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*MA Applied Theatre: Community, Education,
Wellbeing*

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Holding Stories Safely: Fictionalised Lived-experience Narratives and Their Impact on Young People's Mental Health

Abstract

This dissertation presents a Practice as Research investigation into how fictionalised lived-experience narratives can support the emotional wellbeing, agency, and reflective capacity of young people aged 14–16 in the South Wales Valleys. Over eighteen months of collaborative devising with Rhydyfelin Youth Theatre, the project explored how adolescents experiencing caring responsibilities or domestic violence engaged with sensitive themes through trauma-informed applied theatre processes.

Drawing on contemporary scholarship in youth applied theatre (Brenner, Ceraso & Cruz, 2024), consent-based facilitation (Villarreal & Shively, 2025), and trauma responsive performance practice (Diamond, 2021), the research analyses workshop processes, relational interactions, participant questionnaires, audience feedback, and performance outcomes. Data findings show that fictionalisation and aesthetic distance supported emotional regulation, strengthened agency, and enabled participants to rehearse resilience inside a protective creative frame. The final performance, *If Only...*, generated significant community reflection on domestic violence, safeguarding culture, and the hidden experiences of young people.

Context

For eighteen months, I facilitated weekly applied theatre sessions with Rhydyfelin Youth Theatre, working with young people aged (12-14 then) now 14-16 living in the South Wales Valleys. This post-industrial region is noted for socioeconomic deprivation, limited access to youth mental health services, and intergenerational trauma. Public Health Wales (2022) reports disproportionately high levels of anxiety and emotional distress among adolescents in Rhondda Cynon Taf, while the Children's Society (2020) points out the isolation and

psychological strain endured by young carers. Domestic violence is still a significant issue, shaping many young people's emotional environments.

Within this landscape, two themes surfaced consistently through improvisation and devising: the emotional labour of young carers and the impact of domestic violence. These themes have not emerged through disclosure but through metaphor, symbolic characters, and fictional scenes. The young people expressed a desire to tell these stories publicly, not as autobiographical testimony but as a collective act to raise awareness of issues embedded in their community.

Youth theatre in Wales has long functioned as a site of cultural identity, resilience, and intergenerational storytelling (Ada, 2025). The young people's creative impulses reflected this tradition, using theatre to make visible the hidden emotional labour that many adolescents carry. My role as facilitator, dramaturg, and student researcher called for attentive ethical navigation, balancing authenticity with protection and guaranteeing that young people could explore sensitive themes without exposure to harm or re-traumatisation.

The World of If Only... Narrative, Characters and Creative Structure

If Only... is a fictionalised lived-experience drama that explores the emotional, relational, and psychological pressures faced by a fourteen-year-old girl navigating domestic instability, coercive control, and the invisible labour of caring. Developed collaboratively with Rhydyfelin Youth Theatre and shaped to ensure emotional protection, the play unfolds through scenes that reveal how trauma, secrecy, and adultification shape the lives of adolescents in precarious environments.

A defining creative choice in *If Only...* is the construction of the performance space as Mam's mind. Rather than staging the narrative in a literal domestic or social environment, the world of the play is intentionally "other-worldly," suspended, and slightly dislocated. This emerged from ensemble discussions about whether Mam was physically unwell, mentally unwell, or both. Instead of resolving this ambiguity, the staging embraces it. The audience is placed inside Mam's internal landscape, a consciousness that is present but unreachable. This

choice shapes the emotional tone of the entire piece, allowing the story to unfold within a space that reflects absence, illness, and fragmentation.

Within this structure, only one moment breaks the rule: the repeated scene. This is the sole point in the play where the audience is invited directly into Haley's head, rather than Mam's. In this moment, Haley is trying to anticipate what her older sister will do after discovering the mark on her arm, a moment of fear, calculation, and emotional forecasting. The repetition shows Haley rehearsing possible outcomes, anticipating danger, and preparing herself for the fallout. It is the only time the audience sees her internal processing without Mam's filter. The scene ends with Haley returning home and having to explain the argument with her sister, grounding the moment back in lived reality. This structural interruption highlights how Haley's internal world is shaped by vigilance and anticipation, while the rest of the play remains held within Mam's suspended consciousness.

At the centre of the narrative is Haley, whose world is defined by exhaustion, vigilance, and a constant negotiation of safety. Her character embodies the play's emotional core: a young person attempting to maintain normality while carrying responsibilities far beyond her developmental stage. Haley's inner monologues, voiced through headphones, reveal fear, longing, and confusion, contrasting sharply with the defensive, compliant persona she presents to adults. This device allows the audience to witness her internal reality.

Surrounding Haley is a plethora of characters who each illuminate different facets of her life:

- **Dad (Aaron)**

Haley's father is the central source of instability and coercive control. He shifts between charm, defensiveness, entitlement, and explosive anger. His inner thoughts expose a worldview shaped by resentment and rigid gender expectations. He believes others' needs burden him, and this belief fuels his volatility. His presence structures the play's emotional tension, revealing how unpredictability and blame erode a young person's sense of safety.

- **Mam (Lisa)**

Mam never appears onstage, yet her absence is the emotional spine of the narrative. Haley's longing to see her mother, combined with the secrecy surrounding Mam's illness, creates a powerful sense of loss. Mam becomes a symbolic figure, a source of comfort and identity that Haley is denied access to. Her absence heightens the stakes of Haley's journey and underscores the systemic failures surrounding families in crisis.

- **Rachel (Older Sister)**

Rachel offers a crucial counterpoint to Haley's experience. Unlike Haley, she has not been exposed to the same intensity of coercive control or emotional burden. She has lived adjacent to the instability rather than inside it, and this shapes her responses. Rachel is protective but distant, caring but conflicted. She represents the sibling who "got out early" emotionally or physically and therefore struggles to understand the depth of Haley's exhaustion. Her interactions reveal frustration, guilt, and genuine concern, illustrating how uneven exposure to harm creates emotional divides within families.

- **Nan**

Nan introduces intergenerational trauma and unresolved family conflict. She arrives with urgency and guilt, attempting to reconnect with Haley and understand what has happened to her daughter. Her inner thoughts reveal self-blame and confusion, alongside a desperate need to repair the past. Her confrontation with Dad exposes long standing patterns of manipulation and isolation. Nan represents the possibility of intervention and the painful reality of arriving too late.

- **Jess and Katie (Friends)**

Haley's friends embody peer-based safeguarding. They notice her withdrawal, exhaustion, and emotional shifts long before adults do. Their concern is genuine but limited by their age and understanding. They represent the social world Haley is slipping away from, highlighting how adolescent friendships can provide emotional grounding but often lack the tools to intervene when a peer is in distress.

- **Brittany (School Peer)**

Brittany represents the social pressures and performative norms of adolescence. Unlike Jess and Katie, who respond to Haley with concern and emotional attunement, Brittany embodies a more detached, image focused peer dynamic. Her interactions with Haley are shaped by school-based social hierarchies, where reputation, confidence, and perceived normality carry significant weight. Brittany's presence highlights how some peers respond to distress not with empathy but with judgement, dismissal, or avoidance. She reflects the part of Haley's world where vulnerability is risky and where emotional struggles are often masked to maintain social standing. Brittany's character underscores the theme that not all peer relationships are protective; some amplify isolation by reinforcing expectations of "keeping it together" even when a young person is overwhelmed.

- **Principal and Teacher (School System)**

The school characters illustrate institutional misinterpretation. They read Haley's exhaustion as defiance, her withdrawal as behavioural misconduct, and her silence as non-compliance. Their responses to this behaviour demonstrate systems that prioritise performance over wellbeing (e.g., detention, behavioural diaries, monitoring). Their inner thoughts reveal uncertainty and concern, as well as the limitations of institutional frameworks. They represent the structural gaps that allow domestic instability to remain hidden.

- **Neighbours (Adele and Eric)**

The neighbours' scenes provide a community perspective on domestic violence. They hear thuds, shouting, and distress, yet remain unsure whether to intervene. Their dialogue captures the moral ambiguity and fear of "getting involved" that often prevents community safeguarding. They represent the wider social environment, of which people are often aware and concerned but ultimately passive to what they see or hear. Their presence underscores the theme of collective witnessing and the consequences of silence.

- **Doctor**

The doctor scene highlights systemic barriers to information for young people. Haley's attempt to access her mother's medical information is denied due to policy, reinforcing her isolation. The doctor represents institutional gatekeeping and the emotional impact of being excluded from decisions that directly affect one's life.

- **Olly (Dad's Friend)**

Olly's pub conversation with Aaron reveals the gendered norms underpinning Aaron's worldview. He recalls traditional gender roles: women doing housework, men working, but crucially, Olly does not fully endorse these beliefs. He pushes back against Aaron's misogynistic comments, challenges his assumptions, and ultimately refuses to collude with Aaron's behaviour. His decision to leave the conversation signals that even within male friendship groups, harmful norms can be resisted. Olly represents a subtle but important counter voice, someone who recognises the toxicity of Aaron's attitudes and chooses not to reinforce them.

- **Patricia (Social Worker)**

Patricia appears briefly but symbolically as the representative of formal safeguarding systems. Her presence signals that intervention is possible, yet her limited role reflects how social services often enter young people's lives late, after patterns of harm have already escalated. Patricia embodies the tension between institutional responsibility and the practical constraints that shape real world safeguarding. Her character highlights the gap between policy and lived-experience, and the difficulty of identifying risk when a young person is actively concealing distress.

Missed Opportunities for Intervention

Throughout *If Only...*, the narrative repeatedly highlights missed opportunities for adults and community members to intervene. Teachers misinterpret Haley's exhaustion as misbehaviour; the principal focuses on academic performance rather than emotional wellbeing; neighbours hear signs of distress but choose not to act; the doctor follows

protocol rather than recognising a safeguarding concern; and Nan arrives too late to disrupt the cycle. These moments accumulate to show how young people in unsafe environments often remain unseen, even when signs of harm are present. The play uses these missed opportunities to critique the systems and social norms that allow domestic instability to remain hidden.

An Intentionally Unresolved Ending

The story ends without resolution, a deliberate choice that reflects the reality of many young people's experiences. There is no sudden rescue, no neat transformation, and no fix. Instead, the play concludes with uncertainty, signalling that safeguarding is complex, slow, and often incomplete. By resisting closure, the piece honours the truth that these situations rarely resolve cleanly and that young people frequently continue navigating instability long after adults believe the crisis has passed. The unresolved ending invites the audience to sit with discomfort, recognise the ongoing nature of harm, and reflect on their own responsibility to notice, intervene, and support.

Introduction

Applied Theatre sits at the intersection of creativity, social engagement, and ethical responsibility. It offers participatory, relational, and embodied methodologies that enable communities to explore identity, social conditions, and emotional experience (Prentki & Preston, 2009).

When working with young people whose lived realities include caring responsibilities or domestic violence, Applied Theatre becomes a carefully mediated space where wellbeing, agency, and meaning making can be supported through creative practice. This dissertation examines how fictionalised lived-experience narratives can support young people's mental health within a community youth theatre context.

Drawing on eighteen months of Practice as Research with Rhydyfelin Youth Theatre, the project examines how aesthetic distance (Landy, 1993), trauma-informed facilitation (Diamond, 2021), and co-creative dramaturgy (Nicholson, 2014) enabled young people to explore sensitive themes safely. As Landy notes, "aesthetic distance allows the individual to

approach personal material without being overwhelmed” (1993, p. 15), a principle that influenced how participants interacted with emotionally charged content. Rather than disclosing personal histories, participants used metaphor, improvisation, and fictional characters to articulate emotional truths.

The introduction establishes the conceptual foundations of the project, situating it within applied theatre discourse, trauma-informed practice, and youth mental health research. It also frames the central inquiry: how can fictionalisation, aesthetic distance, and trauma-informed facilitation enable young people to explore sensitive themes safely while maintaining agency, emotional regulation, and creative ownership?

Societal, Cultural, and Political Context

Young people in the South Wales Valleys navigate structural inequalities formed by decades of post-industrial decline. Rhondda Cynon Taf remains one of the most deprived local authorities in Wales (Welsh Government, 2023), with limited access to youth mental health services, high unemployment, and persistent intergenerational trauma. Public Health Wales (2022) reports elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional distress among adolescents, particularly those living in households affected by domestic violence or caring responsibilities.

Young carers often experience emotional isolation, reduced access to leisure activities, and heightened psychological strain (Children’s Society, 2020). Domestic violence adds to these pressures, establishing conditions in which young people may feel unsafe, unheard, or responsible for managing adult conflict. These realities surfaced repeatedly in the devising process through symbolic scenes, imagined characters, and metaphorical storytelling.

