The challenges of assessing the impact of a comedy programme aimed at improving the mental well-being of young people

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Abstract

Assessing the impact of community-based programmes presents many challenges. One difficulty encountered is how to develop appropriate research methods to capture the impact of the work while also meeting the demands of external funders. For almost two decades, the charity organisation The Comedy Trust (TCT) have attempted to navigate these challenges. In 2018, TCT had the opportunity to work with a university-based researcher to develop their approaches to research. We aimed to explore what happens when you move away from quantifiable predetermined methods to take a more participatory approach to work alongside the participants of the programme. We decided to focus on their Feeling Funny Youth programme, which is aimed at young people to support their mental health and well-being. This paper is a case study of how the programme worked with a group of young people based within a youth organisation. In this paper, we offer a comparison of the standardised tool adopted by TCT with the development of more creative and participatory methods developed in collaboration with young people who participated in the programme. We offer an insight into what

can be gained by adopting more creative and participatory methods to capture the experiences of young people, as this enabled us to really hear the important messages they want to share.

Keywords young people; comedy; mental health and well-being; participatory research; standardised tools; impact and evaluation

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Key messages

- A standard well-being survey for evaluating comedy dampens the mood and discourages expression; it is inherently unsuitable for gaining insights and judgements from young people, and it may undermine the positive outcomes the comedy was intending to cultivate.

- External funders liked the qualitative feedback we gained through the development of creative and participatory methods. However, they also wanted the statistical data which can lead to more standardised ways of evaluating, without necessarily considering the impact this can have on limiting the quality of the data received.

- The research has inspired change to implement more flexible, accessible, creative methods to capture the impact of workshop programmes on young people, led by the voices of young people. This study has prompted further research to make these flexible approaches more sustainable for the small charity and to create a framework that can be used across the board for their programmes.

Introduction

Since 2002, The Comedy Trust (TCT) has been delivering community-centred workshop programmes to support the personal and social growth of the public through the art form of comedy. The Feeling Funny Youth programme was established in 2018 and aims to create an alternative support system for young people to help them feel happier, and to gain personal skills in areas such as their confidence and self-esteem. It also aims to improve and create relationships among like-minded peers, and provide participants with a creative platform to express themselves while tackling difficult situations and topics, such as talking about their mental well-being in a light-hearted, accessible way. In 2018, TCT successfully applied for research funding from the Cultural Education Research Initiative (CERI) to work in partnership with Liverpool Hope University to evaluate their Feeling Funny Youth programme. One of the key aims of the CERI initiative is to support the development of research-informed, evidence-based practice for cultural organisations working with children and young people in North West England. During our initial meetings, we decided we would like to understand why the standardised tool that TCT had been employing to capture the impact of their programmes (the Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale – SWEMWBS) was not deemed suitable, and if we could design more effective methods which align with the nature of the comedy programme.

The Feeling Funny programme seeks to improve the mental well-being of young people through comedy. There is a plethora of research which emphasises the positive impact of the arts on the well-being of young people; however, this tends to focus on music, drama, dance, singing and visual arts (Lee et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Zarobe and Bungay, 2017). Although rather limited, there is a growing body of evidence which highlights the positive impact that humour can have on an individual's health and well-being (Crawford and Caltabiano, 2011; Twardzicki and Jones, 2017). A systematic scoping review conducted by Gonot-Schoupinsky et al. (2020) explored the many benefits of laughter, which include a reduction in anxiety, tension, stress and depression, and an increase in self-esteem, hope and energy. It also helps to provide a sense of empowerment and control. Furthermore, it has been suggested that humour can help reduce the stigma associated with talking about mental health (Corrigan et al., 2014). The Feeling Funny programme employs the art form of comedy to provide space for young people to talk about their mental health. An outline of the programme and techniques employed is provided in Box 1.

> **Box 1: Outline of the Feeling Funny programme**
> Over the course of seven weeks, young people are led by the charity's team of creative practitioners and comedians to learn skills that enable them to devise their own stand-up or sketch comedy performances to an invited audience of family and friends. Throughout the seven-week programme, groups are introduced to the world of comedy, learn about routine creation and development, microphone techniques, comedy styles and themes, punchlines, and delivery, staging and performance skills. Alongside this, mental health themed activities are included in creative ways to promote positive discussions surrounding mental well-being, such as Jitter Jar, Comedy Homework, and the Well-Being Check-in. Sessions are two hours in length with a 15-minute break. The performance takes place in the sixth week, with the course culminating in Week 7 with an end-of-course celebration and feedback session.

