



Youth arts and mental health: exploring connections in the Top End

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Introduction

Participation in youth arts activities is generally considered 'good' for adolescents' social and emotional wellbeing. Yet much of the literature on this topic comes from a 'big-city' perspective that may not take into account the (at times conservative) social and cultural norms found in regional, rural or remote locations. In 2014 Charles Darwin University and Corrugated Iron Youth Arts joined together to explore *if and how* participating in youth arts is good for young people in a Northern Territory, and in particular, in a Darwin context. To this end we undertook a qualitative research project, retrospectively exploring 17 participants' stories of participation in performance-based youth arts when they were aged between 12 and 26 years old. Our analysis showed a range of health and wellbeing benefits, particularly in the area of mental health: Participation assisted young people with self-confidence, identity formation and belonging, a sense of themselves as 'creative' people, and emotional development. An overview of these mental health outcomes is the focus of this paper.

Here we provide a brief introduction to the literature about the mental health impacts of participation in youth arts activities, with a focus on rural and remote locations. We then introduce Corrugated Iron Youth Arts. Our research findings are presented and then considered in light of the existing literature in order to understand similarities and differences between our Northern Australian and other contexts. Finally, some recommendations are made.

Background

Adolescent mental health problems are an issue across Australia (1). A 2007 ABS survey reported that just over a quarter (26%) of young people (16-24years) had experienced at least one mental disorder during the preceding 12 months. The literature indicates that young people in rural and remote locations experience particular issues which can exacerbate mental health problems, such as lack of services, issues with confidentiality, and the impacts and restrictions of particular masculinities associated with rural and remote lifestyles (1)(2). This set of issues can create feelings of isolation and feelings of hopelessness, contributing to mental ill health.

With the rapid rise of mental illness among adolescents in Australia, and in rural and remote contexts particularly, creative approaches to prevention are required. A lack of diversity in mainstream representations of young people can lead to stereotypical options for identity formation, resulting in the social exclusion of those who may not fit these images. For many young people the particular types of masculinities and femininities often found in rural and remote locations can contribute to feelings of isolation.

Darwin

Darwin is a small tropical city of approximately 130,000 people located in the remote 'top end' of Australia. It is a youthful place, with a median age of 33, compared with an Australian median of 37 (3). The city is culturally vibrant and diverse, median wages are high and unemployment (for the non-Indigenous population) is low compared to national median figures (4). Darwin has a 'frontier' city identity, having been partially destroyed by both natural disaster and war-time bombing over the past century. The city has a male dominated, drinking culture with alcohol consumption in Darwin being amongst the highest in the world (5). Natural resource extraction and defence force industries currently dominate the Territory economy. The incidence of violent crime is also high, with rates twice the average of other Australian states and territories (6).

Literature

There is a growing body of literature pointing to a broad array of positive health and wellbeing impacts of participation in community arts programs and performance-based arts for young people (7-18). Mental health outcomes include increased self confidence and self-esteem(11), identity formation

(17), and sense of belonging(19), increased responsibility, family reintegration, employment options, suicide prevention and crime prevention (Mills & Brown 2004 in 14).

Hampshire and Matthijsse (12) found that while there were many positive impacts associated with a singing program for young people, the benefits were not 'unequivocally good or straightforward' in that participation can entail disconnection from existing friendships groups. Other problematic outcomes that have been reported involved participant stress, boredom, anxiety and conflict (Hansen et. al 2003 in 18).

While there are some accounts of the use and benefits of arts-work, particularly youth theatre, in rural and remote locations (9, 20, 23), there is still much to learn about the impact of arts participation upon young people's mental health in rural and remote locations in an Australian context. The existing literature points to a challenges in terms of staffing rural and remote arts work, 'fly-in fly-out' arts-workers, and working across different cultures (in particular Indigenous cultures) (20, 23). In addition to these issues, gender stereotypes that may cause or exacerbate mental health issues, can also create barriers to participation in the arts in rural and remote contexts (21). However, further exploration in this area is required.

