binary, an emphasis that leads to stereotyping and prejudice” (Keener and Kotvas, 2022, p. 27). This declaration of pronouns leads to the recognition of individuality, identity and, ultimately, respect. This change is especially relevant with youth groups as it is in the teenage years that identities are often formed “as they try to find out who they are [...] and form new commitments to identifications” (Branje *et al.*, 2021, p. 908).

There were nine members of the group, all between eleven and sixteen years old (UK secondary school age or grades six to ten in U.S. schooling terms). Gender, in terms of this study, is immaterial in reporting, as this study views the sample group as an opportunity to “understand [...] whatever you are interested in, rather than to represent a population” (Mason, 2002, p. 135), aiming to produce results as a starting point for further practice and study.

Before the session began in earnest, each member of the group was given a preliminary questionnaire on paper with a yes/no tick option for each in order to create a quickly completable survey providing a quantifiable baseline, which would add context to the observations made throughout the session. The focus of the workshop was to be on the work and not the questioning about it. The questionnaire asked the following:

Are you a writer?

Do you have things to say?

Have you been a member of a youth theatre before?

Do people like you belong in theatres?

Are your stories important?

Each sheet was numbered to preserve anonymity but to also allow for comparison of the pre- and post-questionnaire, and participants were asked to fold these sheets and keep them on hand until later in the session. These closed questions were to form the baseline of result analysis; as such, no context was offered when participants engaged with it.

There was a discussion about topics and issues that meant a lot to the participants that they felt did not privilege or centre their point(s) of view. There was no explicit steer as to the topics that could be discussed but the guidance was that what was spoken about had to be something that (metaphorically) 'kept them awake at night'. Every member of the circle was encouraged to contribute and did so from their seated position. There were animated discussions about popular culture – centred around music, film, and literature – and its importance to their sense of self; a sense of self that was not always understood by the adults around them. This led to a discussion about the clothing and 'style(s)' associated with subcultures and the sense of belonging that subcultural allegiance gave rise to, as well as the battles that they felt they needed to fight in order to express and present themselves. Happiness and what that meant and felt like was explored. This took us into the realm of the 'existential crisis that is climate change'. Several of the group spoke profoundly and eloquently about the problems with finding happiness when the 'consistent thought' that the world that they will inherit will be more unstable than that of the generations preceding them. Discussions then turned to mental wellness, pitching their need for personal space to 'gather' their thoughts against the expectation of those thoughts to be shared openly with others. Participants were also eager to talk about lunchtimes at school. This became a clear framing device which enabled them to explore the meaning and importance of social interaction in the non-structured time of their formal educational spaces. In addition to sparking these engaged and engaging conversations, this acted as idea generation, leading easily to crafting some writing.

After this sharing of ideas and themes, participants were asked whether they felt that these stories were already performed in theatres and, more broadly, if the stories that they had experienced in theatres felt truthful or authentic. The difficult notion of authenticity is important to explore if we consider that "authenticity has become a vital preoccupation for many because it carries the promise of some tangible outside and essentialist reality" (Schulze, 2017, p. 6). This exploratory conversation was intended to, and did, lead to ideas about who was writing the stories and for whom. It allowed the questioning of whether there was a semblance of authentic representation, or caricature/assumption which could be argued to be a persistent trope when theatre talks about groups who are under-represented, often reinforcing 'outdated stereotypes' (Masso, 2019).

The basic premise of the beginning, middle and end structure was introduced with examples given, underscoring the innate understanding of the story form that all humans have.

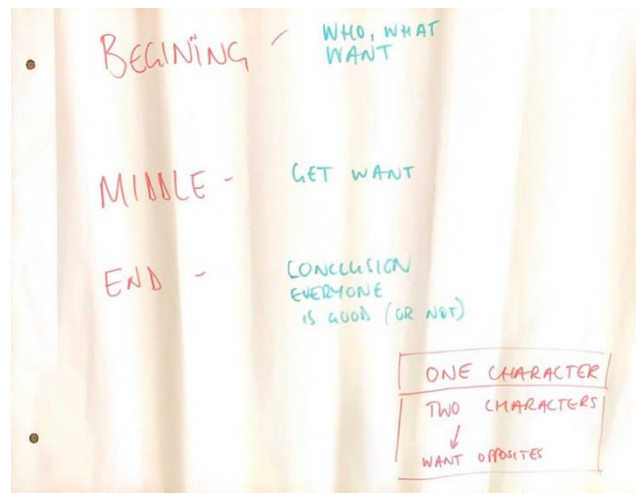


Figure 1: Suggestions of what the beginning middle and end of a story should contain (including a semi-corrected spelling mistake)

