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Wimpenny, K. and Savin-Baden, M.

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# Using Theatre and Performance for Promoting Health and Well being amongst the 50+ Community: an Arts Informed Evaluation

*Katherine Wimpenny, Maggi Savin-Baden, Coventry University, UK*

## **Abstract**

*“There is increasing interest in the use of arts-based media to improve the health and well-being of the older population. Whilst there have been a number of initiatives in this area, there have been relatively few arts-informed evaluations of such interventions. This paper worked with a local theatre to design an evaluation that fitted with an arts-based intervention. What is novel about the approach adopted here is that not only was the study user-guided, but also the study adopted a new and emerging form of arts-informed inquiry, which offered clarity to the evaluation which is not seen in some of the earlier methods available. The findings of the study indicate that theatre and performance provided opportunities for diverse marginalised members of a community to connect and participate in a shared activity and transform their views of themselves and others in ways that were beneficial for health and well being.”*

*Keywords:* arts informed inquiry, evaluation, older people, well being

## **Introduction**

In recent years there has been growing interest in the contribution of the arts to the health of communities and individuals, and there has been growing interest in the value of the arts in addressing significant social issues (Arts Council England 2007; Clift 2006; Clift et al 2006; Clift et al 2009). Yet the evidence base regarding the effectiveness of interventions targeting social isolation needs strengthening (Dickens et al 2011), in particular when considering (measurable) means for elders to develop interpersonal relationships that can enhance self-esteem, well-being and social inclusion (Sviden, Tham, & Borell 2004). Thus there is a need to conduct robust studies to provide evidence of the importance for successful aging and maintaining an active lifestyle physically, mentally and socially (Health Development Agency 2004).

This paper presents an evaluation of an arts-based intervention (called the Creative Gymnasium project) that examined the benefits of drama and arts activities for improving and maintaining the health and well-being of isolated and marginalised adults aged 50+ in Coventry, UK, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The Creative Gymnasium project aimed to build on research and practice for older people in a city centre population that were more difficult to reach and engage, such as those living alone and those with disabilities. The way in which the project was designed and delivered is detailed as well as the methodology of arts-informed inquiry (Savin-Baden & Major 2013). The findings are presented and discussed and recommendations for practice are made.

## **Literature**

There is a broad range of literature that suggest that artistic activities improve the lives of older people to enhance health, quality of life and function, for example, through gardening, music and dance (Batt-Rawden & Tellnes 2005; Greaves & Farbus 2006; Kilroy et al 2007; Daykin et al 2008). Health gains have also been evidenced through the use of music and singing (Skingley and Vella-Burrows 2010). More specifically theatre performance has been used to stimulate discussion of problems depicted by older adults and their possible solutions (Palmar & Nascimento 2002). In the UK creative activities and health are an integral element of government policy and health guidelines (Department of Health Arts Council England 2007; 2011 National Arts Policy Roundtable; National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence [NICE] 2008; Social Exclusion Unit 2004). Yet despite research interest in the value of arts for health, the field

is relatively under-developed, not least due to the inherently complex and subtle nature of artistic and creative endeavours, which include:

- The huge range of art forms
- Individuality of different healthcare and community settings
- Diversity of individuals participating in projects
- The range of health issues that might be addressed

(Clift et al 2009:13)

A range of retrospective and prospective studies have gathered evidence capturing the perceived benefits of art programmes. For example, through the use of dance in patients with chronic heart failure (Belardinelli et al 2008); to examine social and psychological wellbeing with children with communication difficulties (Barnes 2013); through art to improve young people's wellbeing using a social capital approach (Hampshire & Matthijsse 2010); in artwork with patients whilst on renal dialysis (Rowe et al 2011) and with people who use mental health services (Stacey & Stickley 2010). These studies demonstrate how arts projects have provided a valuable means of opening up engagement in new ways of expression and enthusiasm; encouraging people to participate in ways that are creative, rewarding and inclusive. However, as noted in reviews conducted by Macnaughton et al (2005) and Clift et al (2009) few studies identify direct measurable health gains required to convince policy makers of the need to adequately support the arts and health sector.

