

# Working on a dream

**Lizzie Winter & Jacqui McAlpine**

## Abstract

As one of the partners of the project, Seven Doors approached The University of Edinburgh to offer the opportunity to a student to conduct a piece of work within the project. As one of the authors was considering options for her thesis for MSc Childhood Studies, she conducted an ethnographic study of the project, focusing on the experiences, views and opinions of young people and care staff participating in the project, and this produced some of the results which will be discussed in this paper.

## Keywords

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## Corresponding author:

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## Introduction

Creativity is understood to improve young people's esteem, motivation, achievement, outcomes and enjoyment. Participation in arts projects can enhance young people's satisfaction with life, prepare them for what is yet to come and also inspire them to help create what comes next (Balshaw, 2004; Russ, 2003; Scottish Government, 2008a). Working on a Dream brings multidisciplinary arts workshops into two secure units in Scotland. Through partnerships with other arts organisations and work with the young people's teachers, and care staff, Working on a Dream provides high quality creative, enriching and transforming artistic experiences, including new technologies, with the aim of raising young people's aspirations and improving their achievements. As the project was initially engaged in the units to work alongside the education provision, the content of workshops was guided by the Curriculum for Excellence. Funded by Scottish Arts Council Inspire Communities Fund, The National Lottery, BBC Children in Need, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Fairer Scotland, Working on a Dream engages Looked After Children in multi-disciplinary cultural and arts experiences, aiming to enhance their creativity and learning and help fulfil Scotland's vision of 'Getting It Right For Every Child' (Scottish Government, 2010).

As one of the partners of the project, *Seven Doors* approached The University of Edinburgh to offer the opportunity to a student to conduct a piece of work within the project. As one of the authors was considering options for her thesis for MSc Childhood Studies, she conducted an ethnographic study of the project, focusing on the experiences, views and

opinions of young people and care staff participating in the project, and this produced some of the results which will be discussed in this paper.

### Description of *Seven Doors* and the workshops

Throughout 2010, *Working on a Dream* brought a team of three artists into the two secure units for an hour and a half, three times a week. During these sessions, artists, young people and *Seven Doors* staff explored themes, ideas and topics that link to the curriculum through arts experiences that support and expand on what was being learnt in the classroom. The year was structured in three blocks which shadowed the school terms, each ending with a celebratory presentation of young people's achievements. The objectives of the project were:

- To increase the aspirations and academic achievements of Looked After Children through engagement in the arts;
- Guide LAC towards positive behaviour when they return to their communities by providing a network of opportunities in the arts;
- Provide artists with new methods to engage with LAC specifically in the context of multidisciplinary arts activities;
- Provide teachers and care staff with new approaches for using arts in their everyday interactions with LAC;
- Increase the awareness of LAC in the general public through the viewing of public events created by LAC within the context of this project;
- Create case study material for professional educators and student teachers through the documented experiences of this project;
- Develop a model for arts engagement in work with LAC for use in other parts of Scotland; (*Seven Doors*, 2009).

As the first project of its kind, all the participants have been on an exciting and challenging journey and it is important to share this journey with the wider care community to illuminate ways in which residential care is meeting the needs of young people and explore ways in which frontline staff can be supported to help the young people with whom they work.

### Why Arts?

All young people deserve access to the arts (Scottish Government, 2008a; 2008b). Creative practices provide the potential for people to learn in different ways, for new and fresh expressions and experiences, and for participants to engage in safe yet challenging environments (Cape UK, 2008). Research demonstrates that arts education can engage young people who have become disenchanted with education in general and can bring therapeutic advantages to young people (Griffiths et al., 2006). These factors are of

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crucial importance to young people in residential care because ‘a commitment to children’s social, emotional and physical needs is mentioned in the literature as being a key feature of a positive residential experience’ (Elsley, 2009, p. 15). In addition to improving access to the arts, Working on a Dream challenges participants to step out of their comfort zones; however, it does so in a way that promotes confidence, risk-taking and the growth of talents and interests. These are factors that contribute to the development of resilience and provide ground for relationships to begin, grow and flourish, contributing to the work that residential child care practitioners already carry out in relation to promoting attachment (Gilligan, 1997).