The premise of the story structure was deliberately basic to facilitate ease of understanding and removal of barriers to starting writing. An aide-memoire (Figure 1), written in session from the suggestions of what each stage of the story should aim to contain, was prominently displayed. Engaging participants in the frameworks that they were being asked to use allowed them to begin to think about the framing of their stories and to understand that the stories that they were to tell would be rooted in the same frameworks as the stories that they had been, and are routinely, told. Participants were given the option of writing a monologue for one character, or a duologue for two, and were then given fifteen minutes to write their story before reconvening as a group to discuss what was written.

Prior to a fifteen-minute timer being started, participants were invited to break away from the circle and to use the space in the way that they saw fit. Some members of the group immediately broke away and decided to pair themselves, having conversations about their similar ideas. Some participants, however, decided to find a solitary part of the room to begin their task – potentially rooted in the need for personal space to ‘gather’ thoughts as discussed previously. Soon enough, however, those who decided to work on their own gravitated to others to verbally cross-reference what they had written, or in several cases, simply sat next to each other, silently, working in proximity but independently.

Once reconvened back into the now familiar circle group members were invited to read their writing out loud themselves, pass it over to one of the other participants to read, pass it to the lead creative to read, or decline to have their story read aloud and leave it on the page. All consented to leave their story to be read after the session.

With this discussion concluded, participants were given a plenary questionnaire. As with the preliminary questionnaire, this was provided on paper with all but one question employing a yes/no tick box option as before - the outlier to this used a five-level Likert response scale to gauge more nuanced detail; this question is clearly delineated below. As the plenary questionnaire was handed out the preliminary questionnaire was collected, ensuring that the numbering of each sheet corresponded to the correct participant. The questions asked were:

Are you a writer?

Do you have things to say?

Would you join a youth theatre?

Is it important that people like you perform in theatres? (This question used the five-level Likert response scale)

Are your stories important?

These questions correlate, in the same order, to those that were asked initially, in order to facilitate comparison.

Once the questionnaire was completed and handed in, participants were free to leave.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Each member of the group created a piece of writing; all were based on the themes that were discussed in the initial conversation. These themes included climate change, mental health, empathy, fat shaming, and the acceptance of difference. The groups' increasing physical animation, volume, and hand gesturing throughout the preliminary conversation, as well as the increased eye contact with the speaker and use of acknowledgement tokens (Jefferson, 1984) indicated 'affective convergence' (McCarthy, 2003, p. 59). It was clear that these were themes that the participants cared passionately about; this passion was also evident in the dynamic verbosity present in the articulation of their thoughts. Many of the pieces were written as monologues, with two written as third-person narratives, suggesting miscommunication (or misunderstanding) of the task. There was evidence of written planning, and all aimed to follow the structure as discussed and available to them in the aide-memoire (Figure 1).

The responses to the questionnaire have been grouped here to aid easy comparison.

WRITING IS NOT JUST DONE WITH PEN AND PAPER.