TCT hoped that through this research project, they would be able to provide concrete evidence to support the case for using alternative methods of evaluation and impact when applying for funding. There is a growing body of evidence which calls for more flexible, creative and participatory methods to be recognised (Cook et al., 2017; Holt, 2004; Dunn and Mellor, 2017; Lee et al., 2020). Indeed, it has been suggested that this type of research can provide a more accurate account of how a programme is working, and therefore the impact it is having on the community (Elmore et al., 2019; Lenette et al., 2019). It is important to recognise the issue of capacity for small charity organisations, as these methods take time to establish, and for people to develop. TCT wanted to use the research not only to highlight to funders the financial implications, but also to share what can be gained by taking a more participatory and creative approach. Overall, TCT hoped that with the evidence gained as part of this research, they would be able to develop a new and improved practice that would truly capture the participants' journey without the added pressure of clinical scales that take away from the fun and creativity of the workshop programmes.

The project

For many years, researchers have highlighted the importance of working collaboratively with young people to move beyond 'top-down' approaches when assessing impact (Alderson et al., 2019; Doucet et al., 2021; Hodges et al., 2014). The benefits of adopting such approaches include the potential for social change, as it empowers communities that are often disempowered, and 'the potential to strengthen participation in service provision and delivery' (Smithson and Jones, 2021: 358). Shifting to working alongside rather than 'on' young people allows the opportunity to generate and produce knowledge with them (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018; O'Brien and Dadswell, 2020), as they are placed as the 'expert' (Liddiard et al., 2018). Indeed, as argued by Doucet et al. (2021: 2), this 'allows for the development of conceptual frameworks that value and validate the realities and perspectives of youth'. Yet despite these many benefits, there are still challenges that come with such approaches. Adults working with young people are required to be reflexive throughout the research process and production to acknowledge issues such as inherent power imbalances between the adults and the young people (Kirby, 2020; O'Brien and Dadswell, 2020). Researchers are being encouraged to acknowledge the 'messiness' that comes with participatory research (Cook, 2020; Facca et al., 2020).

Although TCT have worked across a range of different educational provisions to deliver their Feeling Funny programme, for the purposes of this paper we focus on how the programme worked within one setting, a youth organisation. The youth organisation offers support to disadvantaged young people outside their educational environment and is based in North West England. The young people involved in this project had encountered a range of difficulties during their educational journey, leading them to disengage from education. All had received a Special Educational Needs (SEN) label, were experiencing issues around their mental health, and were likely to have a range of services involved with their care. Such young people would potentially fall into the category of 'seldom heard' (Ní Shé et al., 2019). This term is employed within academic literature to describe a wide range of participants who struggle to have their

voices heard (Cook, 2020; Hodges et al., 2014). It was important to be aware of the wider circumstances that surround the young people. For example, they were likely to encounter a wide range of professional adults, and potentially had rather negative experiences with regard to sharing their stories. It is widely acknowledged that having an SEN label attached shapes how young people are responded to by adults (Caslin, 2019; Liddiard et al., 2018). Within educational settings, it is often the adult's voice which will dominate any discussion surrounding the young person's needs (Dimitirellou and Male, 2020; Bourke and Loveridge, 2018). Therefore, making the adjustment to being on an equal footing with the adults in the room may feel very unfamiliar (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018). Spending time with young people to get to know them and to build trusting relationships prior to any data collection taking place was essential, as was making sure that they understood the purpose of the research (Bourke and Loveridge, 2018; Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2016).

Research process

During the first session, all the young people were informed of the research and asked if they would be willing to have their experiences captured. The first part of the research was trying to capture the young people's experiences of taking part in the programme. All the young people were also asked to complete the standard tool at the start and at the end of the programme. Young people were also invited to participate in semi-structured interviews to gain a more detailed insight into their experiences. Five young people agreed to take part in interviews before, during and after the programme. The young people were provided with a series of prompts and were asked to share their responses. It was up to the young people