Culturally, youth theatre in Wales plays an important role within community identity, resilience, and intergenerational storytelling (Ada, 2025). Welsh cultural policy increasingly foregrounds youth voice, trauma-informed practice, and community-embedded creativity (Arts Council of Wales, 2024), positioning this project within a wider movement toward socially engaged arts practice. Within this sociopolitical landscape, *Holding Stories Safely* responds to a significant need by creating environments where young people can explore

emotionally charged themes without being exposed to harm, judgement, or re-traumatisation.

Why Explore This Project through Applied Theatre?

Applied Theatre offers a participatory, relational, and embodied methodology uniquely suited to exploring sensitive lived-experiences. Unlike clinical interventions, Applied Theatre situates wellbeing within communal creativity, shared presence, and collective meaning making (Thompson, 2015).

For adolescents aged 14-16, an age distinguished by rapid cognitive and emotional development, Applied Theatre provides a regulated yet flexible environment for emotional regulation, agency, and reflective thinking. Trauma-informed facilitation is essential to this process.

Diamond (2021) emphasises that emotional safety emerges through choice, pacing, and protective framing; as she writes, “safety is not the absence of risk, but the presence of choice” (2021, p. 42). This principle shaped the project opt-out mechanisms, flexible participation structures, and careful pacing of sensitive material.

Aesthetic distance (Landy, 1993) further supported emotional protection by enabling participants to approach difficult themes without becoming overwhelmed. Applied Theatre also foregrounds agency and co-creation. Nicholson (2014) argues that Applied Theatre is most transformative when participants are positioned as active meaning makers rather than passive recipients, in accordance with Freire’s (1970) dialogic pedagogy. In this project, young people shaped the characters, scenes, and themes, ensuring that the narrative originated from their creative impulses rather than from adult assumptions.

How Applied Theatre Contributes to the Understanding of This Project

Applied Theatre supports understanding youth mental health through its capacity to externalise internal experiences, redistribute agency, and cultivate collective witnessing. Thompson (2009) describes performance as a “third space” in which emotions, memories, and social conditions can be explored at a safe aesthetic distance. His later work emphasises

the relational ethics of witnessing, noting that “performance creates a space where people can witness each other without the demand for confession” (Thompson, 2015, p. 78). This is especially important for young people navigating caring responsibilities or domestic violence, as it enables them to articulate experiences that may otherwise be left unspoken. Fictionalised coping strategies such as imagined support systems, symbolic characters, and alternative endings offer emotionally safer ways to explore difficult experiences.

Drawing on trauma-informed applied theatre practice (Diamond, 2021), fictionalisation enables participants to maintain distance while experimenting with new possibilities for agency, safety, and self-understanding. Audience feedback from *If Only...* demonstrates the effect of collective witnessing. Community members reported increased awareness, empathy, and understanding of young people’s hidden struggles.

Finally, Applied Theatre provides a mechanism for ethical mediation. Adult facilitators act as “dramatic frame makers” (Saxton & Miller, 2016), shaping material to ensure safety, coherence, and emotional protection, preventing testimonial exposure and safeguarding young people from re-traumatisation.

Aims and Objectives

Aim

This project aims to critically investigate how co-creating and performing fictionalised lived-experience narratives shapes the mental health, emotional resilience, and sense of agency of young people aged 14-16 in Rhydyfelin Youth Theatre, with particular attention to experiences connected to caring responsibilities and domestic violence.

This aim reflects the project’s dual artistic and ethical responsibility to develop a performance that honours youth voice while safeguarding emotional wellbeing, and to examine how trauma-informed applied theatre methodologies support young people in engaging with sensitive themes safely and creatively.

Objectives

To evaluate how Applied Theatre supports young people experiencing caring responsibilities or domestic violence.

This evaluation focuses on how ensemble based creative processes, aesthetic distance, and fictionalisation contribute to emotional regulation, confidence, and reflective capacity. It also considers the ways Applied Theatre offers young people alternative methods to understand and express complex emotional experiences.

To analyse the emotional, social, and reflective impact of co-creation on participants.

Attention is given to how agency, relational dynamics, group attunement, and dramaturgical decision-making shape young people's engagement with sensitive material. Participant questionnaires, workshop observations, and reflective facilitation notes illuminate how young people navigated emotional safety, creative ownership, and ensemble collaboration.

To investigate how fictionalised coping strategies support resilience.

This project examines how imagined support systems, symbolic characters, and alternative endings enable young people to rehearse resilience, regulate emotion, and participate in reflective thinking within a protective aesthetic frame.

To contribute new knowledge of trauma-informed, youth led Applied Theatre methodologies.

This contribution situates the project within contemporary critical discourse, offering a model for ethically navigating lived-experience material in community youth theatre contexts. It explores how facilitators balance co-creation with safeguarding, and how ethical dramaturgy can protect young people from testimonial exposure while preserving authenticity and agency.

Literature Review

Applied Theatre Foundations and Youth Participation

Applied Theatre encompasses socially engaged, participatory, and community-based performance practices aimed at exploring social issues, supporting wellbeing, and amplifying marginalised voices. Prentki and Preston (2009) position the field at the intersection of art and social justice, while contemporary scholarship has expanded this understanding. Nicholson (2022) argues that youth participation requires a re-thinking of agency that accounts for emotional complexity, precarity, and relational dynamics. Abraham (2023) similarly emphasises that youth led applied theatre must centre activism, care, and social responsibility, recognising that young people's creative choices are shaped by their lived conditions. These perspectives extend Nicholson's earlier work (2014) and build on Freire's (1970) dialogic pedagogy by acknowledging the psychological and social realities young people navigate. Within *Holding Stories Safely*, these principles underpin the co-creative processes that enabled participants to shape characters, themes, and scenes, ensuring that the narrative emerged from their creative impulses rather than adult assumptions.

Youth Theatre, Precarity, and Community Contexts

The benefits of youth theatre participation are well documented. Hughes and Wilson (2004) identify confidence, emotional literacy, and social connection as key outcomes, while more recent work highlights youth theatre's role in supporting emotional regulation, reflective thinking, and mental health resilience when facilitated within trauma aware structures (Hughes, 2023). Baker (2022) deepens this discourse by examining youth theatre within contexts of instability and emotional strain, noting that young people often carry invisible pressures that shape their creative engagement.

These insights resonate strongly with the South Wales Valleys, where adolescents face heightened structural and emotional challenges linked to socioeconomic deprivation, domestic conflict, and care related responsibilities. Finneran (2022) emphasises the role of arts practice in post-industrial communities, arguing that culturally embedded creative work can promote resilience, community cohesion, and intergenerational dialogue. The young

people's desire to share their stories publicly reflects this wider Welsh tradition of community storytelling, where performance becomes a vehicle for social visibility and collective resilience.

Trauma-informed Practice and Ethical Facilitation

Trauma-informed practice has become central to Applied Theatre, particularly when working with young people navigating instability or emotionally charged home environments. Diamond (2021) argues that trauma responsive facilitation requires structured flexibility, careful pacing, and protective framing to ensure participants remain emotionally safe while engaging with sensitive material. Baim and Brookes (2021) expand this by outlining grounding strategies, consent-based approaches, and modulation techniques that support regulation and agency. O'Connor and Anderson (2021) similarly highlight the importance of embodied pedagogy in helping young people manage complex emotions through shared creative action.

These insights reinforce Landy's (1993) concept of aesthetic distance, which suggests that fiction provides a protective buffer that enables participants to explore difficult emotions without becoming overwhelmed. In *Holding Stories Safely*, fictionalised coping mechanisms, symbolic staging, and mediated sound ensured that participants were not required to embody material too close to their lived realities.

Aesthetic distance also underpins ethical dramaturgy. Brecht's (1964) *Verfremdungseffekt* emphasises the value of critical distance, arguing that performers and audiences engage more reflectively when the boundary between fiction and reality remains visible. Distancing techniques in this project included casting an external performer as the father character, using symbolic staging to represent the "mind of Mam," employing mediated sound through headsets, and redistributing vocal responsibility through recorded monologues. These choices align with O'Toole's (1992) argument that symbolic staging creates a "frame of meaning" that allows participants to explore difficult content safely. Saxton and Miller (2016) describe the facilitator as a "dramatic frame maker," responsible for shaping material in ways that safeguard participants while honouring their contributions. Gallagher and Wessels (2020) extend this by arguing that an ethics of care must underpin youth

performance, particularly when working with lived-experience material. Gallagher (2007) warns that youth performance can unintentionally slip into testimonial exposure if adults do not take responsibility for dramaturgical mediation. These insights informed the decision to write the final script myself, ensuring that lived-experience material was fictionalised, redistributed, and ethically framed.

Youth Agency, Imagination, and Creative Autonomy

Contemporary applied theatre scholarship highlights the importance of creative resilience and shared meaning making in supporting young people's wellbeing, particularly in contexts marked by instability or emotional strain. Rather than relying on therapeutic models, theorists emphasise how creative processes enable young people to explore experiences safely, rehearse alternative possibilities, and construct collective meaning within an ensemble.

Hughes (2023) argues that youth theatre provides “creative pathways to wellbeing” by offering structured opportunities for emotional regulation, reflective thinking, and social connection. Baker's (2022) work on youth precarity suggests that creative participation allows young people to navigate invisible pressures through metaphor, symbolic action, and collaborative storytelling. These approaches foreground creativity as a mechanism for resilience, emphasising how fictionalisation enables participants to maintain emotional distance while engaging with the thematic significance of difficult experiences.

Within applied theatre, fictionalisation is increasingly understood as a tool for autonomy and imaginative reframing. Abraham (2023) notes that youth led performance enables participants to “reshape the conditions of their experience” through collective authorship, symbolic representation, and shared decision making. This aligns with Nicholson's (2022) argument that agency involves influencing meaning, structure, and emotional tone within the creative process. In *Holding Stories Safely*, fictionalised coping strategies such as imagined support systems, symbolic characters, and alternative endings allowed young people to explore sensitive themes without being positioned as narrators of their own lived realities.

Creative resilience theory also emphasises ensemble-based meaning making. O'Connor and Anderson (2021) argue that embodied, relational pedagogies support young people in negotiating complex emotions through shared action rather than personal disclosure. This is particularly relevant in trauma affected contexts, where emotional safety depends on collective structures, mediated distance, and facilitator guidance. Participant responses in this project suggest that fictionalisation enabled them to think about their experiences in new ways not through therapeutic introspection, but through imaginative experimentation, symbolic representation, and collaborative problem solving.

Collective Witnessing and Community Impact

Youth mental health research highlights the importance of emotional regulation, social connection, and creative expression in supporting wellbeing. Applied Theatre offers a unique combination of emotional safety, creative exploration, and ensemble support, making it particularly valuable in contexts where young people navigate complex emotional or domestic pressures.

Thompson's (2009) concept of collective witnessing emphasises the significance of shared presence, validation, and group recognition in nurturing emotional resilience. Abraham and Baker (2025) extend this by demonstrating how youth led performance can catalyse community empathy, safeguarding awareness, and social responsibility. Audience feedback from *If Only...* indicates that the performance prompted reflection on domestic conflict, care related pressures, and the hidden emotional labour young people carry. This suggests that Applied Theatre can contribute not only to individual wellbeing but also to wider cultural understanding and community accountability.

Re-Thinking Participation: A Critical Interrogation of Co-Creation

Co-creation is central to Applied Theatre and to this project. Freire (1970) emphasises shared authorship and collective inquiry, while Nicholson (2014) argues that co-creation enhances agency and transformative potential. Contemporary scholarship, however, complicates these assumptions. Nicholson (2022) notes that youth agency must be understood within the constraints of emotional readiness, social vulnerability, and relational

dynamics. Abraham (2023) similarly argues that co-creation must be grounded in care and ethical responsibility, particularly when working with lived-experience material.

In *Holding Stories Safely*, co-creation enabled young people to shape characters, themes, and scenes, ensuring that the narrative emerged from their creative impulses. Relational dynamics significantly shaped the quality and direction of the devised material: supportive partnerships enabled subtle exploration, while other pairings revealed developmental tendencies toward simplification or moral certainty. These findings correspond with research on relational attunement in youth arts practice, which emphasises the importance of trust, communication, and emotional maturity in supporting reflective thinking.

Despite the growing body of research on trauma-informed Applied Theatre, gaps remain regarding fictionalised coping strategies as a protective mechanism for young people exploring lived-experience narratives. This project contributes new insights into how fictionalisation can support emotional regulation, how aesthetic distance can prevent testimonial exposure, and how dramaturgical mediation can balance authenticity with safeguarding. It also extends understanding of Applied Theatre in post-industrial Welsh contexts, highlighting how youth led creative processes can support mental health, community awareness, and collective resilience.