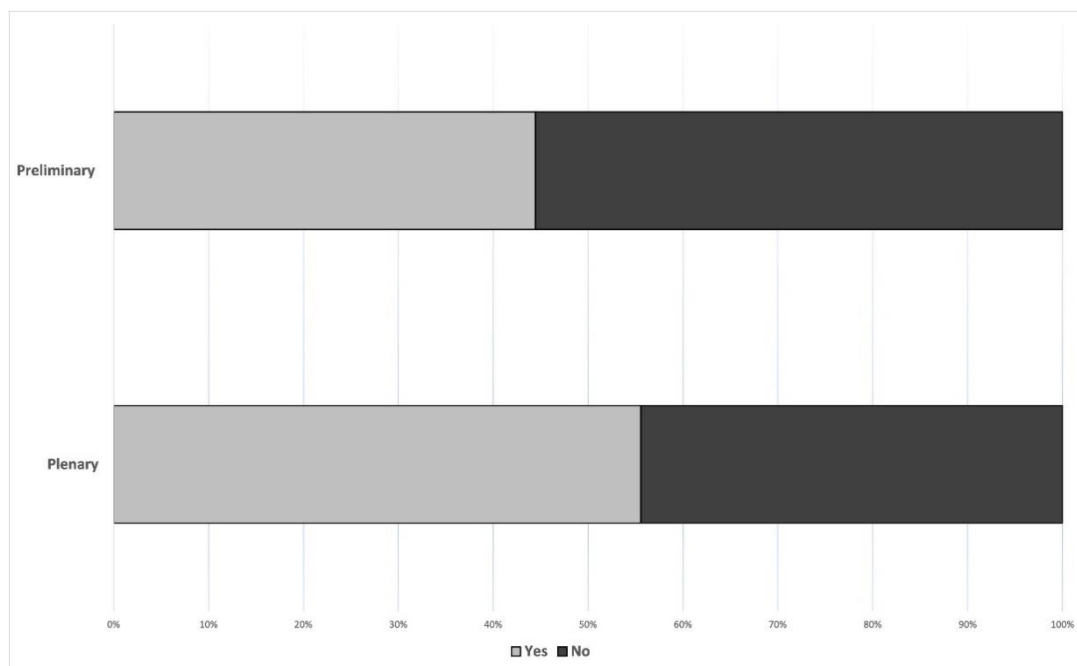


Figure 2: Are you a writer?

The use of this question is to provide a very definite baseline. The purpose of asking before the beginning of a writing workshop whether the participants were writers, was to encourage participants to think about themselves in a positive manner. The corollary between 44% of a self-selecting group taking part in a creative course regarding themselves as writers seems a clear and obvious conclusion but taken within the context of participants accessing mental health services, it could be causally argued that writing could be seen by some as a way to write their own story. In either case, the aim of facilitating a sense of self-worth around writing was achieved. We must not lose sight of the fact that this workshop was designed for, and specifically offered, to those referred to the theatre by CAMHS, therefore leading to a hypothesis that there had been a level of writing (or telling of stories) involved to get to this point. It is interesting to note that the theatre had already thought about access at the point of first contact, ensuring that there was a ‘simple sign-up form’ (Crosland, 2023, n.pag). This, however, does not negate the myriad of assessments and consultations that may have occurred for the young people on their journey to this point — a journey which has the potential to leave them "feeling peripheral to the assessment process" (Stafford *et al.*, 2016, p. 5) and therefore alienated and insignificant.

During the conversation held after the completion of this preliminary questionnaire, and against this backdrop of assessments and consultations, one participant shared that they “just wanted to be listened to.” This was something that, it was implied, had not happened for them to that point.

The wider question here relates to the definition of a writer and self-perception of success – encapsulated by one participant asking if they *had* to write it down. This wider question can be examined using the self-efficacy model which posits four basic factors in this estimation of this ability. These factors are:

- (a) Performance (a very broad category that includes past success, amount of effort necessary, the need for assistance, patterns of progress, task difficulty, task persistence, and belief in the effectiveness of instruction); (b) Observational Comparison [...]; (c) Social Feedback [...]; and (d) Physiological States (internal feelings that the child experiences during writing). (Bottomley, Henk, and Melnick, 1998, p. 287)

This framework can be ably applied here. *Performance* can be encompassed in the thought that a writer sits with a pen and paper or (as is the case in the writing of *this* paper) in front of a computer. *Observational comparison* can be linked to the idea that writing can be seen as an academic pursuit, something that is, at the point of calling oneself a writer, not an option for some – this can be unpicked through positive *social feedback*. The very real need to widen participation in the arts calls for these perceptions to be analysed openly to address and improve the suggested *psychological state*. Writing comes in many forms, only one of which is the form that is taught in language classes in schools.

By the end of the session, 56% of participants saw themselves as writers. The act of telling a story and having that story heard could be a contributory factor. Had the writing occurred before the discussion the focus would have been on the act of putting pen to paper; as it occurred here, that physicalised version of writing was an adjunct, a way of recording the conversation and storytelling that had gone before. Offering simple tools to structure that writing aided confidence – as evidenced by the planning done by some of the participants before commencing. This planning was physically part of the pieces that were written for several participants, with one making clear where their story started using the words ‘my

start’ before drawing a line under the three-part plan at the top of the page. Quite literally, this participant had drawn a line under their preparation making a distinct separation between their planning and their story. The pedagogical philosophy underpinning such sessions is rooted in the realm of inquiry-based learning where “students investigate questions that are student formulated through student designed/selected procedures” (Banchi and Bell, 2008, p. 27).

FINDING A COMMON PURPOSE CAN BOOST CONFIDENCE.

