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Creating Community Resilience: Theatre for Young Audiences and the Mental Health Crisis

Danny Braverman and Ava Hunt

Abstract

The authors explore the assertion that TYA in schools can play a significant role in addressing the mental health crisis affecting young people in the UK, with implications globally. There is growing consensus that the current mental health crisis is impacting on attainment. However, government remains reluctant to recognise the value of arts education in schools, as narrow instrumentalism which continues to feed the 'exam factory'.

This paper proposes not just a reinvigoration of professional TYA in schools, but also a framework to evaluate 'quality'. Braverman's *Dialogue Across Difference*, inspired by the work of Jill Dolan (2008) and Victor Turner (2011), uses the exemplar of Theatre Centre UK. David Johnston's leadership (Artistic Director 1977-1986) is placed within this framework to explore Hunt's practice-as-research project *Journeys of Destiny* (2019). The authors reframe the notion of 'resilience' as a community-social paradigm in contrast to an individualistic-medical model.

Context: the mental health crisis

The mental health crisis is thought to affect 10-20% of children and young people in the world (World Health Organization 2019). It is clear that this is something that needs addressing in many ways, but importantly in schools. So, how can Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) make a contribution? In this article, we will explore how visiting theatre companies can regain a foothold in schools, focusing on the specific example of Ava Hunt's most recent project, *Journeys of Destiny* (Christie 2019), and using Danny Braverman's *Dialogue-Across-Difference* framework. This collaboration was inspired by the pioneering work of our colleague and friend, David Johnston, who passed away in November 2017. Johnston's work, as Artistic Director of Theatre Centre from 1977 to 1986, presents us with an approach that can act as an inspiration for today.

One way of looking at the mental health crisis for young people in the UK is through statistics:

- A quarter of a million children in the UK have an identified mental health need (YoungMinds 2019);
- 33% of children with mental health needs come from poorer families (Minds Ahead, 2019).
- 82% of teachers say that the focus on exams has become disproportionate to the overall well-being of students (YoungMinds 2019).
- 92% of parents think that schools have a duty to support the well-being and mental health of students (YoungMinds 2019).

However, as artists and academics, we want to excavate beneath the data to human testimony. Teachers say of the mental health crisis:

'It's like a slow-motion car crash for our young people that I am powerless to stop and can't bear to watch or be part of anymore.'

'SATs pressure and general expectations are taking their toll on more vulnerable pupils ... We have nine-year-olds talking about suicide.'

'I am currently working with 15 children who have been bereaved, have anxiety, have PTSD or a parent with a terminal or life-threatening illness' (Weale 2019).

Parents often focus on the inadequacy of services:

'Parents can be left in limbo for many weeks or even months waiting for the appointment.'

'If my child appeared in A&E with an acute physical illness that needed on-going urgent treatment, they wouldn't be sent home to wait' (YoungMinds 2018).

Nikki Mattocks, now an advocate for change in child and adolescent mental health services, has relayed her experiences as a fourteen-year-old in psychiatric hospitals:

‘It was a different place every time ... It was a repeating cycle. It was horrible. Every time, you would have to repeat your story, you would have to build up trust and then it would be broken when you left ... I didn’t see anyone for a week, because my dad, who has a low paying job, could not afford to come and see me’ (McVeigh 2014).

Natasha Devon, sacked by the Conservative Government in 2016 as their Mental Health Czar, said:

‘Those subjects widely recognised to have value in building confidence, self-esteem and maintaining good mental health – namely, sport, art, music and drama – have also been cut in the state sector. Under the Conservative drive to improve standards, even English, which can provide crucial therapeutic value by allowing young people to explore emotions through character, or get difficult thoughts out of their heads in the form of creative writing, is becoming more about grammar and being able to identify and define a split infinitive.’ (Devon 2019)

