CultureCase

Using the arts to address social harm

This research was conducted by **Tonimarie Benaton** and **five others** at the **University of Derby** and **Derby Theatre**

Summary

This paper is an exploration of how the arts can address the issue of ‘social harm’ for young people with experience of care. The research is based on a programme run by a regional theatre company called ‘One Plus One’, which comprised a mixture of activities delivered to small groups during the school holidays. The authors found that two key ingredients gave the programme its potency: an internal ‘ethic of care’ and an external ‘ethic of justice’. The ethic of care was demonstrated by the way participants were ‘taken seriously as creative directors of the process'. The project also sought justice by contesting ‘the social structures and behaviours which generate’ social harms and giving young people the means to assert and affirm their experience of the care system as often ‘uncaring and alienating’.

In order to closely observe the activities the researchers became active participants in the sessions

They also interviewed staff, stakeholders and carers as well as the young people themselves. One Plus One worked with people aged eight years old through to care leavers in their early 20s for a series of three- or four-day workshops during school holidays in which small groups of young people came together 'to engage in mixed-arts activities'.

There are limits to any ‘scale-up’ or replication of the project

Social harm describes ‘the injuries done by social, political and institutional structures of inequality, and state responses to it, on individuals, many of whom may be subject to enforcement rather than protection by the state’. Addressing social harm with arts-based programmes demands ‘small scale and long-term programmes with sustained staffing, and working hard to maintain contact with participants whose lives may make this difficult’. It also requires ‘a very specific skill set and character attributes which emphasise care and working slowly to build relationships, trust and young people's ownership of the creative process’.

Keywords

interview **observation** **theatre** **young people** **UK**

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