Corrugated Iron Youth Arts (CIYA)

Corrugated Iron is the premier youth arts organisation in the Top End of the Northern Territory providing dynamic creative arts experiences that empower young people. Operating for over 30 years, the organisation offers innovative and challenging arts experiences that express the diversity of young people living in the Northern Territory. Corrugated Iron acknowledges the importance of its role in providing not only the initial sparks to invigorate creative impulses in young people, but to continue supporting individuals through mentoring options, skills development and training, and real opportunities for young people to be drivers of meaningful artistic outcomes.

Through a rich and varied annual program that operates in urban, regional and remote environments, Corrugated Iron seeks to:

- inspire young people in the arts as audience, participants and performers
- develop young people's life skills, artistic skills and confidence through an arts medium
- create an outlet for young people's stories to be shared
- promote positive community perceptions of young people and the arts.

The outcomes of our work include:

- quality performances and public outcomes created by young people
- increased skills in artistic and personal expression of young people
- a range of sustainable opportunities for artists to develop career pathways, present work and explore creative development
- a program that reflects the diversity of our community in content and participation.

Underpinning all our work is the value we place on the critical role the arts play in individual lives and the community.

With CIYA celebrating 30 years in Darwin, and wanting to reflect on their role in the community, a partnership was formed with Research Centre for Health and Wellbeing at Charles Darwin University. The partnership resulted in a study exploring *if, how* and *why* participating in youth arts was beneficial to young peoples' health and wellbeing. It became clear that there were specific mental health impacts which warranted singling out for attention. The focus of this paper is on understanding the mental health benefits of participation in youth arts activities in Darwin, NT.

Research method

The research presented represents one aspect of the broader study (24) which sought to understand *how and why* participation in youth arts was good for young people's health and wellbeing in general. Data was obtained via a combination of purposive and convenience sampling methods (where participants are 'handpicked for their ability to help answer the research question). This provided access to a diverse range of adult participants (over 18 years of age) who participated in CIYA projects for at least two years when there were between the ages of 12 and 26.

The Executive Producer of CIYA used the organisations networks to contact people who had participated in CIYA at different time periods (from CIYA's inception in the 1980's to the present time). Information about the study was put in the CIYA newsletter. A total of 23 people initially expressed interest in being interviewed, and eventually 17 were interviewed. Most interviews took place in person, with some occurring via Skype and telephone. One interview occurred via email. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in length. All participants were emailed a copy of their interview transcript and the draft analysis for comment. Only people over the age of 18 were able to participate as they needed to be able to 'look back' at their time in youth arts, and reflect upon the impacts and meaning of participation. Such a process was thought to be less relevant and more difficult for younger participants.

A narrative analysis was used in order to analyse participant's stories about the health wellbeing impacts of participating in youth arts, and to explore their ideas of how and why these impacts occurred. A narrative approach has proved effective in developing a deep understanding of the richness and meaning of participant's experiences. Kohler Riesman (25) advocates narrative analysis as a way of conducting case-centred research (with "individuals, identity groups, communities, organisations, or even nations") where understandings of human agency, identity and culture are sought. There multiple types of narrative analysis and in this case a 'categorical content' (26) approach was considered appropriate, as it allows for the consideration of multiple texts about a particular phenomenon. Such an approach involves searching for themes across many peoples stories.

The broader research project focused on understanding if, how and why participation in youth arts was 'good for' young people in general. In this paper, we present only results related to understanding the mental health outcomes of participation. We consider this to be an issue which deserves specific attention.

The participants

The 17 participants were aged between 10 and 26 when they participated in CIYA. Most were involved for a period of two to five years, with a handful involved for up to 10 years. Participants were evenly distributed in terms of the dates of their involvement, with the study including two founding participants and others who were involved across the 1980's, 1990's, 2000's up until 2013. Seven participants were male and ten were female. Participants range in current age from 18 years to late 40's. Most participants were involved regular term-long workshop programs (drama and circus skills) and most participated in at least one large performance production.

