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Article: The New Town Culture Programme: Promoting Cultural Exchange between Artists and Children's Workers

Author: Rachel Hughes, Marijke Steedman and Adi Staempfli | **Tags:** [arts](#), [children's services](#), [cultural exchange](#), [Neoliberalism](#), [reflective practice](#), [social work](#)

This article offers some reflections on 'cultural exchange' within an ongoing arts programme (New Town Culture) being run by a partnership of a Greater London local authority (London Borough of Barking and Dagenham) with prominent cultural institutions, a university, and a number of artists and local arts organisations already engaged in working with marginalised people. The programme has two phases, both funded by the Greater London Authority/Mayor of London. The first phase (NTC1) funding was a London Borough of Culture award and the second phase (NTC2) is funded through the Violence Reduction Unit. This has brought about a shift in focus from all local residents in touch with the local authority's Children's and Adults' Social Services, to young people aged 10 to 21, and especially those judged more likely to experience violence in their lives. The organisation we work for, Goldsmiths (University of London) has been commissioned to carry out research and evaluation work on the programme, and to deliver training and produce resources for the local authority's workers. The intention is that our work will generate a legacy of sustained learning when NTC2 ends in 2022.

Both phases of the NTC programme have three aims. The first is to increase the arts offer to young people in the borough, which is one of the most deprived in London. This is being done through the direct provision of arts-based workshops and clubs for young people. The second is to embed this offer within local authority provision and within local authority social care. The goal is for arts activities to become a routine part of the local authority's offer to its children and young people. The third aim, which is really the means by which the second aim may be achieved, is to promote an exchange between the arts and the social care sectors; a cultural exchange – with a small 'c' – of ideas and expertise, of ways of doing things and

even of tacit ways of being, between artists and curators on the one hand, and local authority children's service workers on the other.^[1] It is this third aim which we want to focus on in this article and, in particular, some of the dilemmas we encountered in our pursuit of it.

The opportunity for the kind of cultural exchange we are trying to achieve arose because of the formation of the multi-agency partnership outlined above. Such partnerships usually come together because, at a particular moment in time, a number of policy agendas align, and the NTC partnership is no exception. The flow of ideas and energy within such partnerships is inevitably a 'complex confluence' (Spandler, 2004: 190). In the case of the NTC partnership, this confluence has three streams. Firstly, from within the arts sector, there is a movement to be more inclusive and to support diversity. This is being driven in part by funding imperatives (i.e. grants being offered to projects which seek to include minority groups) but of course the impetus to work for and with the most marginalised people in society has always been strong within the arts,^[2] perhaps especially so during the past two decades (Bishop, 2006). In this respect, artists and local authority children's service workers are natural allies (Huss and Bos, 2019). Unfortunately, during the past thirty years, social work has '*vacated the ground*' which it formerly shared with socially-engaged art, a move which has been attributed to the increased dominance of neoliberal philosophy within local authorities (Schubert and Gray, 2015). Recently, however, there appears to be a renewed recognition on the part of social work leaders of the importance of relationships in social work and local authority practice (Harvey and Leddra, 2020) and of the potential of the arts in social work (Huss and Boss, 2019).

An example of relationship-based practice, and a second stream within the New Town Culture confluence, is the Contextual Safeguarding agenda (Firmin and Lloyd, 2020).^[3] Contextual Safeguarding emphasises the need to intervene in contexts and with relationships beyond the family in order to safeguard young people (Firmin and Lloyd, 2020). This approach represents a departure from neoliberal social work practice which has individualised risk within families and focused interventions on 'parenting'. These extra-familial contexts and relationships are the same space in which community arts and culture can be found. Working with artists and arts organisations therefore represents a way of supporting the Contextual Safeguarding work which is already ongoing within the local authority.

The final stream in the confluence of policy agendas behind NTC is the new public health approach to violence reduction adopted by the Mayor of London's Office for Police and Crime (MOPAC). This approach is described as a contextual, preventative approach to violence reduction (SCIE, 2020). The Violence Reduction Unit was set up by the Mayor of London in 2018 in order to promote such an approach, in conjunction with local government and community organisations. The unit's funding of the NTC programme is testimony to its willingness to innovate in the pursuit of violence reduction, as well as to the success of the first phase of NTC.