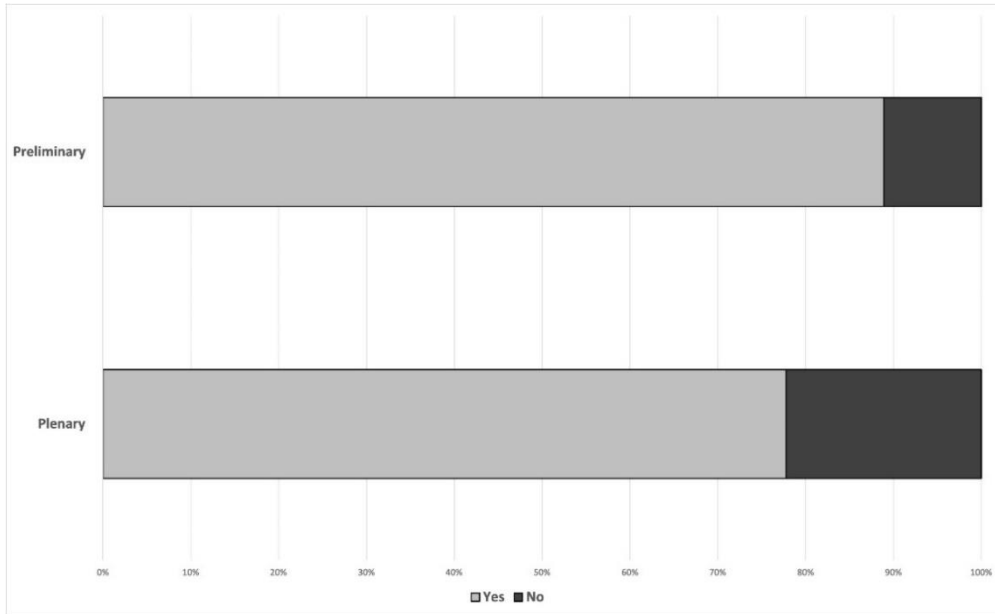


Figure 3: Do you have things to say?

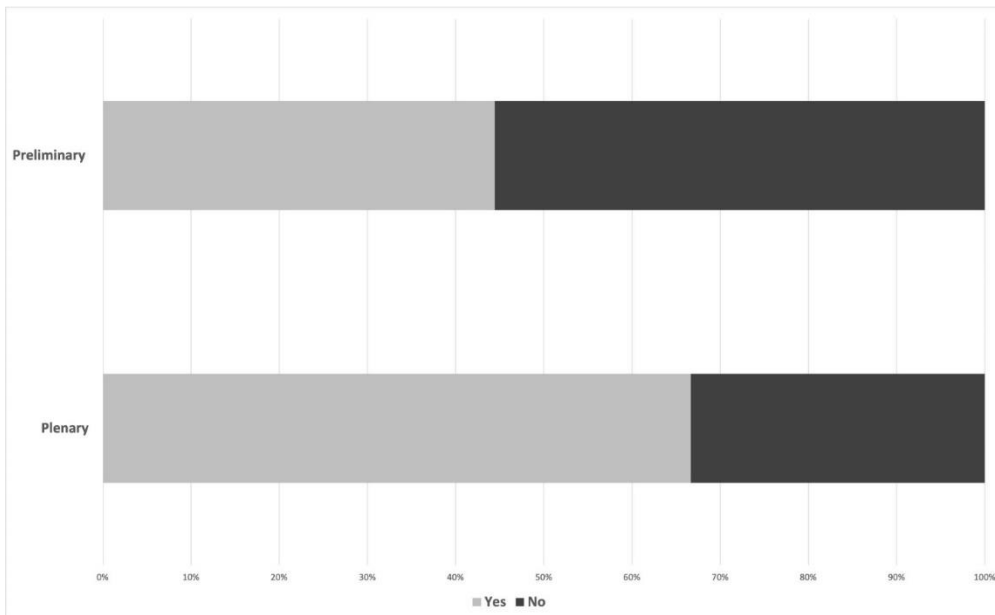


Figure 4: Are your stories important?

Figures 3 and 4 show responses to questions which were asked as questions two and five in the preliminary questionnaire and questions one and four in the plenary set of questions. Ostensibly these two questions are asking about the self-confidence of the participants but were spaced apart as they were so that one answer did not lead the other.

It has been noted that “a unique feature of adolescent behaviour is heightened attunement to, concern over, and reaction to perceived instances of peer evaluation” (Somerville *et al.*, 2013, p. 1554), and given that these sessions are attended by and designed for adolescents who have had/have contact with CAMHS, this is to be kept in mind when looking at these results. This heightened attunement to peer evaluation, at its extreme, can be a constituent part of social anxiety disorder, a disorder that falls under CAMHS’ remit.

