

Connected Communities

Building resilience through community arts practice

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Building resilience through collaborative community arts practice: a scoping study with disabled young people and those facing mental health complexity

Executive Summary

This scoping study has involved the delivery of weekly resilience-building arts workshops for young people and a review of associated 'arts for resilience' literature. We found a significant existing evidence base which links visual arts practice to individual and community resilience (over 190 related references). This is dispersed across a number of disciplinary fields including art therapy, social work, community health, cultural policy and geographies of health. Key recent publications in the 'arts for health' and 'arts for community well-being' research literature have also been linked to this review of 'arts for resilience'. The researchers contributed to the evidence base through developing a program of arts workshops and evaluating these in terms of their resilience benefits. They found that even short-term visual arts interventions can have a significant impact on young people's resilience. Further research is required to explore in more depth: what constitutes resilience amongst people with learning difficulties and how this links with prior research definitions of resilience; the longer-term resilience benefits of arts participation; the most cost-effective modes of delivering arts for resilience amongst young people with complex needs; the appropriateness of existing scales and measures of resilience for evaluating the impact of arts interventions with young people with complex needs.

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Introduction

This Connected Communities Programme (CCP) funded study explored how visual arts practices build resilience amongst disabled young people and young people facing mental health challenges. Our research involved the following:

- A systematic review of existing research findings (over 190 articles and books) in the field of resilience, community well-being and visual arts practice. This drew on academic literature in the fields of resilience, disability studies, arts for health, art therapy and geographies of health, and community and policy websites. An expert advisory panel informed the framework for this reviewⁱ.
- The co-design and delivery of 10 weekly arts for resilience workshops for young, socially-excluded people who experience mental health complexity and/or learning difficulty aged between 16 and 25. Workshops were held in conjunction with our community partners (9 out of 10 recruits had sustained attendance)
- On-going community co-learning and evaluation of the workshops through participant observation, weekly reflective meetings with the facilitator, PI researcher and support workers.
- An art exhibition held at the Phoenix Arts Centre, Brighton. Family members and the public were able to view young people's art work and learn more about resilience research (over 50 attendees).
- One focus group and 9 semi-structured interviews conducted with project participants to reflect on the resilience benefits of the workshops.
- Initial development of an accessible 'tick box' resilience questionnaire that is appropriate to a diversity of participants, including people with learning difficulty.
- A practitioner workshop on 'Building resilience through community visual arts' on Friday 12 October, 2012, at Community Base, Brighton. This shared project learning, a draft of this report and pooled practitioner knowledge. Representatives from the Arts Council, art therapists, commissioners, young people, parents and adult practitioners in the South East attended.
- Research and practitioner publications including: a film of the project; one journal discussion piece on impact (Macpherson et al., in preparation); an extended version of this report (in preparation, to be submitted to the Journal of Social Work); the co-development by young people, adult community partners and academics of a 'visual arts for resilience' practitioner resource which includes practical advice on how to conduct arts for resilience activities (www.boingboing.org.uk).

What is resilience?

In this project 'resilience' is understood as a capacity to do well despite adverse experience, and 'community resilience' is understood to be an integral element of that capacity, emergent through well-networked, connected communities (Gilchrist, 2009; Hicks et al., 2012). We focus here on the application of existing understandings of resilience in young people (rather than, developing a specific understanding of resilience from the perspective of our participants, cf. Irvine, 2008). The study has been structured and evaluated according to 5 key components of resilience that prior reviews and research have identified as crucial to young people's well-being and personal development - these are Basics, Belonging, Learning, Coping and Core Self (see Appendix). In sum these refer to the capacity of a young person to feel safe, commit to a group and belong, develop their learning, cope with difficult feelings, help others, develop self-understanding and foster a sense of identity. Further information about research which informs these key resilience outcomes and how to apply a resilient approach to evaluating research and assisting young people and their communities is available at www.boingboing.org.uk (see also Aumann & Hart, 2009; Hart, Blinchow & Thomas, 2007; Hutingner et al., 2002; Newman, 2004).

We understand that evaluating arts practice through a resilience lens is only one (quite instrumental) way to think about visual arts activity, which results in arts practice being conceptualised as a 'therapeutic tool' or 'mode of intervention' for young people. This report is limited to this framework. Other work explores the dialogic, relational and transformational nature of arts practice by young people (Macpherson, 2012; Pahl et al., in press).