One of the difficulties with multi-agency partnerships is that, while the confluence of policy agendas may be apparent to those looking down from a high level (i.e. senior management), it is not always apparent to those swimming in the individual streams (e.g. at practitioner level). This can be a barrier to cultural exchange across organisational boundaries, such as the exchange between children's service workers and artists and curators which the NTC programme is aiming to support, and it means that concerted efforts need to be made to engage those below senior management in organisational hierarchies.

In the first phase of the NTC project, we set out to promote cultural exchange between artists and children's service workers by inviting children's service workers to participate in the workshops and clubs alongside the young people they supported. During NTC1, artists ran six successful groups with local children and young people who were in the care of the local authority or otherwise receiving support from children's services, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, young women at risk of sexual exploitation and foster families. As researchers, we attended several of these groups to observe and document what was going on. The hope was to be able to represent and communicate what was taking place in language which would resonate with both artists and children's service workers. The case study below illustrates one of our findings, which was that the groups seemed to allow the young people to reveal previously hidden aspects of themselves; we could say, to enact dynamic narratives of identity. One factor in this may have been that the artists, intentionally, brought no pre-existing 'knowledge' of the young people to the groups; they did not ask for the young people's stories, not having any obligation – as children's service workers do – to reproduce the stories for other purposes at a later point. Another factor may have been that the artists

demonstrated their willingness to reveal hidden aspects of their own identities to the young people through their equal participation in the activities of the group. Finally, the activities were designed by the artists to celebrate diverse identities thus making it not only safe but positive for the young people to reveal difference.

Case Study

One of the New Town Culture art groups is a group aimed at young people who are seeking asylum, having entered the UK independently. The workshop takes place over 5 days and 16 young people attend. The young people, who are mostly aged 16 and 17, come from Vietnam, Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Algeria, Albania, Congo and speak variously Arabic, Amharic, Tigrinya, Oromo, Albanian, Somali, Vietnamese, Kurdish Sorani, Persian, Swahili, Berber, French and German, as well as some English. One of the participants is Celestine, a quietly spoken young woman of sixteen with very limited English who is fairly new to the local authority area. Her social worker, Amina, tells us that Celestine speaks a minority African language and that the team have yet to find an interpreter in London who speaks the same language. During the course of the week, there are a number of activities designed to celebrate the many languages spoken by the participating young people. For example, everyone in the group (including the artist) photocopies their hands, writes on them all the languages they speak and holds up the hands to show them to the rest of the group. It emerges that Celestine actually has a good knowledge of two major African languages, as well as her own minority language. Amina is astounded that Celestine has disclosed this and delighted that new possibilities for communicating with Celestine have opened up.

As noted above, unlike artists, children's service workers have an obligation to reproduce and reformulate young people's stories for organisational purposes. This recording imperative can override all others within organisational culture (Munro, 2004). The attendance of children's service workers in the NTC1 groups was much lower than hoped for and, in debriefing sessions, some workers attributed this directly to the need to complete written work to meet organisational targets.

You have to have permission to go. Because the pressures to meet the daily requirements of the tasks are vast... I've got a conference report, my assessment is due, I'm red on the dashboard that tells us how we're performing, so it is about having permission to spend time.

We were interested in this worker's references to 'permission'. It seemed that she felt that she and her colleagues needed permission to do something other than report-writing. But permission from whom? Perhaps senior management backing for the NTC programme had not filtered down to the frontline, we wondered, or perhaps it was permission from frontline operational managers which was felt to be lacking. We know from past experience that such managers are instrumental to any programme of change in a local authority (Lewis, 2005).

The quotation above, however, comes from someone who was one of these frontline managers. Was it perhaps about a particular 'mindset of participation' (Davies, 2020)?^[4] When we ran the group with unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, the team manager arranged a roster of social workers covering each day of the group. Two workers joined in all of the group activities on their allocated day, but the other workers simply came in briefly to ask if the group was going well and whether there were any behavioural issues. Perhaps, within a certain mindset, children's service workers see themselves as people who arrange art groups but don't join in with them. That would not be unexpected, given the dominance of neoliberal managerial philosophy within local authority social care over the past twenty years (Ferguson, 2008; Cunningham and Cunningham, 2017). According to this philosophy, it is not the job of children's service workers to directly provide support themselves but rather to arrange, commission and procure support services from others. The issue for the NTC programme was that, if non-participation in art groups is part of a worker's professional identity, then that worker is going to need a great deal of encouragement and support to make the leap to participation. However, the neoliberal-influenced mindset was far from universal within Children's Services in the local authority. As part of our research, we talked to workers who were very committed to relationship-based practice (e.g. Ruch, Turney and Ward, 2018) and to arts-based work with young people. Some were directly involved with the arts in their own lives and chose to bring that into their practice with young people; others had trained abroad or in the UK before neoliberalism came to dominate practice.^[5] These workers were not necessarily joining in with the art

groups any more than their colleagues who may have had a more neoliberal mindset. One worker, very committed to relationship-based practice, commented that attending the groups would be a *'luxury'*. We could see this: if you are very busy and you already know some of what you think there may be to learn from attending a group, then it could seem like indulging yourself!