Freire's (1970) dialogic pedagogy remains foundational to participatory arts practice, but its application within trauma affected youth contexts requires critical interrogation. Freire's model assumes equal emotional capacity and psychological safety among participants, conditions rarely present in contexts marked by domestic instability or care related pressures. In such settings, co-creation without trauma-informed mediation can inadvertently place emotional labour on young people or reproduce harm.

Similarly, Nicholson's (2014) emphasis on youth agency must be balanced with Diamond's (2021) insistence on structured flexibility and emotional pacing. Agency cannot be understood as unrestricted creative freedom; rather, it must be scaffolded through protective dramaturgical frames that prevent young people from being positioned as narrators of their own trauma. This project therefore challenges the assumption that co-creation is always the most ethical or empowering methodology. Instead, it proposes a

model in which co-creation shapes thematic direction, while adult dramaturgical mediation ensures emotional protection, aesthetic distance, and ethical coherence. This critique contributes to current discourse by highlighting the limitations of participatory orthodoxy in trauma affected youth contexts and by proposing a recalibrated model of co-creation grounded in care, protection, and ethical dramaturgy.

Methodology

Qualitative Practice as Research Approach

This project adopts a qualitative, Practice as Research methodology, recognising artistic processes as both method and data. Practice as Research is particularly suited to Applied Theatre because knowledge emerges through embodied action, relational dynamics, and creative decision making rather than solely through verbal articulation. The methodology therefore centres lived-experience, meaning making, and co-creation, aligning with the project's ethical and artistic aims and reflecting my dual role as facilitator, dramaturg, and student researcher. This positionality required sustained reflexivity, particularly when navigating sensitive themes related to caring responsibilities and domestic violence.

Facilitation Roles, Professional Expertise, and Relational Care

The facilitation structure for *Holding Stories Safely* was shaped by the professional expertise and relational foundations of the two practitioners leading the work. As lead facilitator, I brought five years of sustained practice with Rhydyfelin Youth Theatre and an established relationship of trust with the ensemble. My RCT Cwm Taf Health Board Level C Safeguarding training informed all facilitation decisions, enabling careful boundary management, early recognition of emotional cues, and confident navigation of sensitive material. This long-term embeddedness meant that shifts in behaviour, tone, or group dynamics could be accurately read, thereby supporting the negotiated agency central to the project.

Working alongside me was a freelance co-facilitator who has collaborated with Valleys Kids since May 2025 and holds over twenty years of experience working with young people across schools, community settings, prisons, and youth justice environments. Their professional background includes delivering Level 3 Safeguarding training for Phoenix

Training Ltd to social workers, as well as specialist training in Managing Violence and Conflict in Approved Premises and Managing Irritation and Aggression training for staff at the Welsh Senedd. This expertise contributed significantly to relational safety, enabling attuned support, confident intervention, and sensitive handling of emotionally charged moments.

Should anything arise that fell outside the group's usual patterns of behaviour, both facilitators had the professional experience to respond carefully, calmly, and with appropriate safeguarding judgement. This dual practitioner structure ensured that one facilitator could lead creative exploration. At the same time, the other monitored emotional regulation, offered grounding strategies, or provided one-to-one support without disrupting ensemble flow. This was also interchangeable.

The facilitation team enacted what Preston (2016; 2019) describes as care-based practice, an active, ethical responsibility requiring attentiveness, responsiveness, and the ability to “hold the space” with sensitivity. This approach ensured that participants could engage with sensitive themes safely while retaining agency, dignity, and creative ownership.

Together, these methods produced a rich qualitative dataset illuminating how young people navigated emotionally sensitive material, co-creative processes, and trauma-informed facilitation structures.

Applied Theatre as Relational Inquiry

Applied Theatre was approached not simply as a representational form but as a relational and affective process shaping how young people engage with themselves, each other, and the material. Workshops, rehearsals, and the final performance were treated as sites of inquiry where emotional responses, creative choices, and group dynamics offered insight into how participants navigated fictionalised lived-experience narratives. The performance, *If Only...*, functioned simultaneously as an artistic outcome and a research artefact, providing a lens for examining how fictionalisation, aesthetic distance, and dramaturgical mediation supported emotional safety and agency.

Ethical Dramaturgy within the Methodological Framework

Although thematic material emerged from the young people's devising, I wrote the final script to ensure ethical protection and maintain appropriate aesthetic distance. This decision reflects the need for adult dramaturgical mediation when working with sensitive lived-experience material, particularly in trauma affected youth contexts (Saxton & Miller, 2016; Gallagher, 2007). Fictionalisation and redistribution of content ensured that no participant was required to embody material that felt too close to their lived reality. A fuller account of the ethical rationale for this dramaturgical approach, including distancing techniques, symbolic staging, and mediated sound, is provided in Section 8.4.

Ethical Negotiations as Methodological Tools

The methodological design was shaped by a series of ethical negotiations that emerged directly from the practice: balancing co-creation with safeguarding, fictionalisation with authenticity, youth agency with adult dramaturgical responsibility, and emotional safety with creative risk. These negotiations reflect the complex realities of working with young people whose lived-experiences include caring responsibilities and domestic violence. Trauma-informed practice requires protective structures, yet the processes of devising rely on openness, experimentation, and participant ownership. Similarly, while co-creation invites young people to shape meaning, safeguarding requires clear adult mediation to prevent testimonial exposure. By recognising these negotiations as methodological tools rather than obstacles, the project was able to structure workshops, make dramaturgical decisions, and conduct reflexive analysis in ways that upheld both ethical integrity and creative autonomy.

Relational Sensitivity and Collective Witnessing

The relational nature of Applied Theatre further shaped the methodological approach. Thompson's concept of collective witnessing highlights the importance of shared presence, validation, and group recognition in supporting wellbeing (Thompson, 2015). For young people navigating caring responsibilities or domestic violence, being witnessed within a supportive ensemble can counteract feelings of invisibility and isolation. This justified the inclusion of observational methods attentive to group dynamics, emotional shifts, and

moments of collective meaning making, ensuring that the methodology captured not only individual responses but also the relational processes that shaped the ensemble's creative and emotional engagement.

Methodological Ethos

Overall, the methodology is characterised by ethical rigour, relational sensitivity, and creative responsiveness. It recognises that Applied Theatre research cannot be separated from the artistic and emotional processes that shape it, and foregrounds fictionalisation, aesthetic distance, and dramaturgical mediation as essential to supporting emotional safety and agency. The methodological approach reflects the project's commitment to safeguarding, co-creation, and trauma-informed practice, offering a model for ethically navigating lived-experience material in community youth theatre contexts.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection occurred through multiple interconnected qualitative methods. Participants completed a pre-questionnaire exploring emotional regulation and confidence (Appendix K), and a post-questionnaire evaluating emotional impact and agency (Appendix L). Audience feedback was collected using a structured questionnaire (Appendix M). These sources were analysed alongside the following qualitative methods:

- **Improvisation and devising**- generating narrative material and revealing emotional responses, group dynamics, and participant agency.
- **Image Theatre, role-play, and storyboarding**- enabling symbolic exploration of sensitive themes.
- **Semi-structured interviews and focus groups**- exploring emotional impact, perceived agency, fictional coping strategies, and experiences of sharing the work publicly.
- **Participant observation**- documenting emotional shifts, confidence changes, ensemble dynamics, and audience reactions.
- **Reflective journalling**- capturing ethical dilemmas, facilitation decisions, and researcher positionality.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which acknowledges the researcher's interpretive role and supports nuanced engagement with emotional, relational, and artistic data. Themes were developed through repeated engagement with workshop notes, participant questionnaires, audience feedback, and reflective journal entries, allowing for a layered understanding of how young people navigated fictionalised lived-experience narratives. This approach aligns with the project's emphasis on reflexivity, ethical awareness, and relational sensitivity.

Risk Assessment and Ethical Safeguards

A comprehensive facilitator risk assessment was completed to identify emotional, dramaturgical, and safeguarding risks (Appendix E), and this was signed off by the Director of Arts at Valleys Kids as part of the project's safety planning. The organisation's risk assessment also supported the project's safety procedures (Appendix F). Together, these assessments covered both practical and wellbeing related risks associated with the workshops and performance, including building safety, fire procedures, electrical equipment, manual handling, safeguarding, emotional wellbeing, and dramaturgical risks. A wellbeing specific risk assessment was developed to address emotional regulation and trauma responsive facilitation (Appendix G). The wellbeing risk assessment identified key amber rated risks, including emotional safety during devising, script authorship, and performance exposure. These were mitigated through trauma-informed facilitation strategies including opt-outs, grounding exercises, predictable session structures, and reflective check-ins, aligning with Diamond's (2021) emphasis on choice, pacing, and emotional regulation.

As noted in the facilitators risk assessment: *"Young people may share lived-experiences of domestic violence or caring responsibilities during improvisation"* (Appendix E). The facilitator's decision to write the final script was therefore a central ethical control, preventing the use of raw material and ensuring the fictionalisation of lived-experience material. This aligns with contemporary consent-based practice, which emphasises the importance of adult mediation when working with sensitive content (Villarreal & Shively, 2025). Green rated risks such as confidentiality, anti-bullying, and data protection were

supported by Valleys Kids' existing policies and enhanced through project specific measures including anonymisation, group agreements, and secure storage of recordings and vox pops.

This layered approach ensured that the project met safeguarding requirements, upheld trauma-informed practice, and maintained a safe environment for participants and audiences. It reflects recent scholarship emphasising the need for ethical dramaturgy, protective distancing, and relational care in youth performance (Brenner, Ceraso & Cruz, 2024; Abraham & Baker, 2025).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to every stage of *Holding Stories Safely*, shaping the project's design, facilitation, dramaturgy, and evaluation. Working with young people aged 14-16 on themes related to caring responsibilities and domestic violence placed the research within a category requiring heightened ethical scrutiny under the UWTSD Research Ethics & Integrity Code of Practice (2022). Participants were given full details of the project in the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix A); all young people provided informed consent before participation (Appendix B); parents/guardians provided consent for their child's involvement (Appendix C); and Valleys Kids formally approved the project. They outlined safeguarding expectations (Appendix D). The project therefore adhered to the principles of honesty, rigour, transparency, care, respect, and accountability, ensuring that participants' wellbeing, dignity, and agency remained paramount throughout.

The ethical framework was grounded in contemporary trauma-informed and consent-based practice, recognising that creative exploration of sensitive themes can surface emotional responses requiring careful mediation. Trauma-informed facilitation emphasises safety, choice, collaboration, trustworthiness, and empowerment (Diamond, 2021; Baim & Brookes, 2021). Consent-based pedagogy further highlights the importance of ongoing negotiation, participant autonomy, and facilitator responsibility (Villarreal & Shively, 2025). These principles shaped the workshop structure, dramaturgical decisions, and relational environment.

Sheila Preston's work on applied theatre ethics offers an additional lens for understanding the project's ethical foundations. Preston argues that facilitators act as ethical agents responsible for exercising "attentive, relational care" when working with vulnerable groups, responding sensitively to emerging emotional cues and ensuring that participants remain protected within the creative frame (Preston, 2016; 2019). Her emphasis on care as an active, skilled practice reinforces the need for facilitators to read shifts in behaviour, tone, or emotional energy and to intervene calmly and appropriately when required. This perspective aligns closely with the project's trauma responsive ethos, where safeguarding was not treated as a procedural requirement but as a relational, moment-to-moment practice embedded throughout the creative process.

Predictability was built into sessions through consistent routines, grounding exercises, and clear expectations, while flexibility allowed participants to take breaks, step out, or modify activities according to their emotional needs. Pre-questionnaire responses indicated that knowing they could take breaks and access support was a key factor in feeling safe, and this was reinforced throughout the project. Preston's framing of ethical facilitation as a practice of "holding the space with care" further supports these structures, emphasising that emotional safety is co-created through attunement, responsiveness, and the careful balancing of agency and protection.

Consent Procedures

Informed consent was obtained from all participants and their parents or guardians. Consent forms clearly outlined the purpose of the project, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and the measures in place to protect privacy and wellbeing. The Participant Information Sheet explained that sensitive themes might arise, but that fictionalisation and protective distancing would be used to ensure emotional safety. As stated, *"Participation is voluntary. You can stop at any time without giving a reason."* (Appendix A).

Consent was treated as an ongoing, relational process rather than a one-time agreement, aligning with contemporary consent-based facilitation (Villarreal & Shively, 2025). Regular check-ins and opportunities to renegotiate involvement ensured that consent remained

active and responsive. Parents and guardians also provided consent for workshop participation, discussions, interviews, and optionally, the final performance, acknowledging that the project explored themes such as caring responsibilities, emotional resilience, and domestic violence.