### Inspiring Resilience

Gilligan’s definition of resilience as ‘a set of qualities that helps a person to withstand many of the negative effects of adversity....Bearing in mind what has happened to them, a resilient child does better than he or she ought to do’ (Gilligan, 2000, as cited in Maclean, 2003, p.1) resonates here, as *Seven Doors* contributes to the work that is done in the units to help young people come to terms with their past and move on to their future. Confidence is a valuable currency for young people in care, and arts activities contribute to the development of confidence (Griffiths, 2006). The artists in the project ask young people to speak in groups, or to perform in front of their peers, care staff, *Seven Doors* staff and managers, to share their ideas, and to speak about hopes and aspirations. As such, effort and energy are demanded from young people and care staff in stimulating and novel ways. This has not been without challenges. *Seven Doors* frequently asked participants to engage in unfamiliar activities. For example, some workshops involved young people drawing round each other in the dark with torches, recorded by a slow shutter camera to create still images to be used for Christmas cards and invitations for Christmas events at the units. This required concentration, trust and creative thought from all participants, attributes which were built throughout the year-long programme.

As highlighted by Maclean, ‘there is a growing body of research that shows that participation in activities, hobbies and useful tasks promotes resilience’ (Maclean, 2003, p.4). By responding to the interests and hobbies of young people in the units, *Seven Doors* encouraged young people to nurture and develop individual talents and interests, which is proven to increase self-esteem and have great effects in gaining a sense of self-worth (Gilligan, 1997). Roles and responsibilities are important parts of workshops, providing a sense of positive identity, and are a source of pleasure (Maclean, 2003). This is one example of the child-centered approach adopted by *Seven Doors* staff. As illuminated by the manager of one of the units:

It wouldn’t be possible without the care and child-centeredness of the Creative Directors. They really place the young people at the heart of everything they do; (Care manager of Unit A).

A useful framework of reference here is Grotberg’s ‘five building blocks of resilience’. Grotberg believes ‘for youth to become resilient, they must feel that they have the ability to do something about their situations - to meet their challenges’ and this ability is created by five basic building blocks (Grotberg, 1999). Corresponding to the five

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developmental stages of life, the five basic building blocks of resilience are: trust, autonomy, initiative, industry and identity. *Seven Doors* promotes these different attributes through its child-centered approach to arts and creativity. Relationships, stimulating activities and hard work in a safe and supported space play important roles in developing resilience.

## Relationships

Relationships are pivotal in residential child care (Morrow, 2001; Phelan, 2001). *Seven Doors* recognised this and provided experiences that attempted to be inspirational, professional and understanding. Experiences that *Seven Doors* shared with young people and care staff can be understood through the lens of attachment theory, with emphasis on:

- Promoting relationships with new people that otherwise would not be experienced or enjoyed;
- New experiences for young people, care staff and teachers to share together;
- Group work experiences;
- Developing new ways for participants to express themselves and new ways of being understood.

The journey from discussing favourite music to creating music offers care staff opportunities to engage with young people in ways that are new and offer potential for growth and learning. Young people participating in the project often found group work challenging. Being aware of this and giving young people a choice of activities to engage in, artists were able to create safe spaces for young people to work together in groups and to encourage everyone to benefit from the relationships that grew as a result of this kind of engagement.

## Stories

Young people in secure units have complex and difficult stories from their lives and they often have limited tools with which to tell these stories. *Working on a Dream* offers young people ways of accessing and expressing their stories that may not have been experienced before, and this has emerged as an invaluable impact of the project. Taking photographs of meaningful places in the units, writing stories inspired by objects in the units and writing, recording and performing lyrics and songs all encourage creative ways for young people to make sense of their worlds. Young people and residential child care practitioners learn about each other in ways that they have not previously experienced. Residential care offers young people ways to explore their identities (Gharabaghi, 2009). For one young participant struggling with an aspect of his identity, the experience allowed him to rehearse and test his feelings about himself in a safe and supported way.