Teachers, parents, policymakers and young people are all in agreement that something needs to be done. The crisis has reached such an acute stage that government has been forced to respond. Although poorer young people are disproportionately experiencing poor mental health, this is a crisis affecting the Conservative government’s core middle-class support base too. Fundamentally, however, the response has not been to look at causes, but to try to fix symptoms once a young person is already in crisis. Government has introduced a target to be achieved for next year to increase health service support from 25% to 35% for young people diagnosed with mental health conditions (Campbell 2019), which of course still leaves 65% of children and young people with no access to services, and that is just those with a diagnosis. There is now an onus on every school to have a trained ‘mental health first-aider’, a response that in its terminology assumes a ‘band-aid’ approach. There is also a continuing emphasis on ‘building resilience’, a notion challenged by the British Psychological Society:

‘It is unsuitable to apply the single term resilience to both children who may be more able to ‘bounce back’ from troublesome events and to those who may have suffered serious trauma’ (British Psychological Society 2019).

It is noticeable that ‘resilience’ is seen individualistically and concerned with a sense of *returning* to a former state of well-being. This insight into the underlying assumptions behind resilience strategies has helped us to dig deeper into the impact of the TYA project *Journeys of Destiny*, as we will discuss later.

Overall, this range of strategies to address the crisis sees the ‘mentally-ill’ person as ‘a problem that needs curing’; a medicalisation camouflaged as empowerment. Here, disability theory is helpful to consider (Campbell and Oliver, 2013). Applying the ‘social’ rather than a ‘medical’ model, disability is defined as the barriers that society

creates, rather than the impairment itself. Current UK government education strategy continues to focus on

‘heavy-handed assessment’,

which has become

‘harmful rather than supportive’ (Wrigley 2017: 7).

With this in mind, the ‘exam factory’ and the dominant idea that pupils just need to ‘toughen up’ are as much barriers to learning as the lack of a ramp or lift is to a wheelchair user. There are, however, signs of a modest paradigm shift in the UK. Significantly, Ofsted, the UK government’s inspection framework, will now take into account well-being:

‘Schools where teachers just think about how you get exam results and not what is best for the children to learn will be marked down,’

an anonymous (Ofsted) source told the *Sunday Times* (Ward 2018).

This trend is leading to enlightened schools promoting whole school approaches; as the obvious link between positive psychology and attainment has become too compelling to ignore. In addition, Arts Council England have placed children and young people at the heart of their draft new ten-year strategy, saying:

‘Children and young people themselves told us that, as well as helping them to express themselves and develop their skills and confidence, taking part in creative activities, offered them a means of dealing with anxiety, stress, and social isolation’ (Arts Council England 2019).

These indicators of a change of direction are signs of hope. However, having said that, artists and educators in the UK are naturally wary. At the time of writing Boris Johnson’s Conservative government has come to power, taking a sharp hard-right turn. The Conservative manifesto’s arts in education policy was interpreted as

‘peripheral tinsel on the tree of learning’,

ignoring

‘growing evidence from the likes of the [Cultural Learning Alliance](#) and the recent [Durham Commission](#) that effective arts education can foster creativity, innovation, empathy, and resilience’ (Arts Council England 2019).

A history of radicalism in Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA)

Following David Johnston's death in 2017, a documentary film of Theatre Centre from 1986 was unearthed that illustrated both the visionary leadership and politicisation of theatre for young people that characterised the period. It is no coincidence that in the 1980's Johnston, as the company's Artistic Director, was exploring a radical response to a right-wing government too. Johnston believed that theatre for young audiences must

'...communicate ideas, thoughts about a real world and cannot afford to be an escapist fantasy, a diversion from twentieth century reality... [that] school is the environment where that communication can be made most effective...[and] the visit from a theatre company must potentially present a very different experience' (Johnston 1981).

Johnston's radicalism came by creating an ensemble, uniquely diverse for its time. He worked with artists of different classes, sexual orientations, and ability/disability; actively seeking out more women, and people of colour. Crucially, many of the artists were comparatively young, some as young as seventeen, more like the older brothers and sisters of their audience than their parents. The company also had extraordinary reach, with four companies working simultaneously, with over a quarter of a million children each year, both in the UK and internationally. They toured both the inner cities and the traditionally more conservative rural areas. But there was political resistance: Norman Tebbit, part of Margaret Thatcher's cabinet, called upon schools to ban the productions. However, teachers throughout the UK overwhelmingly backed the work against government interference, citing the high quality of the theatre experience.