## **The project**

Building on the research and literature, this project sought to explore the impact of arts-based activities, particularly the use of theatre and performance on the elders' lives using a combination of qualitative evidence and quantitative evidence for measurable change. Ethical approval was granted through Coventry University Research Ethics Committee (P1362/28.09.11).

The Creative Gymnasium project involved the use of a drama intervention, delivered in stages by a city centre theatre company, over a 12 month period:

- Stage I – Recruitment and convening of the groups
- Stage II – Developmental workshops
- Stage III – Resources to be made available

A professional theatre practitioner was employed as project manager to deliver the staged intervention. The project was widely promoted through local media, Age UK networks (a UK based charity) and community groups, sheltered residences, churches and charitable organizations, where 'taster sessions', were offered which led to weekly developmental workshops. The evaluation of the project was undertaken by researchers at Coventry University.

## **Methodology**

Arts-informed inquiry (Savin Baden & Major 2013) was selected as a means of evaluating the project from both participant and stakeholder perspectives. As researchers engaged as participants and observers within the inquiry process, a conscious decision was made to follow guiding principles underpinning this approach which included:

1. The research is guided by moral commitment
2. Knowledge is generated through the work
3. There is a strong focus on reflexivity
4. Accessibility is a strong focal point
5. Diverse forms of quality are celebrated together
6. There is a sense of authenticity

(Savin-Baden & Major 2013)

## ***Project participants***

Data used in this paper was gained from four participant groups, both female and male with ages ranging from 50+ to 80+

- a city centre group, who met for 20+ weeks<sup>1</sup> at the Belgrade Theatre (n=25)
- a sheltered residential home, workshops delivered over 10 weeks (n=8)
- an Asian Women's group who met for 12 weeks in a local suburb (n= 18)
- a group of out-patients receiving dialysis treatment (3 workshops) (n=4)

### ***Data collection***

A range of methods were used to collect accounts from the 50+ group. This included qualitative data collection as outlined in Table 1:

**Table 1 Qualitative data collection strategies**

<b>Method of data collection</b>	<b>Description</b>
Participant interviews/focus groups	20 minute interviews/focus groups undertaken with participants at the start, interim and end of the workshop programme (Interviews n= 10 Focus groups n=3)
Participant observation of workshop sessions	to observe the interaction, and also to participate in the creation of the interaction as a participant observer
Ethno drama	to showcase participants' experiences through development of written scripts and reflections of their realisations through story boards, creative writing and art work
Sharing of artefacts and use of photography	Visual data to capture participant perspectives including homemade crafts, sewing, needlepoint, dress jewellery (in particular from the Asian women), postcards, poetry, drawings, photographs and storyboards.

*Source: data adapted from: Savin-Baden et al., 2013.*

Quantitative data were collected via the *Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS)*, a health outcomes framework tool, recommended by the NHS Confederation (2011), administered at the beginning and end of three workshop programmes (see Table 2) to gain statistical data to measure population-level progress for well-being.

**Table 2 WEMWBS data set**

<b>Group</b>	<b>No. Completed Initial</b>	<b>No. Completed Follow-up</b>
Residential housing group	6	6
City centre group	10	10
Asian women's group	8	8

*Source: data adapted from: Savin-Baden et al 2013.*

<sup>1</sup> This group met for a longer period of time as they developed and performed 'Shine On' a formal theatre production which showcased at the theatre and went on a local tour

It is important to note that the WEMWBS performs well against accepted criteria at a population level and that the WEMWBS was developed to enable monitoring of population health. It is therefore recognised that the scale is likely to appeal to those evaluating mental health promotion initiatives, because of its positive focus (Tennant et al 2007). In terms of this study it is acknowledged that relatively small numbers of participants would complete the tool.

### ***Data Analysis***

Qualitative data were analysed across the separate groups and cross over themes and outcomes were compared. Interpretive interactionism (Denzin 2001) was adopted to analyse the data which meant the research teams focus was on understanding the logical structures of participant meaning making, which provided a focus for the interpretation. As the researchers were often also part of the group activity, the analysis took into account the intellectual and personal presence of the researchers within the process, as suggested by Cotterill and Letherby (1993). In terms of the quantitative data, each item of the 14 item responses in the WEMWBS was scored from 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time) and a total scale score calculated.

A Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test calculation was performed across three groups (city centre, sheltered housing, established community group) to assess pre and post test scores to calculate effect size and any statistical significance. In addition, a Kruskal-Wallis H test was performed to calculate how the groups compared, and if any differences in pre and post test scores could be attributed to other factors related to the three groups.

### ***Plausibility***

While validity and trustworthiness have provided a base for researchers to document the integrity of qualitative research, we argue for the notion of plausibility, which we think is ultimately at the heart of what the researcher must strive to do. In short, we need to present a plausible case of research contexts, participants' stories, or participants' experiences of phenomena. We define plausibility in terms of conceptual framing, design and a clear location of methodology, methods and data interpretation. What is also vital is honesty about what is taking place in the research process. Qualitative research is not about tidying up around the edges of data and cleaning it to make it fit. It requires that the researcher is rigorously honest about the relationship between the design, the process and what is, and is not discovered. Art emphasizes the unique and immeasurable aesthetic qualities of a particular work. Yet art is also characterized by consistent formal patterns and structural elements that can be generalized beyond the experience of individuals (McNiff 1998). The translation of art experiences into descriptive language can present a number of challenges to the art-based researcher and the research team recognised that artistic knowing was not something that could always be reduced to language and that there was considerable truth to the phenomenological declaration that 'the original text is perception itself' (Merleau-Ponty 1962:21). As a result, four art-installations using participant data were developed. The installations befit the principles of arts-informed inquiry including issues of authenticity and accessibility, alongside researcher interpretation. The selection of data was agreed amongst the participants and research team to ensure it was representative, whilst illustrative of personal experience.

### ***Findings***

Participants' experiences of engaging with drama are presented in four themed areas:

- Beginnings
- The influence of others
- Shifting perspectives
- Performing

### ***Beginnings***

This theme represents participants' and stakeholders' response towards a new opportunity. It describes the sense of disruption and challenge experienced as a result of being involved in the project. The collation of the participants' responses are illustrated in the arts-based installation (Figure 1) and explained further by textual data:



**Figure 1 Arts-based representation of findings: Beginnings**

Source: Savin-Baden et al 2013.

The beginning phase marked a period of intrigue and interest around the project. Individual choice making around levels of engagement with the workshop material was evident. People were not likely to respond to the environment, content and materials in consistent ways, people came with different expectations, hopes, and ideas. For some an uncertainty was revealed, for others intrigue, enjoyment, for others a bewildering beginning:

I was told about this by an acquaintance who persuaded me to come along, I couldn't quite work out what she was talking about really, so I was intrigued to find out about exactly what it was. The first meeting with the professional artist we were doing little mimes, the kind we used to do at school at the end of the day, and I was thinking what have I come to?, but I have come, so I'll give it a go . . . and it gradually evolved.

Considering participants' initial experiences, it was interesting to examine what influenced people to come back for more - the following theme moves on to expand upon this further.

### ***The influence of others***

This theme illustrates how 'a person is a person because of other people' (isiXhosa proverb; Watson and Fourie 2004:20). The theme both represents and acknowledges the interrelatedness of human existence and relates to Shutte's (1993) perspective that people depend on one another for the exercise and development of their capacity for self-realisation. Figure 2 represents participants' responses which are explained further below:



**Figure 2 Arts-based representation of findings: The influence of others**

Source: Savin-Baden et al 2013.

It was evident that a commitment and reliance on one another developed which was seen to lead to opportunities for individuals to extend their influence whilst strengthening their abilities. The participants became a group through doing things *together*, as the following quotation illustrates:

Meeting other people kept me coming back, I liked the company. I live alone, so it was nice to have something different to do. I saw it as pushing me, challenging me to a certain extent - not stressful though - not like that. I had the element of choice, and I got to enjoy it with other people. It's the interaction between people I enjoyed, we're all in it together, and of course some people are more outgoing and show leadership in the group and that always happens, someone emerges as a leader where there's a group of people.

The relationships amongst group members, supporting participation, should not be underestimated. Many people spoke of the importance of 'the group'. The fun, the friendship, the shared experience, the stimulation of seeing 'change' in one another certainly appeared to help shape group confidence and a willingness to do more.

The influence of the facilitator is also reflected here, including her style and approach, and commitment to a belief in human potential and the vision of how the arts could support people to be enriched and empowered.

