

Connected Communities

Community? What do you Mean?

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Community? What do you mean?:

An investigation into how differing understandings of the term 'community' shapes care-leavers' move to independence

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Executive Summary

We explored the ways in which a performance-led approach to community formation and personal development can inform care-leavers' move to independence. We adopted a case study approach, working with two groups of participants: young people leaving care and their support workers in Devon County Council's Children in Care team (DCCCS). The project was co-designed and co-developed with participants from both groups and our colleagues from Exstream Theatre Company. In this action–research project all researchers acted as participant-observers. It had two key objectives: first, to better understand how the term 'community' shaped the processes that the participating young people engaged with, and second, to take a practice-led approach to explore if, and how, performance-based methods and principles could be used to support the participants as they left care. A number of findings challenged our early assumptions, in particular the complexity of working with people with unstable and unpredictable lives. By working with the young people and DCCCS managers and support workers, we developed a new way of using the creation of a theatrical performance, a deeply-supportive, peer-enabled environment and a theatre company, to enable a space in which participants could re-imagine both their sense of self and community. The development and implementation of this model raises further research questions relating to how new communities might be formed, as well as suggesting a number of uses that may inform the future development of the Connected Communities community engagement strategy.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Looked-after young people;

Drama-based approach;

Peer-enabled.

Introduction: Aims and Objectives

The literature surrounding the poor outcomes for individuals leaving foster care is well-established. However, this material provides limited insight into the significance of 'community' in this process. Our community partners, DCCCS, argue that when the formational experiences of communities are lacking for young-people in cares, or have been disrupted/fragmented, there is a significant impact on their capacity to make a successful transition out of foster care. They suggest that it is these important experiences that enable the building of, or entry into, communities in later life. Moreover, they believe that the experiences which led to the children being taken into care cause a damaging fragmentation of sense of self and self-worth. In this project, we set out to explore whether performance-led process and practices could be usefully used in two inter-related ways: first, as effective means of support for a key transitional period in the lives of these young people in their move from care to independence, and second, as a way of holding open a space in which participants could begin to reflect on notions of community and use these experiences to re-imagine their future outside the care system. In so doing, we sought to ensure that these practices and processes were co-created with the participants to ensure the work's emphasis on their understanding of both community and identity.

In this project, we aim to develop an effective means for our self-selecting participants to creatively re-imagine and embody their own sense of identity and community through performance-based approaches. We also aim to understand whether these new-found knowledges and skills could transfer to other settings to support participants in creating and sustaining other communities in their lives.

Methods:

Our project employed performance-led, studio-based, participatory action-research methods. These involved reflective practice and centred on meaning-making. The interdisciplinary nature of the team necessitated and facilitated a mixed-methods approach to research development, analysis and interpretation. Our methodological underpinning combined applied drama practice and analytical methods. From the outset we conceived of this work as akin to community-based, participatory, research with one or more researchers attending each event as a participant-observer. This relationship was negotiated with all participants in the events. Participant reflections were fed into each subsequent event. Conversations and field-note observations were made which, alongside the reflections, informed the findings from this work. A final event was held which showcased the learning from the project, and a subsequent sense-making session was held with DCCCS which also explored how the project might continue and further develop.

The project grew out of a 2011/2012 pilot scheme at the University of Exeter's drama department facilitated by Exstream Theatre Company where post-graduate students worked alongside young people in care. We recognised the strength of this pre-existing peer-to-peer work and further developed this process. Moreover, the relationships and understanding created through the pilot provided early relationship-stability and agreed working practices between DCCCS and the project's research team. This essential foundation enabled a flexible and sensitive response to the unpredictability of the lives of the young people participating in the project.

The project's central premise was that the creation of a theatre company could provide a useful modelling-method of how communities can be formed and thrive. Such a company would offer a performative space within which new ways of behaving, relating to one another, and dealing with responsibilities, could be imagined and embodied, accepted and rejected, tested and revised. This would be shaped by a shared trust while being sustained by a continued collective, creative

collaboration, enabling the whole company to create and share performances with an audience and workshop participants.