Safeguarding and Dual Roles

Safeguarding was a critical ethical priority. As a paid employee of Valleys Kids, I held a dual role as both facilitator and student researcher, which required careful boundary management. This dual role was explicitly communicated to participants and parents, ensuring transparency around responsibilities and expectations. Any safeguarding disclosures followed organisational and statutory procedures, and pastoral conversations were kept separate from research interactions.

Two adults were present in all sessions, and clear exit strategies were established for moments of emotional overwhelm. The safeguarding plan emphasised that no participant would be pressured to disclose personal experiences and that fictionalisation would be used to protect any lived-experience material. This aligns with contemporary youth ethics research emphasising the need for protective structures, relational clarity, and trauma aware facilitation (Brenner, Ceraso & Cruz, 2024; Ada, 2025).

Confidentiality and Data Protection

Confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation of data, secure storage of recordings and notes, and careful handling of sensitive information. Participants' names were not used in any writing or presentations, and creative contributions were treated as collective material rather than individual testimony. This approach aligns with Prentki and Preston's (2009) framing of Applied Theatre as communal meaning making, where stories are held collectively rather than attributed to individuals. It also reflects Neelands' (2004) argument that shared authorship can prevent testimonial exposure and protect participants from being identified through their creative contributions.

Contemporary youth arts scholarship reinforces the importance of collective authorship and anonymity when working with lived-experience material, particularly in trauma affected contexts (Nicholson, 2022; Abraham & Baker, 2025).

Dramaturgical Mediation and Aesthetic Distance

The dramaturgical process required particular ethical attention. While the young people generated thematic material through devising, I wrote the final script to ensure aesthetic distance and emotional protection. This decision was informed by Saxton and Miller's (2016) argument that adult practitioners must act as dramatic frame-makers, shaping material in ways that safeguard participants while honouring their contributions. Gallagher (2007) cautions that youth performance can unintentionally slip into testimonial exposure if adults do not take responsibility for dramaturgical mediation.

Writing the script myself enabled fictionalisation, redistribution, and reshaping of material so that no participant was required to embody or articulate content that felt too close to their lived reality. Distancing techniques were therefore not only artistic choices but ethical imperatives. Bringing in an external performer to play the father character prevented young people from embodying an aggressor figure that might resonate with personal experience. Symbolic staging, mediated sound, and recorded monologues created layers of aesthetic distance that protected participants while enabling critical engagement with the themes.

These choices align with Landy's (1993) concept of aesthetic distance and Brecht's (1964) emphasis on critical detachment and are further supported by contemporary trauma responsive dramaturgy (Diamond, 2021; Abraham & Baker, 2025).

Managing Narrative Material

The ethical framework also extended to the management of new devised material. A clear boundary was established that no new content would be added in the final four weeks of devising before the script was written, ensuring that participants were not exposed to fresh emotional material during the rehearsal period. This decision reflects trauma-informed principles of pacing, containment, and emotional regulation (Baim & Brookes, 2021; Diamond, 2021).

Audience Care and Content Advisory

The performance addressed sensitive themes including domestic violence, emotional stress, and caring responsibilities. Audience members received a content advisory and support information sheet which was developed by me and approved by Valleys Kids to ensure audience members were adequately prepared and supported. The sheet provided a clear content advisory: *“Tonight’s performance includes themes related to caring responsibilities, family conflict, domestic violence, emotional stress and resilience”* (Appendix I). Audience members were informed that they could step out at any time and access a designated quiet space staffed by trained personnel.

This aligns with trauma-informed principles of choice, emotional pacing, and safety (Diamond, 2021; Villarreal & Shively, 2025). The sheet also included a comprehensive list of support organisations such as Live Fear Free, Childline, Samaritans, and Carers Trust Wales, recognising the potential emotional impact of fictionalised lived-experience narratives and ensuring that the performance upheld ethical responsibility to the wider community.

Recording and Data Protection Protocols

The performance was recorded for two limited purposes: to allow youth theatre members who could not attend to view the piece privately, and for secure organisational archiving. Audience members were informed of recording procedures through the Valleys Kids Filming Notice. A Recording Notice, developed by me and approved by Valleys Kids, stated that the recording would *“not be shared publicly, posted online, or distributed outside the organisation”* (Appendix H). Audience members were informed that they would not be filmed directly unless incidentally captured as part of the general auditorium and were invited to speak to staff if they preferred not to appear in the recording. Vox-pop participants provided explicit consent for recorded feedback (Appendix J).

All footage is stored securely in accordance with Valleys Kids safeguarding and data protection procedures, with access restricted to authorised staff only. This aligns with contemporary youth arts ethics emphasising privacy, consent, and controlled dissemination (Brenner, Ceraso & Cruz, 2024).

Ethical Implications of Public Performance

Presenting fictionalised lived-experience material in a public performance required careful and trauma-informed planning. The audience included family members, neighbours, and community members; there was a risk of recognition, misinterpretation, or emotional distress. To mitigate this, the performance employed fictionalisation, symbolic staging, and mediated sound to ensure that no personal stories were revealed verbatim while still enabling authentic thematic exploration.

Audience feedback indicated that these dramaturgical and ethical measures successfully balanced authenticity with protection, enabling reflective engagement with domestic violence, safeguarding culture, and the hidden experiences of young people. This aligns with contemporary scholarship emphasising relational ethics, collective witnessing, and community-embedded care in youth performance (Abraham & Baker, 2025; Nicholson, 2022).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity was integral to the ethical approach. Facilitator reflexivity was documented throughout the process through a reflective journal (Appendix S), which recorded ethical dilemmas, facilitation decisions, and moments of emotional attunement. This reflexive practice allowed continual evaluation of the impact of my decisions, adjustment of facilitation strategies, and accountability to the young people's wellbeing. Ethical considerations were therefore not static but dynamic, evolving in response to the ensemble's needs, emerging material, and relational environment.

This aligns with contemporary reflexive methodologies in youth applied theatre, which emphasise ongoing ethical responsiveness and practitioner self-awareness (Brenner, Ceraso & Cruz, 2024; Diamond, 2021).

The ethical considerations of *Holding Stories Safely* were embedded throughout the project, shaping its design, facilitation, dramaturgy, and evaluation. The project adhered to trauma-informed principles, safeguarding protocols, and ethical dramaturgy, ensuring that young people could explore sensitive themes safely while maintaining agency, dignity, and creative

ownership. The ethical framework reflects a sophisticated understanding of the complexities of working with lived-experience material in youth theatre and contributes to wider discourse on ethical practice in Applied Theatre.

Data Findings

This Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA) draws together insights from the reflective journal, the pre- and post-questionnaires, and audience feedback. Pre-questionnaire results established participants' baseline levels of emotional regulation and awareness (Appendix N), while post-questionnaire responses demonstrated strengthened agency and reflective capacity (Appendix O). Audience feedback highlighted awareness of safeguarding and community empathy (Appendix P). Spoken audience feedback captured nuanced community responses to the performance (Appendix Q), while audience reactions during the final performance are available in the recording (Appendix R). Using Braun and Clarke's reflexive model, the analysis treats themes as constructed rather than discovered, shaped by my positionality as facilitator and student researcher and by the trauma-informed, relational ethos underpinning *Holding Stories Safely*.

Each dataset contributed a distinct perspective:

- The reflective journal traced the dramaturgical and emotional processes unfolding in real time;
- The participant pre and post questionnaires captured shifts in confidence, emotional safety, and thematic understanding;
- Audience feedback illuminated how fictionalised lived-experience material was received and interpreted by the wider community.

These sources form a holistic picture of how young people navigated fictionalisation, ensemble dynamics, and ethical dramaturgy within a protective creative frame. The themes below represent interpretive patterns of shared meaning, grounded in relational practice and supported by contemporary applied theatre discourse on trauma-informed facilitation, youth agency, and ethical dramaturgy.

Analysis of Reflective Journal

The reflective journal offered a close view of the ensemble's evolving relational, emotional, and dramaturgical processes. Across the devising period, several interconnected themes emerged, each revealing how young people engaged with fictionalised lived-experience material within trauma-informed structures. These patterns resonate with contemporary applied theatre discourse emphasising relational ethics, negotiated agency, and trauma responsive dramaturgy (Nicholson, 2022; Diamond, 2021; Abraham & Baker, 2025).

Developing Critical Distance through Writing and Rewriting

Writing became a key mechanism for creating aesthetic and emotional distance. When monologues were typed up, participants began to see their words as crafted text rather than personal storytelling. This shift supported emotional regulation and encouraged more deliberate engagement with language, repetition, and character intention.

Nicholson (2022) identifies reflective authorship as a route toward symbolic rather than testimonial storytelling, while Villarreal & Shively (2025) highlight consent-based distancing as an ethical dramaturgical strategy. In practice, writing served both creative and protective functions, enabling participants to reinterpret material with imaginative freedom.

Moral Reasoning and Collective Ethics

The ensemble's reworking of the neighbours' scene revealed a shared moral stance. Although the original development offered contrasting responses, participants instinctively chose intervention over avoidance. Their choices suggested a collective ethic shaped by lived-experiences of responsibility, protection, or adultification.

Abraham (2023) describes youth performance as a site where moral reasoning is rehearsed and refined, and Brenner, Ceraso & Cruz (2024) argue that youth led work often foregrounds ethical dilemmas and social accountability. The ensemble's dramaturgical decisions clearly reflected these dynamics.

Multiplicity and Complexity in Character Construction

The father character evolved significantly across the devising process. Initially a flat aggressor, he became a multi-layered figure through hot-seating and improvisation. Participants explored contradictory traits such as charm, volatility, helplessness, and trauma, all revealing a nuanced understanding of harm as relational rather than singular.

Diamond (2021) emphasises multiplicity as central to trauma responsive dramaturgy, while Ada (2025) notes that young people often use fictionalisation to interrogate contradictory adult behaviours. The ensemble's refusal to flatten complexity demonstrated emotional intelligence and ethical sensitivity.

Navigating Proximity to Lived-experience

Several entries highlight moments when participants felt emotionally close to the material. Some used humour to deflect, while others explicitly protected private family details. One participant's statement when performing the role of dad was "I don't want to talk about that... that's private"; this illustrates the delicate boundary between fiction and lived-experience.

These moments illustrate what Baim and Brookes (2021) describe as the need for careful containment when material sits close to lived-experience, reinforcing Nicholson's (2022) argument that youth participation requires relational ethics. The journal shows how fictionalisation served as both a shield and a mirror, enabling exploration without requiring personal revelation.

Ensemble Protection and Relational Attunement

The ensemble frequently demonstrated protective behaviours, answering for one another, softening difficult questions, and mirroring emotional states. These relational patterns shaped facilitation decisions, prompting increased individual writing time and careful modulation of group discussions.

Abraham & Baker (2025) describe this as collective witnessing, while Brenner, Ceraso & Cruz (2024) identify ensemble care as central to trauma aware youth practice. The group's attunement became a regulating force throughout the process.

Recurring Narrative Architecture

Across sessions, participants repeatedly returned to a core narrative structure. An unwell mother, a difficult father, a responsible child protagonist, slipping grades, and escalating pressure. These elements formed the emotional architecture of the story, suggesting shared thematic concerns rather than individual testimony.

This recurrence reflects Ada's (2025) observation that youth theatre often gravitates toward themes of precarity, domestic tension, and emotional labour, particularly in communities where caring responsibilities are common. The ensemble's narrative choices reveal collective meaning making shaped by social context.

Clarifying Purpose and Conceptual Spine

A pivotal reflective moment occurred when a collaborator asked, "Why this story? Why now?" This prompted the articulation of the project's conceptual spine and the exploration of masking, intervention, and the unseen emotional labour young people carry. The ensemble repeatedly emphasised moments where someone could have intervened but did not.

This aligns with Brenner, Ceraso & Cruz's (2024) argument that youth led dramaturgy frequently centres on identifying systemic failures and imagining alternative forms of care, intervention, and social responsibility. The journal shows how the ensemble used fiction to interrogate real world gaps in safeguarding.

Ethical Navigation and the Role of Fictionalisation

The journal reveals ongoing negotiation around authenticity, fictionalisation, and safeguarding. Balancing emotional truth with protection required continuous reflexivity.

Long-term relationships within the youth theatre provided a foundation of trust, enabling participants to explore difficult themes safely.

This demonstrates what Villarreal & Shively (2025) describe as consent-based dramaturgy, in which fictionalisation serves as an ethical tool that enables exploration without requiring personal disclosure, and is supported by Diamond's (2021) emphasis on pacing and emotional safety.

