

# Beating the Odds

The impact on young people of  
participation in the creative arts

Final Report, October 2018



## Beating the Odds

**First of all, we would like to thank you for your invaluable support of this project.** As detailed below, your generous funding of our work has enabled us to build a strong and sustainable foundation of work involving a large number of young people and a growing network of creative arts organisations.

### SUMMARY OF EMPIRICAL WORK

We are pleased to say that we have now successfully completed data collection and primary analyses on all strands of Beating the Odds (BtO), with dissemination well underway.

At the heart of our BtO research has been an exploration and examination of psychological factors underpinning the experiences of children and young people taking part in targeted out-of-school creative arts projects. We successfully partnered with the following creative arts organisations across a wide range of arts forms, including drama, music, dance, photography, crafts, and creative writing:

- Brighton Dome (Miss Represented)
- Thames Valley Partnership (Modelling Change)
- Turner Contemporary, Margate (Youth Navigators)
- Little Green Pig, Brighton
- Varndean School, Brighton (Transitions Project)
- Glyndebourne Youth Opera, Lewes

For our core analysis, we worked with well over 100 young people aged 9 to 21 years who were participating in creative arts with the above organisations, including in-depth interviews with 22 young people. We utilised a longitudinal, mixed-methods approach to our research so that we could gain rich insights into the process of change over time. Survey questions tapped into key processes regarding social relationships, self-perceptions, motivation, values, emotional experiences, and resilience/perseverance, while our in-depth qualitative longitudinal work has enabled us to access more deeply the experiences of the participants.

We were excited to have been able to complement this core body of BtO research with a number of additional strands of work that could help us understand better the psychological dimensions of young people's engagement with music and theatre – whether as creators, performers, or audiences. These included:

- A collaboration with Professor Ed Hughes (Head of Music at Sussex) on his project investigating **the use of technology to support ensemble work with primary school orchestras**, involving an adaptation and application of our BtO mixed-methods approach with 29 young musicians in an orchestra, as well as the conductor
- An extension of our work with the Education team at Glyndebourne to understand **the ways in which young people can be introduced to an unfamiliar arts form**, with surveys of school groups being taken to a live opera performance
- A successful trial of a **new approach to investigating psychological aspects of participation in the creative arts** in direct comparison with general experiences at home and at school, so we can quantify the added value of engagement in the creative arts.

Together, these strands of work have given rise to valuable new insights into the psychological dynamics of young people's participation in the creative arts. In turn, our commitment to working locally, nationally, and internationally has enabled us to share evidence-based good practice to a wide audience and thus extend the impact of the BtO work.

## KEY INSIGHTS FROM BEATING THE ODDS

After successfully completing data collection with **Miss Represented** and **Modelling Change**, we are pleased to say that an article based on our longitudinal qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with young women involved in these projects is currently in the final stages of preparation for journal submission. These two multi-disciplinary arts projects targeted young women (aged 12-20 years) on the margins of society, many of whom had experiences of homelessness and involvement in crime, and did not attend school regularly due to school exclusion or school dropout. Our analysis of one-to-one interviews with eight young women (aged 14 to 19 years) at multiple time-points provided rich insights into the unique space for growth and change that involvement in these creative arts projects afforded them. In particular, the young women described the arts projects as safe spaces where they could be themselves and where uniquely supportive relationships with practitioners and other young women could be formed. In addition, the young women described a youth-led art process which encouraged them to engage in their own creative investigations and self-expression by supporting their freedom and autonomy, whilst providing opportunities for achievement experiences. This nurturing, accepting, and empowering female-only environment gave rise to new perspectives on themselves and others, leading ultimately to behaviour change and differently imagined futures. This work has significantly added to the preliminary insights gained from our previous qualitative work on school-excluded young people who participated in a theatre project, which was published last year.<sup>1</sup>