The core question - 'Community? What do you mean?' - was central to the project's research approach. Throughout the facilitator-researchers continually re-evaluated how explicitly the research question need to be expressed to the participants and what impact direct questioning might have on the participants' response. (Discussed below).

Project Activities:

The project's activities were grouped into three phases: Initiation, Consolidation and Development.

Initiation: finding company members

- Planning
- Two, day-long, taster workshops: invitation sent to young people leaving care across the South West via an email flyer. This was communicated via their individual care workers who were invaluable advocates throughout the project. 13 young people attended: (6 & 7), along with 4 (2 & 2) adult social-care workers and a drama facilitation team of 4 at each event with one member of the research team as participant observer.

Consolidation: creating a theatre company

- Following on from the initial taster sessions all the participants were invited to attend a three-day drama workshop, run by Exstream and PG students who acted as peer-participants, which led to the co-creation of a theatre company: Perfectly Mixed Up (company membership has stabilised at 7).

- We also conducted a one-day workshop with youth workers from DCC Permanence and Transition Team that mirrored the process the care-leavers had shared in the taster days (5 participants).
- One day, digital story-telling workshop with students from Theatre Department students from the University of Austin, Texas. Producing a short collective autobiographical film shared alongside live performance at public showing.

Development : performing our work

- Weekly sessions leading to a theatre piece, *The Girl who Lost and Found*.
- Contribution to the Care-leavers *South West Forum* 6th December. Showcase performance of *The Girl who Lost and Found* – practical workshop led by Perfectly Mixed Up and contributions to discussion.
- Sense making session with the research team, Exstream Theatre Company and DCCCS to discuss the AHRC project, the ongoing practise arising and future development.
- An international visit to the University of Austin, Texas to perform in their festival. (Funded by DCCCS, participant fundraising and the University of Exeter – March 2013).

Research findings:

- *Need for collective reflexivity on ethics and motivations:* the research-team had considerable experience of 'issue-based' work with vulnerable participants. We knew that the way we framed the notion of 'community' within the workshops would inevitably shape the direction and outcomes of the work: during the initiation phase of the project, we explicitly used the term community, as well as looking for implicit connections of ideas.
- *Benefit of implicit approaches:* transitioning into the consolidation phase of the project, we concluded that the project should use approaches that were largely

implicit. That is to say, we did not ask the young people to emphasise scene-work where participants develop characters and plots based on the theme of community or any related theme. We felt that the most important themes to focus on would be those emerging from the young people themselves, from the stories of their own lives. We worked with confidence that the theme of 'Community, what do you mean?' would be adequately explored in the process of drama creation and in the final dramatic production itself. This was certainly borne out in the workshop, creation and rehearsal process of the consolidation phase.

- *Developing transferable skills:* we found that the model of a theatre company as a micro, transient, and newly formed group worked well as a means of bringing a community together and offered key opportunities for participants to explore modes of behaviour that they could use in other real-life situations. For example participants had the opportunity to develop new roles and role relationships, and to expand their 'role repertoire' (Jennings, 1987, 2011).
- *The complex relationship of community to/with the individual:* the participants created work with a number of themes directly or indirectly relevant to the theme of 'community': many of these were underpinned by concepts of the self. An overarching theme was that of 'finding', as emphasised in the title of the performance. Other themes included:
 - a sense of identity being deserving of respect as an equal;
 - a sense of fulfilment by helping others/being a part of something bigger;
 - a sense of significance/ making a positive difference to other people;
 - comfort and strength in imaginative ideas and exploration;
finding your voice;

Alongside these themes, a number of other 'discoveries' of ways of behaving were made:

- coming to terms with losses/ traumas, especially those that can never be 'made right';

- dealing with failure;
 - needing / finding the loving support of an attuned attachment figure;
 - feeling alienated/ stupid/ incompetent, but wanting to be so much more;
 - becoming self-aware; growing and maturing;
 - misreading cues; making meaning of things and getting it wrong sometimes; but carrying on and trying to learn from mistakes;
 - feeling one's self to be likeable and worth knowing;
- *A testing-ground for other identities*: The rehearsal room held open a space of respect and trust in which participants could design, test and evolve multiple notions/narratives of themselves (or future selves) in plural communities. Care-leavers took the opportunity to try and fail, and see that beyond these set-backs, the community continues.
 - *A testing-ground for other identities*: The workshop for DCCCS staff was similar in form to the young people's, although their self-selected response and reflection focused on how the systems and processes they operated within might shape the young people's notions of self /community. A key insight surrounded a form they complete when they meet a young person for the first time: one of the sections is entitled 'identity'. This is often filled with information about ethnicity, or even a passport number. The support workers wondered if the narrative scrapbook that each care leaver creates, as part of another initiative which tells their story and offers a continuity as they move between families and communities, might be a better way of exploring and sharing richer aspects of what the young person in care's identity is.
 - *A point of commonality*: the project brought together both the DCCCS and care-leavers to for a shared meaning-making event. This took place in a *forum setting* where the care-leavers taking part in the project led a workshop for their peers. The success of this event marked not only the young people's *confidence in, and understanding of*, the process, but also the shared experience that they also had

with the support workers who had taken part. *This was a sophisticated, simultaneous negotiation of multiple notions of personal identity and community.*

- *Meaning-making as a theatrical process/ the 'production' of sense:* We suggest that one of the ways in which theatre-making is a good method for developing thriving communities it is through offering a practical, embodied, means for collectively solving shared problems encountered in everyday life, whilst developing empathy for the needs of others.
- *Peer-learning and operational flexibility:* We suggest that much of the success of this project was due to peer-learning occurring in a closely supportive environment which operated over a sustained period of time: importantly, participants had the opportunity to try, fail and grow a range of transferable skills that helped them reconstruct a more secure and stable sense of self and self-worth in a continually changing environment. We recognised this in participants who took part in the taster-days and saw it develop in those participants who chose to form the theatre company. *Our experience highlighted the importance of having as many facilitators as participants to support and sustain new practices, flexible resources (in particular, start times and spaces, transportation and food), and that the project be given a long preparation and running time (at least a 3 month set up and a 9 month exploration).* We continue to explore ways of making the group self-sustaining.

Outcomes:

The young people leaving care, who have become the core participators in this project have been working with Exstream Theatre Company and University of Exeter post-graduate students for almost 12 months now – well beyond the original scope of the project. During this time they have been able to collaboratively create a community. This community has taken the form of a theatre company which includes them and reflects them. We would argue that, although challenging for all involved, the performative nature of the theatre-as-community offers something unique to its

participants. It is a real community, operating in real time, where participants are themselves. Simultaneously, it also holds open a space where they can 'perform' life with less risk: they can try out, problematise and modify other scenarios built on their own sense of (future) identity and community. In their testing of these other possible realities, they are scaffolding from what they know to create an alternate future in reality. Their growth as people and community members has become clear through their public performances. They have been empowered by this experience. This is evident in their fundraising efforts to help the whole company travel together to perform in Austin, Texas in March 2013. On their return the team will meet to discuss how the company can be sustained: this we believe is the community's next challenge.

Discussion/Recommendations for Future Research:

A particular sense of community is not generalisable beyond the specific individuals and context in which it was created. This demands considerable and continual attention be paid to the variable and repeated processes of community formation. It also suggests the necessity of a *practice* of researching community, to braid with traditional and performative notions of theory. The dramatic methodologies deployed and developed in this project provide one possible successful mode of practice. We suggest that when it comes to investigating and understanding particular communities, including most importantly the way communities understand themselves, what is often of most significance are not the superficial facts of that community – the who, the what, the where – but rather the specific ways in which these ideas are given meaning and *made* meaningful.

"I have come to realise how individual the meaning of community is for people. That it means different things to different people, and that this can shift depending on their circumstances, sometimes overnight." (paraphrased remark from DCCCCS workshop)

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Policy Impact:

Our transdisciplinary work has relevance for colleagues both inside and outside the academy. We will seek to publish in Research in Drama Education and the British Journal of Social Work.

We suggest that these principles and exercises can be generalised beyond the domain of theatre and used in a very wide variety of social contexts where communities may benefit from facilitated networking / linking / finding common ground. It is one of the hopes for the project that non-theatre practitioners may benefit and use some of these ideas in their work.

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

