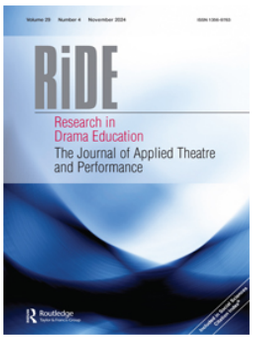

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"It really connects all participants" example of a playbuilding process through youth theatre-based competition in Iceland

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to shed light on how participation in *Skrekkur (stage fright) can* affect young people's well-being and self-esteem. Through a playbuilding process, young people gain the opportunity to perform seven minutes of on-stage production, in *Skrekkur, (English: stage fright)*, a youth theatre-based competition, for lower secondary schools in Reykjavík, Iceland. The research is grounded in the qualitative tradition, classified as a case study. The findings reveal that the participants saw the project as an empowering aspect of their studies, and it boosted the students' self-esteem and increased their well-being.

KEYWORDS
Arts education; playbuilding process; youth theatre; well-being; self-esteem

Short narrative of observation of performance of *Skrekkur (stage fright)* at the City Theatre

The narrative is built on observation from the researchers to give the reader a flavour of the actual performance of Skrekkur, theatre-based competition at the City Theatre.

> The group we followed is made up of eight students as well as two technicians. They had created their performance themselves and they had won the qualifier for *Skrekkur* in their schools. The qualifier was an idea competition, open to all students at the school to find out who should be the school's representative at *Skrekkur*. The performance was chosen by all the students at their school. Our group members have known each other since they started school. They have always kept the group together and are very good friends. Their performance, called "**You are not alone",** discusses the importance of having a supportive family and friends when coming out of the closet as a gay person. They had written the song and dance for the performance themselves and they sang and danced on stage. The performance begins with one person standing front stage and you see two families talking about being gay, being different, being genderfluid. Next, one of the performers says, "Lucky me to have a family who understands me". Then two dancers come on stage and perform a heart-warming dance about being different with the sub-play from the song "The Village" by Wrabel. They finish with an original written song called: "Hey I gay and that's ok". Backstage at the City Theatre the atmosphere is crazy. There are pizza boxes all over the place and a strong hairspray scent in the air. About 200 young people sing loudly to powerful music. It is not possible to see that these are many schools. Could be one big school where everyone is friends. Our group is the sixth on the stage out of eight groups. The green room has large TV screens all around that show what is happening on stage. Every time a group has finished and returns to the green room, they are applauded. When

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> the call comes to go on stage, we are led down several floors to the main floor where the big stage is. Once there, students are given an explanation as to what is going to happen. They must be completely silent and must not go beyond a certain frame taped onto the floor backstage. When we enter, one group is waiting and another is on stage. There is a complete silence backdrop and everyone is very focused. It is dark and we can hardly see what is happening on stage. In the theatre you can see student representatives from all the schools participating that evening. The excitement is very great. When it is our group's turn, they are quick to get on stage and signal that they are ready. The scene went very well and they were very happy. However, they are not allowed to go upstairs but have to wait again backstage. Then all eight groups are called to the stage and all the students sit on the floor facing the audience. Now two schools will be chosen to take part in the main competition and the excitement is high. "The schools that make it to the finals are … " Yes, our school was chosen to perform again at the final show a few days later. After the performances all the students and their teachers gather outside the City Theatre where the buses are waiting for students. Everywhere young people are laughing and singing and I have the feeling that everyone is a winner. (Field note 1. 05.11.19)