We are also in the process of integrating the insights from the surveys and interviews with young people involved in the other projects. Questionnaire responses and interviews with 9- to 15-year-olds involved in **Little Green Pig**, **Varndean School's Transitions** project, and **Turner Contemporary's Youth Navigators** initiative have been analysed and reveal positive effects in terms of improved well-being, sense of mastery/competence, and experiences of

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<sup>1</sup> Hanrahan, F., & Banerjee, R. (2017). [“It makes me feel alive”: The socio-motivational impact of drama and theatre on marginalised young people](#). *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 22, 35-49.

being supported by creative practitioners. Our extensive work with **Glyndebourne Youth Opera** also revealed a fascinating pattern of individual differences that exist within the overall positive picture of young people's engagement in the creative arts. Both the survey and interview data reveal that how young people *approach* the creative arts – such as their goal orientation (e.g., focusing on task mastery rather than merely trying to avoid negative performance evaluations) and type of self-regulation (e.g., creative behaviours being motivated by intrinsic enjoyment rather than by external pressure) – significantly predict outcomes such as how much the young people improve in self-worth and life satisfaction. In a similar way, the extent to which the creative arts nurture basic needs for relatedness (sense of belonging and connection with others) is an important predictor of just how much the young people increase in their experience of positive emotions.

These kinds of insights were apparent across a wide age range, including the 49 young people aged 13-19 who were in the chorus or orchestra of Glyndebourne's nationally-acclaimed production of *Nothing*, as well as the 30 younger children aged 10-14 who took part in a shorter but highly creative outdoor performance of *A Garden Dream* in and around the Glyndebourne gardens during the Festival. Interestingly, our work with the Education team's outreach programme to introduce opera to new audiences revealed that even among younger children (a total of 123 pupils aged 8-11 years), the response to watching live artistic work is highly affected by intrinsic enjoyment, as well as greater understanding of the artwork itself. We were also able to show that conducting creative workshops within schools prior to experiencing the performance led to greater levels of enjoyment, understanding, and feelings of being inspired.

The collaboration on Professor Ed Hughes's AHRC-funded **networking technologies** project has also been a huge success, recently culminating in the acceptance for publication of a research paper in *International Journal of Music Education* (currently in press<sup>2</sup>). In this paper we report on research

<sup>2</sup> Hanrahan, F., Hughes, E., Banerjee, R., Eldridge, A., & Kiefer, C. (in press). Psychological benefits of networking technologies in children's experience of ensemble music making. *International Journal of Music Education*.

which tapped directly into the children's experiences of orchestral playing – including their enjoyment, barriers to taking part, sense of belonging and the perceived helpfulness of the technology (networked tablets using traditional music notation) – using specially devised surveys which the children (aged 8-11) completed at several time-points during a school year. Furthermore, in order to capture the rich experiences of the children, a focus group with a sub-sample of 8 children was conducted, together with an interview with the school orchestra conductor to gain her insights into the benefits of the technology. Our analysis of the resulting data suggested that the introduced technology helped to reduce the practical problems associated with ensemble playing for early stage musicians. This reduction in barriers to engagement in ensemble playing appeared in turn to interrupt the downward spiral of frustration and lack of confidence in playing for some young people, and enhanced the likelihood of feelings of enjoyment, belonging and social engagement.

Finally, we have completed a very successful trial of a new survey-based approach to quantifying the psychological experiences of participating in creative arts programmes, relative to experiences at home and at school. This work was the direct consequence of a workshop on BtO that brought creative professionals and researchers together at the University of Sussex to identify key directions for taking our research forward. Working again with participants in **Miss Represented** as well as a new sample of 49 disadvantaged teenagers at **Company Three** (a youth theatre company based in Islington), we were able to demonstrate quantitatively that: a) satisfaction of young people's basic psychological needs was significantly higher in the creative arts workshops than at home or at school; and b) satisfaction of young people's basic psychological needs in the creative arts workshops significantly predicted higher levels of well-being, over and above their experiences at home or at school. This provides a very promising foundation for new work to understand the added value of engaging in the creative arts.