In summary, it became obvious on reflection that we had not sufficiently engaged with the culture(s) of children's service work in the borough, whether neoliberal or relationship-based; it was this failure that was thwarting our plans for cultural exchange. We needed an alternative plan for phase two which would attend to both these cultures, and allow us to understand better how they operated within the local authority.

The coronavirus pandemic provided a pause to our work and an opportunity to rethink how we would achieve this aim of cultural exchange, and the first few weeks of lockdown acted as a crucible for forging new ideas. We realised that what was needed for the workers was in fact something like what we had seen the artists creating so successfully for young people: a space and form of activity which allowed for an exchange on equal terms and the creation of new narratives of (professional and personal) identity and practices which may transcend existing mindsets and cultures.

We think we have found this in 'Intervision', a peer-led, group-based approach to reflective practice, which has its origins in Balint groups (Van Roy, Vanheule and Inslegers, 2015). While it is influenced by relationship-based, psychodynamic and systemic practice models, Intervision is also a structured approach which offers emotional containment, widens participants' perspectives and enhances reflective skills (Staempfli and Fairtlough, 2019; Wagenaar, 2015; Bailey et al., 2014; Roy et al., 2014; Tietze, 2010). We have been developing Intervision at Goldsmiths for six years now, with our social work students and with other local authorities (Staempfli and Fairtlough, 2019), but until now we have not explored the possibility of Intervision as a vehicle for interdisciplinary or cultural exchange. From a logistical perspective, Intervision seems an ideal approach for the present time because it is highly flexible. It can be delivered virtually or face-to-face (Staempfli, 2020). It can also take place as *live* sessions of fixed duration or as a facilitated exchange of written reflections over a longer period. While it is usually based on verbal

communication, we can see no reason why an Intervision session could not involve the exchange of drawings, photos, films or even music. Such artefacts could support learning and meaning-making process by recognising that knowledge arises from the discussions we have around mediating artefacts (Eraut, 2013). Indeed, for us, the participation of artists alongside children's service workers provides a wonderful opportunity to expand the approach in this way.

However, the compelling reason to use Intervision is precisely the potential for creating space for discursive and reflective practices in which new narratives of professional identity can emerge. Intervision groups are non-hierarchical; each member of the group takes it in turns to take on the different roles which enable the group to function including that of lead facilitator/chair. The structure and sequence of the group process serves to facilitate what we might call (after Barry Mason) 'safe uncertainty' by stalling an immediate leap to coming up with solutions to the dilemma which has been raised (Mason, 1993). In the first stage of reflection, the group members are specifically instructed not to start talking about solutions to the dilemma which has been raised. Remaining in this position of safe uncertainty allows the group members to remain open to each other in a very fundamental way. Some commentators (e.g. Ben-Ari and Strier, 2010) would go so far as to argue that it is such fundamental openness which forms the basis for cultural competence. We will have to see whether what happens in our Intervision groups lends support to this claim; it is an exciting prospect.

Footnotes:

[1] The local authority children's service department employs workers from a range of backgrounds, including social workers, graduate social care workers, youth workers, youth offending officers (who come from a range of professional and educational backgrounds), play workers and therapists, family therapists and occupational therapists.

[2] One of the activities which was offered to the young people on the project was a trip to the Foundling Museum, where the young people got to see the work of Hogarth.

[3] See also discussions of the approach in this journal by Mills and Unwin (2020) and Andell (2019).

[4] Drawing on the work of Muschamp, Bullock, Ridge and Wikeley (2009), Sarah Davies uses this phrase when discussing why young people from more economically disadvantaged backgrounds participate in extra-curricular cultural activities to a lesser extent than their more affluent peers. She suggests that there are psychological barriers as well as practical and financial ones; young people get fixed in a 'mindset of participation' at an early age which is hard to change once established.

[5] In fact, this was the case for the worker quoted above, which demonstrates that the cultures we were noticing were not discrete groups of people but rather, we might say, discourses invoked by different workers in different situations.

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