Fig. 1: David Johnston Artistic Director Theatre Centre 1986 (Palmer 1986)

The 1986 documentary also remarkable, not just for the voices of the artists, but for the archive footage of theatre in schools, with the audience clearly wholly engaged and uplifted. Here we have highly political theatre that was founded not on didacticism, but a dialogic learning that extended into everyday decision-making, as evidenced by the sequence of actors debating diversity in a team meeting. We see Royce Ullah, an Asian actor, and Hamish MacDonald, a Disabled actor discuss their reception in schools. They talk about how they are perceived by teachers and pupils. They not only represent outsider voices, but they also present a model of diversity. A model that is still not commonplace.

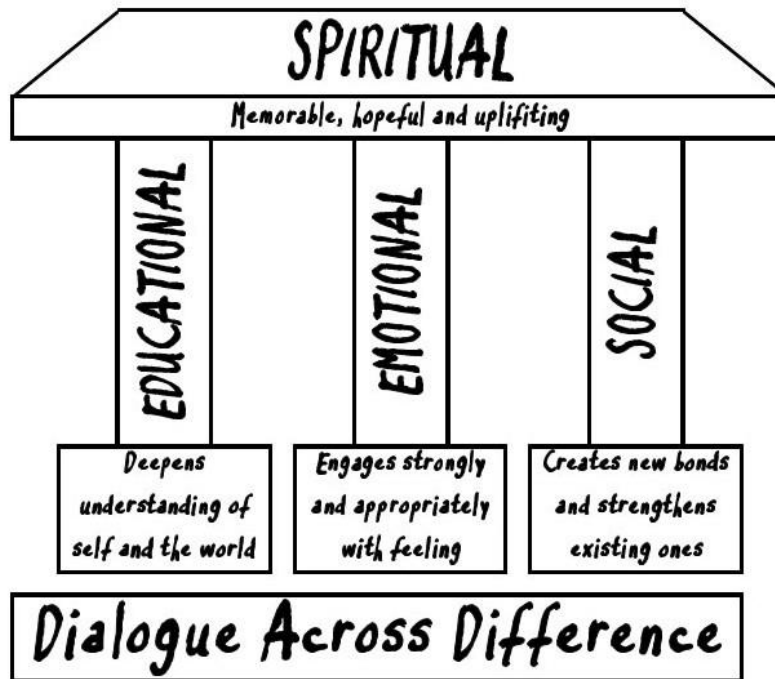
In the years since the film was made, there has been an incremental contraction of radical, challenging TYA in the UK. As arts have been marginalised in the curriculum, TYA has been decimated by funding cuts, particularly work in schools. In this context, it may seem remote that this movement can thrive again as a response to the current mental health crisis.

Johnston's innovations as a producer were grounded in dialogue with schools, always aware of their constraints. For TYA in schools to flourish once again in the current hostile climate, the continuing pressure of tests and exams should not be minimised and it would be naïve to assume that our schools will miraculously adopt a radical pedagogy. A compelling argument is needed that well-being is intrinsic to attainment, and, in turn, that creativity and culture are essential for well-being. So how can this be achieved?

A new dramaturgical framework for TYA: Dialogue-Across-Difference

Over the past five years, Danny Braverman has been developing a dramaturgical framework to provide a tool for theatre makers to create and evaluate 'quality', a term so often shrouded in subjectivity. Dialogue-Across-Difference looks at four interconnected areas of audience engagement. The social, educational and emotional pillars of the experience, if harnessed effectively, can lead to a spiritual experience. The key to a spiritual experience is that it is not just uplifting and hopeful, but also *memorable* – providing the 'stickability' that is a vital component of learning. As Joseph Conrad would argue the aesthetic experience goes beyond the everyday, it goes

'into the spaces in between, into the ephemeral, the unmeasurable ... a 'sigh – a smile' (Anderson and O'Connor 2015: 24).