Introduction

As this article focuses on a youth theatre-based competition set in lower secondary schools in Iceland, a short overview of the curriculum guide in compulsory education, in Iceland, will be given. The National Curriculum Guide in Iceland is based on six fundamental pillars intended as recommended standards for general education and practices in the compulsory school. The fundamental pillars are *literacy in the widest sense*, *education towards sustainability*, *health and welfare*, *democracy and human rights*, *equality* and *creativity*. These principles appear in provisions regarding the content of subjects and subject areas, the students' competence, study assessment, the school curriculum guide and the internal evaluation of schools. All the fundamental pillars emphasize critical thought, reflection, scientific attitudes and democratic values. The curriculum highlights creativity as being one of the fundamental pillars and a central concern of education in Iceland. Creativity, according to the national curriculum, involves shaping the subject matter, designing in a different way, or creating something new. Through creativity, students can discover and enjoy, and creativity can also stimulate curiosity and imagination (The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2014). Creativity is based on inquisitiveness, challenge, excitement and exploration. Grappling with the subject matter and its solution can, in and of itself, be the reward of creativity. Creativity goes against the grain, undermines traditional patterns, rules and structures, and offers new perspectives on phenomena and accepted beliefs (The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2014). Each compulsory school decides whether the arts subjects are taught separately or integrated in separate short-term courses allocated more hours in the timetable during certain periods or continuously throughout the school year (Österlind, Østern, and Thorkelsdóttir 2016). The reference timetable (from the Ministry) stipulates that drama, dance, visual arts and music should be taught at every age level (The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2014). Through drama and theatre, students can learn to interact with one another in a safe space in drama, dance and music and try out different societal roles. The term 'youth theatre' describes a wide variety of organizations that engage young people in theatre-related activities in their own time (Hughes and Wilson 2004). This usually takes place outside of formal education and is founded on the voluntary

participation of young people where they take part in a range of activities within youth theatre. However, in Iceland the youth theatre is set in a formal education and is sometimes part of the timetable in compulsory education. The activities include devising and performing theatre productions with peers; creative, skills or issue-based workshops preparing participants for the personal and social challenges implicit in the art of presenting theatre as a meaning-making process. Youth experience how their choices and actions can affect themselves and others and ultimately shape outcomes, such as the creative process, group dialogues and performance products. In other words, the collaborative and interactive nature of theatre works to construct and perform relationships between self, others and society. According to Lazarus (2015), theatre education, both in formal and non-formal educational contexts, provides youth with myriad benefits, and can positively contribute to student success. It is in this environment that *Skrekkur (stage fright),* a youth theatre-based competition, takes place.

Making sense of arts education

In Iceland like in many other countries young people spend much of their time using the Internet and social media and communication is declining. The educational task is demanding. Lazarus (2015) believes that for young people, performance, as part of arts education, can be an opportunity to be someone else and young people use this opportunity to explore, practise, experiment with and extend their awareness of self and the world around them. The term 'arts education' is used in professional discourse. However, according to Keuchel (2016), there is no firmly established definition of what the field of arts education comprises specifically. The question is when do we refer to something as art and when do we not? In that sense, arts education is fundamental to our understanding of the world we live in and the societies we belong to. Advocates for the importance of arts education consider it a unique field of knowledge with its own theoretical constructions. They see the arts as being a universal human language (Schonman 2016, 22). When education takes place in a social context arts education is often said to be a means of developing critical and creative thinking and behavioural and social skills. Ellen Winner, Thalia R. Goldstein and Stéphan Vincent-Lancrin conclude in Art for Art's Sake? The impact of Arts Education

> / … / that arts education can strengthen students' academic motivation and enhance performance in non-arts subjects such as reading and writing, mathematics and science (Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lancrin 2013, 251).

Biesta (2018) believes that art is not merely an exploration of what it means to be in dialogue with 'the world' or in dialogue with 'the other'. Biesta describes the power of art in educational work as follows:

> Art makes our desires visible, gives them form, and by trying to come into dialogue with what or who offers resistance, we are at the very same time engaged in the exploration of the desirability of our desires and in their rearrangement and transformation (Biesta 2018, 18).

Through the arts, ideas can be transformed into reality, co-operation changes its participants in such a way that reality is doubted and reconsidered. Thus, social change can occur through the medium of art (Anderson 2012; Neelands 2015; Thorkelsdóttir 2018).

In the UNESCO's *Framework for Culture and Arts Education* (UNESCO 2024), the following is stated:

> // **…** the culture and the arts play a vital role in the flourishing of human imagination, creativity and self-expression, which nurtures exploration, curiosity, and expands the possibilities of creation, while opening up social and economic prospects for all learners, particularly in the cultural and creative industries (UNESCO 2024).

