

ACTING AS LEISURE

What non-acting-related benefits, if any, do adults report experiencing through participation in acting classes?

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WHY THIS STUDY?

After seventeen years of teaching adults at Merseyside Academy of Drama, I repeatedly heard students describe benefits beyond learning to act.

I wanted to examine those accounts systematically.



MY CONTEXT

Founder and tutor at Merseyside Academy of Drama with 17 years' experience teaching adults.



THE GAP

Research links arts participation and wellbeing, but acting is more often studied in educational, therapeutic, professional or experimental contexts.



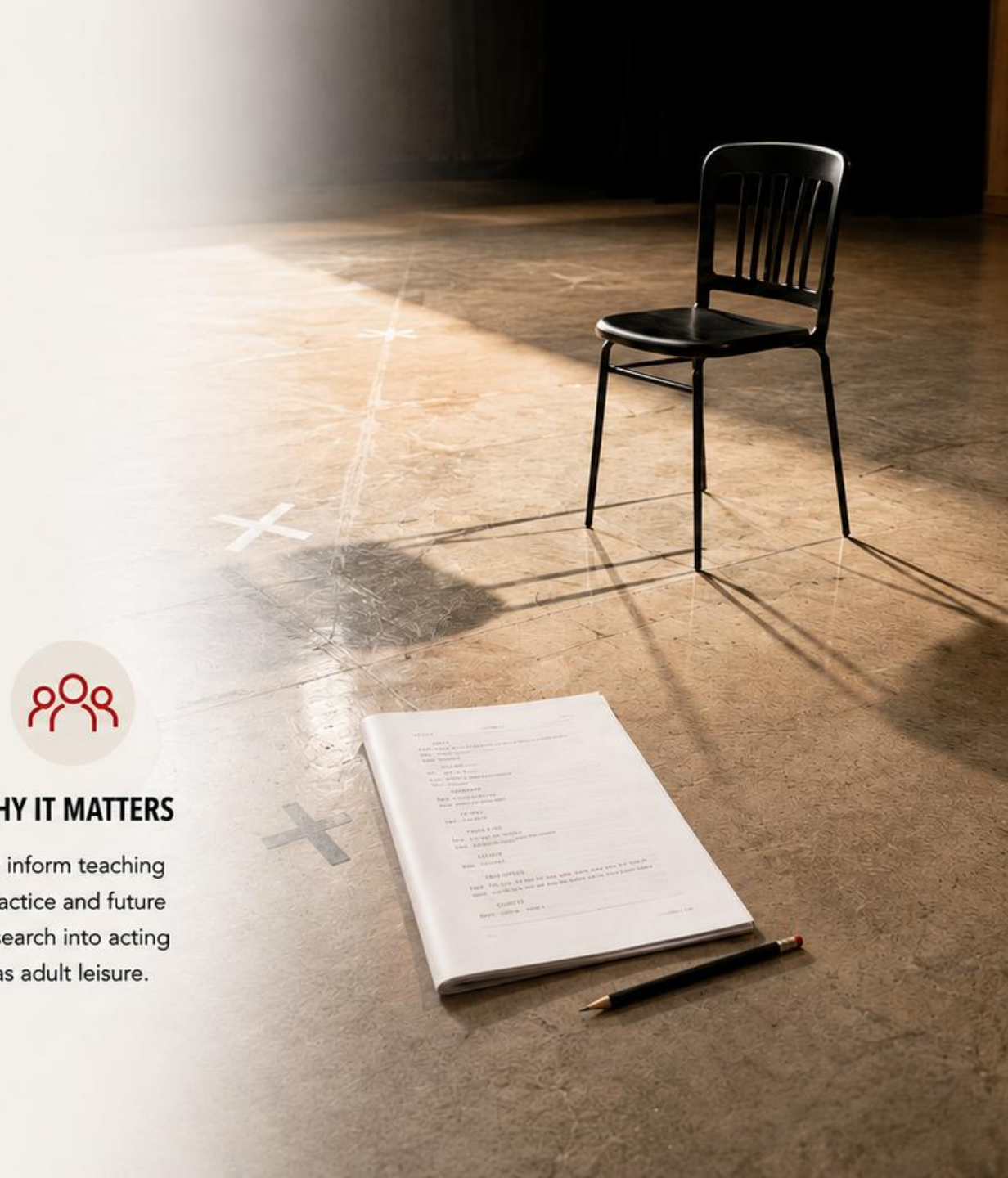
THE OBJECTIVE

To explore what non-acting-related benefits, if any, adults report through sustained acting participation.



WHY IT MATTERS

To inform teaching practice and future research into acting as adult leisure.