Understanding one's role in society is heightened during adolescence, a period in which feeling a sense of purpose in life “is a key developmental task” (Sumner, Burrow, and Hill, 2018, p. 742) which “is associated with a list of desirable outcomes [...], including higher self-esteem, greater life satisfaction, hope, and happiness” (Sumner, Burrow, and Hill, 2018, p. 742). During adolescence, especially for those in the formal schooling system, the contemplation of their future is ever-present. Arguably, this period serves as the backdrop for the assessments and qualifications that will facilitate these futures to come to fruition. In order for young people to have active participation in these conversations and the decisions around these assessments, for which “[s]ignificant [...] decisions have been made without any/adequate consultation with young people themselves” (Brown and Woods, 2022, p. 53), they must be given agency which is more than perfunctory or even tokenistic. Indeed, one of the themes from the discussion with this particular group was a sense that they were not listened to enough. This bled through to one story which had the protagonist 'Rose' asking if "she could speak in the morning assembly that day. To her surprise, they allowed her to".

Given that “[t]he transition to adolescence is typically marked by a rise in the frequency and intensity of peer interaction” (Somerville *et al.*, 2013, p. 1560), feelings of self-worth and confidence are ever present for those in this stage of life. Self-worth can be imbued in understanding and contentment in thoughts and feelings that the peer interaction may or may not engage in. “Fitting in, or gaining peer acceptance, is a primary objective of youth in the high school context and, for many adolescents, may be more important than academic goals” (Schall, Wallace, and Chhuon, 2016, p. 462) – these results seem to underline this assertion, as does this extract from one participant’s piece, “I was just about to tap them on the shoulder when a gang of older years came past - ‘Freaks,’ they shouted”, the protagonist did not continue the approach.

The 23% rise in confidence in the importance of their stories seems to suggest that knowing that the concerns that they share are concerns and ideas shared by their peer group offers some semblance of confidence in their worth. One of the benefits of groups like this is that this becomes possible. Finding and grouping together participants of similar experience can, however, create a confirmation bias which will dissipate and/or be obliterated by those outside of the ‘in’ group. Creating the conditions for secure confidence at the outset will, it is suggested, negate a severe potential fall, as confidence would be starting from a higher point.

The 11% fall-off in whether participants had something to say seems to counterbalance the confidence gained in whether those stories are important and also the self-evaluation against peers in the room who held the same values and opinions but were perceived to ‘own’ them more. The small percentage – given the sample size – could, arguably, be said to be small. The percentage here equates to one person, and with a larger sample, might well be negated by a broader pool of peers to assess against. All in all, there is a gaining to be had, in terms of self-confidence in bringing groups such as this together. The ability to speak and

actually be heard -as opposed to being asked leading questions- is key to this outcome – young people most definitely have important stories that need to be heard.

CONFIDENCE IN SELF CAN BREAK DOWN BARRIERS.

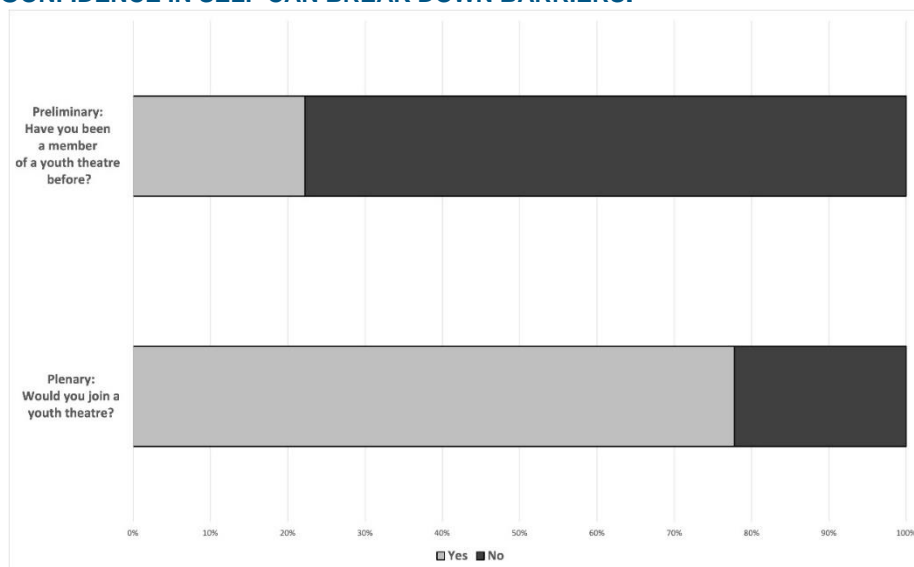


Figure 5: Have you been a member of a youth theatre before? And would you join a youth theatre?

