

Theatre and performance can improve the social skills of 'at-risk' youth

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Summary

The paper reports the results of a substantial evaluation of a national arts education programme in Canada. The results suggest that high-quality arts programmes can improve children's behavior and emotional wellbeing. The research also found that these effects can be maximised through sustaining engagement in the programme and getting high levels of parental involvement with the child's development.

National Arts and Youth Demonstration Project (NAYDP)

The NAYDP intentionally reached out to 183 children aged 9-15 from low-income families. The after-school programme lasted nine months and focused mainly on theatre and performance but also included elements of set-and-prop design, and filmmaking. There were two 90-minute sessions per week conducted by professional arts instructors. They took place in five locations that included rural and urban settings. By the end of the programme 68 students (37 per cent) had dropped out.

Data were collected using pre- and post-programme surveys and interviews with a sample of children and their parents

Questionnaires were administered before the start of the programme, at three-month intervals during the programme, and then six months after the completion of the programme. The researchers also conducted 30 separate interviews with youth and parents. In order to isolate the effects of the NAYDP the children's scores for standardised test questions were compared with a carefully selected control sample of participants in the National Longitudinal Survey on Children and Youth (from which the questions were taken). The evaluation showed significant improvements in social skills and task completion as a result of the programme.

More benefits from the programme were identified through the interviews

The data from the interviews showed that children enjoyed (and benefited from) working in teams (including negotiation, decision-making, and compromise), they felt generally happier, more sociable and better behaved.

Keywords

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