In what ways does previous literature show how collaborative visual arts practices build resilience amongst disabled young people and young people facing mental health challenges?

From our systematic review of existing research findings we have found that there is a considerable body of prior research indicating that well facilitated, regular, group visual arts activities can improve the overall resilience of young people. More detailed findings from this literature review are summarised in this report under key headline statements and in a forthcoming journal article.

Most of the literature gathered in our scoping review is from the fields of Art Therapy and Psychology. It is primarily about how art enhances resilience through helping young people develop a 'sense of belonging' and 'cope with difficult feelings'. However, it is not necessarily the case that arts alone will enhance a young person's resilience and it is evident that wider structural determinants of individuals' capacities to be resilient also need to be addressed. The benefits of arts projects have been shown to be experienced differentially depending on participants' existing social capital and networks (Hampshire & Matthijsse, 2010) and the socio-economic structure of participants' local area (Stewart, 2011). The extent to which particular aspects of a young person's resilience will be enhanced through visual arts activity will depend on the nature of the intervention and whether it is designed to support individual or communal outcomes (White, 2009).

Visual arts can foster a safe space, helping young people connect and develop a sense of belonging through verbal and non-verbal means

Prior research shows that participation in group visual arts activity can foster a sense of belonging (Parr, 2006; Skudrzyk, 2009), stimulate new social interactions (Askins & Pain, 2011), and 'mirror pro-social experience' which are sometimes lacked in a wider community setting (Cumming & Visser, 2009; Slayton, 2012)ⁱⁱ. Arts practice can be particularly appropriate in engaging diverse groups and those with learning difficulty because it enables forms of non-verbal dialogue and mutuality (Bethards, 2003; Elkis-Abuhoff, 2008; Gabriels & Gaffey, 2012; Macpherson & Bleasedale, 2012), a finding echoed in our own workshops. However, it is important not to over-romanticize arts participation and its potential contribution to young people's individual and community resilience and sense of belonging. Sometimes feelings of belonging within arts groups are only partial and feelings of otherness can also be exacerbated in these settings (see Parr, 2006).

Visual arts can develop young people's confidence, their ability to focus and their specific artistic skill set

Resilience can be built through learning a specific art skill set (for example see Borzi, Phillips, & Dietz's, 2006, work in 23 schools in Illinois). Crucially though, skills and learning objectives need to be balanced against the benefits of a non-judgmental environment in the art room. All prior research projects in the arts for resilience field point towards the need to provide arts activity in a safe, supporting, unthreatening environment. However, individuals also need to be engaged in tasks which match optimal levels of skill and challenge in order to facilitate flow and learning. Thus activities in a diverse group need to be chosen which can accommodate a range of skill levels and capacities. How learning in the arts transfers to learning and behaviour in other contexts remains contested research terrain (Rostan, 2006).

Visual arts can help young people develop a sense of identity, self-awareness and self-esteem

It is undoubtedly the case that participation in visual arts activity can help people understand themselves better and cope with difficult feelings. The evidence base for this is vast. Our focus was on studies that specifically mention resilience in relationship to young people with mental health or learning difficulties. Arts activities have been found to aid adolescents in developing their sense of identity as well as preserving their autonomy by giving them a sense of mastery and control (Chambala, 2008; Jessup, Cornell & Bundy, 2010; Raghuraman, 2000; Roaten, 2011). Exhibiting the work of young people in a gallery setting has also been found to instil a sense of hope and enhance their self-esteem (MacLean, 2008; NIAD Art Center, 2012).

Visual arts can help young people explore and express difficult feelings

Arts activity can help in coping with feelings, externalising difficult thoughts and with the recovery from mental health difficulty (Dyer & Hunter, 2009; Lamont Brunero & Sutton, 2009). Coholic has conducted a significant body of research in the arts for resilience field (Coholic, 2011; Coholic, Eys & Lougheed, 2012; Coholic, Lougheed & Lebreton, 2009) using arts activities as a therapeutic tool in themselves, and a means through which to

enhance the mindfulness of young people. In her recent work she compared two groups, one which practised mindfulness techniques, including breathing and meditation work and emotion pictures, and the other a more standard arts and crafts group. She found that arts activities in the former group - which incorporated a specific mindfulness component - helped with emotional regulation, social and coping skills, and can improve aspects of self-awareness, self-esteem and resilience.

