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LIVSMESTRING

A sense of freedom in a restricted environment

How can theatre give adolescents with behavioral problems a sense of freedom in an environment built on rules and restrictions?

We need art in child welfare

The reform school system (RS) in Finland is the most demanding and challenging part of child welfare. Despite the good-quality care provided, the adult-age prognosis for RS adolescents is often poor.¹ There are numerous plausible factors for this unfortunate outcome, ranging from genetic risks and early traumatic experiences to later antisocial attitudes and peers. Even though the RS system cannot change everything, it still provides a very important window of opportunity before adulthood. A good intervention at this phase might be able to change the adolescent's pathway from antisocial and destructive to a more positive one.

Our project, *Drama-based methods & emotion processing*, is a longitudinal and still ongoing study that started in 2017. The project set out to assess the possibilities of drama workshops as an intervention method in RS care,

as well as providing adolescents an open access to art and culture. The outcomes are measured with both qualitative and quantitative methods, and the results have raised considerable international interest. In this article we will describe the workshop carried out with the adolescents as well as the outcomes of the project.

A sense of freedom

Arts-based methods (ABM) are able to engage people in a creative and meaningful way,² which is especially relevant for vulnerable groups like out-of-home care (OOHC) children and adolescents. In the social and health care sector, ABMs are used more and more and cultural well-being is nowadays considered an important part of a meaningful life.

However, in child welfare, ABM has not yet reached its full potential. This is unfortunate, since in order to provide



DRAMA WORKSHOP FOR ADOLESCENTS WITH BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS

- **Reform schools (RS)** are rehabilitative institutions for adolescents who have several severe problems, for example, school, mental health or substance abuse problems, and juvenile delinquency.
- **Drama-based methods & emotion processing** (2017-) is a project that uses drama workshops as an intervention method in RS care. The idea is to provide socially engaged theatre and give voice to marginalized sectors of society.
- **The project** is carried out in collaboration with the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), State reform schools and the Touring Stage (TS) of the Finnish National Theatre.
- **The collaboration** has included e.g. shared blog writings and other media outcomes, and organizing a public discussion session of the project aims and outcomes.
- **The first** workshop took place during spring 2018. The results are presented in detail in an article, which is currently under review in *The Journal of Nordic Arts and Culture*.

safe structures, child welfare is often burdened by control, agreements, rules, and restrictions. The challenge for the care-takers and facilities is to provide safe structures, but at the same time avoid adult-oriented, unnecessary boundaries. Through art, it might be possible to achieve a sense of freedom in an environment that is otherwise restricted.

Art as a metaphoric shelter

Prior studies on drama-based workshops in environments somewhat comparable to RS have shown promising results.³ The common outcomes from drama sessions are fun and relaxation, self-esteem and confidence, enhanced communication skills, recognition, creativity, opening up, self-understanding and finding purpose. Moreover, an important outcome reported by the attendees is the positive experience of being a part of a group. Connection, agency, activity, and coherence are also important factors in OOHc adolescents' successful transition to adulthood.⁴

A drama workshop can give the participants a specific advantage: different roles and costumes act as a shield or shelter to maintain a sense of privacy, which in turn may facilitate self-expression. This symbolic distance, a *metaphoric shelter of arts*, might prove to be essential for per-

sonal growth.⁵ At large, drama workshops can provide the participants a new meaning-making environment.⁶

Facilitating personal growth

The workshop in this ongoing project is divided into three phases (see timeline and information in the fact box). In this article we will focus on our experiences and results from phase 1, which we initiated in 2018. The phase was based on the famous novel *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and the project was divided into two parallel offshoots: *workshops* and *producing the actual play*. The workshop part included 13 drama workshop sessions for the adolescents. The aim was to assess the effects on emotion processing and provide control-free space in a restricted environment, which in turn could facilitate personal growth.

We, the researchers, participated in the preliminary session, where we introduced ourselves and took part in low-threshold exercises (e.g. warming-up, contact, light improvisation). We did not participate in the workshops, as the study design in the first phase was individual interview study. We chose this approach to minimize the potential disturbance of the group dynamics, as the total



CRIME AND PUNISHMENT: The young participants were invited to read selected parts of the book, addressing themes such as guilt, crime, love, forgiveness, sacrifice and anger. In the end, the play was performed by professional actors. **FOTO:** Tuomo Manninen.

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amount of adults would have been too high compared to the amount of adolescents. We also wanted to give every youth a possibility to be heard, which might not always be the case in group interviews.

Eight adolescents participated voluntarily, six girls and two boys. We interviewed them three times: at the beginning, at the end, and six months after the workshop. In addition, we communicated with the artistic leaders regularly, and interviewed them twice. The artists also kept

a diary on the process, which they provided to us as an additional data source.

In parallel to adolescents' workshops, the play, directed by Johanna Freundlich, was produced. The play was acted by professional actors from TS who helped to put the play into practice; however, the manuscript was written during the workshop period and influenced by the adolescents' contributions. In addition, the final play soundscape included parts of the text narrated by the adolescents.

Crime and Punishment: Addressing potent themes

The first session began with low-threshold exercises, aimed for warming-up, building trust, and strengthening contact. Later, the artistic leaders provided more demanding tasks: reading the original text and translating it into street-wise language, practicing scenes from the actual play, role changing, and a brief introduction to theater sound tech.