Even though not all youth theatre members go on to win an Olivier Award, it can be the starting point for many successful actors – for example, the 2023 winner of the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Actor in a Musical, Arthur Darvill, thanked not only his school drama teacher but the leader of the youth theatre he attended. Youth theatre can also help to refine and magnify skills that are useful outside of the performance world, impacting positively on “personal and social development” (Hughes and Wilson, 2004, p. 70), equipping “people with the ability to better understand and articulate their feelings in other areas of their life” (Hughes and Wilson, 2004, p. 70). The arresting need for the widening of participation and inclusion in formalised youth theatres is convincingly indicated and confirmed by the fact that the vast majority of this sample had not been a member of a youth theatre before. There is evidence that “the more insider access a young person had to the theatre the deeper the levels of meaning that ascribed to it” (Hart and Winston, 2019, p. 131) and for young people who, like our sample group, are marginalised, this access becomes more limited. Targeted projects such as CAMHS Creative Socials could be a way to bridge that gap.

The 78% (or 71% if those who have previously been a member of a youth theatre are removed) that indicated a willingness to join a youth theatre is striking and evidence that the benefits that could be achieved through an increase in agency and control, within a youth theatre setting, as exemplified by this session, were felt by the participants. Whilst there was not a preliminary question which is directly comparable, the interest in joining a youth theatre rose exponentially after exposure to what a youth theatre setting *could* feel like. This indication shows that exposure to activity heightens interest. In an environment where young people are known, appreciated, and cared for – exemplified here through the discussion circle where they were able to be heard – a positive and empowering space was created, allowing the participants to “feel [that] they can influence their environments positively” (Broom, 2015, p. 82). The opportunities offered to the participants in shaping the session for telling their stories correlate with research by Spencer and Doull (2015).

The authors suggest that affective experiences – such as the reported session – can have the power to shape the effect, resulting in the power to claim a relationship between young people and, in this case, youth theatre. The gaining of confidence in abilities as storytellers or writers (as evidenced in Figure 5) could be argued to account for the removal of one of the barriers to joining a youth theatre. Levels of peer acceptance within the group provide “important information sources for youth coming to understand how they are likely perceived in society at large” (Schall, Wallace, and Chhuon, 2016, p. 463), leading to greater confidence in where and how they can fit in; “belonging is essential to engagement and achievement behaviour” (Schall, Wallace, and Chhuon, 2016, p. 464). Finding one’s tribe is powerful and primal.

That said, it is important to be aware of the potential of confirmation bias leading to the creation of an 'in-group', however diverse it is. Part of the perception of youth theatre, as potentially exemplified by the responses to the preliminary question is that it is tribal, exclusive and 'not for us'. In creating spaces where there is open challenge and constructive discussion, the act of writing can become a beacon to interrogate differing and diverse (or even divisive) viewpoints with the common goal of finding confidence in reasoned and well-defended viewpoint(s). Thus, building on the contention that “[y]outh theatre is a place where young people are protected and develop important personal and social skills and resources at the same time as confronting the uncertainty and risk involved in making transitions to adulthood” (Hughes and Wilson, 2004, p. 70).

Joining a youth theatre or engaging with the arts “has been linked with improved self-esteem, confidence, resilience, skill building, connection to peers and positive role models” (Davies and Pescud, 2020, p. 17). These are the intrinsic foundations for the possibilities of success of youth theatre. Ultimately, it could be argued, that the aim of a youth theatre is to make participants “better human beings” (Marsden, 2019) by providing “a way of developing a sense of accomplishment” (Ferrell *et al.*, 2023, p. 686) – however, that is measured externally.

PARTICIPATION IS CONTINGENT ON REPRESENTATION.