One particular strand of the project focused on telling stories through puppets. Twelve young people and their care staff engaged in an intensive puppet-making course, creating

and performing with their puppets. One member of the care staff team described the experience as ‘externalising identities and trying new identities (which) enables young people to develop new ways to experience themselves and others, contributing to their ability to form healthy and positive attachments’.

### Trips and visits

Seven Doors offers opportunities for young people to visit arts and cultural sites in Edinburgh, and so far young people have been on trips to the Lyceum and the Talbot Rice Gallery. Young people attended ‘Child’ by Julie Andrews at the Talbot Rice Gallery. Having spent periods of her own life in care, Julie brings autobiographical elements to her images of children and childhood. During the visit, Julie engaged with young people from the units on a tour of her exhibition and one young person residing in the units described her experience of the Talbot Rice Gallery:

I found it good! To understand how you could express your emotions in art but hearing stuff about Julie was quite sad and with being in care; (Young person, UnitB).

### Monitoring and Evaluation

An interactive evaluation of Block One throws light on the experiences of young people, residential child care practitioners and teachers. Below is an example of the comments which emerged from the evaluation session:

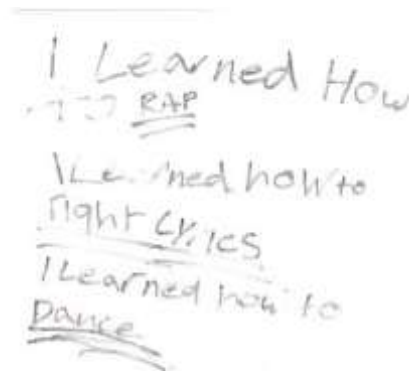
Response to

‘What have you enjoyed?’:



Response to

‘What have you learned?’:



Response to 'What could be changed?':

More green screen !!!  
 More Me  
 More debating about graffiti

Participants particularly enjoyed debates that emerged about graffiti, which relied on the professionalism of the artist to guide and inform lively debates on the history and laws surrounding graffiti. Advice from young people about future sessions included 'come in twice a week' and 'smaller groups'. These pieces of advice were documented and used to inform following programmes of workshops. Evaluation of the second block included activities and guided conversations with young people and residential child care practitioners, and interviews with teachers, senior staff at Secure Services, artists and *Seven Doors* staff. Findings demonstrate that the project has shared positive effects with young people and the units as a whole and that there are certain areas which require more energy to maximise their impacts. Young people are not the only ones who have engaged on a learning curve; *Seven Doors* has also learnt a great deal since February. The main challenges and learning by *Seven Doors* will now be explored briefly.

### Learning by *Seven Doors*

Secure units are one part of a complex myriad of staff, service users, councils, needs and provisions surrounding vulnerable young people and communities. *Seven Doors* entered into this myriad of provision with a lot to give and a lot to learn. Highlighted by care staff and teachers, the main areas that are crucial for success of the project are communication and continuity. Care staff voiced concerns that they did not have enough opportunity to share their practice with *Seven Doors* and that they would benefit from a more comprehensive induction to the project. Joint planning and information sharing emerged as key springboards to success, and this has been taken on board by *Seven Doors* by allowing time and resources to engage with participants outwith workshops to increase understanding and form relationships. *Seven Doors* requires commitment and enthusiasm from all staff. By identifying particular 'link' workers for bi-weekly meetings and attending weekly managers' meetings, *Seven Doors* began to learn about and work with the cultures of the units. As people in the units became accustomed to *Seven Doors*, trust and relationships began to grow.

### 'It takes my mind off things, ye ken?'

Through an ethnographic study of the experiences and opinions of young people and care staff using interactive activities, guided conversations and participant observation,

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findings indicate that there are eight key ingredients to a successful arts project. These are: understanding of the project, care staff participation, introduction to the project, importance of relationships, person centered-ness, relationship with the Curriculum for Excellence, confidence and ‘voice and agency’.