Results

Four major categories of mental health outcomes were identified through the analysis. These are documented in the table below, along with an overview of how participants thought these outcomes occurred. Participant quotes are used to provide detail about each theme.

Mental health outcome	How it occurred	Participant quotes
Increased confidence (16 participants)	Being challenged and confronting fears	I think how much it can change you. At school, before I started doing drama classes, I was the shyest kid imaginable..... But the confidence and the social kind of confidence that it's given me has just changed me a lot. (Participant 1)
	Having a purpose	I think the times when my mental health was at its worst was when I was lacking a central governing sense of purpose. What I think youth arts do, is provide that. In a mental health context, gaining a sense that perhaps this stuff, this creativity, this could be a career.... this could be central to what my professional purpose in life is. There was the first kind of glimmers of that taking place for me there. (Participant 9) Theatre gives you moments that you wouldn't have in your ordinary life, and it's those moments that help you to see the world differently, it gives you confidence. (Participant 2)
	Feeling valued	There's something about the immediate validation of performing....That immediate ego boost that comes with people saying 'well done, that was great, I loved it, you were excellent'. As a teenager, there aren't many opportunities to have that kind of validation (Participant 3). In terms of mental health - it was really a place that I could feel special (Participant 2)
	Being treated 'like an adult' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • input • responsibility • trust 	The content was devised by who was in the group and what was important to us. So we helped shape shows. It was a space where you felt listened to and able to make contributions that were actually really valid and important to you at the time. Whereas you didn't have that outlet at school, or sometimes not so much at home, you wouldn't feel as listened to by your parents sometimes. (Participant 11)
Development of 'creative' self (17 participants)	Using imagination and creativity	It really is an opportunity to explore, in a safe place, the idea of creativity. You can't do it right or wrong. I think that's something really valuable. (Participant 10)
	Acquiring skills and knowledge	I was learning all these skills, mostly about putting yourself out there (Participant 6) I was learning how to kind of bring up your own energy, be a bit up-beat. A lot in drama is the same in group interviews for jobs. They basically play small drama games, so you know what they're doing. (Participant 8)
	Strong role models	My predominantly my memory was there was lots of women and strong, intelligent, outspoken women. (Participant 3) At the time I kind of got involved I was just coming out. It gave me a lot of positive role models. You know, gay people who weren't drug addicts and paedophiles, you know what I mean, all of that stuff that I'd been told... (Participant 2)
	Developing options for the future	I feel especially with our current political situation there is so much concern about economics, this sense that everyone has to cut back and people should be getting real jobs or that there's no space to dream or follow a dream that actually can shape you and prepare you for a career in the arts. That doesn't haven't be acting, you know, it might be event work or it might be producing or festival work. There are all sorts of different avenues that people go down. (Participant 3)
Emotional Development (16 participants)	A safe place for expressing and sharing	Finding a space to express yourself in and learning to witness other people's expression is fundamental to healthy emotional development. (Participant 7)
	Having intense experiences	There were some really hard hitting projects and things as it evolved....Some pretty intense stuff that really dug pretty deep into the youth experience (Participant 12)
	Feeling happy	Doing theatre and performance is a way of exercising your soul (Participant 1)

Mental health outcome	How it occurred	Participant quotes
Identity & Belonging (16 participants)	Exposure to difference <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sexuality • gender • age • ethnicity • class • culture 	It was an introduction to a whole new social circle of friends (Participant 10) Initially it did seem like a different world, but over time it became one of the most comfortable places, especially like because I never enjoyed school at all, and it's so good to have that outside of school. (Participant 8)
	Finding 'my people'	I think you don't feel quite so much as an outsider, there's a group of people who like doing the same things as you and yeah maybe you feel a little bit less strange. (Participant 15) You can be part of something big. You can be your normal self on the surface and underneath you're something special. You are part of the team and you're achieving things and how wonderful this is. For me it was very much, very much about the friends and the intensity of that relationship. And identity is very much linked in with that. (Participant 4)