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Fig 2: Dialogue-Across-Difference

Since the advent of the National Curriculum in the UK in 1988, and the introduction of SATS a year later, it can be argued that there has been an overwhelming dominance of the educational pillar of the model. This narrow approach, seen as the key to unlocking academic achievement, works to the detriment of understanding and recognising the emotional well-being of young people. Academic studies on the link between anxiety and testing have evidenced wider damaging effects, including

‘poor cognitive performance, scholastic underachievement, psychological distress and ill health’ (Zeidner 2007:165).

Dialogue-Across-Difference, used as a tool for the evaluation and dramaturgy of TYA, recognises that learning is also emotional, social and spiritual. It has the benefit of identifying how a theatrical experience can elevate the performance event beyond solely cerebral learning and everyday cultural experiences. An example of this can be seen in the Theatre Centre film, showing a performance of the Infant show *Tchoka Chlova* in a school hall. The children are clearly completely absorbed and mesmerised by the show. *Tchoka Chlova*, was a devised piece telling the story of five diverse characters who have all lost their way, the piece culminates when they realise that, through mutual support, they can help each other take risks and confront their fears. Educationally, the audience is being offered conceptual tools to better understand the themes of gender, cultural identity, and understanding difference. More than that, these themes are intimately connected to the characters’ emotional journeys. Each audience member brings with them their own ‘horizon of expectation’ (Jauss 2010), but this is also a shared, *social* experience. Through call-and-response singing and carefully designed scenography, the school hall has been transformed and a sense of (temporary) community or *communitas* (Turner 2011) has been established. This

transformation through *communitas* contributes to each child's sense of connectedness through shared experience, thereby increasing the sensation of unity across difference. Indeed, diversity and inclusion were at the heart of Theatre Centre's ethos, which was not at the time, and arguably is not today, the mainstream theatre experience. Diverse casts were highly uncommon for any audience to witness in any medium. Therefore, young audiences were experiencing a rare identification with both characters and the young performers.

If our current theatre is to contribute to the positive psychology of every child, it is important that schools create an environment where all thrive regardless of their background. A theatre event is a unique opportunity that can include the whole school community, including parents and staff, as we shall see through *Journeys of Destiny*. In an age where tribalism and division are increasing with the rise of nationalism, it becomes critical that schools challenge the prevailing notion that individual identity is in opposition to community. As Johnston's practice at Theatre Centre showed over thirty years ago, theatre in schools is exceptionally well-placed to contribute to the celebration of difference that is a key to a healthy learning environment.

A case study: *Journeys of Destiny*

Journeys of Destiny was a practice-as-research investigation with several interconnected starting points. It was designed principally for the oldest primary school children, preparing for their transition to secondary school; a time when many young people experience high levels of anxiety. Ava Hunt was moved by the true story of Saad Al Kassab, a young Syrian refugee, also in transition. As a long-time associate of Johnston, Hunt was directly influenced by his life's work, particularly his commitment to tell important stories through the highest quality theatre in schools. To quote Johnston from the film, the plays were the

‘equivalent to anything you might see on TV, film or the West End’ (Palmer 1986).

Journeys of Destiny would incorporate high production values touring to schools throughout the East Midlands but primarily Derbyshire.

Saad is fourteen years old when war breaks out in 2011, bored with school he dreams of playing football for Manchester United. He escapes the war in Homs and takes refuge with his family in Melbourne, traumatised by war and torture and without any English. However, despite the obstacles, within two years Saad outperforms every young person in the state of Victoria in his exams, but now with the dream of becoming a doctor. This is a story that resonated with young people transitioning to secondary school in Derbyshire, from some of the poorest backgrounds in the UK, but it was also a story that challenged prevailing views towards refugees and cultural difference.

For the last three years the young people participating in *Journeys of Destiny* have been growing up against the backdrop of Brexit and the political rifts that have opened up across the UK. Derbyshire voted to leave the EU and anti-immigration rhetoric has increased, amplifying the echo chambers inhabited by the young audience and their families. Indeed, it could be argued that the UK is now even more divided than in the 1980's, when Johnston ran Theatre Centre. So, a central concern of the piece was how to question entrenched views and create genuine dialogue across difference. To address this, Hunt proposed a specific structure for the project.