## OUR FUTURE CITY + LOCAL IMPACT

The BtO project enabled us to develop a solid foundation for linking up with **Our Future City** (which aims to increase creativity and improve well-being by increasing access to the arts across Brighton & Hove). In fact, some of the young people involved in Our Future City initiatives (e.g., the Varndean School 'Transitions' group) were a focal part of the BtO project. As a direct consequence of this, BtO research made a key contribution to the #BeWell focus of Our Future City.<sup>3</sup>

We are delighted to report that we have now formally established a partnership with Our Future City for the next three years. This will be rooted in a **jointly-funded PhD studentship investigating more directly the specific processes that give rise to the effects of participation in the creative arts** that we observed in BtO. This will involve direct and detailed observation of exactly how creative practitioners work with young people, to extend and build upon the survey and interview techniques we established in BtO. We have successfully recruited to this position, and the PhD researcher started working on this project in October 2018. We are excited to expand our team and nurture new research talent, while continuing to build greater understanding of the role of creative arts in young people's lives.

We also continue to work effectively with **Brighton & Hove City Council** as they seek to promote emotional health and well-being for young people across schools and communities in our city. The Council has contributed funding to support a parallel programme of research to evaluate family support for young people at risk, and mental health support for young people in secondary schools. This has revealed the transferability of insights from the creative arts (particularly the importance of autonomous self-expression and patterns of supportive nurture from professionals) to other areas of work with vulnerable young people. More broadly, our research lab on Children's Relationships, Emotions, and Social Skills (CRESS) is now involved in an exciting programme of **consultancy work with the Welsh Government to support the**

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<sup>3</sup> Visit the [Our Future City website](#) and [watch the #BeWell video](#)

**development of the new national curriculum**, which includes Expressive Arts and Health & Well-being as two of the six core Areas of Learning and Experience.

## SHARING THE RESEARCH

An essential part of this project continues to be the dissemination of findings using multiple formats. The dissemination and practice-sharing event in December 2016 at the Attenborough Centre for the Creative Arts at Sussex, was hugely successful, and afforded a truly engaging way of sharing the emerging learning and knowledge from our research to a far-reaching audience of academics, practitioners and policy makers.

In order to add to scientific knowledge in this emerging area of research, we are keen to publish findings from our research activities in peer-reviewed journals. As noted above, we have already made forays in this regard with one paper already accepted for publication by *International Journal of Music Education*. The paper entitled “Psychological benefits of networking technologies in children’s experience of ensemble music making” reports on research activities from the collaboration on Professor Ed Hughes’s Networking Technologies project. Furthermore, we are currently about to submit a paper which reports on our findings from the analysis of interviews with young women involved in **Miss Represented** and **Modelling Change**, and plan to move onto publication of work with Glyndebourne and the other creative arts projects after that.

We will also be continuing to share findings from this research at conferences. We have already presented BtO research at events in the arts sector (e.g., events organised by Artswork), as well as national conferences on psychology (e.g., the British Psychological Society annual conference on developmental psychology). In addition, in November 2017, Robin Banerjee gave a very well-received keynote presentation at the annual meeting of the European Network for Opera, Music, and Dance Education in Dusseldorf, in which the BtO work was a major focus. We plan to extend the reach of this work by

presenting to joint audiences of practitioners and interdisciplinary researchers such as the Annual Conference of Youth Studies, BERA (British Educational Research Association) Annual Conference, or the iJADE (International Journal of Art and Design Education) Conference in the years ahead.

Our work in this area continues to be a prominent part of two major interdisciplinary research centres at the University of Sussex, namely the Centre for Research in Childhood and Youth and the Centre for Research on Creative and Performing Arts, and we retain a close working relationship with the vibrant Attenborough Centre for Creative Arts.

Once again, we would like to express our grateful appreciation to you for helping us to launch and develop this exciting programme of work. We look forward to staying in touch with you as we continue to grow our research in this important area locally and further afield.

**Professor Robin Banerjee and Dr Fidelma Hanrahan**

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