Figure 1. Overview of research process (Source: Authors, 2022)
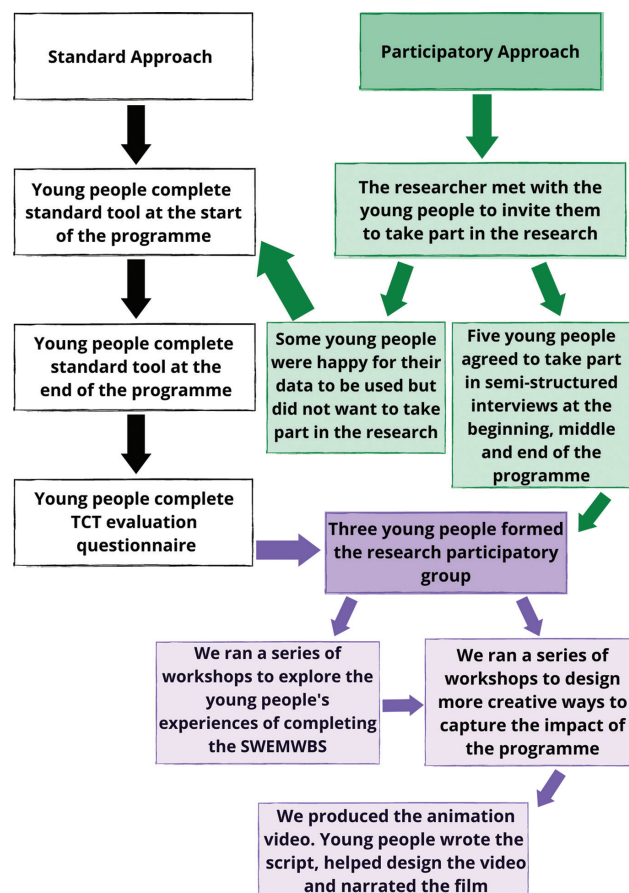
to decide how they would like to respond; for example, they could draw, write or just talk about their experiences. These sessions focused on what the young people hoped to get out of the programme, how the programme was going, and what they felt they gained from taking part in the programme. Following on from this, the young people were invited to form a participatory research group. The focus of this group would be trying to identify any issues experienced when completing the standard tool, to establish why this tool was not considered effective in capturing young people's experiences of the programme. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the experiences of the three young people who formed the participatory research group. These young people took on the role of research subject and co-researcher (Dunn and Mellor, 2017). An overview of this research process is provided in Figure 1.

Ethical considerations

Throughout the study, ethical considerations were of the utmost importance. The study gained ethical approval from Liverpool Hope University Ethics Committee and adhered to British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines throughout. In a study of this nature, issues around power relations were significant. To help develop trusting relationships with the young people, the researcher attended all the sessions and participated in some of the games and activities to help build relationships. The data collection techniques developed were discussed with the young people, and flexibility was essential to allow young people to decide how they wanted to participate (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Michail and Kellett, 2015). It was considered important that the participants felt part of, and in some ways took ownership of, the research process. One mechanism employed to achieve this was to ask the young people to decide how they would be referred to throughout the research. Within the findings section of this paper, all the names used are those chosen by the young people themselves. In addition, the study adopted 'process consent', with consent being negotiated as an ongoing concern throughout the research process (Heath et al., 2004). The young people were provided with ongoing opportunities to agree to continue or to withdraw at any stage (O'Reilly and Dogra, 2017).

We wanted to work with the young people at every stage of the research process, which included the analysis of data. Throughout the research, 'data' took many formats, including the use of Post-it Notes, storyboards, conversations, posters and the standardised tool (Dunn and Mellor, 2017). We discussed the data that had been gathered during the semi-structured interviews and participatory research group with the young people. During our conversations, we were able to identify themes that we felt were important to share as part of the research. Due to the nature of the research, data production and analysis were an ongoing process, and we worked collaboratively with the young people to make meaning of the data (Alderson et al., 2019; O'Brien and Dadswell, 2020; Smithson and Jones, 2021). The young people were given access to all the findings prior to dissemination to ensure that they were happy that their voices had been captured accurately.

For the purposes of this paper, we have chosen to focus on two key challenges encountered by TCT:

1) meeting the expectations of external funders and the standardised tool
2) the development of creative and participatory methods that align with TCT programmes to capture the impact of comedy on young people's sense of well-being.

Challenge 1: meeting the expectations of external funders and the standardised tool

Like many small charity community-based organisations, TCT are reliant on external funding, and this often comes with expectations of how impact will be captured. It is widely acknowledged that funders tend to prefer quantifiable, statistical data to demonstrate impact (Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Lenette et al., 2019). Determining whether an intervention has had an impact on an individual's sense of well-being is neither easy nor straightforward. The subjective nature of well-being makes it difficult to make universal

claims (Fattore et al., 2019). The difficulties of assessing the impact of community-based programmes are widely acknowledged (Cook et al., 2017; Hokanen et al., 2018). For TCT, their funders had asked them to employ the Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS).

The standardised tool

SWEMWBS is a widely employed tool with a significant number of studies advocating its use (for example, Rogers et al., 2018). The SWEMWBS is a shortened version of the Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) that uses 7 of the 14 items with an alternative scoring system. TCT based their standard tool on the SWEMWBS. (For an example of what the young people are asked to complete, see Figure 2.)