When young people and care staff understood the purpose of the activity, participation and enjoyment increased. Participants felt that this needed to be improved on in some workshops. As can be seen in the following quote, many young people reported increased enjoyment when care staff participated in workshops.

Princess Tippytoes: I like it that everyone joins in, that MK and Ringo join in.  
 Researcher: Has *Seven Doors* made you see the care staff in a different way?  
 Princess Tippytoes: Aye aye it has.

Both groups of participants reported that workshops allow new interactions and experiences with each other. Some care staff reported issues with behaviour in workshops and this has been listened to by *Seven Doors*. Many participants reported that they could have done with a more comprehensive introduction to the project, including who was going to be involved, what workshops would entail, and why participants should engage in the project. One residential care worker stated:

It would be better if the workers came in and spent some time with the kids you know, to get to know them as young people, what they like, what they're into.

Young people held preference for artists who had delivered the most workshops and with whom they had the most contact. This calls attention to the need for space within the project for relationships to be cultivated. Six young people reported having never met an artist before and being surprised at how normal artists are, and how meeting artists had made them think about their own futures. Young people reported that when they directed the content of workshops, and when the content related directly to their lives, they enjoyed and learnt from the project. Some activities were reported as ‘babyish’ and ‘boring’ and this prevented young people from participating in the workshops. Young people, care staff and artists engaged in negotiations which were reported and observed to be both challenging and useful in developing skills. Some activities, however, were conveyed as being difficult for young people and care staff to understand and this has been taken into account by *Seven Doors*. *Seven Doors* works within the 24-hour curriculum and offers creative ways of teaching and learning. Young people reported that they enjoyed the project because it offered different types of learning and different ways of expressing themselves.

Many young people and care staff report that activities offered by *Seven Doors* has increased their confidence and self-esteem, with both groups expressing that they now do things that they did not believe that they could do before. This in turn contributed to the success of the workshops. When asked about what he had learnt from the project, one young person stated:

I talk in groups now, before I wouldnae even go into a group. But now I will. I have become more respective towards people in a group, I'll listen to other people

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Speaking up in groups, performing in front of an audience and trying new things were all communicated as consequences of workshops. One young person described how he spoke at his recent Children's Hearing, something that he had not previously done. This is a great achievement for him. Young people conveyed that they were learning how to negotiate with others and express their views, and these were factors that contributed to successful workshops.

When the key ingredients are present, Working on a Dream lets young people learn in new ways, allows them to enjoy each other's company and learn ways of making sense of their complex and challenging lives. Overwhelmingly, many young people had not participated in similar artistic or cultural activities before, highlighting a disjunction between policy and practice.

### Policy and policy implications

The experiences of *Seven Doors* could have valuable impact on policy making. Getting it Right for Every Child (Scottish Government, 2010) encourages inter-agency working to improve outcomes and opportunities for all young people, and *Seven Doors* helps to achieve this. By engaging with *Seven Doors* to deliver arts and cultural experiences, the units are becoming even more involved in their responsibility as corporate parent to the looked after young people in their care. *Seven Doors* addresses some of the aspirations featured in *These are our bairns* (Scottish Government, 2008b) by removing barriers such as lack of equipment, clothing, transport, fear of the unknown and lack of awareness, and provides creative and exciting programmes specifically created for young people in secure care. Working on a Dream has given opportunities to artists to work with looked after young people in ways that are new to them, sharing skills which increase the potential for future projects with this population.

### Unlocking potential

The various activities and journeys that participants have engaged with have gone beyond 'increasing the aspirations and academic achievements of Looked After Children through engagement in the arts' (*Seven Doors*, 2009). Moreover, they have equipped young people with ways of understanding and expressing their own life stories and have provided a safe space for young people to rehearse aspects of their identities. Participation in the project supports work done by the units to encourage young people to develop trusting relationships with each other and to develop inner strengths of confidence, self-esteem and responsibility, each crucial to the development of resilience in young people.

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