Youth Led Complexity and Meaning Making

Ultimately, the journal demonstrates that youth led storytelling thrives when participants are given space to explore contradiction, complexity, and multiple truths. Characters evolved from archetypes into layered, human figures. Through shaping these narratives, the young people were simultaneously shaping their understanding of themselves, their peers, and the adults in their lives.

This complexity reflects Nicholson's (2022) argument that youth meaning making thrives when participants are invited to explore contradiction and nuance and aligns with Abraham's (2023) framing of youth performance as a space for negotiating identity, agency, and relational understanding.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Participant Pre-Questionnaire Responses

The pre-evaluation responses offered a clear picture of how participants entered the project: comfortable in drama spaces, motivated to engage, yet carrying subtle relational sensitivities. These early patterns shaped the facilitation choices that followed.

Theme 1: Established Comfort with Drama Spaces but Trust Remains Conditional

Participants expressed strong comfort in drama environments, echoing Hughes and Wilson's (2004) observation that youth theatre often provides an immediate sense of belonging. Comments such as *"being able to take breaks when I need to"* and *"knowing I have support"* highlight the value of predictable structures and relational warmth, which are central components of trauma-informed practice (Diamond, 2021; Thompson, 2015).

Yet ambivalence about feeling heard suggests trust was present but not fully secure. Rather than reading “neither agree nor disagree” as neutrality, I interpret it as relational sensitivity, a sign that safety was still being negotiated. Nicholson (2014) reminds us that applied theatre spaces are both supportive and precarious, requiring ongoing relational work rather than assuming safety as a given.

Theme 2: Agency as Desired but Unevenly Experienced

While many participants felt confident sharing ideas, others described feeling “*undermined*” or hesitant. These moments reveal uneven experiences of agency within the ensemble. Neelands (2004) critiques the assumption that participation automatically produces empowerment; agency must be actively facilitated, protected, and distributed.

My reflexive stance, shaped by a commitment to co-creation, led me to read these comments as indicators of ensemble power dynamics rather than isolated discomfort. Gallagher (2007) similarly notes that youth creative spaces can reproduce social hierarchies unless facilitators intentionally disrupt them. This theme directly informed the project’s emphasis on shared authorship and negotiated decision making.

Theme 3: Fictionalisation Valued Emotionally but not yet Understood as Protection

Participants strongly agreed that fictional stories help explore feelings safely, aligning with Landy’s (1993) argument that role and distance support emotional processing. However, mixed responses regarding the safety of fictional characters suggest that fictionalisation was intuitively felt but not yet understood as a protective device.

Baim (2017) notes that distancing becomes reliable only when explicitly scaffolded. This baseline insight shaped my facilitation approach: fictionalisation needed to be taught, modelled, and reinforced as an ethical boundary, not simply assumed. Thompson (2009) reminds us that fictionalisation is not inherently safe; it becomes safe through relational and aesthetic care.

Theme 4: Performance Confidence as a Platform for Ensemble Risk Taking

Participants reported high confidence performing in front of others and strong comfort in ensemble work. This resonates with Saxton and Miller's (2016) view that drama education often cultivates performative confidence early, providing a foundation for deeper ensemble exploration.

Reflexively, I recognise that my facilitation identity shapes my interpretation of this confidence. I do not equate performance confidence with emotional resilience; instead, I view it as a platform from which relational and creative risk taking can be developed. This aligns with O'Toole's (1992) argument that drama processes require both competence and vulnerability, and that facilitators must avoid assuming that confident performers are emotionally secure.

Cross Theme Reflexive Interpretation

Across themes, the baseline data reveals a group that entered the project with high comfort, motivation, and performative readiness, but with subtle relational vulnerabilities around idea sharing, listening, and fictionalisation literacy. My own positionality as the facilitator with a long-term, embedded relationship with the group shaped how I interpreted these nuances. Rather than treating ambivalence as neutral, I read it as an indicator of potential emotional triggers and uneven power dynamics with the group members.

This reflexive reading aligns with trauma-informed applied theatre scholarship (Diamond, 2021; Thompson, 2015) and justified the project's methodological choices, predictable session structures, opt-out mechanisms, co-created boundaries, and explicit scaffolding of fictionalisation. The baseline data did not simply inform the project; they shaped my facilitation stance and the ethical commitments embedded in the work.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Participant Post-Questionnaire Responses

Post-questionnaire responses reveal a marked shift in strengthened emotional safety, deeper agency, expanded reflective capacity, and robust ensemble support. Participants engaged

with challenging material while remaining regulated, a key indicator of trauma-informed success.

Theme 1: Strengthened Emotional Safety Through Predictability, Care, and Aesthetic Protection

Participants unanimously reported feeling emotionally safe. Reflections such as *“They were checking in with me all the time”* and *“giving me time outside for fresh air or a break”* highlight the importance of attuned facilitation, choice, and co-regulation (Diamond, 2021; Bath, 2015).

Participants also noted that *“the way the show was written prevented things from becoming too explicit or too much for me.”* This speaks directly to aesthetic protection and the careful use of dramaturgical distance, fictionalisation, and structural containment (Thompson, 2009; Baim, 2017). For me, aesthetic distance is not merely an artistic device but an ethical one.

The strengthened emotional safety aligns with Nicholson’s (2014) argument that safety is an ongoing relational achievement rather than a static condition.

Theme 2: Deepened Agency and Creative Ownership Through Co-Creation

Participants reported meaningful agency in shaping scenes and ideas, describing moments such as: *“I suggested certain props... it ended up being included,”* and *“I could decide how I wanted her to be portrayed.”* These reflections resonate with Neelands’ (2004) critique of tokenistic participation and his call for genuinely shared authorship in drama education.

The quantitative data also show sustained agreement that participants felt they had a say in creative decisions. I interpret these responses through my commitment to youth led practice; I see agency not merely as participation but as influence that shapes the aesthetic and narrative direction of the work.

Responses to fictionalisation (*“made exploring themes safer”*) and fictionalised coping strategies were more varied. This aligns with Landy’s (1993) argument that distancing is often felt rather than consciously articulated, and with trauma-informed scholarship

suggesting that safety mechanisms may operate implicitly (Diamond, 2021). Participants may not always name fictionalisation as a protective tool, but their comfort engaging with difficult themes suggests it functioned effectively.

Theme 3: Emotional Impact, Trigger Awareness, and Expanded Reflective Capacity

Participants described moments of emotional difficulty: *“Some of the shouting became triggering... due to my PTSD,”* *“Knowing the story was built from our lives,”* and *“It was difficult to watch some of the scenes... due to home life.”* These reflections highlight the complex interplay between lived-experience and fictionalised narrative, echoing Thompson’s (2015) concept of “the aesthetics of care”, in which emotional risk is present yet held within supportive structures.

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated significant reflective growth:

- *“I’m braver than I thought.”*
- *“My confidence has grown now.”*
- *“That abuse isn’t always black and white”* (Appendix P).

This aligns with Gallagher’s (2007) argument that applied theatre can cultivate critical self-understanding when facilitated ethically. The increased confidence reported post-project suggests that participants were able to engage with emotionally charged material without being overwhelmed, a key indicator of trauma-informed success.

These reflections are interpreted as evidence of regulated emotional engagement, that participants encountered difficult themes but remained within their window of tolerance due to the project’s relational and aesthetic scaffolding.

Theme 4: Ensemble as a Regulating Force and Fource of Collective Witnessing

Participants described strong ensemble support:

- *“We all made new friendships.”*
- *“They were unbelievably supportive... even after rehearsals.”*

- *“Everyone listened to each other and gave feedback.”*
- *“The community just seemed welcoming overall”* (Appendix P).

These reflections align with Thompson’s (2009) concept of collective witnessing, where ensemble members hold one another through emotionally charged creative processes. The ensemble acted as a regulating force, providing co-regulation, validation, and shared emotional labour, key components of trauma-informed group work (Bath, 2015).

I view ensemble not simply as a group of performers but as an ethical structure that distributes emotional load. This aligns with Saxton and Miller’s (2016) framing of ensemble as a relational practice that fosters empathy, mutual support, and shared meaning making.

Cross Theme Reflexive Interpretation

Across themes, the post-project data revealed strengthened emotional safety, deepened agency, increased reflective capacity, and robust ensemble support. Participants engaged with difficult material while maintaining emotional regulation, suggesting that the trauma-informed structures, predictability, opt-out mechanisms, aesthetic distance, and co-created boundaries were effective.

I recognise that my trauma-informed, youth led facilitation stance shapes my interpretation. I read participants’ growth not as evidence of transformation rhetoric (Neelands, 2004) but as the outcome of carefully scaffolded creative processes that honoured their agency, boundaries, and lived-experiences.

The post-project findings therefore validate the project’s methodological approach and demonstrate the potential of fictionalised lived-experience narratives to support emotional insight, agency, and collective witnessing within applied theatre.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Audience Responses and Community Impact

Audience feedback provided a third layer of triangulation, offering insight into how the performance communicated fictionalised lived-experience material to the wider community.

Using RTA, I approached audience responses as co-constructed meaning shaped by audience members witnessing and my own facilitation stance.

Theme 1: Audience Recognition of Emotional Safety and Ethical Storytelling

Audience members frequently commented on the production's careful handling of sensitive themes, noting that the work felt "*respectful*," "*gentle*," or "*handled with care*" (Appendix Q and R). This aligns with Thompson's (2009) concept of aesthetic containment, in which dramaturgical choices prevent emotional overwhelm while enabling meaningful engagement.

Several audience members described feeling "*safe to watch*," (Appendix Q and R) or that the performance "*didn't sensationalise trauma*," (Appendix Q and R) echoing trauma-informed principles of non-exposure, choice, and emotional pacing (Diamond, 2021). My facilitation stance shapes how I interpret these comments. I read them as validation of the project's ethical commitments rather than simply as praise for artistic quality.

Audience feedback therefore suggests that the fictionalisation strategies such as symbolic characters, alternative endings, and aesthetic distance were legible to audience members as protective mechanisms, even when participants themselves did not always consciously articulate them.

Theme 2: Validation of Youth Agency and Co-Creation

Audience members frequently highlighted the authenticity and ownership visible in the performance, describing it as "*clearly youth led*," "*powerful because it came from them*," or "*full of their voices*" (Appendix Q and R). This resonates with Neelands' (2004) critique of adult imposed narratives and his call for genuinely participatory dramaturgy.

Audience members recognised moments where young people shaped the narrative, characters, and staging, noting that the work felt "*collaborative*," "*truthful*," and "*owned by the performers*" (Appendix Q and R). I interpret these responses through the lens of my commitment to participant agency. I see them not merely as compliments but as evidence that the ensemble's co-creative labour was visible and valued.

Audience recognition of agency also aligns with Gallagher's (2007) argument that spectators can perceive when youth work is ethically facilitated rather than extractive or tokenistic.

Theme 3: Emotional Resonance and Collective Witnessing

Many audience members described the performance as *"moving," "hard-hitting,"* or *"emotionally powerful"* (Appendix Q and R). Some noted that the fictionalised narrative allowed them to engage with difficult themes without feeling overwhelmed, echoing Landy's (1993) argument that role and distance support emotional processing.

Audience responses often reflected collective witnessing (Thompson, 2015), where spectators recognise the emotional labour of performers and share responsibility for holding the narrative. Comments such as *"I felt protective of them," "I wanted to support them,"* or *"the community in the room was palpable"* (Appendix Q and R) suggest that the performance generated a shared emotional field.

These responses are evidence that the ensemble's relational dynamics extended beyond the rehearsal room into the audience space, creating a wider ecology of care.

Theme 4: Recognition of Ensemble Cohesion and Peer Support

Audience members frequently commented on the ensemble's cohesion, describing the group as *"tight-knit," "supportive,"* and *"working as one"* (Appendix Q and R). This aligns with Saxton and Miller's (2016) framing of ensemble as a relational practice that fosters empathy, mutual support, and shared meaning making.

They also noted moments of visible peer support, glances, gestures, and collective breath that signalled co-regulation within the performance. I take these observations as confirmation that the ensemble's internal dynamics were not only functional but aesthetically legible.

This theme reinforces the idea that ensemble work can act as a regulating force, supporting both performers and audience members through emotionally charged material.

Cross Theme Reflexive Interpretation

Across themes, audience feedback demonstrates that audience members recognised and valued the project's trauma-informed, youth led ethos. They perceived emotional safety, ethical storytelling, authentic agency, and strong ensemble support mirroring the developmental trajectory seen in participant data.

I interpret audience responses not simply as external validation but as evidence of the ethical and aesthetic commitments embedded in the project. Audience reception therefore functions as a third layer of triangulation, confirming that the fictionalised lived-experience narrative was both emotionally safe and artistically meaningful.