The facilitators were good, they really were. They did guide us along the way and I should say we wouldn't have managed without them. It was our material but they had to hone it down so it could be used on a stage, so they helped with the quality, the delivery, we had no experience of that, not being in theatre work.

The theatre practitioner guided the group using her expertise in interactive and participatory performance encounters, whilst working with the participants' ideas and contributions. It was evident that managing the challenge and pace of sessions, within an environment of trust and respect was key, and this approach was observed as influencing participants' decisions to keep

coming back. In addition the facilitator's enthusiasm, creativity and warmth was viewed as inspiring and energising. The role of the Age UK project worker also requires mention here, as she supported individuals across the groups through her generous, considerate, encouraging and perceptive manner. Her role could be viewed as one of a 'translator'; working with the content and subtleties of interaction between the facilitator and group members. In summary, it was evident that human interaction and pursuit served to support people's needs and wants and had the potential to be transformative. As Townsend noted:

Empowerment is enabled when people demonstrate mutual respect, promote positive interdependence, share risk and responsibility, encourage hope and build trust in themselves and others. (Townsend 1996:182)

The following theme moves on to consider the resulting shifts which occurred through such actions and interactions.

### *Shifting perspectives*

This theme both represents and explores how engagement in arts-related activities nourished and supported transition of participants' sense of being. It reflects the quality of the personal and social dimensions of the arts-related activities, in which the participants were engaged, as well as the diversity, strength and potential for development that each person offered and took from workshop sessions, as illustrated in Figure 3. What was evident across these data was not only different forms and levels of engagement, but also the ways in which shifts had occurred in perspectives about engagement, through the process of working and learning with and through others. Greaves & Farbus (2006) similarly acknowledged the importance of the group process to support elders' confidence development and self-efficacy.



**Figure 3 Arts-based representation of findings: Shifting Perspectives**

Source: Savin-Baden et al 2013.

Participants became empowered during the creative process through development of the content using their stories, their ideas, their suggestions for improvement and their risk taking. In the following example, one participant shared a particularly significant experience:

I think when we started to do a little bit of writing that was a turning point for me because I like writing, I used to like writing. It's given my writing a new lease of life, I used to write doggerel but now I think I'm verging on writing poetry - without that hopefully not sounding too big headed.. There's been quite a few bits of applause and well you know you play to the gallery don't you. I think the group have enjoyed the few bits I've read out that I've written. I've never had a very high opinion of myself, a bit of a jack of all trades, not really very good at any one thing, so the response I've had to the poetry has been quite gratifying and I've been feeling quite big headed about it. I'm enjoying it!

This theme recognizes how mutual support and validation enabled shifts in participants' self-perception and sense of presence, reflected by a growing commitment to the group and the project. Indeed, the unity and group dynamic supported transition from workshop participant to performer. Such transitions were also seen to influence other aspects of participants' everyday life, as reflected in this individual's data:

I think I've got a bit more 'get up and go' since I've started doing things here in coming to these workshops - I may not be fast, but I am going (laughs). I have been doing a little more gardening - ladylike gardening - and what else? I've been to the theatre a couple of times by myself. Of course another influence is my sister who is a companion as well, and who has been housebound for the past few weeks so I've been doing things for her too, but it all adds up to the fact that I've got a bit more purpose in life. All through the last year I sat and watched day time telly, so compared to that its improving.

Such personal reflections and revised perspectives about oneself provide some measure of evidence of the transitional experience encountered by participants, enabled through the sense of unity, group dynamic and freedom of the participants to express, explore, create, dare, and to try things out, as illustrated by another participant below:

I think the difference is with this is we haven't had a script, we had to do our own script and I think that's been the interesting part of it, that we've had to put in our own ideas.

Some have been absolutely fantastic and hilarious at times, there's been a lot of humour! The final theme moves on to present the impact of the project more widely and the dynamic and expressive responses experienced in being involved.