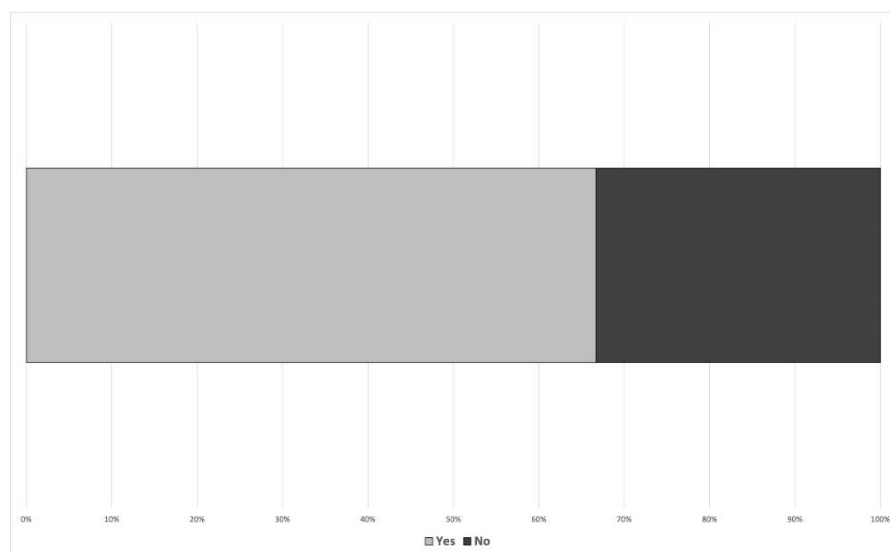


Figure 6: Do people like you belong in theatres?

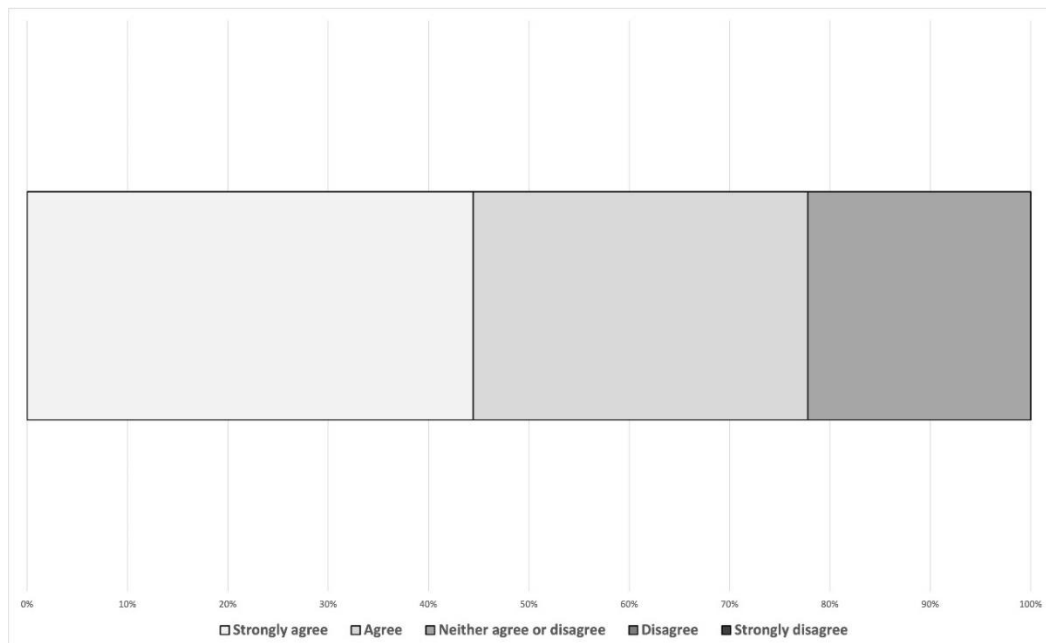


Figure 7: Is it important that people like you feel like they belong in theatres?

There is a conscious decision on the part of many arts organisations to diversify and widen participation – this could be down to a few reasons, but here we will focus on two: the societal benefits of broadening the bases of the stories that we tell, and the capitalistic benefits inherent in having a bigger audience.

The results shown in Figures 6 and 7 underscore the need to create a sense of belonging in theatre more broadly. It is argued here that this sense of belonging will – and should – come from representation; in order to believe that one can be a part of a group, that group must be representative of the people it wishes to attract. This poses a Gordian knot. To increase representation there needs to be an increase in participation. Likewise, to increase participation there needs to be an increase in representation. Ultimately, it is argued here that the way to untie the knot is to cut it by creating a sense of belonging. Facilitating groups such as CAMHS Creative Socials creates a group of like-minded people who can, and will, work together for common themes. This collective work will create a hub of representation which can then be spiraled outward, taking in and inspiring other marginalised and under-represented groups to join or create their own hubs.