Discussion

This discussion synthesises the project's findings with contemporary discourse in applied theatre, trauma responsive youth arts, and ethical dramaturgy, examining how methodological choices shaped participant experience and how fictionalised lived-experience narratives supported emotional safety, agency, and reflective capacity. It also considers how the performance functioned as a site of collective witnessing and community reflection, positioning *Holding Stories Safely* within current debates around safeguarding, youth voice, and socially engaged performance.

Fictionalisation as Emotional Protection and Creative Possibility

The findings demonstrate that fictionalisation operated as both an emotional safeguard and a generative creative tool. Participants were able to explore themes related to domestic violence, caring responsibilities, and emotional labour precisely because the work maintained aesthetic distance. This aligns with Landy's (1993) foundational concept of distancing and is reinforced by Diamond's (2021) trauma-informed dramaturgy, which emphasises structures that enable participants to engage with sensitive material without becoming overwhelmed.

Woodland (2022) highlights how trauma responsive youth arts rely on relational pacing and co-regulation, while White (2023) frames care as both an aesthetic and an ethical practice in

participatory performance. These perspectives illuminate how symbolic staging, mediated sound, recorded monologues, and external casting created a protective dramaturgical frame.

The decision to cast an external performer as the father character was particularly significant. It prevented young people from embodying an aggressor figure that might resonate with their lived-experience, while also elevating the performance's aesthetic quality. Audience feedback confirmed this choice, describing the father's first outburst as "*jolting*" (Appendix Q and R) yet recognising that the young people were not harmed.

Rather than diluting authenticity, fictionalisation reframed lived-experience within symbolic, ethically mediated structures. This supports Villarreal & Shively's (2025) argument that consent-based dramaturgy enables exploration without testimonial exposure, and echoes Munson's (2024) work on narrative ethics in youth lived-experience performance. Fictionalisation therefore becomes a site of emotional protection and creative possibility, enabling participants to rehearse resilience, explore alternative perspectives, and engage in reflective meaning making.

Agency, Attunement, and the Emotional Architecture of Co-Creation

Agency emerged as a central factor in supporting emotional regulation and creative engagement. Participants felt safer when they could shape ideas, negotiate involvement, and take breaks, reflecting trauma-informed principles of choice, collaboration, and empowerment. This aligns with Nicholson's (2022) argument that youth agency is relational and negotiated rather than inherent, and with Neelands' (2004) critique of tokenistic participation.

Relational attunement also shaped the emotional architecture of co-creation. Partnerships such as P3 and P4 demonstrated how attuned communication can scaffold emotional nuance and reflective thinking, while other pairings revealed tendencies toward moral simplification. These dynamics highlight the importance of facilitation strategies that encourage multiple viewpoints, resist binary framings, and support reflective thinking, resonating with Brenner, Ceraso & Cruz's (2024) emphasis on relational pedagogy in youth led performance.

Canas (2021) argues that youth led practice must continually interrogate power to avoid reproducing adult authority or extractive storytelling. Redding & Aujla (2023) highlight how creative labour intersects with emotional regulation, reinforcing the ensemble's role as a regulating force.

The project contributes to discourse on co-creative practice, demonstrating that trauma-informed applied theatre requires not only structural safety but relational sensitivity. Facilitators must navigate the tension between shared authorship and safeguarding responsibility, ensuring that young people retain agency while being protected from emotional harm.

Dramaturgical Mediation and the Ethics of Representation

The decision to write the final script myself was a deliberate ethical choice. The final script demonstrates how fictionalisation and dramaturgical mediation protected participants (Appendix T). Findings confirm that dramaturgical mediation was necessary to prevent testimonial exposure, protect participants from embodying their own lived-experiences, and maintain fictionalisation as an ethical boundary. This aligns with Gallagher's (2007) caution that youth performance can unintentionally slip into autobiographical revelation without careful adult mediation.

Participants' interpretations of characters, particularly the father, revealed how personal experience can shape dramaturgical choices. Without mediation, this risked flattening the character into a singular villain. Through hot-seating, fictionalisation, and iterative dramaturgical exploration, the ensemble developed a more nuanced understanding of multiplicity. This reflects Diamond's (2021) trauma responsive dramaturgy and Ada's (2025) analysis of youth theatre's engagement with precarity and emotional labour.

Peck (2023) emphasises relational ethics and multiplicity within feminist dramaturgy, offering a lens for understanding how the ensemble resisted reductive portrayals.

The project therefore offers a model for trauma-informed dramaturgy, demonstrating how facilitators can balance authenticity with protection while expanding interpretive possibilities.

Collective Witnessing and Community Impact

Audience feedback revealed that the performance catalysed community reflection, empathy, and awareness of safeguarding. The audience recognised the emotional labour carried by young carers and young people affected by domestic violence, noting the complexity of safeguarding dilemmas and the need to look beyond surface behaviours.

These responses align with Thompson's (2015) concept of collective witnessing, where performance creates a shared space for emotional recognition and social responsibility. Audience members described moments of shock, empathy, and critical reflection, indicating that the performance successfully invited deeper understanding of youth experience.

Baron Cohen (2022) describes community dramaturgy as a process of social repair; a concept reflected in audience responses that recognised the emotional labour of young people and the wider safeguarding implications of the work.

The Value of Long-term, Embedded Practice

Audience responses also highlighted the significance of long-term, embedded practice. Recognition that the piece emerged from "*18 months' worth of work*" (Appendix Q and R) underscores the necessity of sustained engagement when working with sensitive themes. This supports Nicholson's (2022) argument that transformative applied theatre requires time, trust, and relational depth.

The extended timeline enabled iterative devising, ethical dramaturgy, relational attunement, and emotional pacing. Participants developed confidence, reflective capacity, and ensemble cohesion. The findings suggest that trauma-informed applied theatre cannot be rushed; it requires slow, responsive, relationally grounded practice. This contributes to discourse on Practice as Research, demonstrating how long-term engagement supports both artistic quality and ethical integrity.

How *Holding Stories Safely* Contributes to Applied Theatre Praxis

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that fictionalised lived-experience narratives can support young people's emotional wellbeing, agency, and reflective capacity when held within trauma responsive, ethically grounded applied theatre practice. *Holding Stories Safely* contributes to contemporary praxis in several interconnected ways.

First, the project offers a clear model for ethically navigating lived-experience material in youth contexts. Through symbolic staging, dramaturgical mediation, and carefully structured aesthetic distance, the work shows how sensitive themes can be explored without exposing participants to testimonial risk. This aligns with recent scholarship on consent-based dramaturgy (Villarreal & Shively, 2025), narrative ethics (Munson, 2024), and trauma responsive youth arts (Woodland, 2022).

Second, the project foregrounds the relational nature of co-creation, demonstrating how attunement, trust, ensemble stability, and negotiated agency shape both emotional safety and creative depth. This contributes to current discourse on relational pedagogy (Brenner, Ceraso & Cruz, 2024), decolonial youth practice (Canas, 2021), and feminist dramaturgy (Peck, 2023), highlighting the need for facilitation that is both collaborative and protective.

Third, the work provides evidence of applied theatre's capacity to promote community reflection, safeguarding awareness, and collective witnessing. Audience responses revealed heightened recognition of the emotional labour carried by young people, echoing Thompson's (2015) concept of collective witnessing and Baron Cohen's (2022) framing of community dramaturgy as a form of social repair. The performance invited spectators into deeper understanding, empathy, and critical consciousness, resonating with Freire's (1970) notion of *conscientização*.

Fourth, the project extends understanding of trauma-informed dramaturgy in post-industrial Welsh contexts, demonstrating how long-term, embedded practice supports ethical integrity, ensemble cohesion, and reflective growth. The sustained timeline allowed for iterative devising, relational pacing, and symbolic protection, reinforcing Nicholson's (2022) argument that transformative applied theatre requires time, trust, and relational depth.

Holding Stories Safely advances applied theatre praxis by demonstrating how sensitive stories can be held safely, ethically, and creatively. It shows that fictionalisation can protect without diminishing authenticity, that youth agency thrives within relationally attuned structures, and that community witnessing can deepen safeguarding culture. The project therefore contributes a contemporary, trauma responsive model for youth led applied theatre that enables young people to explore difficult themes without harm, while inviting communities to witness, reflect, and respond with empathy and responsibility.

Implications for the Future of Applied Theatre Praxis

The findings of *Holding Stories Safely* offer several implications for practitioners working with fictionalised lived-experience material in youth contexts. They point toward a praxis that is trauma responsive, relationally attuned, and ethically grounded.

The project demonstrates that fictionalisation should be understood as a protective dramaturgical strategy, not a dilution of authenticity. Symbolic staging, redistributed vocal responsibility, mediated sound, and external casting served as ethical safeguards that enabled young people to explore emotionally charged themes without being exposed to testimonial risk. This aligns with recent scholarship on consent-based dramaturgy (Villarreal & Shively, 2025), narrative ethics (Munson, 2024), and trauma responsive youth arts (Woodland, 2022). Future praxis should treat these techniques as standard safeguarding tools when working with sensitive content.

The importance of attuned facilitation that balances agency with emotional protection. Trauma-informed pacing, opt-out mechanisms, predictable workshop structures, and relational attunement supported participants' emotional regulation and creative confidence. These approaches should be embedded from the outset rather than introduced reactively, echoing White's (2023) framing of care as an aesthetic and ethical practice.

Ensemble fluctuation and attendance instability underscore the need for adaptive dramaturgy. Applied theatre processes must be able to withstand shifts in group composition without compromising emotional safety or narrative coherence. Modular scene structures, flexible casting, symbolic character roles, and iterative fictionalisation can

support this adaptability. This resonates with Peck's (2023) feminist dramaturgy, which emphasises multiplicity and flexibility within relational creative processes.

The project demonstrates the value of collective witnessing as a community intervention. Performances that blend fictionalisation with lived-experience resonance can catalyse community reflection on hidden issues such as domestic violence, caring responsibilities, and emotional labour. This aligns with Thompson's (2015) concept of collective witnessing and Baron Cohen's (2022) framing of community dramaturgy as social repair. Future praxis should therefore consider how performance events can be designed as communal acts of recognition rather than merely artistic outcomes.

These insights contribute to a developing praxis that is trauma responsive, ethically grounded, and attuned to the complexities of youth experience in socioeconomically marginalised contexts.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations shaped the scope and outcomes of this research. Acknowledging these boundaries strengthens the credibility of the study and clarifies the context within which its findings should be interpreted.

- The sample size is relatively small, reflecting the scale of Rhydyfelin Youth Theatre and the fluctuating attendance patterns typical of community youth settings. While the depth of engagement was significant, the findings cannot be generalised across wider populations without caution.
- Attendance fluctuation impacted ensemble stability and narrative development. Although adaptive dramaturgical strategies were employed, inconsistent participation limited the extent to which long-term character arcs or complex relational dynamics could be developed collaboratively. This challenge is common in community-based youth arts and reinforces the need for flexible, modular dramaturgical structures.
- My dual role as facilitator, dramaturg, and student researcher introduced potential bias. Reflexive journaling, ethical safeguards, and triangulation across datasets

mitigated this, but the interpretive lens remained shaped by my positionality.

Participants may also have moderated their responses due to my role in the project, particularly during reflective discussions and evaluation processes.

- Location: The project took place within a specific sociocultural context, the South Wales Valleys, characterised by post-industrial decline, limited youth mental health provision, and strong community identity. These contextual factors significantly influenced the themes that emerged and may not be replicable in other settings. As Canas (2021) and Ada (2025) note, youth arts practice is deeply shaped by local histories, power structures, and socio-economic conditions.

Recognising these limitations ensures that the study's contributions are understood within their appropriate boundaries and supports responsible application of its insights within future applied theatre praxis.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined how fictionalised lived-experience narratives, embedded within trauma responsive applied theatre practice, can support the emotional wellbeing, agency, and reflective capacity of young people aged 14-16 in the South Wales Valleys. Across eighteen months of co-creation with Rhydyfelin Youth Theatre, *Holding Stories Safely* explored sensitive themes related to caring responsibilities and domestic violence, using aesthetic distance, dramaturgical mediation, and relational attunement to ensure that young people could engage with these themes safely, creatively, and without testimonial exposure.

The findings demonstrate that fictionalisation was not merely an artistic device but a vital ethical strategy. Symbolic staging, mediated sound, recorded monologues, and external casting created a protective dramaturgical frame that enabled participants to explore emotionally charged material while remaining regulated and supported. This aligns with Landy's (1993) concept of aesthetic distance, Diamond's (2021) trauma-informed dramaturgy, and recent work on consent-based dramaturgy (Villarreal & Shively, 2025). Fictionalisation allowed young people to rehearse resilience, experiment with alternative perspectives, and engage in reflective meaning making without being placed at emotional risk.