As highly skilled and experienced theatre makers, Hunt and writer Craig Christie worked with Saad to develop his story, into a participatory community musical. At the centre of the piece was an examination of how Saad managed to navigate his extraordinary journey emotionally. Crucially, every performance was unique, by working with a whole year group of ten to eleven year olds participating and performing alongside the professional actors to the rest of the school. This co-creative process involved the children in learning the songs (as well as British Sign Language to key phrases) and scripted lines, as well as generating their own material and physical sequences, to be performed at the end of the school day to the school audience, which would also, importantly, include parents and whole families.



Fig 3: *Journeys of Destiny* (Christie 2019)

The piece begins and ends in a TV studio with Saad being interviewed by ABC News reporters. These supporting roles are played by children, who interview Saad throughout as, through short scenes, he describes the horror of what happened. Inspired by Dorothy Heathcote's 'Mantle of the Expert' (Heathcote and Bolton 2010), the children are placed in control and are also thereby authors of the narrative. The process of young people inhabiting roles within the story becomes what Shaughnessy calls 'embodied interaction' (2012: 11). This embodied interaction creates not only

pedagogic engagement and agency but also allows the young people to make a deeper meaning from the story.

The team were cognisant of the need to tell this story of trauma truthfully, but in a way that would not be psychologically damaging. Saad's brother Omar is tortured by the Syrian government and his friends are killed in front of him in prison. The team discussed whether it was appropriate to present this to a young audience. A decision was made to retain that element of the narrative, but not to use the word 'torture'. Nevertheless, young people were shocked:

'But why would the government kill children?'

one child asked. The idea that a government would kill, or torture civilians was inconceivable. A member of the team, a Syrian actor, was able to corroborate the facts; but would the truth be to the detriment of young people's mental health?

New Possibilities

The evaluation of the project demonstrated that it largely achieved its aims. We can see how this aligns with the Dialogue-Across-Difference framework. Educationally, the young people were equipped with the conceptual understanding to question the role of the media, how outsiders are treated and how to manage trauma. There was increased knowledge of the issues. In a post-show questionnaire, the young people said:

'Now, after the play, I understand a lot more about refugees than I did before, I now know what refugees are.'

'... how they do not choose to go or want to...how cruel the governments are.'

'.. that they fled their country even if they had a very good job.'

This last statement was particularly significant, as Saad's mother, Alma, was an engineer: not a familiar role for either a Syrian woman or, indeed, for many women in the lower socio-economic areas of Derbyshire. But by participating in the production, the young people not only worked as a team in a collective endeavour, strengthening their social bonds they also created new role models. For some parents, many of whom have little opportunity to break out of class constraints, seeing their children in role as reporters was a powerful shared image of hope and new possibilities.

And by bringing together the wider school community; parents, pupils and staff, they were, simultaneously, invited to engage with an alternative narrative of migration and why young people become asylum seekers. Nearly two hundred parents saw the production, many of whom would never specifically choose to see a refugee theatre piece. Parents comments included:

'It was very moving. Giving everyone a lot to think about'.

One venue observed:

‘The parents were transfixed ... visibly moved. I liked the fact that it didn’t shy away from showing the true horror of war and the impact on families uprooting themselves’ (Butter 2019).

Involving the parents in the shared experience helped to create dialogue around their children’s transition anxieties, thereby providing a vehicle to build emotional support. In a baseline audit, the children were asked how they would react if they were forced to leave their home. Most children expressed understandable sadness and reluctance. The audit also revealed the severity of the emotional challenges. One child responded: ‘I would be sad and want to hurt myself.’ That children as young as ten present self-harm as a response to upheaval is indicative of the poor levels of mental health currently experienced. The audit also revealed that less than 25% of the five hundred young people surveyed were looking forward to going to secondary schools. However, in post-show questionnaires, this had increased to 58%. As questionnaires were always completed by the young people several days after the performance this percentage increase in well-being cannot be attributed to a post-performance glow. Therefore, responses and qualitative comments expressed by the young people were critically reflective having had time to analyse the performative experience and self-evaluate any changes towards their transition to secondary school.