## ***Performing***

This theme captures participants' diverse, yet often overlapping conception of the notion of performance. It also illustrates expression of individuality in that there were a number of typologies reflected in being involved as reflected in Figure 4. Participants' gains in terms of being-well included:

- A sense of pride and pleasure in undertaking something many had never thought possible
- Increased sense of performance noted in peoples' lives more generally
- Performance in terms of taking part in something that had personal meaning and significance
- The quality of the performance - with the support and kudos of the Theatre
- The sense of presence, and voice and how this challenged perceptions of the skills, abilities and valued contribution of older adults, realized through expressions of self, agility, bravery, sharing of emotion and importantly humour.



doing, and everything's 'cool' you know, and when I told her I was actually going to be performing at the Belgrade - because they've been here when I've brought them to see pantomimes and that - well she was so impressed!

In addition, this theme relates to a momentum created amongst participants for future action. As Inglis (1997) notes, future choice in action and self-reliance centre on creating self-confidence, self-expression and an interest in learning, which this project has been the catalyst for:

... when this came along it felt like a wonderful opportunity for me because I did used to do amateur dramatics a long time ago and really enjoyed it but back then.. I thought well I'll give it a try, and I've really, really, enjoyed it and I'm dreading it finishing because I'm wondering - when I have caught up with myself around the house - I'm just worried I'm going to be back to where I started. I want something to help occupy my mind that isn't just connected with the house or my garden.

### ***Findings of the WEMWBS data***

The WEMWBS data provides complementary, confirmatory evidence about the positive shifts experienced by participants. This can be seen in Tables 3, 4 and 5 in relation to initial and follow-up scores. What is evident is that except for one participant who had no shift in scores (female vii Table 5) all individuals scores increased at follow-up and shifts were seen to occur across all items. Of note were shifts linked to the following items: 'Feeling optimistic about the future', 'feeling close to other people,' 'feeling interested in other people,' 'having energy to spare', 'thinking clearly', 'being interested in new things'.

**Table 3 Residential housing group data**

Participant	Initial score	Follow up score
Male a	47	49
Male b	40	47
Female a	56	60
Female b	41	45
Female c	62	65
Female d	48	53

*Source: data adapted from: Savin-Baden et al 2013.*

Mean initial score	49
Mean follow-up score	53.166
Mean group score	51.08

**Table 4 City centre group data**

Participant	Initial score	Follow up score
Female i	59	63
Female ii	42	51
Female iii	52	57
Female iv	56	57
Female v	59	61
Female vi	44	56
Female vii	63	63
Female viii	50	52
Female viiii	54	58
Male i	41	56

*Source: data adapted from: Savin-Baden et al 2013.*

Mean initial score	52
Mean follow-up score	57.4
Mean group score	54.7

**Table 5 Asian women’s group data**

Participant	Initial score	Follow up score
Female A	44	48
Female B	54	58
Female C	53	58
Female D	48	50
Female E	51	56
Female F	55	60
Female G	48	52
Female H	61	70

*Source: data adapted from: Savin-Baden et al 2013.*

Mean initial score	51.75
Mean follow-up score	56.5
Mean group score	54.125

Overall mean score (both male and female scores)  $51.08 + 54.7 + 54.125 / 3 = 53.30$

Sample size calculation – total participants 24 (21 females and 3 males)

A Wilcoxon Signed Ranks tests was carried out on the WEMWBS scores (see Table 6) and suggested that individuals scored significantly higher after the intervention (Mdn = 56.5) than before the intervention (Mdn = 51.5),  $Z = 4.22$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.86$ . Changes between pre and post intervention scores on the WEMWBS scores were examined using a Kruscal-Wallis test and suggested that the effect of the intervention was similar across Residential Housing, City Centre and Asian Women’s groups,  $H(2) = 0.39$ ,  $p = 0.82$ .

**Table 6 Pre and Post intervention score on the WEMWBS scale**

Group	Pre Median, (Range)	Post Median, (Range)	Change Median, (Range)
Residential Housing N=6	47.5 (22)	51 (20)	4 (5)
City Centre N=10	53 (22)	57 (12)	4 (15)
Asian Women N=8	52 (17)	57 (22)	4.5 (7)
All groups N=24	51.5 (23)	56.5 (25)	4 (15)

*Source: data adapted from: Savin-Baden et al., 2013.*

In summary, the findings from both these calculations suggest that the increase in scores for participants in the respective groups was attributable to the intervention itself, rather than any other external factors. As such the WEMWBS data usefully supports and corroborates the overall study findings.