The project also revealed the centrality of agency and relational attunement in supporting emotional regulation and creative engagement. Participants felt safer and more confident when they could shape ideas, negotiate involvement, and take breaks. Supportive partnerships enabled nuanced exploration of emotional themes, while ensemble fluctuations required flexible facilitation and adaptive planning. These findings reinforce Nicholson's (2022) argument that applied theatre is most transformative when participants are positioned as active meaning makers, and resonate with Brenner, Ceraso & Cruz's (2024) emphasis on relational pedagogy in youth led performance.

The dramaturgical process further illuminated the ethical complexities of representing lived-experience themes. Writing the final script myself ensured that participants were not required to embody their own histories, preventing testimonial exposure and maintaining emotional safety. The iterative development of characters, particularly the father, mother, and grandmother figures, demonstrated how fictionalisation can expand interpretive possibilities while maintaining ethical integrity. This aligns with Peck's (2023) feminist dramaturgy, which foregrounds multiplicity and relational ethics, and contributes to ongoing debates around ethical representation in youth performance.

Audience reception formed a significant part of the project's impact. Feedback revealed that the performance served as a catalyst for community reflection, empathy, and awareness of safeguarding. Spectators recognised the emotional labour carried by young carers and young people affected by domestic violence, noting the complexity of safeguarding dilemmas and the importance of looking beyond surface behaviours. These responses align with Thompson's (2015) concept of collective witnessing and Baron Cohen's (2022) framing of community dramaturgy as social repair, demonstrating how youth led applied theatre can contribute to wider community understanding and responsibility.

This dissertation offers an original contribution to applied theatre praxis by articulating a trauma responsive model of fictionalised lived-experience performance for young people. It challenges the assumption that co-creation alone ensures ethical practice, proposing instead a recalibrated methodology that balances youth agency with dramaturgical protection. The project demonstrates how fictionalisation, aesthetic distance, and symbolic staging can

safeguard young people from testimonial exposure while enabling them to engage meaningfully with emotionally resonant themes.

Furthermore, the research contributes new insights into how fictionalised coping strategies, such as imagined support systems, alternative endings, and symbolic characters, can facilitate emotional regulation and reflective thinking. It extends Thompson's (2015) concept of collective witnessing by showing how community audiences can engage with sensitive themes through mediated performance rather than direct disclosure.

The project offers a practical framework for adaptive dramaturgy in contexts marked by attendance fluctuation, emotional volatility, and structural inequality. This framework provides practitioners with concrete tools for balancing ethical responsibility, creative risk taking, and youth agency within complex community settings. It contributes to discourse on Practice as Research by demonstrating how long-term, embedded engagement supports artistic quality, ethical integrity, and relational depth.

Overall, *Holding Stories Safely* advances applied theatre praxis by demonstrating how sensitive stories can be held ethically, creatively, and collaboratively. It offers a model for trauma responsive youth theatre that balances authenticity with protection, agency with safeguarding, and creative risk with emotional safety. It shows that young people can engage deeply with difficult themes when supported by relational attunement, aesthetic distance, and ethical dramaturgy. It also demonstrates that applied theatre allows for community reflection, empathy, and safeguarding awareness, contributing to wider social change.

In conclusion, *Holding Stories Safely* demonstrates that applied theatre can be a powerful, ethical, and transformative space for young people to explore, reshape, and share the stories that matter to them. Through fictionalisation, relational attunement, and collective witnessing, the project created a brave, supportive, and artistically rich environment where young people could safely hold their stories and their community could learn to hold them, too.

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Appendices

Ethical and Administrative Documents

A) Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet: Major Project Applied Theatre University of Wales Trinity St David

Project Title: Holding Stories Safely: Fictionalised Lived-Experience Narratives and Their Impact on Young People's Mental Health supervised by Emily Hutchings and Jonathan Pugh (University Lecturers).

What is this project about?

You are invited to take part in a creative research project exploring how young people can use theatre to share stories safely and powerfully. You will take part in drama workshops where we create scenes together based on themes that matter to you.

What will I be asked to do?

- Join weekly drama workshops.
- Take part in devising, improvisation, and creative activities.
- Share your thoughts in group discussions or short interviews.
- Help shape a final performance (optional).

Do I have to take part?

No. Participation is voluntary. You can stop at any time without giving a reason.

Will my information be kept private?

Yes. Your name will not be used in any writing or presentations. All data will be stored securely.

Are there any risks?

Some themes may feel emotional. You can step out at any time, and support will be available from myself.

Who can I talk to if I have questions?

You can contact Kiara during normal work hours Monday – Friday by email:

Kiara@valleyskids.biz or by telephone: 01443 303032

B) Participant Consent Form**Participant Consent Form**

Please tick each circle to show you consent:

- ☐ I understand the project and what I am being asked to do.
- ☐ I know I can stop at any time.
- ☐ I understand my name will not be used.
- ☐ I agree to take part in the workshops.
- ☐ I agree to be interviewed or take part in discussions.
- ☐ I agree that my creative work can be used in the project.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

C) Parent/Guardian Consent Form**Parent or Guardian Consent Form**

I understand:

- The purpose of the project
- That my child can withdraw at any time
- That data will be anonymised and securely stored
- That safeguarding procedures are in place

- That the project involves creative exploration of sensitive themes: (Caring responsibilities, Emotional resilience, Domestic Violence, Healthy coping strategies, Community and identity).

I give permission for my child to take part in:

- Drama workshops
- Group discussions
- Interviews
- The final performance (optional)

Parent/Guardian Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

D) Valleys Kids Letter

Dear Rhydyfelin Youth Theatre Member and parent or guardian,

As you are aware, in our weekly sessions over the last year and a half, we have been working towards a production. I have spoken with you as a group to let you know that our production will be happening this July. For some of you, you have gone through the process of production building with me before and for some of you, this is the first time, both of which I'm very excited about.

However, there is a slight difference this time round, I am currently studying my master's at University of Wales Trinity St David and for my last module, I have chosen to document the process of building to a production with you. What this means in practical terms, is that I will need to do small interviews/questionnaires with you before we go into production mode and after we have done the production. If you are happy to consent to these interviews/questionnaires, the information you give will be anonymised. I will also be documenting the process of us building our story and production, and within this, you will be anonymised throughout.

I am wearing two hats throughout this process, University Student and Employee of Sparc, Valleys Kids. Valleys Kids wants you to know that your wellbeing is of primary importance. As this is a Sparc provision, you are able to access support from myself, Carys, Gemma and Miranda if you would like any further support at any point during this process. The material that we have been devising is around the sensitive themes of: (Caring responsibilities,

Emotional resilience, Domestic Violence, Healthy coping strategies, Community and identity).

The following dates and times are confirmed and booked with the centre for our rehearsals and the show:

Tuesday 21st July Rehearsal- 10am-2pm

Wednesday 22nd July Rehearsal- 10am-5pm

Thursday 23rd July Rehearsal- 1pm-6pm

Friday 24th July Rehearsal- 10am-5pm

Saturday 25th July Rehearsal- 10am-5pm

Monday 27th July Tech- 10am-5pm

Tuesday 28th July Tech and Dress- 10am-5pm

Wednesday 29th July Rehearsals and Show- 10am-3pm (young people have a break. They can stay or go home and then they come back for 5:30pm, ready for the show at 6pm).

Sparc will provide food, refreshments, costumes etc.

Parents and guardians, please fill in the consent form via this link:

<https://forms.gle/w8Cfm3TfeLjb42PZ7> if you are happy for your child to take part. Or scan this QR code to complete the form.



Any questions, please don't hesitate to email me (kiara@valleyskids.biz) or call us on 01443 303032,

We are very much looking forward to working on this production with you,

Kiara

Safeguarding Paperwork

E) Facilitator Risk Assessment

Risk Area	Potential Impact	People at Risk	Existing Controls	Additional Actions	Risk Level	RA Completed By:
Emotional Safety During Devising- Young people may disclose lived-experiences of domestic violence or caring responsibilities during improvisation.	Emotional overwhelm, re-traumatisation, distress.	Young People and facilitators	Staff trained in safeguarding; “listen, reassure, do not promise confidentiality” procedure already in place; mandatory reporting structure.	Use aesthetic distance; provide opt-outs; grounding exercises; no new lived-experience material added in final 4 weeks.	Amber	Kiara Sullivan
Boundary Confusion (Dual Role)- Researcher is also a paid staff member.	Power imbalance, perceived coercion, blurred roles.	Young People	Valleys Kids code of conduct; requirement to clarify safeguarding responsibilities; supervision structure.	Clarify dual role at project start; reinforce voluntary participation; separate research and pastoral conversations.	Green	Kiara Sullivan
Confidentiality Breaches- Sensitive information shared in workshops	Loss of trust, reputational harm, safeguarding risk.	Young People	Confidentiality policy; staff duty to share only on a	Establish group agreements; reinforce limits of confidentiality;	Green	Kiara Sullivan

may be repeated outside the group.			“need-to-know” basis.	anonymise all material.		
Script Authorship Risks- Young people scripting their own lived-experiences may lead to exposure or unsafe self-representation.	Emotional harm, re-traumatisation, community repercussions.	Young People	Staff responsibility to prevent harm; organisational emphasis on safe creative environments.	Facilitator authors script; use fictionalisation; include only material already processed safely.	Amber	Kiara Sullivan
Performance Risks- Audience includes family/community members connected to sensitive themes.	Shame, exposure, unintended identification.	Young People	Venue safeguarding procedures; staff presence; risk assessments for events.	Remove identifying details; composite characters; content warnings; post-show support pathways. <u>Invited Audience Only</u>	Amber	Kiara Sullivan
Peer-on-Peer Harm- Conflict, bullying, or emotional harm within the group.	Reduced safety, withdrawal, distress.	Young People	Anti-Bullying Policy; staff supervision; behaviour policy.	Monitor group dynamics; intervene early; restorative conversations.	Green	Kiara Sullivan

Research Ethics Risks- Participants feel pressured to contribute because of staff–youth relationship.	Coercion, compromised consent.	Young People	Valleys Kids ethos of respect; requirement for voluntary participation.	Reiterate voluntary nature; multiple ways to contribute; allow withdrawal at any time.	Green	Kiara Sullivan
Data Protection Risks- Mishandling of interview recordings or reflective notes.	Breach of GDPR, loss of trust.	Young People	Data Protection Policy; secure storage requirements; locked cupboards for records.	Anonymise data; encrypted digital storage; limit access.	Green	Kiara Sullivan

This project takes place within a safeguarding-critical environment, where the Valleys Kids Safeguarding Policy emphasises that *“everyone has a right to live free from abuse, exploitation, harm and fear”* (p.3–4). Because the work explores sensitive themes such as domestic violence and young caring, the emotional and ethical risks are inherently higher. The Red, Amber, Green-rated assessment identifies these risks clearly and demonstrates how organisational controls and project-specific measures work together to maintain a safe, ethical, and trauma-informed process.

Amber-rated risks: Emotional Safety During Devising, Script Authorship Risks and Performance risks, reflect the complexity of working with lived-experience material. These risks are mitigated through the use of aesthetic distance, fictionalisation, predictable workshop structures, and clear communication about the limits of confidentiality. The decision for the facilitator to write the script is a key ethical safeguard,

preventing testimonial exposure and ensuring that young people do not carry the emotional burden of scripting their own lived-experiences. This aligns with the policy's requirement to create "a safe space for quality provision" (p.4).

Green-rated risks: Highlights areas where Valleys Kids already has strong embedded controls, confidentiality, anti-bullying, data protection, and safe recruitment. This project builds on these foundations by adding group agreements, anonymisation, reflective practice, and trauma-informed facilitation strategies. These measures ensure that the creative process remains safe, respectful, and ethically grounded.