The ability to participate in the drama whilst, at the same time, viewing a different reality leads to what Augusto Boal, borrowing a term from Plato, terms *metaxis*; an altered state of empowerment, contributing to increased well-being. It is worth noting, particularly in the light of the spiritual element of the Dialogue-Across-Difference framework, that Plato applied the term *metaxis* to spirituality, describing its location as being between humans and the gods (Linds 2006). Boal says the young artist is:

‘... able to create an autonomous world of images of his own reality, and to enact his liberation in the reality of these images, he will then extrapolate into his own life all that he has accomplished in the fiction. The scene, the stage, becomes the rehearsal space for real life’ (Boal 1995: 44).

So, it can be argued that the dramatic decrease in anxiety about secondary transition was in significant part a well-calibrated response to the project. This is reinforced further by the most common descriptors young people used about their experience, including:

‘Happy and proud.’

‘Proud.’

‘Relaxed.’

‘Changed and confident.’

‘Proud of myself for trying something new and determined to try it again.’

Journeys of Destiny was evidentially an experience that created qualitative impact with pupils, parents and teachers. One teacher said the play was: ‘A very powerful,

spiritual experience for children and staff.’ One can conclude, as least in this teacher’s summation, that it was the combination of the social, educational and emotional experience of the school community that marked the project as being high quality and aligned to the Dialogue-Across-Difference framework.

As with all arts projects, activating the imagination was essential. The participants’ and the audience’s imagination enabled them to empathise with Saad and, by inference, also with other young people in seemingly impossibly dangerous and frightening circumstances. But in a larger sense, the event itself enabled everyone concerned to imagine a more hopeful world; what Jill Dolan describes as a ‘utopian performative’. As she says:

‘Is it too much to ask of performance, that it teaches us to love and to link us with the world, as well as to see and to think critically about social relations?’
(Dolan 2008: 23)

Conclusion: Creating community resilience

As we wrote this article, we agreed on many things: that theatre in schools can contribute to an environment that promotes good mental health; that we have a responsibility to address tough political questions; and that we must consistently work dialogically with teachers, parents, the wider community and fellow artists, as well as children. However, there was one issue that remained unresolved, and that was the question of ‘resilience’. From a Disability Rights perspective, the dominant ‘resilience’ narrative presents an additional barrier to young people experiencing poor mental health. This places extra pressures on schools who, it could be argued, have a responsibility to prioritise a caring and creative learning environment and thereby counter the prevailing political narrative that we live in a harsh world and children need to ‘toughen up’. As Saad’s story demonstrated, narratives of extraordinary emotional resilience can be inspirational for young people and communities. However, we needed to reframe and reclaim the term ‘resilience’, to apply it to a communal, rather than individual, purpose.

Rob Hopkins - one of the pioneers of the ecological, grass-roots Transition movement - links ‘community resilience’ to creativity and building sustainability projects. Interestingly, he not only sees building resilience as a collective rather than individual endeavour, but also as a forward-looking, rather than retrospective undertaking:

‘Resilience was once famously described by football manager Iain Dowie as referring to ‘bouncebackability’ ... I wonder though whether we should actually be thinking about it in terms of ‘bouncing forwards’, using shock or the expectation of it, to evolve and to see it as an opportunity for great creativity and inventiveness’ (Hopkin 2015: 1).

Of course, Saad’s story is about an exceptional and inspiring individual, but he also needed to be connected to the wider world. In fact, it was his involvement with a

youth group, the Scouts in Melbourne, which was key to him envisioning a positive future, and a critical element of the *Journeys of Destiny* narrative. It has become clear to us that there are two sides to resilience: a *retrospective* individualistic-medical model that seeks to place the individual young person back into a mythical time of wellness, or a *prospective* community-social model that looks forwards, hopefully and imaginatively. This article has explored the potential of returning to a model of using high quality theatre to engage young people in rich and complex issues. Bringing theatre back into schools will be a painstaking process. It will require energetic advocacy from artists and educators using the leverage of the policy shifts of Ofsted and The Arts Council, and a rigorous approach to sustaining quality. However, we would contend that TYA in schools can play a unique and important role in promoting well-being through community resilience.

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