The implied importance of belonging in theatre is one of the merits of the stories that will be brought, added, and suggested. If we look back to Figure 4, there was a clear understanding, by the end of the session, that participants' stories were important. If that is so, then it follows that they should be seen as equal to those who are already told, and those who are already told fill our stages. This sample group believed and recognised that 'people like them' do belong in theatres – 67% (Figure 6) - with 78% (Figure 7) agreeing or strongly agreeing that it is important that they feel this way. It is important to note that no member of this sample group disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that Figure 7 conveys.

The 'edgelands', a concept coined by Jane Riddiford of Global Generation where 'two different environments meet' (Glasier, 2022) is applied to youth theatre, authoritatively, by London-based Youth Theatre Company Three and their founding Artistic Director Ned Glasier who writes that their:

[...] work is almost always born and developed in the edgelands - in the break in the middle of a rehearsal when everyone comes alive, or the walk home where thoughts settle and you say what you really mean, the long bus journey to a residential, in a secret look, a missed meaning, a moment of eye-contact, a mistake. (Glasier, 2022)

These edgelands are where the societal ramifications of youth theatre and the commercially driven impulses needed to create such spaces could meet fruitfully. With a mean score of 1.8 (correlating to 'Agree') within a range of 2 and a standard deviation of only 0.8, figure 7 strongly suggests that these young people are homogenously aware that they should feel that they belong in theatres, intimating that they believe their presence as important. Allying this with the positive 23% differential in the assertion that their stories are important (figure 4), gives a compelling grounding (and justification) for facilitating and giving voice to their presence – literally and metaphorically. This presence could create the conditions for new work emanating from their 'new' stories, and therefore, new knowledge. It is interesting that the part of this writing session which drove the rest was held in the edgeland of (semi-structured) conversation, where words and thoughts could be exchanged without the pressure to 'create something' and from these conversations the creation that happened was organic, propulsive, and compelling. To create spaces in which young people feel like they belong, those who facilitate those spaces need to listen to what it is that the young people want and act accordingly.

CONCLUSION

Writing can give voice to youth theatre members and — as is clear from this limited study — that voice is needed. The organisational nous of York Theatre Royal could be emulated simply elsewhere by asking the right questions – where is there most need? Who serves that need? How can the theatrical arts augment and support that need? And, in the UK landscape of cuts to direct arts funding, where could that funding be sought?

Theatre is about collective action and communality; this communality must be fermented outside of the auditorium and not solely focused on creating the artists of the future. If the engaged and connected citizens of the future can be emboldened, then the artists of the future will spring from that well. It is hoped that larger versions of this study can be offered in future to confirm, add to, or refute the claims made here.

There must, however, be circumspection when thinking about writing as the physical act of pen on paper – it is that, but it can be so much more. In its variance, it can offer more nuanced interaction. Writing, if seen as a transmission point for a story – or experience – should offer different points of entry. As seen here, the point of entry of discussion and interrogation of story and experience can lead to confidence in the validity of those stories, which in turn can aid in the building of confidence to share those stories more widely. Asking questions such as 'Which stories are being privileged?' and 'Which stories are not given space and room to breathe?' are offered as points of departure for further research which will make clearer what needs to be done in order to remove the barriers that this case study suggests are readily removeable.

Understanding the needs of the groups that are brought together and finding commonality before embarking on such a scheme is important as it allows for there to be genuine peer interaction which is, on some level at least, on parity. There is a suggestion that there could be an ecology of groups that have semi-porous

memberships. Knowing that identity is formed through many facets, many facets should be at the core of group formation. The fact that there are experiences specific to a certain group should not override the more common themes that will emerge with young people living in and through the climate emergency – that one participant said that they were ‘terrified’ of the impact of climate change for their generation was quite a moment but one, climate change research suggests, that is common to many young people at this moment, in time.

Writing is arguably about being heard. This study suggests that whilst some are not sure of the validity or importance of what it is that they have to say, being heard, and actually listened to, is important and can increase confidence in these thoughts. It must be emphasised that this small sample was comprised of young people who had previous contact with CAMHS, a service which, post-pandemic, has been even more stretched than ever. The spaces that CAMHS aims to create in order to facilitate such listening ‘are extremely overstretched’ (Crosland, 2023, n.pag). Having a theatre company so invested in the community, ‘recognise we are no replacement for counselling’, and understanding that ‘creativity, alongside other ways of support, can be really effective’ (Crosland, 2023, n.pag), is a major strength of theatre, art, and community engagement so intrinsic to youth theatre.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Lydia Crosland and the York Theatre Royal

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