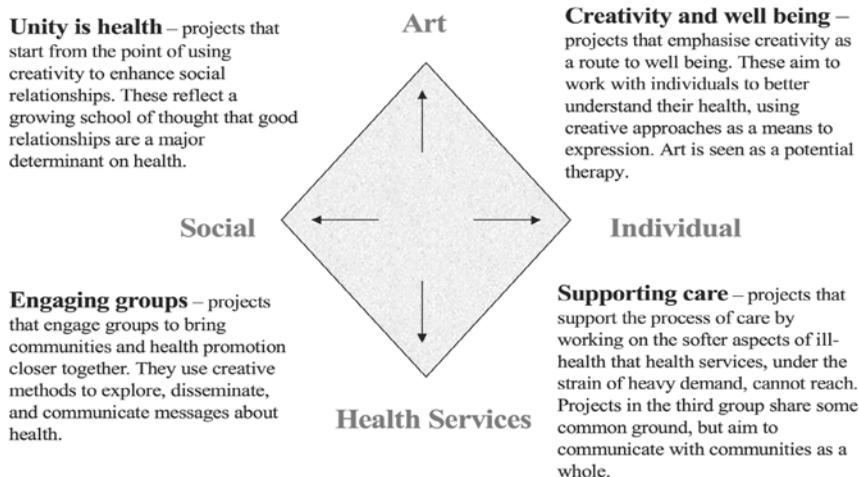
## Discussion

Marginalised and occupationally deprived people are often viewed as being at a disadvantage when their knowledge and skills are challenged by the realities of their daily life. Social deprivation is a particular health risk relative to wider society (Benetar 2002; Duncan 2004). In

examining human experience and well-being, we are interested in considering what supports people to experience satisfaction in their daily life. Being isolated, or marginalised raises issue of vulnerability and individual's capacity to respond to life challenges. This project sought to examine how arts interventions including theatre and performance, could influence participants lives, and facilitate a process that might enable people to achieve beyond what they previously considered possible.

McNaughton et al (2005) present the arts/health diamond which categorises arts and health projects along two dimensions, in Figure 1 below.

## Key dimensions of arts/health



**Figure 5 The Arts and Health Diamond (McNaughton et al 2005).**

*Source: from McNaughton et al 2005.*

The first dimension is whether the focus is primarily on engagement with the arts (with an assumption that such activity carries benefits for well-being) or more specifically on health improvement (with the supposition that the arts can help to achieve health outcomes); and the second is whether the focus is on individuals and their well-being, or on working with groups and communities. We suggest the model can be usefully applied in relation to the findings of the Creative Gymnasium project in that engagement with the arts has been evidenced as rewarding across both dimensions; targeting well-being through the creative process and offering health improvement at the personal, group and community level. However, measuring effectiveness is still an underdeveloped field of research activity and it is evident the relationship between the arts, health and well being remains diverse and includes a wide range of practices, communities and contexts.

The findings from our study revealed that participants were seen to engage at a primary level of reflection, an inquiring phase in which the workshop content and environment (physical and social) was assessed. Individuals made active judgments about their choices around engagement in relation to an initial assessment of the self. For many the initial experience was one of 'bewilderment' and uncertainty, with initial workshops experienced as infantile, although for others a more immediate connection and sense of enjoyment was evidenced. What appeared important in relation to participants ongoing commitment in the early stages was a general level of intrigue, a commitment the sense of one another, and in particular the role of the facilitator, and the significant role she held in managing the challenge and pace of sessions for individuals, nurturing engagement, building trust, being inspiring and energising.