Drama exercises were built around the themes from the classic novel. The participants were invited to read selected parts of the book, addressing themes like guilt, crime, love, forgiveness, sacrifice, and anger. Role-taking was used in exploring possibilities for reacting to different situations. All exercises were guided by common principles, such as the joy of playing together, positive feedback, and emphasis on everyone's individual strengths. In the beginning, the aim was to build self-confidence and trust in other participants as well as daring to express oneself. The participants performed both individually, in pairs and in larger groups. At the same time, the leaders worked consciously with practicing the skill of both giving and receiving feedback.

Opening up to the future

I decided to participate as I wanted to somehow challenge and overcome myself. I got new experiences and learned new things about myself. It is important that staff also see all the hidden talent that youths have. I learned more about myself (Anonymous adolescent)

Overall, the adolescents reported many positive outcomes from their participation in the workshop sessions. During the final interview, most of the participants had already left RS and were beginning their independent lives. At this point, all of them were somewhat optimistic about their future. Their plans included having a family, apartment, job etc. In addition, the motivation for study-



PROJECT TIMELINE

- **2017 project planning**, establishing co-operation between Finnish National Theatre, State Reform Schools, and the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare
- **2018 Phase 1:** *Crime and Punishment* workshop period in Vuorela RS. Focus on adolescents' experiences and emotion processing.
- **2020 Phase 2:** *East of Eden* workshop period in Sippola RS. Focus on staff experiences, and the possible effects to their professional growth.
- **2021 Phase 3:** Third workshop period in Sairila RS & gathering material (poems, letters, lyrics for rap songs and other texts) from RS adolescents for documentary theatre phase.
- **2022 Producing** a documentary theatre play.

– I decided to participate as I wanted to somehow challenge and overcome myself.



ing, as well as their attitude towards society at large, was more positive than before the workshop series. Practicing improvisational exercises together introduced new perspectives from both adolescents and staff, including indulgence, fooling around, and showing a side of one's personality that had previously been hidden. We also asked the adolescents about the overall satisfaction with their lives in all three interviews. Half of them reported positive development; for the other half, however, there was no change. Despite their challenging life situations, no one reported deterioration – which we consider an important finding.

Even though most of the adolescents had no prior experience with drama exercises, everyone considered the workshop a positive experience and recommended it to other RS adolescents. Moreover, during the process, the attitude towards theatre and culture at large grew more positive. Some adolescents even considered theatre work of some type as an occupational possibility. We labeled this process *opening up*.

Overcoming and challenging the negative self-image during the workshops made it possible for the participants to see themselves from a different viewpoint: as an active, capable adolescent with future potential, which challenged and changed the negative and problem-centered personal narrative. There were two crucial components facilitating this process, which emerged from most interviews: overcoming one's fear (e.g. regarding performing in front of others) and nurturing imagination.

Unexpected positive moments

An important outcome, stressed by the artistic leaders, was the importance of specific little moments that can have long-term positive consequences. This could be the joyful and unexpected feeling coming from crossing one's personal boundaries. The same could happen when the participant engaged in the workshop, despite his or her fear. Afterwards, while recalling the experience and realizing the overcoming of personal boundaries, he or she felt like a winner.

Another important finding was the positive power derived from working as a group. During the sessions, some of the participants acted as role models: when these adolescents first expressed themselves freely, it gave the others the courage and liberty to indulge as well. This positive group effect was mainly generated by the artistic leaders and their ability to motivate these key persons to interact. This allowed all participants to become surprised and fascinated by each other's hidden talents.

According to an RS staff member present in all workshop sessions, it was obvious that the workshops were not detached from daily life. The harmful events and personal crises present in the adolescents' everyday clearly affected his or her behavior during the drama exercises. The same adolescent could behave in totally different ways, depending on his or her mood. This was something that the leaders just had to accept. Despite this fluctuation, they underlined that every adolescent showed personal growth during the workshop process.

Every child has a right to shine

Adolescents in RS are often burdened with numerous stigmas that further add to their difficult life situation and negative self-image: Prostitute, thief, junkie, criminal, drug dealer, truant, gay, lesbian, or runaway. Despite these labels, every youth has a desire to shine, to show what he or she is capable of, and that as such, he or she is important. Art – and especially theatre – might provide young people from disadvantaged backgrounds an opportunity to find his or her capabilities and strengths.

NOTER

1. Venla Lehti, «Induced Abortions and Birth Outcomes of Women with a History of Severe Psychosocial Problems in Adolescence.»; Marko Manninen, «Adolescents in a Residential School for Behavior Disorders Have an Elevated Mortality Risk in Young Adulthood.»; Heli Talaslampi, «The Factors That Contribute Educational Outcomes of Adolescents Placed in Care Due to Severe Behavioral Problems.»; Marko Manninen, «Adult Criminality among Former Residential School Adolescents.»; Marko Manninen, «Severe Conduct Problems in Adolescence and Risk of Schizophrenia in Early Adulthood.»
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3. Paul Animbom Ngong, «Therapeutic Theatre: An Experience from a Mental Health Clinic in Yaoundé-Cameroon.»; Galia Moran & Uri Alon, «Playback Theatre and Recovery in Mental Health: Preliminary Evidence.»; Debra Salmon & Caroline Rickaby, «City of One: A Qualitative Study Examining the Participation of Young People in Care in a Theatre and Music Initiative.»; Kim Coleman & Heather Macintosh, «Art and Evidence: Balancing the Discussion on Arts- and Evidence-Based Practices with Traumatized Children.»; Larry Brewster, «The Impact of Prison Arts Programs on Inmate Attitudes and Behavior: A Quantitative Evaluation.»
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