Other research with those who experience mental health complexity and learning difficulty found a reduction in the occurrence of behaviours associated with mental illness, and increases in personally expressive behaviours, as a result of participating in visual arts activity (Malley, Dattilo & Gast, 2002; Rapp-Paglicci, Stewart & Rowe, 2009). For those who self-harm, visual arts has been found to be particularly useful because it provides opportunities to exercise the same destructive and integrative urges that underlie their self-abuse (Milia, 1996), a finding which we found echoed in our own workshops. Participation in group arts programs have also been shown to help prevent youth re-offending (Shelton, 2008).

Despite significant evidence that participation in regular group visual arts activity can be beneficial for young people's resilience we cannot assume that changes to those participating in visual arts projects will be unequivocally good or straightforward. There are also competing perspectives on the extent to which the benefits of art making are intrinsic to the process of art making itself, and the necessity of an art therapist to instruct or interpret the outputs of any work. Not all research has found group arts based approaches helpful to participants - a number of studies point towards the risk that art may allow participants to reconnect with difficult feelings that un-qualified or under-resourced facilitators do not have the capacity to deal with (see for example, Fitzsimmons & Levy, 1997; Parr, 2006; Springham, 2008). Therefore, caution must be exercised in this area, and there certainly is no one size fits all approach that can be recommended here. High levels of support are required if developing a program for a diverse group of individuals with complex needs.

What can be learnt from a planned visual arts intervention with community partners about the possible links between collaborative arts practice and resilience?

Firstly, visual arts strategies for achieving resilience need to be tailored effectively to the setting and objectives of a program. For commissioners it is important to remain alert to the values which underpin individual art facilitators' approaches. An excellent 'do's and don'ts' for those involved in commissioning collaborative community arts projects is available in the latest Arts Council 'Be Creative, Be Well' publication (Ings, Crane & Cameron, 2012, pp. 10-13).

Artists, psychologists, social geographers and play therapists working on our project had differing interpretations of resilience and the mechanisms through which resilience might be achieved. The research literature shows that the most successful arts for resilience programs tend to combine more than one of the strategies below. We chose to use approaches 1-4 in order to develop work that had both an individual and community orientation:

- 1) Using visual art to help communicate pro-health, pro-resilience messages.
- 2) Using visual art to help young people cope with difficult feelings which may be hard/impossible to articulate.
- 3) Using skills based visual art workshops to help young people develop a range of core components of resilience.
- 4) Using arts activities to help foster social empowerment and communicate the lived experience of participants to wider communities.
- 5) Using visual art methods to help young people talk about their own resilience individually or in a group.
- 6) Choosing a component of arts practice (such as mindfulness of feelings) which is known to be resilience-promoting and focusing on this activity.

Secondly, through interview, observation, focus group discussion and collaboration on project outputs, the following were identified as key resilience outcomes for participants in this study:

- Crucially visual arts participation was extremely beneficial to young people's sense of belonging and their ability to cope with difficult feelings (these topics arose repeatedly in interview, focus group and observation). One participant stated, *"I used to self-harm... and painting, is like producing fluid, producing blood, it is kinetic, but it is less destructive."*
- The workshops enabled neuro-diverse young people to work alongside each other collaboratively and learn from each other.
- All participants learnt a new skill at the weekly workshops and many mentioned how this increased their sense of confidence.
- The young people facing mental health complexity identified repeatedly the importance of art for externalising and accepting difficult feelings. They stated how art was empowering because it gave them the autonomy to work through their own issues compared to seeing a counsellor and they described how, *"Emotions aren't always verbal things so doing art is a really useful way of expressing those things."*
- We provided a non-judgmental, safe, supportive atmosphere which many participants identified as a key reason for returning each week.
- Validation, self-acceptance and pride were experienced by young people through public exhibition of their work at our summer exhibition and audience feedback.
- Development of new role-models in the leaders, new friendship networks, new strategies of coping with difficult feelings through practising art at home.
- Two of our participants have proceeded to further arts study partly as a result of our workshops. In fact one is now following the University of Brighton MA in inclusive arts practice as a result of participating.

- The satisfaction of co-authoring a guide to resilience-focused arts practices and presenting project findings at the practitioner day.

Thirdly, we discovered there was no existing self-evaluative measure of resilience that was in a format and language that might be accessible to people with learning disability. Therefore as part of this research we re-worded and developed questions from an existing valid measure (Connor-Davidson, 2003) and constructed our own more accessible measure of resilience to be filled out by participants. While the scale we constructed showed only slight positive change in respondents, the scales proved to be a useful jumping off point for further, more in-depth discussion with some participants about the nature of their own resilience.