The programme functioned at the level of the group, and through the sharing event and performances, in the wider community, yet interestingly, despite this, participants recognised an

opportunity to be oneself. Participants spoke of feeling able to do things alone whilst feeling part of a group – this individual opportunity to demonstrate capacity was valued; participants spoke of being an individual, alongside others, with sense of their own space. This (transitional) process prompted movement from a previously held belief to another, and aspects of personal change ensued and are evidenced within the data, for example, participants spoke of seeing other productions at the theatre, taking up previous and /or new hobbies. Such shifts, whilst viewed as positive, can be troubling whilst affirming, as inhabiting such a changed perspective can be disquieting for some. For example, the changed perspective offered individuals potential to take or make other choices; they prompted a desire to sustain or move forwards and engage further, which was not always possible due to funding and the project lifetime. The use of drama to enhance personal health and well-being suggests the arts may be transformational in shifting behaviour in terms of patterns of doing, thinking and feeling. Transformation resulted from perhaps a personal epiphany, a change not only of how one views oneself, but also changes in perspectives about the political, economic and social ways in which life is lived. These shifts result in major change in ideas of one's potential and identity – an 'interactional moment' (Denzin 1989:70). Yet despite such moments of heightened significance questions remain regarding whether longevity, or the quality of the experience, or what other factors are distinguishable which can support transformation. We suggest reflection, accessed via our data collection methods, proved useful when exploring with participants the shifts experienced in relation to personal identity, participant engagement, agency and presence. Sharing reflections with one another was seen to support the shaping of alternate views of the self, and with that more accurate interpretation of the self.

## **Key findings**

The findings to date from across the study appear to indicate 6 important features:

1. Engaging in drama and arts activities provided forms of creative encounters and processes that were valued by participants. Examples include the development of a new and broad set of relationships which encompassed peer to peer, individual and facilitator, individual and family as well as between audience and the wider community. Such interactions amongst participants extended beyond the creative process and influenced the roles, relationships and routines of participants' everyday lives
2. Participants' skills and confidence were influenced in a positive way by taking risks, for example in sharing personal material, public speaking, and generally doing things that previously individuals did not think they could do, or had opportunity to do. Such risk taking however was experienced as fulfilling and rewarding.
3. Participants believed they gained a greater sense of agency, voice and presence in their community. This occurred through the creative process and products developed, such as digital stories, educational materials and public performances.
4. The skill set of the workshop facilitators was a core contributor to effective participant engagement, for example, a facilitator who was generous, considerate, encouraging, with expertise in interactive and participatory performance encounters, and who demonstrated the ability to encourage and value participants' ideas and contributions.
5. The connection with the respected theatre company added both kudos and value to the drama and arts activities.
6. Participant gains were evident from both an immediate and medium term perspective; however, due to the short timeframe of the project it was not possible to give indications of any longer term benefits, as these have not been demonstrated to date.

## **Conclusion**

The findings indicated that participants' engagement in an artistic occupation was self-validating. Further, theatre and performance provided opportunities for diverse marginalised members of a community to connect and participate in a shared activity and transform their views of themselves and others. What is of note is the importance of space and place within this project, that is, the participants found a place to express themselves, to be themselves, to find out things about themselves and to feel respected members of their community. Moreover, the opportunity to produce credible public performance was also emphasised, to create and have support to do this from a professional artist as a workshop facilitator. The evidence and recommendations from the project, in combination with new partnerships established, has contributed to the Theatre's decision to make an ongoing commitment to the delivery of arts activity to the 50+ population; this group being a key part of the delivery infrastructure of the city.

## **Reflection on the arts-based evaluation**

For many researchers in this area of inquiry, artful works and texts are expected to stand alone and be open to many and diverse interpretations. Yet for us this perspective seemed to stand against many of the arguments that have been fostered in qualitative inquiry, whereby researchers should not leave the text to speak for itself, since it is mediated by time and context. Therefore, the role of the researcher is to interpret the text and explain it for those reading it. What became critical for us to acknowledge as researchers in using arts-informed evaluation was it was highly likely to introduce more questions than answers, both for the researchers, the participants and the stakeholder. What was at the heart of this kind of project and evaluation was the desire to make (radical) statements about arts, justice, equity and health.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Katherine Wimpenny** is a Research Fellow within Learning Innovation, Coventry University and a Senior Occupational Therapy Lecturer within the School of Social, Therapeutic and Community Studies. Katherine has a developing portfolio of research expertise in the use of innovative methodologies such as arts-based inquiry, qualitative research synthesis, participatory action synthesis and participatory action research.

**Maggi Savin-Baden** is Director of Learning Innovation has a longstanding and international reputation for her work in the area of learning and digital media, as well as her use of innovative research methodologies. Maggi’s expertise and experience in qualitative research is substantial and multi-professional.