F) Valleys Kids Risk Assessment

Valleys Kids Out of Centre Risk Assessment			
Building	Rhydyfelin Community Centre performance of 'If Only... '	Assessor	Kiara Sullivan/ K. Sullivan
Date of Assessment	27 th July 2026	Signed off by	Director of Arts, Valleys Kids
Review Date	1 st August 2026	Signature	

Hazard	Persons at risk	Existing controls	Risk Level	Further Actions/	Completed by

				Any other comments	Signed & dated
Electrical Equipment: Faulty appliances could cause electric shock or fire risk. Electrical multi adaptors Electrical extension leads – trips/falls	Staff/volunteers/ service users and all visitors to the Centre	Equipment to be turned off when not in use. Cables to be checked before equipment is used. Any faults or concerns about faulty equipment to be reported to Director of Arts Electrical multi adaptors are not to used at any time. Cables not to be run across walkways if possible. If unavoidable suitable cable covering to be used and replaced when necessary.	Green	Trained staff to set up equipment	KS/Ian McAndrew

		Electrical extensions should never be daisy chained			
Walking Risk of slips, trips and falls. This is considered a normal “life risk” for most people. Risk of musculoskeletal injury – strains, sprains and fractures.	Staff/participants	- For slips, trips and falls, no specific action needed other than reasonable care. -Additional consideration is needed if ground conditions are expected to be poor or if staff have mobility issues. - Staff should ensure they have suitable footwear. - Avoid walking in unlit areas or walking alone late at night.	Green	- For people who have access needs, we are not going to be rushing, we will take our time. - Kiara is also First Aid trained should anyone have a fall.	KS/ CP/Sparc staff
Security Risk of theft or damage if building left unattended.	Staff/Volunteers/ audience members	Staff/ Volunteers to be made aware of leaving valuables unattended. When rooms are unused, they are to be locked, make sure that no fire escape will be obstructed. Windows checked and locked by last person leaving building. Building to be alarmed by last person leaving the building	Green	Key staff to be trained in the lock up procedure	KS/CP

Fire Risk of injury due to fire outbreak.	Staff/participants	- Ensure that fire exit routes are known and usable. - Share with audience before performance - identify key staff to marshal on evening	Green		KS/MB
Musculoskeletal injury Possible risk of musculoskeletal injury due to handling or carrying heavy items of personal belongings.	Staff/participants	Staff and volunteers to adhere to Manual handling policy updated November 2025,	Green		KS
Venue	Staff/participants	- Insurance cover is checked - Venues are asked to risk assess their own building - First aid kits at every activity - Check where the fire exits and meeting point is	Unlikely	- Ensure all staff (team members) know about fire procedures	KS/MB

Safeguarding Protection of vulnerable – children, and disabled young people	Staff / Participants	- All staff are DBS checked and will be made aware of those who need additional support	Unlikely		KS/CP and Sparc staff
First Aid Lack of FA provision Lack of communication	Staff / Participants	- First Aid point will be easily identified to anyone requiring First Aid If an alarm / emergency is raised the emergency services will be called.	Unlikely		KS

G) Valleys Kids Well-Being Risk Assessment- this was built from the Wellbeing Risk Assessment Kiara made for the project- intended use for University and VK

Risk Area	Potential Impact	People at Risk	Existing Controls & Valleys Kids Controls	Additional Actions	Risk Level	RA Completed By
Emotional Safety During Devising – Young people may share lived-experiences of domestic violence or caring responsibilities during improvisation.	Emotional overwhelm; re-traumatisation; distress.	Young People; Facilitators	Safeguarding training; “listen, reassure, do not promise confidentiality”; mandatory reporting structure. Staff are DBS and Safeguarding Trained. Debriefs after every session and weekly check ins with the Director of Arts to ensure regular communication.	provide opt-outs, grounding exercises. Facilitators check in and debrief before and after a session. Reflection Circles at beginning and end of session for young people. At least 2 experienced members of staff present to allow for additional support	Amber	Kiara Sullivan Miranda Ballin

Boundary Confusion (Dual Role) – Researcher is also a paid staff member.	Power imbalance; perceived coercion; blurred roles.	Young People	Valleys Kids code of conduct; safeguarding clarity; supervision structure. Valleys Kids being clear and aware of Kiara’s dual role and ensuring that Valleys Kids practice is still upheld.	Dual-role explanation at project start; voluntary participation reinforced; separation of member of staff and research roles Kiara working in with a co-worker who isn’t involved in research project to allow for additional support if needed.	Green	Kiara Sullivan Miranda Ballin
Confidentiality Breaches – Sensitive information shared in workshops may be repeated outside the group.	Loss of trust; reputational harm; safeguarding risk.	Young People	Confidentiality policy: “need-to-know” information sharing. Valleys Kids Ethical and Safeguarding policies are in place.	Establish group agreements; reinforce limits of confidentiality; anonymise all material.	Green	Kiara Sullivan Miranda Ballin

Script Authorship Risks – Young people scripting their own lived-experiences may lead to exposure or unsafe self-representation.	Emotional harm; re-traumatisation; community repercussions.	Young People	Staff responsibility to prevent harm; safe creative environment. Valleys Kids have sign off the script before young people see it. Parents/guardians consulted throughout process, and trigger warning contained in their consent letters.	Facilitator authors script. Young people receive the script a month in advance to be able to make a collective decision on whether it is right for them. If so, they take the scripts home and share with family members if they wish too. Invited-audience controls; content-warning sheet; recording used only for archive and absent group members.	Amber	Kiara Sullivan
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Research Ethics Risks – Participants feel pressured to contribute because of staff–youth relationships.	Coercion; compromised consent.	Young People	Valleys Kids ethos of respect; voluntary participation. Consent from parents/guardians sought at beginning of process.	Clear consent statements; anonymous feedback explanation; multiple contribution routes; withdrawal possible at any time (both for young people and audience).	Green	Kiara Sullivan Miranda Ballin
Data Protection Risks – Mishandling of interview recordings or reflective notes.	Breach of GDPR; loss of trust.	Young People	Data Protection Policy; secure storage; locked cupboards; any printed documentation with lead facilitator/Director of Arts.	Anonymisation; encrypted digital storage; limited access; secure storage of performance recordings; secure storage of vox pops; archive-only use.	Green	Kiara Sullivan
Audience Feedback & Vox Pops – Misunderstanding of consent or discomfort with being recorded.	Distress; accidental identification; ethical breach.	Audience Members; Young People	Trained Staff present, safeguarding policy.	Clear consent statements; anonymous feedback explanation; storage and access statement; voluntary participation; option to decline without explanation.	Green	Kiara Sullivan Miranda Ballin

Risk Matrix

Colour	Risk Level	Description	Recommended Action
 Green	Low Risk	Unlikely to cause harm. Existing controls are effective.	Continue to monitor and maintain current controls.
 Amber	Medium Risk	Some potential for harm. Additional controls may be required.	Review and implement further control measures where reasonably practicable. Monitor regularly.
 Red	High Risk	Significant likelihood of harm or severe consequences.	Immediate action required. Stop the activity until the risk is reduced to an acceptable level.

Signed by: Director of Arts, Valleys Kids – Monday 27th July 2026:



H) Valleys Kids Filming Notice



Recording Notice

Please note: Tonight's performance will be recorded.

The recording is being made only for two purposes:

1. **To allow members of the youth theatre who could not attend or perform tonight to watch the final piece privately;**
2. **For Valleys Kids archive**

The recording will:

- **Not be shared publicly**
- **Not be posted online or on social media**
- **Not be distributed outside the organisation**
- **Be stored securely in line with Valleys Kids safeguarding and data-protection procedures**

Only authorised staff members will have access to the recording. No audience members will be filmed directly unless they appear incidentally as part of the general auditorium. If you don't want to appear in the video please let a member of staff know.

If you have any questions about recording or data protection, please speak to a member of staff before or after the performance.

I) Valleys Kids Audience Information Sheet



Audience Information

Content Advisory

Tonight's performance includes themes related to:

- Caring responsibilities
- Family conflict
- Domestic violence
- Emotional stress and resilience

If any part of the performance feels emotionally difficult, you are welcome to step into the small hall where an identified member of staff will be present, where if you wish, you can speak to them or take a break.

Support & Helplines

If you are affected by any of the themes, the organisations below offer confidential support:

Domestic Violence & Family Conflict

- **National Domestic Abuse Helpline (Refuge)** - 0808 2000 247
- **Live Fear Free-** Call 0808 80 10 800 Email info@livefearfreehelpline.wales
Text 07860077333
- **Respect- Men's Advice Line** - 0808 801 0327

Young Carers

- **Carers Trust Wales** - 0808 808 7777
- **Barnardo's Young Carers Service** - <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/>

Mental Health & Emotional Support

- **Childline (under 19s)** - 0800 1111
- **Samaritans** - 116 123
- **Mind Cymru** - 0300 102 1234

J) Kiara Sullivan's Audience Consent Slip

Audience Consent Slip

By taking part in a vox pop, you're giving permission for your recorded comments to be used anonymously as part of the project's evaluation and Kiara's Master's research.

Your participation is voluntary, and you can stop at any time.

The recordings will be stored securely and accessed only by Kiara for research purposes.

PRINT NAME:

SIGNATURE:.....

DATE:.....

K) Link to: [Valleys Kids Safeguarding Policy](#)

Data Collection Instruments

L) Link to Participant Pre- Questionnaire Form: [Major Project Pre-Questionnaire – Fill in form](#)

M) Link to Participant Post- Questionnaire Form: [Major Project Post-Questionnaire – Fill in form](#)

N) Link to Audience Feedback Questionnaire Form: [Major Project Post-Questionnaire \(Audience\) – Fill in form](#)

Data Collection Findings

Due to the presence of personal and sensitive data, the full dataset is stored in a secure university folder accessible only to the supervisory team.

O) Link to Participant Pre- Questionnaire Data- [Major Project Pre-Questionnaire \(Participant\).xlsx](#)

P) Link to Participant Post- Questionnaire Data- [Major Project Post-Questionnaire \(Participant\).xlsx](#)

- Q) Link to Audience Feedback Data- [Major Project Post-Questionnaire \(Audience\).xlsx](#)
- R) Link to Audience Transcription of Spoken Feedback- [Spoken Audience Feedback for If Only....docx](#)
- S) Link to the footage of If Only... - [If Only...Rhydyfelin Youth Theatre Wednesday 29th July 2026.mp4](#)

Creative Artefacts

T) Reflective Journal Entry

Over the past weeks, the group's work around monologues, character development and hot-seating has revealed far more emotional and dramaturgical depth than I anticipated. What began as simple perspective-writing exercises quickly became windows into how these young people understand family, responsibility, and adult behaviour.

Typing up their monologues created a surprising shift. Seeing their words formalised on the page helped them recognise repetition, refine language, and approach their own writing with a more critical eye. It also gave performers permission to reinterpret the material, creating a healthy distance between writer and character.

A major learning moment emerged when exploring the neighbours' scene. Initially written with contrasting reactions, the participants re-performed it with both neighbours choosing to call social services. This raised questions about why they avoided the "it's not my problem" stance. It became clear that many of them instinctively gravitate toward fixing, intervening, or protecting, perhaps reflecting their own lived-experiences of stepping into adult roles prematurely.

The most complex work centred on Dad. Early in the devising process, Dad was a flat aggressor. Through hot-seating, multiple versions emerged: the charming public figure, the volatile private presence, the helpless partner, the man shaped by his own childhood trauma. Participants described him as "narcissistic," "misogynistic," "self-absorbed," and someone who "maintains a good outward appearance". Yet they also revealed glimpses of care, confusion, and emotional collapse. This multiplicity felt truer to their lived realities than a single villain would have.

Hot-seating unintentionally brought personal feelings to the surface. When in role, some participants deflected with humour when unsure; others became protective of private family details. One participant said, "I don't want to talk about that... that's private," signalling how close the material sat to real experience. Another participant, who has never had a father figure, approached the role with imaginative distance but also emotional curiosity. These moments reminded me that fiction can be both a shield and a mirror.

I also noticed how tightly the group protects one another. They answer for each other, step in to soften difficult questions, and mirror each other's emotional states. This reinforced the need for careful pacing, individual writing time, and clear boundaries around autobiographical writing.

As the narrative developed, I realised the group consistently returned to the same core elements: an unwell mother, a difficult father, a responsible child protagonist, slipping grades, and escalating pressure. These components felt non-negotiable; they were the emotional architecture of the story they wanted to tell.

A key reflective challenge emerged when my collaborator asked, "*Why this story?*" *Why now?* This question forced me to articulate the deeper purpose: to explore masking, intervention, and the unseen emotional labour young people carry. The group repeatedly highlighted moments where someone could have intervened but didn't. This became the conceptual spine of the emerging script.

Throughout this process, I've been navigating institutional scrutiny around ethics and fictionalisation. Balancing authenticity with safeguarding has been a constant negotiation. Yet the work itself feels safe, held, and grounded in long-term relationships. Fiction has allowed participants to explore difficult themes without re-traumatisation, and ensemble practice has distributed emotional weight across the group.

Ultimately, these sessions have taught me that youth led storytelling thrives when participants are given space to explore complexity, contradiction, and multiple truths. Their characters are no longer flat archetypes; they are layered, shifting, and deeply human. And in shaping these narratives, the young people are also shaping their understanding of themselves, each other, and the adults in their lives.

U) Link to If Only...Script: [University Master- If Only... RYT Script.pdf](#)