

Portfolio

In the following text, I will present a portfolio with different examples of our work in a school that we visited in our Participatory Performance Practice project. I will reflect upon some of the choices we made, what worked and what we should have done differently, and discuss some of the ethical considerations we had to relate to.

Relationships

An important goal for our work at the high school was for us to build good relations between the pupils. I think the importance of having good relations, friends you can talk to and that you can trust, is a major factor for having a safe and happy time at school. I wanted to use games with some potential to create a space where the pupils could feel that they all had an important role to play. To create small moments of joy here and there, moments the pupils could talk about after the workshops, moments they could relate to together. In some ways I think we achieved that goal.

Trying to succeed in my goal, I started most of our workshops with different types of ball games. Some of them went well, and one game did not. A game called *Keepy Uppyy*, (Baim, et al., 2002) where the aim is for the whole group to keep the ball in the air as long as possible. I thought this game could be a fun and safe game to do together. I was wrong. In the beginning the pupils looked at the ball as it was a dangerous spike wrecking ball. But after a while it got better, even though we didn't achieve more than eight taps. But still, I think the game created some memorable moments. We all laughed a lot together, I think maybe the situation got a bit comical, seeing the ball hit the floor all the time. I also noticed that after a long time of failing together, more of the pupils tried to contribute to keep the ball in the air. And the first time we reached eight taps, which in this situation was an adequate number of taps, we all cheered together.

We also had one workshop with the theme power. We had different exercises and games related to power. I used *The great game of power* (Boal, 2002) to make the pupils reflect over how different levels of power inflect their everyday life, both in school, but also at home. The aim for me doing this game was to give the participants some belief in their own ability of power. Some structures in life can seem impossible to change. It can be social structures in the classroom. Some people always seem to have more power than others, and sometimes it's

possible to think that you don't have any power. But in this game, I wanted the pupils to reflect over the fact that what people think of as powerful, is always based on their own experiences. People always have different views on who is the most powerful, which this game also reflected, the pupils having different answers on which image was the most powerful. And that there are always opportunities to make a change in your life, even if it is small changes, I wanted to show the pupils that they have power to make changes.

Outdoor.

Andy McGeeney writes in *With nature in mind* about how being outdoors in nature has a positive effect on the wellbeing of humans. He also points out how we all are doing some type of ecotherapy without even noticing that we are doing it, like walking your dog, playing in the park, or feeding the birds. Normal everyday activities that put us in contact with nature. McGeeney also says that: "The need for a mindful connection to nature has never been more important" (McGeeney, 2016, p. 25).

And why is it important to be mindful? More and more people live in big cities where places without noise pollution are hard to find, and especially during the pandemic it has been very clear how important it is with parks and green areas in the cities. Being mindful means being in the moment and being aware of what is going on. And being mindful in nature, is what you can call ecotherapy. McGeeney states that ecotherapy: improves your mood and Clarity of thinking, has no known side-effects, is backed by research, and is free (McGeeney, 2016, p. 33).

But how can we use ecotherapy in our work in applied drama, without any further expertise on it? This is also a question McGeeney addresses in his book. First, he says that there are now formal requirements you need to be qualified in ecotherapy. Because it's not about the conversation between the client and a professional, but the aim of ecotherapy is to build a relationship between the client and nature. To build this relationship, is your main task as a facilitator in ecotherapy. Being a facilitator in ecotherapy, McGeeney writes about the importance of being sensitive to the participants emotions and feelings. Because it's not about solving every problem the participants may have, but to encourage them to gain a deeper connection to nature, and that this relationship can affect their wellbeing in a positive way. In ecotherapy the participants' background and history are not that important. McGeeney does not focus on if you have been diagnosed with a mental illness, and he does not ask about their

problems. This is in some ways different from more common applied drama projects, where the research about your target group often is an important factor in the process.

So, how could we use ecotherapy with the pupils at the high school? Some challenges made it not too easy. Visiting the school for the first time was for me a strange experience; never ever have I before seen a school with such a big fence like they had around the school yard. It felt like visiting some type of institution. I shall not draw the big lines based on visiting only one school in the UK, but a cultural difference from my own experiences from the school system, it definitely was. I'm not going to make this a political text, but I'm very glad that we don't have school uniforms in Norway. Another challenge was also the lack of nature in the area. They had some green areas in the school yard, but apparently not the most popular place for the pupils to spend their free time. And to bring twenty pupils with us on a trip, is not the easiest project to plan, at least not with the amount of time we had. But we did some exercises in the outdoor spaces, which I think had a valuable effect on the pupils, even though I think the potential of ecotherapy would be higher in other surroundings, and maybe in smaller groups? In the age of fifteen to seventeen, the pupils are very self-aware in how to behave in front of other pupils, and to enjoy nature is maybe not the most "popular" activity to do at that age. This is just my own reflection; I don't have any references to support this statement.

Walking has been an important topic of this pp course. Both how walking affects your mental health, but also in what way it helps you to focus on your surroundings and your own focus. My own experience of walking as a tool to increase your wellbeing, is that it helps my focus on a positive way. Often, the aim of our walking is to get from one place to another place, maybe you walk the same way to work every day.

Creative writing.

One of the methods we used in the workshops at the school, was creative writing, with the aim that creative writing would have a positive impact on the pupils and maybe inspire them to use creative writing as a tool in other occasions. Diana Adjadj writes on the website of the company Thrive Global, a company doing research on human behaviour, about the benefits of creative writing. To write down your thoughts and opinions or other things that come to your mind will help you handle your negative feelings. She explains that when you are writing, you have the opportunity to be completely honest. Most people don't have too many in their life that they can be completely honest with.

A good practice would be to write down three sentences every morning, and tips are to start with a question, for example, what do I think about this... (Adjadj, 2019). And it would also be important to learn to not edit your own writing.

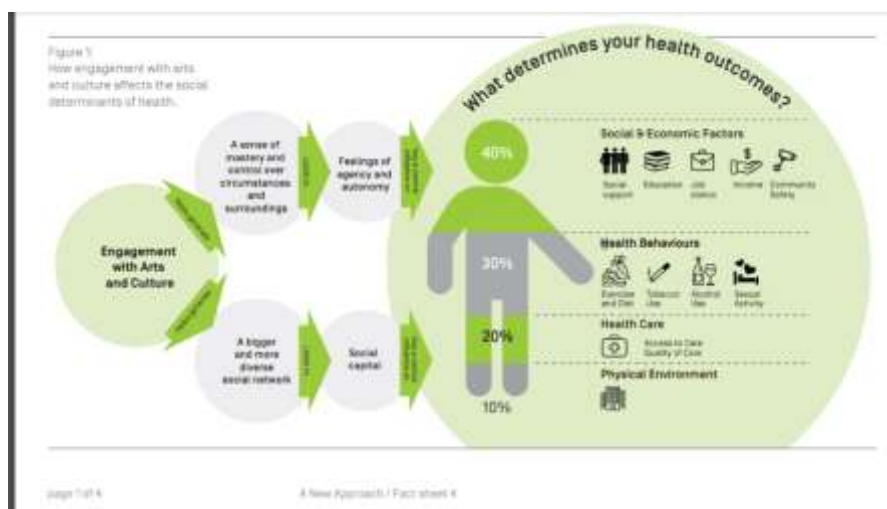
I wish I knew about this article before going to the school, because the tips on creative writing that Adjadj is presenting, would be a good and concrete exercise the pupils could have done at home. However, we did some creative writing with the pupils, where free writing, and drawing, was the purpose. And we did receive a lot of interesting information from the pupils in this exercise, and I think we gave them an opportunity to express themselves in a new way, which also was one of our aims of this project, to give the pupils a safe space to share their thoughts and feelings.

Wellbeing

Is drama for everyone? Can we always make the situations better by using methods of drama? Or is drama just for “some people”? Drama can of course not make everyone’s life better, and I think that it is important for a facilitator to respect that not everyone is into drama, or that someone finds drama exercises difficult to participate in. Many people spend their whole life working in one specific field, for example drama, sports, school, etc, and often people will be convinced that what I’m doing could really improve people’s life and more people should learn what I’m doing. I think that is a good thing, that you have some belief that the work that you are doing has a purpose bigger than yourself, and when it comes to drama a lot of research supports the fact that drama has a lot of positive benefits. The ANA’s Insight Report states that:

“The relationship between engagement with arts and culture, and benefits to health is indirect but strong – as evidenced by various credible international and national research sources” (Report, 2020).

Picture from (Report, 2020).



It is hard for us to conclude on the impact on the pupils of our work at school. We did receive some positive feedback from the pupils, but if our work will have some effect in the long term, it is impossible for us to say. But I 'm pretty sure that we managed to inspire them, here and there, and I think we all had concrete situations in our work that also inspired ourselves, that this work has potential.

We came into the school in a time of difficulty for both pupils and teachers, we also got to see the challenges when it comes to communication between teachers and pupils, but I think our project brought some light into the schoolyard. One common benefit for participants in applied drama projects is the way they learn to concentrate (Prendergast, 2013). Learning new exercise requires from the pupils to have focus, to really give all of themselves, to engage in the exercise. That was for me the best moments in our work, when you could sense that the pupils gave everything they had, when you could see that the effort they showed us came from a desire of taking a role in a game. I think we also succeeded in our aim to create relations in the group between the pupils, of course many of them had good relationships with each other from before, but I think we inspired them to seek new friendship with people they had no intention to speak to, if it hadn't been for our workshops. In many of the games the pupils had to communicate to each other, being in different roles than they were used to. At this age, status plays an important role in the hierarchy of the schoolyard, the pupils have friends' groups that they belong to, and some have not, in our workshops I think we blurred out some of the lines that existed in the school groups.

An ethical reflection.

Frances Rifkin is presenting some ethical principles developed by Stella Barnes that are important related to work with vulnerable groups. Rifkin is presenting a framework on an ethical approach in the practice of applied drama. (Rifkin, 2010), and one of the principles is choice, which I think has been an important principle for us to use in many situations at the school. Going into the school without too much knowledge about the drama background of the participants, it was hard for us to foresee how the pupils would react to our plan. In many of our exercises we received different reactions from the pupils. We had to find the balance between encouraging everyone to participate, but also respect those of them who chose to stay out, or even leave the classroom. It was not our responsibility to keep the pupils in the classroom, we didn't know the pupils well enough to decide if it was because of laziness or shyness, or if they had a serious reason for why they didn't want to engage in games.

Another important subject for us to keep in mind, was how we wanted to leave them. As mentioned earlier, our impression was that the communication between the pupils and the teachers did not work well. This is based on conversations with both teachers and pupils and our observations at the school. Although we should be careful to make conclusions based on just conversations, it became very clear for us all that both teachers and the pupils were struggling to handle the difficult situation related to the pandemic. Two of the teachers presented for us, before the workshops, a problem considering a huge increase of causes related to mental issues such as depression and anxiety. Many of the pupils talked very openly about this problem, and many of them were very honest to us about what they were struggling with. This information was the background of our approach to the workshops, how could we contribute to the wellbeing of the pupils at the school, in a positive way? We are not therapists, we could give them tools to manage stress, we could encourage them to use some of the exercises we did in their own life, but fixing their problems was not our intention. How we communicated to the pupils in the conservation, considering what type of question to ask, and how to respond to what they told us, is maybe something we should have prepared ourselves for more clearly.

In some of the conversations with the pupils, I think we should have been more careful on which role we played. It was maybe too easy for us to take the pupils' part about their situation when it came to the relationships with the teachers. A dangerous path for us to take would be to leave them with the impression that all the teachers are terrible and the source of all their problems. By reflecting about this now, it comes to my mind that a more neutral role in this “conflict”, would most likely be a more sensible approach for us to take. By reflecting about this now, it comes to my mind that a more neutral role in this “conflict”, would most likely be a more sensible approach for us to take. Unfortunately, Covid stopped us from having the closure that we had planned.

Bibliografi

Adjadj, D., 2019. *Using Creative Writing as a Tool to Improve Mental Health*. [Internett]
Available at: <https://thriveglobal.com/stories/using-creative-writing-as-a-tool-to-improve-mental-health/>

Baim, C., Brookes, S. & Mountford, A., 2002. *The Geese Theatre handbook [electronic resource] : drama with offenders and people at risk*. Winchester: Waterside Press.

Boal, A., 2002. *Games for actors and non-actors*. 2nd ed red. New York: Routledge.

McGeeney, A., 2016. *With nature in mind*. London: Jessica Kingsley publishers.

Prendergast, M., 2013. *Applied drama [electronic resource] : a facilitator's handbook for working in community*. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company.

Report, A. I., 2020. *HEALTH AND WELLBEING: TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACTS OF ARTS, CULTURE AND CREATIVITY*, Canberra, Australia: Australian Academy of the Humanities.

Rifkin, F., 2010. *THE ETHICS OF PARTICIPATORY THEATRE*, s.l.: The higher education academy.