Fourthly, we re-discovered the labour intensive nature of working with complex groups in a visual arts setting, the high levels of preparation and support required, and the difficulty in reaching and encouraging those most in need to regularly attend. Delivering this sort of program in a safe, supportive and constructive manner takes time. This has not always been a temporality compatible with research delivery and university ethics boards (see Bastian, 2011; Durham Community Research Team, 2011).

Recommendations for future research

- The majority of studies and evaluations of arts for resilience (including this one) occur over a short time scale. Further longitudinal studies are required to address the question of whether the resilience benefits identified are sustained beyond actual timescale of participation.
- Further research is required in order to develop an accessible scale and measure of resilience which is appropriate to people with moderate learning difficulties. Some initial explorative work on this was done, however it requires validation.
- Further work is needed to ensure that the delivery of this sort of arts program in the future involves lasting partnerships with all key stakeholders rather than a stand-alone intervention.
- Further work is required on how best to deliver cost-effective, sustainable projects which can cater for the requirements of a diversity of young people. Could different sorts of arts groups support each other in the future? For example, could young people with moderate learning disabilities be facilitated to work alongside other sorts of regular art groups?

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Arts organizations with exemplary practice: Links and resources

Internationally programs are using arts to build resilience, connect with and develop the talent of excluded young people.

Social Arts Services <http://communityarts.org.uk>

Helium - a new Arts and Health organisation serving children, their families and health care communities nationwide <http://www.helium.ie/>

Boeltzig, H., Hasnain, R., & Sulewski, J. S. (2008). Effective career development strategies for young artists with disabilities. *The Institute Brief, 24*. Boston: Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts <http://www.communityinclusion.org>

Creative Junctions - Partnerships and creative strategies to inspire young people and children <http://www.creativejunction.org.uk/>

DADAAWA Arts for social change <http://dadaawa.org.au>

National Network for Arts in Health Canada (2012) <http://www.artsinhealth.ca/pages/environment-arts-health.html>

National Youth Arts Week Canada (2012) <http://youthartsweek.ca/>

Room 13 Scotland <http://room13scotland.com/>

Start2 - An excellent range of self-help resources including creative art activity ideas for those seeking to improve their well-being <http://www.start2.co.uk>

Walsall Arts into Health Partnership (2012) <http://www.walsallartsintohealth.co.uk/mental-health>

Working in Public Seminar series: Art, Practice and Policy, UK <http://www.workinginpublicseminars.org>

Other practical guides for arts practitioners, foster carers, parents and social workers

Camilleri, V. A. (Ed.) (2007). *Healing the inner city child: creative arts therapies with at-risk youth*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

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Appendix – The Resilience Framework

Resilience Framework (children and young people) Oct 2012. Adapted from Angie Hart and Derek Blincow (2007) www.boingboing.org.uk					
Broad areas	BASICS	BELONGING	LEARNING	COPING	CORE SELF
Specific approaches	Good enough housing	Find somewhere for the child/YP to belong	Make school/college life work as well as possible	Understanding boundaries and keeping within them	Instill a sense of hope
	Enough money to live	Help child/YP understand their place in the world	Engage mentors for children/YP	Being brave	Support the child/YP to understand other people's feelings
	Being safe	Tap into good influences	Map out career or life plan	Solving problems	Help the child/YP to know her/himself
	Access & transport	Keep relationships going	Help the child/YP to organise her/himself	Putting on rose-tinted glasses	Help the child/YP take responsibility for her/himself
	Healthy diet	The more healthy relationships the better	Highlight achievements	Fostering their interests	Foster their talents
	Exercise and fresh air	Take what you can relationships where there is some hope	Develop life skills	Calming down & self-soothing	There are tried and tested treatments for specific problems, use them
	Enough sleep	Get together people the child/YP can count on		Remember tomorrow is another day	
	Play & leisure	Responsibilities & obligations		Lean on others when necessary	
		Focus on good times and places		Have a laugh	
		Make sense of where child/YP has come from			
		Predict a good experience of someone or something new			
		Make friends and mix with other children/YPs			
ACCEPTING		NOBLE TRUTHS – underpinnings			ENLISTING
	CONSERVING	COMMITMENT			

The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

"to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities."

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx

