

What's the point?

Using drama to engage young people at risk

Executive summary

This report summarises the findings of case study research into a drama based Positive Activities for Young People (PAYP) project. The project was delivered using the Drama Enrichment materials which form part of the Youth Justice Board (YJB) PLUS strategy.

Background and aims

The overall aim of the project was to stimulate the use of the arts in PAYP regionally and nationally through research, evaluation and dissemination of a demonstration project delivering an Arts Enrichment programme through PAYP with young people at risk.

This report assesses the overall effectiveness of the drama programme in engaging socially excluded young people and enhancing the skills they need to re-engage in education or training.

It evaluates attitudinal shifts of participants to key workers and other adults, focusing particularly on communication and group work skills.

Project summary and rationale

It was envisaged that a well resourced, small-scale case study could provide valuable learning for partner organisations, artists and youth workers involved in the project as well as for other agencies and individuals engaged in work with young people at risk. The project focused on a small cohort of young people during a two-week intensive programme of work, assessing the contribution of specific drama based arts enrichment activities to the delivery of some of PAYP key aims and objectives.

A 10-day pilot project was facilitated by two workers from TiPP (Theatre in Prisons and Probation), over a two-week period. The project involved nine young people, aged between 12 and 17, identified and referred to PAYP, and included the support and active involvement of three key workers.

Context

The project was initiated as part of a wider strategy by Arts Council England, North West and Government Office North West to embed the use of the arts in PAYP through the development of opportunities for young people, combined with professional development for artists, research, and advocacy.

The project was framed within the following key national programmes and strategies:

- PAYP aims to reduce crime and antisocial behaviour both in the short and long term, support young people back into education or training and help them stay there, by working with those at risk of truancy
- PLUS is part of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Skills for Life strategy, and is funded jointly by DfES, Youth Justice Board and Arts Council England
- a series of Arts Enrichment programmes have been developed as a resource to support delivery of the PLUS Strategy ¹

A steering group was set up to oversee the planning and delivery of the project and its evaluation and consisted of the following partners: Arts Council England, North West, Government Office North

West, Lancashire Connexions Service and TiPP (Theatre in Prisons and Probation).

¹ Good practice guide, Crime Concern, PAYP 2005

Research

Key objectives and appropriate methodologies were identified to provide both qualitative and quantitative data. Data was gathered by two researchers throughout the project and the findings subsequently grouped under headings corresponding to the intended key outcomes:

Attitudinal shifts in young people

- towards key workers
- towards writing

Development of Emotional Literacy

- communication skills
- group working skills

Key worker attitudes and expectations

- towards young people
- relationships with young people

Arts meeting PAYP objectives

- evidence
- practice

Findings

The findings from this case study research cover five key areas:

- attitudinal shifts in young people
- development of Emotional Literacy skills
- key worker attitudes and expectations
- how using the arts can meet key objectives within PAYP
- progression routes and legacy

Key outcomes

- participants' attitudes to key workers and other adults involved in the study underwent a positive change
- participants' attitudes to group work improved significantly during the project; by the end of the project a strong group bond had formed
- all participants had contributed to the group process and had worked well with key workers, other adults involved in the study and their peers
- participants enjoyed working with drama, citing their sense of enjoyment and achievement as well as the development of new skills as a main factor
- participants enjoyed the learning of new skills and were proud of their achievements
- participants developed a new confidence in their verbal and written communication skills

- participants began to develop strategies for coping with stressful or challenging situations
- key workers developed a growing understanding of and respect for the young people they were supporting
- positive working relationships were developed between key workers and participants
- participants were left with feelings of being 'let down' and missed taking part in a structured activity when the project finished
- most participants were keen to engage in follow up activities immediately after the end of the project

These outcomes reflect and reinforce the findings of other major studies into this area of work by, for example, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

Recommendations

The findings of this case study research suggest the following factors need to be considered and implemented for the effective use of arts projects within key programmes targeting young people at risk, such as PAYP.

Key planning and structure factors

- careful consideration is given to all aspects of delivery in the planning and design of projects including timetabling of activities, location, availability of food and refreshments, workshop design and delivery
- progression routes for participants are identified during the project
- follow up sessions are built into the design of the project to allow young people to debrief and reflect upon their experiences
- key workers and young people should ideally have had previous experience of participating together in a project

Skills and expertise of the arts (drama) facilitators

- the skills and expertise of the arts facilitators in delivering the Enrichment programmes and their specific experiences of working with young people at risk are essential to successful project delivery

- arts workers and facilitators have undertaken relevant training in the delivery of arts for young people at risk
- arts workers and facilitators have undertaken relevant training in the sectors they are working in, for example, education, youth work, youth justice

Levels of key worker involvement

- the level of key worker involvement is central to the project's overall success
- the levels of commitment and active involvement by key workers supports and reinforces the commitment of the participants
- key workers taking part in intensive programmes of work with young people at risk need to be given additional and specific training and support

Effective liaison and planning between partners

- liaison and planning between partners prior to the project commencing is essential for all of the key elements to be truly effective
- liaison and communication between the delivery partners during the project is crucial for the effective delivery of the agreed outcomes

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