The framework aims to ensure access to culture and arts education of quality for learners, ranging from limited infrastructure and resources to vulnerability and exclusion irrespective of race, colour, descent, gender, age, language, religion, political opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, economic or social condition of birth, disability or any other grounds promote the role of arts education in meeting the need for creativity and cultural awareness, and places emphasis on the different strategies required to introduce arts education in the learning environment (UNESCO 2024). The arts, at their best, Abbs (2003) claims in *Against the Flow: Education, the Arts and Postmodern Culture,* deepen and refine our sense of what it means to be alive. The arts matter:

> / … / because they serve at their best the deep human impulse to understand, to integrate and to transcend; they serve life's ineradicable desire to live more fully, more abundantly. I have always felt that art and, especially, the making of art enables individuals to ratchet up their ephemeral lives to the level of high symbolic adventure and philosophical questing. (67)

The arts make a strong claim to be part of education. Through the arts, the students can construct new knowledge and deepen their human impulses and experience that can affect their well-being and self- esteem.

The importance of the arts subject

For the purpose of this article, we want to emphasise the important of the arts in the compulsory education in Iceland, as the research focus on youth theatre-based competition set in lower secondary schools in Iceland called *Skrekkur*. The arts in the Icelandic curriculum are divided into performing arts (dance and drama), visual arts and music. Therefore this article will explore what can be learned through drama as the competition is a short seven-minute scene. The article will also look at dancing as the art of the body by focusing on young people's movement in the competition. And to understand how music is used in the competition, we will be using Guðmundsdóttir's idea of 'social processes' to illustrate the processes that are at work in the competition.

Thorkelsdóttir (2016) believes that through drama students develop their emotions through empathy and self-control. They build up their self-confidence and creativity and boost their powers of expression, as well as improving their social and co-operative skills. She says that the uniqueness of drama consists in the fact that she works equally with intelligence, creativity and physical prowess. In this way, it is transformative and can strengthen the social and emotional aspect of students' lives (Thorkelsdóttir 2016). Through drama the students can learn to interact with one another in a safe space, try out different social roles and through role-playing they have the opportunity to explore aspects of what it means to be human (Thorkelsdóttir 2018). Cahill (2020) points out that since drama requires a lot of cooperation, it can have a strong impact

on students' social and emotional skills which, in turn, has a positive influence on their well-being. She (2020) further states that students also build social skills as they are given the opportunity to get to know themselves better by putting themselves in different situations, encouraging empathy and a better understanding of their environment.

Ofer (2015) beliefs that dancing is the art of the body where motion is the language of expression and communication. In addition, dancing can be a powerful catalyst of spontaneous expression, both at individual and social level. Fels (2009) argues that ' … in arts education, it is understood that embodied learning opens the possibility for new ways of understanding and engagement' (127). She also describes the complexity of embodied learning as:

> Embodied within my own understanding of complexity in education and performative inquiry is the interplay of breath, presence, and absence within the intimacy of relationship, time, engagement, inquiry, language, and location. (140)

Brown (2015) agrees with Fels and sees dancing as a source of mental training through the body and by working with symbolic images. Guðmundsdóttir (2010) points out the importance of music education in and demonstrates that for example, infants become aware of social processes through music, even before they are capable of verbal communication. She also points out the importance of music under a variety of circumstances where music unites people in a social context.

In (2017) Leyre Zarobe and Hilary Bungay looked at the impact of art on the resilience and well-being of 11–18-year-old students in the UK, Australia and Canada. Their findings showed that students who participated experienced more confidence and self-esteem. They felt they were taken seriously as adults who were listened to, and they felt they had overcome challenges and had a purpose. At the same time, they had an easier time communicating and connecting with others in the group. To explore the importance of arts education in relation to Skrekkur, we will be using the above ideas from contemporary debates in arts education to explore the dynamics of the competition, seeing where it does and does not correspond to the optimistic accounts of the use of arts in education in this literature.

Contextual background

The education policy of Reykjavík city, the capital of Iceland, lays the foundations for progressive work in schools and leisure centres, anchored in the strengths of Icelandic society. At the same time, the policy seeks to meet the challenges of the external world by looking into constructive responses to the jeopardies faced by many young people characterised by rapid societal and technological changes that transform children's educational upbringing as well as traditional ideas of learning (Thorkelsdóttir and Ólafsdóttir 2022). The mission is that every child should be an active participant. The policy is based on the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children's education should aim to develop their character, skills, and physical and mental abilities, for the purpose of preparing children to lead responsible lives in a free society in the spirit of understanding, peace, mutual respect, human rights, and friendship. The rationale for this study is that Reykjavík Municipality invites

lower secondary schools in Reykjavík, years 8–10 (13–15 years old) to participate in a youth theatre-based competition called *Skrekkur*, established by the City of Reykjavík which encourages students in every lower secondary school of the city to take part in such a theatre-based competition. The competition, *Skrekkur,* was first held in 1991 and the finals now take place at the City Theatre in Reykjavík in November each year where students from about 25 schools take part. All the lower secondary schools in Reykjavík can take part; they only need to sign up. The aim of the competition is to give young people in The City of Reykjavík's lower secondary schools the opportunity to take part in leisure activities, emphasizing active participation, playbuilding processes and human rights through activities in and through the arts. Participants are invited to engage as creators, decision-makers and leaders. Youth experience how their choices and actions can affect themselves and others and ultimately shape outcomes, such as the creative process, group dialogues and performance products (Cahill 2020). In other words, the collaborative and interactive nature of the theatre helps to construct and perform relationships between self, others and society. Hence, this article aims to answer the following question: How does participation in *Skrekkur (stage fright)* affect young people's well-being and students' self-esteem?

Description of the project

Skrekkur, a youth theatre talent competition established by the City of Reykjavík, encourages students in every lower secondary school in the city to take part in a youth theatre-based competition. The competition is prepared by the City of Reykjavík which invites the compulsory school of Reykjavík to take part. The activities include devising and performing theatre productions with peers as well as creative, skills or issue-based workshops preparing participants for the personal and social challenges implicit in the art of presenting theatre as a meaning-making process. Only 35 students from each school can apply for taking part in *Skrekkur* where they develop and create a project of no more than seven minutes on stage, developed from an idea of a play/project using drama, dance and music. Some schools have a qualifier, an idea competition in their school, whereas others have a system where students can choose *Skrekkur* as an elective subject. Usually, the students begin working on ideas and rehearsing in August, when the school year starts, to be ready for the competition in November. The students have total freedom as to what to do and how to do it. They are required to do all the work themselves and before entering the City Theatre stage the act has to be accepted by the *Skrekkur's* committee, which includes leisure study employees of the City of Reykjavík. The competition has been so arranged that all Reykjavík lower secondary schools, taking part in *Skrekkur,* compete on three semi-final nights at the City Theatre where two schools are singled out every night by a special jury. The jury consists of people who represent all the art forms such as performing artist, director, musician as well as a representative of Reykjavík Municipality. The competition reaches its peak on the fourth night when seven schools compete for the finals as well as one extra school, picked out from all the semi-finals. Since 2012, the jury has also chosen one additional performance in the finals, after the semi-finals. The Icelandic National Broadcasting Service, RUV offers live broadcasts from the competition on TV all four nights.

Methodology

The research is grounded in the qualitative tradition, classified as a case study. The qualitative research tradition involves the collection of data relating to the experiences and background of those under examination and, subsequently, the analysis and interpretation of the data (Davíðsdóttir 2003; Lichtman 2013). Qualitative data is based on interviews through focus group and researchers' observation. Observation is a method for understanding how individuals construct their reality, how they act in their own setting, how they use their space, how they interact with one another, and how particular social settings are constructed (Mulhall 2002). Observation involves a systematic description of events, behaviours, and artifacts in the social setting of the study (Savin-Baden and Major 2013). This research concentrates on one particular case; that is, *Skrekkur* a youth theatre-based competition, under the auspices of Reykjavík lower secondary schools where the main emphasis is on the students' perspective and perception of their participation in the competition.

At the first meeting of Reykjavík Municipality about *Skrekkur*, in August 2019, all the schools, that took part in *Skrekkur,* were asked to be part of the research. The participants in the research were youths from five lower secondary schools, aged 13–15, who had signed up for *Skrekkur,* the youth theatre-based competition in autumn 2019. The participants were chosen from a demographic point of view, with race, gender, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status in mind. The data for the research was gathered through researchers' observation and interviews. A total of eight focus group interviews were conducted with the students (total of 40 students, eight to twelve students in each group), who performed together, from August to mid-November, and two observations of the performance took place, both in the City Theatre, in the middle of the project and on the final night. The focus group questions were, for example: *Why did you decide to participate in Skrekkur? How was the preparation? etc.* All participants were involved in the research from the beginning to the end. In this research, open or deep interviewing technique was used where the interviews involve a process, or flow, between researchers and participants (Lichtman 2013). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim where participant and school names were altered and personal characteristics erased (Lichtman 2013). For convenience, each school received its own letter from A to E and each student was marked with a number from one to twelve, according to the number of students in each focus group. The research data focused on gathering stories supported by performance observation and interviews. After each visit we wrote extended field notes about our observations. At the end we sum up the description of the practices and the practitioner from the viewpoint of observations.

The analytic approach is guided by some principles of field studies. All data was analysed by open coding and repeatedly read in search of patterns and themes. Data analysis was based on induction, a process during which the examiner forms expectations of potential results. Thus he/she reads and analyses the data acquired, revealing patterns or themes on which conclusions are based and presented as results (Lichtman 2013). The main method by which we have analysed the material is interpretative. We searched for meaning and understanding and moved between the various parts and the whole to develop an understanding of the perspectives of the participants. A description of how the students express their engagement were made by using keyword analysis and searched for a word that had a meaning in the larger context: for example, *building a*

self-esteem, solidarity. For the analysis of the observation, we saw a clear process of *play-building* and *cooperation among the students*. The idea is that in order to understand what the participants say it is important to look at words they use to communicate (Savin-Baden and Major 2013).

Based on observations of the performances, combined with an analysis of a focus group interview a thick description was written of the performance with an audience. A thick description is a method by which to present examples from data by giving detailed accounts of field experiences in which the researcher presents patterns of cultural and social relationships and places them in context (Holloway 1997).

Ethical dilemmas

Since the research involved minors, permission was sought from Reykjavík Municipality Department of Recreation and Youth (2014). Information was also submitted to the University of Iceland Science Ethics Committee (2014) for its consideration and comment; the committee made no criticism of the project. In addition, an introductory letter was sent to the parents of participating youths where their consent was requested regarding their children's participation in the research.

The researcher's position

The researcher's position as a drama teacher and teacher educator has given us the opportunity to be insiders in our own research, and this influences the ways we perceive and understand the phenomena under study. We have both been facilitators in *Skrekkur* for many years and we understand the process. Robert K. Merton's definition of insider and outsider positions is helpful to understand our position in this research: 'Insiders are members of specified groups of collectivities or occupants of specified social statuses; outsiders are the non- members' (Merton 1971, 21). However, growing aware of our insider/outsider position as well as of our prejudices and becoming conscious of our roles, all helped us to be mindful of that influence. We have been truthful by writing only what we have observed, and transparent in reporting our findings; what was being investigated, who was involved, and how it was done, but at the same time we maintained the anonymity of the participants. Tone Kvernbekk (2001, 159) writes about the necessity to 'see with theory', because perception is theory loaded. Her argument is focused on the importance of flipping between insider experienced knowledge and an outsider view informed by theory. Kvernbekk interprets the hypothesis as an understanding that the observer does not passively register what is going on. The observer is an active interpreter, and, most importantly, the observer draws conclusions regarding 'invisible' relations, about connections and causal relations. Because our research is set in our own community, we are in a significant sense also an outsider by virtue of entering that community as a researcher. By presenting our position openly, we enable our readers to criticize it and evaluate its influence.

Limitation of the study

Due to the small population of Iceland and since only 25 schools participated in the competition in Reykjavík, we did not have as many schools to choose from as we would have

wished in order to have more variety in the types of schools from a demographic point of view. We also thought about race, gender, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status. By choosing the five schools, however, we believe we were able to reflect the diversity of schools that participated in *Skrekkur*. This also calls for a longer study, assessed from a multitude of angles over a number of years, with all consenting groups/participants involved to obtain a more objective response.

Findings

Here the main findings of the research will be described, supported by citations from the interviews. Two headings were established as being illustrative of the nature of the data; that is, *building self-esteem and cooperation*. The students were given time and space to compose and set up the work. At the end, we sum of the observation field note by making short narrative constructions from observers' field notes as we think it is important to obtain research perspectives on the performance at the City Theatre.

Building self - esteem

The interviews indicated that students experienced strengthened social connections by closer and more personal relationships with their peers. They were*, inter alia,* less shy of having conversations with their peers in the school corridors, as well as having developed the confidence to air their views in the *Skrekkur* group and explain how they felt. They became acquainted in a different and closer way than in classes where the 'traditional' academic subjects are taught. One of the participants talked about how joyful it was to take part in the project and to make friends with fellow students as he said:

> // … this is real fun and you get to know the kids you used to meet every day but yet they were strangers to you. (SDS5)

They described their perceptions and experiences of *Skrekkur* as an empowering aspect of their studies, where participation was positive and constructive through social connections. The students also agreed that this experience had left them with valuable long-term memories. One of the students described this as follows:

> Those are indeed all the years we are going to remember. Everyone is supportive and helpful – and they don't just think of themselves but also of others. (SDS2)

Another participant also spoke of the strong solidarity between participating schools, describing a positive atmosphere and a team spirit. In a group interview with the youths, they said they felt much joy, solidarity and empathy, adding that close relationships within the group played a major role in their *Skrekkur* participation – in order to succeed in their work, everyone had to co-operate constructively towards a shared goal as one of the participants put it:

> I took part last year and I thought it was a lot of fun. I became closer to all the kids and it was so much fun being together, seeing how talented everyone was, and trying out various ways of finalising the whole thing. (SBS5)

The students also described their emotional solidarity which rendered it easier for them to express their feelings and they could test new ideas without being judged.

> Everyone is just strengthening each other and sticking with each other. And you don't just think about yourself, but also about others. (SEE7)

Another student adds:

> Yes, they are all like that together. I also remember when school C was showing, [at the City Theatre] everyone was doing this while everyone with us was doing this. Everyone was in it together. It really connects everyone. (SES4)

It can be said that solidarity extends beyond the *Skrekkur* group itself and to everyone who competes on the final night at the City Theatre, which shows how rewarding, positive and constructive the atmosphere is. They were less fearful of making mistakes and exchanging opinions about different ideas because if some people felt stressed, there was always someone who came to them, embraced them and encouraged them to go on: That is how one of the participants described it:

> // … We have all cried together, laughed together and been angry and irritated together – everyone has experienced those things. (SES2)

One student put it this way: 'We form a kind of a *Skrekkur* family which builds up a lot of confidence.' And another participant adds: ' … I am a very introverted person, but the *Skrekkur* tasks helped me to talk more and tell everyone how I felt … 'The students learned to trust one another through the work process; this strengthened their co-operation and built-up positive attitudes to the tasks, to themselves and, last but not least, to one another. By means of solidarity and positive attitudes, the students attained their shared goal by doing the best they could and overcoming obstacles, each one in his own way.

The pride of participation at the City Theatre shines through. Students reap what they see and realize that the work they put in, both as individuals and as a group, pays off in their joint creation:

> Just, this is incredibly meaningful and it's just like that, if you can do this you can do so much more / … / Yes, also just see what we can do as a group if we gather then we can do something which we are proud of. (sEn4)

In interviews, students stated that participation in *Skrekkur* strengthened their self-confidence and self-esteem. One of them said:

> In a way, you keep developing your self-confidence and kind of self-esteem and this does help. When you are on the stage you are incredibly stressed and when it is over you are really pleased with yourself and you think: This was supposed to be a very good scene, and, hey, it was! Indeed, it was quite a fantastic performance. (SAS4)

Participation in *Skrekkur* developed trust and empathy among the students which can positively impact their self-assurance and self-esteem. Thus, mutual trust can be one of the preconditions for well-being and self-esteem. Participation in *Skrekkur* supported the students in various ways as this gave them opportunities to compare themselves with their peers and their self-esteem and self-assurance was built up as a result.

Cooperation

It varies how the ideas for a *Skrekkur* drama scene are processed. In one school, students formed different groups based on their interests and ideas and rehearsed their scene for a

certain period. When this was over all the drama scenes were presented and the best scene chosen, with a teacher and even an external person, often a former *Skrekkur* member, selecting the best idea. Then this idea was configured in more detail by the whole group and finally found its way to the stage of the City Theatre. Other schools emphasised working with the entire group from the beginning where various ideas were at first suggested and discussed relating to the content of a drama scene. The students then developed various improvisations around those ideas and showed the result to their peers. The outcomes of the improvisations were subsequently discussed and evaluated. After this processing of ideas and improvisations the students chose the best idea which was developed in more detail and rehearsed for the competition. The solution of some other schools, if a number of good ideas coexisted, was to try to identify a motif shared by a number of ideas which were then merged into one drama scene to be further developed and rehearsed.

The student interviews, however, clearly indicated how much of a learning experience they considered working with another large group where democratic values are a guiding light. Focus group interviews revealed that the students experienced an intervention in their own studies, resulting in an exchange of opinions and the drama scenes prepared by the groups were thoroughly discussed. One student said:

> We talk a lot about how we want this or that drama scene to turn out; we bring up ideas and finally we make our choices. (SCS1)

There was clearly a strong emphasis on co-operation and discussion in the *Skrekkur* groups and the participants considered it highly important to pay attention to different opinions and to learn to listen respectfully to one another before deciding on the content and presentation of a drama scene. They also made the point that everyone had to be calm, as one of them said:

> This takes time and you have to be able to, when you have your own opinions and you want to express them, you have the right to do this, but then when someone disagrees, we have to tackle this and then everyone has to be calm, for this takes time. The main thing was that everyone could express his or her own opinions and ideas and then we could add and cut accordingly. (SES3)

The students often mentioned the joy, so typical of the *Skrekkur* operation, where everyone was working towards the same goal. The students also felt proud of the responsibility which accompanied being their own managers who compile their own drama scene and must therefore stand or fall on the merits of their own actions and decisions throughout the entire working process, or as one student put it:

> This is really a lot of fun. This kind of group empowerment and co-operation is fabulous fun! And it is also fun to present an idea and see it brought to life. (SAS3)

Student 4 in school A adds: 'And we thought of something that mattered to us and just created ideas based on it.'

Another student adds:

> Yes, we split into groups and we were kind of brainstorming what ideas we wanted to do. Then just one idea came along and then we were just developing it. (N2SA)

They felt that this kind of democratic working process, based on active contribution and respect, among other things, where different individuals form relationships and learn from one another, was generally spontaneous and normal, or as one of them said:

> It was considered very important that each and every one presented his opinions and ideas and then we could build on this or cut out parts and so on and so forth. (SES3)

Another student added:

> Yes, we were divided into groups and then we started brainstorming what we wanted to do. Then we hit on an idea which we started developing further. (SES6)

As already indicated, the work process is characterised by a great deal of cooperation and respect on the basis of equality where all voices are listened to and the students must finally arrive at a joint conclusion, although this may take time and test your patience, as pointed out in the various student contributions above.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the key findings that emerge from the case study data relating to the research question: *How can a project such as Skrekkur, a youth theatre-based competition, for lower secondary schools in Reykjavík, affect the well-being and self-esteem of young people?* The focus is on the students' experiences in *Skrekkur*, through focus group interviews and observations of the performances. The conclusions show that participants in *Skrekkur* saw the project as an empowering aspect of their studies by means of participation in social relationships which were both positive and character building. By working together and creating together they learn to cooperate and listen to each other which, in turn, has a positive impact on their well-being (Cahill 2020). With their participation in *Skrekkur,* the students realised how to get to know their peers, across year classes, and in a closer and more personal manner where precious memories and even new friendships were initiated. They also discovered easier and more relaxed associations in the school corridors. By participating, their self-esteem increased, and that had an impact on their well-being. Neelands (2015) and Anderson (2015) point out that the arts can have a wide-ranging appeal in transforming people's lives and the society they live in. Rannveig Björk Thorkelsdóttir (2016; 2018) adds that drama students mature their emotions by means of empathy and self-control, thus improving their social and cooperative skills. In Hughes and Wilson's (2004) research, the young people report that taking part in youth theatre develops their sense of self- identity and a range of other internal and external capacities and resources. Youth theatre is a non-institutionalized space, outside of school and home, where young people can build networks of support with peers and adults (Hughes and Wilson 2004). A project such as *Skrekkur* presents young people with pathways that involve creativity, uncertainty and risk-taking but also a safe space to practise taking the risks and responsibilities associated with adulthood and test out different ways of being yourself and responding to others (Guðmundsdóttir 2010).

As a result, the students are more willing to listen and encourage one another, for example in the processing of ideas and task implementation. Most respondents made

the point that it had been a positive experience and easier than they expected to present their ideas to the group as well as listening to other people's ideas, where they were able to reflect upon and clarify their own perspectives and those of others in a positive manner and in a trusted environment. Fleming (2012) is of the opinion that art helps us to understand the world by expanding our horizon and the dominant ideology. Neelands' theories (2015) agree with those conclusions, emphasizing the view that art presents a robust approach for dealing with your experiences, as well as supporting well-being and resilience.

In youth theatre, the initiatives of young persons and their willingness to explore and express their thoughts and feelings are prized as the main assets of the organization. Through a playbuilding process, students can be someone else and young people use this opportunity to explore, practise, experiment with and extend their awareness of self and the world around them. Hence theatre education, both in formal and non-formal educational contexts, provides youth with myriad benefits, and can positively contribute to student success (Lazarus 2015).

Participation in *Skrekkur* demonstrated that camaraderie and close relationships formed across year classes will facilitate friendly exchanges in corridors and classrooms as the students develop mutual understanding and respect. This is in line with Biesta's belief that art makes our desires visible and gives them form, but we are at the very same time engaged in the exploration of the desirability of our desires and in their rearrangement and transformation (Biesta 2018). Learning in and through the arts can strengthen the student's sense of self-identity through expression and communication (Thorkelsdóttir and Ólafsdóttir 2022). Fleming (2006) also points out the importance of education extending beyond curriculum content and becoming no less focused on creating a positive school culture. It has been shown that increased instruction in art subjects encourages a more positive student attitude which, in turn, stimulates their general abilities. In this manner, art became an aspect of the students' learning.

Improvement

Improvements to *Skrekkur*, a youth theatre competition, can still be made. The fact that it is a competition can both be good and bad. Having students compete through the arts can seem strange and belittling the arts but, on the other hand, *Skrekkur* gives the students who, for example, do not participate in sports an opportunity to compete. Maximum participation in each school is 35 students. We recommend giving more students the opportunity to participate in *Skrekkur*, either by increasing the student numbers as a whole or by allowing more groups within each school to participate. By so doing, the City of Reykjavík would contribute to giving all the students that would like to work in and through the arts an opportunity to participate, highlighting the mission that every child should be an active participant, based on the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Projects such as *Skrekkur,* where students work purposefully with drama, music and dancing, are highly significant as, through the study of art subjects, students develop certain skills less easily acquired via other subjects. It is important from the perspective of educational aims that arts education is conceptualized in order to better understand its value and the influence the arts can have on education. Thus, art can, with good reason, claim to be a facet of education.

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