It is important to note that while the majority of participants experienced primarily positive outcomes, each experience was as unique as each participant. For five participants there were challenging aspects of participation mingled in with the positive aspects. These included feelings of exclusion by other cast members during particular theatre productions (2 participants) and body image issues provoked by having to wear particular types of costumes, or get changed in front of others (3 participants). All five participants felt that they moved through these challenging aspects, and for four overcoming these challenges contributed to a sense of achievement. What this information highlights is that participation in youth arts is a journey of ups and downs, yet the accumulated experience over time, at least for these participants, was generally positive in terms of mental health.

Discussion and conclusions

The results from this study provide further weight to the studies noted at the outset in that our participants were very clear about participation contributing to self confidence (11), identity formation (17), and a sense of belonging (19). Our results also concur with other finding about being treated as responsible young adults, and opening up previously unconsidered employment options, (Mills & Brown 2004 in 14). In addition to these findings we found that participants constructed impacts in terms of positive emotional development and a new sense of their own creativity. It has proven difficult to tease out how each of these four 'impacts' themes overlap and interrelate (as they clearly do), we hope that further research will help to unpack this further.

At the outset we pointed to the issue of the identity restricting, dominant narratives about sexuality and gender found in locations such as Darwin and the impacts this can have on young people's mental health and freedom to participate in arts activities (21). In this study participants highlighted the critical importance of CIYA in creating a safe space for expressing themselves, as well as a place with new kinds of role models and opportunities to meet 'different' people that they had not previously had access to.

As with other studies (12, Hansen et. al 2003 in 18) our participants noted that the benefits of participation were not 'unequivocally good or straightforward'. There were issues to be grappled with in terms of participants feeling excluded or ostracised at certain times, as well as feelings of embarrassment and insecurity about bodies and costuming. These issues require further investigation in order to understand how young people safely grapple with them as part of their development.

This study has provided an understanding about the some of the mental health outcomes of participation in youth arts from a 'top end' view point. The participant input and the depth of their story sharing has been strength of the study. The weaknesses centres on the relatively small sample size, as we have not been able to unpack the different impacts of issues such as participant's lengths of involvement, age of first engagements, family background, different time periods of involvement, or

the myriad of other possible variables. Yet this exploratory, qualitative study has provided us with the themes were strong and common experiences that will form the basis of our future work in this area.

Recommendations

1. To build the emerging story of CIYA's 17 alumni into a national story about youth arts participation through a broader study. Using the learning from the current study we would like to create a survey that could be rolled out across Australia via youth arts companies.
2. Find innovative and encouraging ways to share this story with youth service providers in regional and remote settings so they are encouraged to strike arts partnerships and provide creative programs as an essential component of their services. Corrugated Iron has a number of these and uses a variety of models.
3. Build interest and investment in continuing regional and remote arts activities for young people. This requires long term investment to ensure there is scope to offer youth arts programs over the longer term, and to investigate the impact.

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Presenters

Gretchen Ennis is a social researcher, musician and community development worker. She completed her PhD on network approaches to community development in 2012, and works at as a research fellow at The Research Centre for Health and Wellbeing, Charles Darwin University. Her research interests include: developmental evaluation, the wellbeing impacts of participation in arts activity, and intercultural community work.

Jane Tonkin has 25 years' experience in the arts in the areas of festival development, project management, venue management and event producing. Jane has a BA and a Grad.Dip. in Arts and Entertainment Management and specialises in developing projects (including assembling creative teams and seeking appropriate resources), and providing support to artists. After extensive involvement with Corrugated Iron in previous years at board level, Jane took up the position of Executive Producer at Corrugated Iron in 2006.