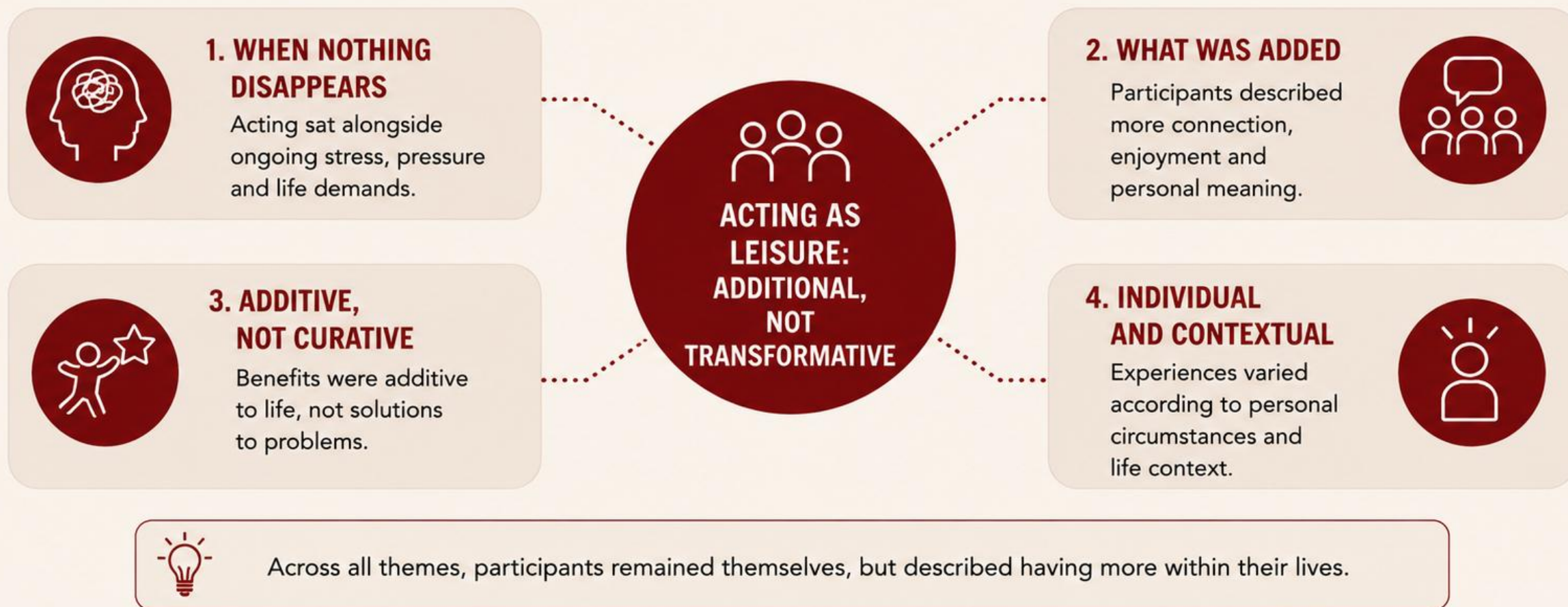
HOW I INVESTIGATED IT



Interpretivist • Purposive sample • Ethical approval • Pseudonyms • Insider researcher
Finlay (2002); Mercer (2007)

WHAT EMERGED?

Reflexive thematic analysis generated four interconnected themes.



WHEN NOTHING DISAPPEARS

**“Your nervousness
doesn’t automatically
mean no anymore.”**

Not confidence → willingness despite discomfort

“ *Maybe confidence isn’t not being nervous.
Maybe it’s just still doing it.*
— KhartEEK

nervousness • mistakes • recoverability

“It moves to the back.”

Not stress relief → temporary reorganisation of attention

“ *It moves to the back.”*
— Claire

absorption • interruption • temporary relief



Both themes complicate conventional ideas of confidence and stress relief.

(Newman et al., 2014; Sonnentag and Fritz, 2015)



WHAT WAS ADDED?

**“People notice if
I’m not there.”**

Not just friendship → being expected,
remembered and known

“ *Known. I suppose.”*
— Lynn

belonging • recognition • continuity



**“That is not useful.
I love it.”**

Not transformation → play, ownership
and identity expansion

“ *I just had another thing in my life.”*
— Claire

play • ownership • possibility

These themes suggest expansion rather than transformation.

(Stebbins, 2007; Newman et al., 2014)

ADDITIVE, NOT CURATIVE

Across all four themes, the benefits described were **additive rather than curative**.



More willingness

to act despite discomfort.



More interruption

from persistent concerns.



More connection

through recognition and belonging.



More play

and self-expression on their own terms.

“It doesn’t fix the hard stuff. It just gives you more to live.”

– Claire

The argument is modest: acting appeared to **add something** to these participants’ lives, without necessarily fixing what was already difficult.

(Diener et al., 2010; Dodge et al., 2012; Daykin et al., 2018)



LINKING TO THE LITERATURE



This aligns with multidimensional accounts of wellbeing where positive functioning can coexist with continuing difficulty.

(Diener et al., 2010; Dodge et al., 2012)



It also supports calls to understand the processes and contexts through which arts participation may matter, rather than assuming uniform effects.

(Daykin et al., 2018)



WHAT THIS STUDY DOES NOT CLAIM

- This is a small study (n=6) of sustained participants from one organisation.
- It cannot establish causation.
- It may under-represent those who left early or had mainly negative experiences.

SO WHAT CHANGES IN PRACTICE?



1. Reframe confidence

Success may mean acting despite nerves — not removing them.



2. Design manageable challenge

Choice, safety and recoverable failure matter.



3. Protect belonging

Continuity and recognition matter — but social pressure can become a burden.



4. Value play for its own sake

Not every activity needs a measurable developmental outcome.

My professional learning: I began looking for benefits. I ended by questioning how I define them.

Future research: early leavers • longitudinal newcomers • comparison with other sustained leisure activities

SLIDE 9

SO, WHAT DID ACTING ADD?

Participants generally remained themselves, but described having *more* within their lives.



More
willingness



More
space



More
connection



More
play

*Acting mattered not because it transformed
who participants were, but because it gave them
more ways to *participate, connect, play* and continue *becoming*.*

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