The tool enables the user to track well-being over a period of time and is used widely within mental health programmes and studies (Haver et al., 2015; Hunter et al., 2015). When using the SWEMWBS, an alternative scoring system called transformational scoring is used to assess impact. A three-point increase between the initial scoring and post scoring is considered as a considerable change in well-being. Due to the tool's national recognition and success in other community projects, this appeared to be the best choice for TCT. However, it soon became clear that this may not be the most appropriate tool for this programme. Upon its initial use, TCT found that, for a significant number of participants, they had scored lower on their post-programme score. This made it appear as though their sense of well-being had deteriorated since taking part in the programme. These results also did not collate with the data gathered from participants when using more participatory methods. TCT wanted to find out why this was happening, so they ran a series of focus groups with people who had undertaken a course with them. Through discussions with the participants, they suggested a number of reasons for why this might be the case. For example, participants stated that they did not understand the terminology used, such as 'I feel useful'. Many of the recipients felt that having a form to complete did not fit with the nature of the programme, which is about having fun and being creative. For many, this was an opportunity to escape from more formal mental health interventions, and several participants indicated that external factors would have an impact on their responses to the tool. Interestingly, another comedy-based programme aimed at supporting people experiencing mental health issues encountered difficulties when applying this tool. This was due to the relatively small number of participants. They also questioned what is meant by a 'meaningful' transformation regarding participants seeing a three-point increase between their pre and post score (The Comedy School, 2017). The employment of the tool does not allow for an opportunity to gain insight into what participants take away from completing the programme. Having a set of predetermined outcomes potentially misses the opportunity to gain a real insight into how the programme is experienced (Ross, 2017). The first stage of the research process was to explore young people's experiences of completing the SWEMWBS.

Young people's experiences of completing the standardised tool

Throughout the course of the seven-week programme, we encountered challenges in maintaining contact with all the participants – 11 young people started the programme, but only 6 completed the course. As noted above, for the programme to be considered as having a positive impact on a young person's well-being, there would need to be a three-point increase in their post score. Analysis of data obtained from the SWEMWBS indicated that only one young person had a three-point increase, with the average transformational score for the six participants who completed the programme being 1.3. This is reflective of data obtained as part of TCT evaluations over the last couple of years. Two of the participants' scores appear to have lowered after participating in the programme. Without talking to the young people, we would not get an insight into why this occurred. Therefore, a key focus of the collaborative research group was to explore the young people's experiences of completing the standard tool. We ran a series of research workshops with the young people to explore this further (see Table 1 for more details). These sessions were designed to provide young people with the opportunity to direct the content of the

Figure 2. Feeling Funny standard tool, based on SWEMWBS (Source: Authors, 2022)

discussions and to allow space for them to provide their interpretation of their reality (O'Kane, 2008). We were able to identify several issues encountered by the young people. A brief discussion of each of the issues identified by the young people is provided below.

Impact of external factors

As noted above, the young people who worked with us were likely to encounter a wide range of external circumstances which would impact on their sense of well-being. The young people recognised that this could have an impact on how they complete the standardised tool:

> Some people have good weeks, some people have bad weeks. (Kieran)

> Depends on the week you have had, you might feel high, you might feel low, just really depends. (James)

Some of the young people who had been invited to take part in the programme had been experiencing issues around their mental health. Those who were engaging with external agencies for support explained that they would spend a considerable amount of time filling in forms which ask them about how they are feeling. They saw taking part in the Feeling Funny programme as an opportunity to escape and have fun, whereas the standardised tool reminded them of experiences they had had in clinical settings which could lead them to disengage:

> I wouldn't say my teenage years would be, have been a teenager, they've been spent in therapy, that's why I hate the stupid sheets. (Yas)

> They are like something from a therapy session … if you change the questions, people may answer more honestly. (James)

Some of the young people would associate the standardised tool with traumatic experiences regarding their mental well-being, and this would lead to young people not really wanting to engage with the tool, and instead just trying to get it out of the way.

Get it done and out of the way

The young people discussed their concerns over how much consideration and thought would be given to the questions when they were being completed. They felt that young people may just be in a rush to get it done, rather than really considering what they were being asked:

> A survey is not good. You are just put on autopilot yeah, yeah, yeah moving on … you can't capture it in an automated system, no offence. (Kieran)

They also felt that the wording of the tool focused on how young people felt and on their mental health, which could also influence the responses young people gave, due to them being worried about how these data would be used:

> You could get people who are reluctant to answer full stop, because they might be, like, if I say I have not dealt with problems well, then they are going to think what is the impact of that, for example I could be new here and think, oh my god they are going to tell my parents. The whole thing is counterproductive. (Yas)

> The more you force someone's hand … (Kieran)

> … the less likely you are to get a truthful answer. (Yas)

> They either don't want to answer the question or just want it to be over and done with, that's the last thing you want. (Kieran)

Table 1. Overview of research workshops (Source: Authors, 2022)

Session	Description	Duration	Attendees
1. Discussion of the standardised tool	These were guided discussions led by the researcher to explore young people's experiences of completing the tool. It was important to have flexibility and be responsive to the needs of the young people to enable them to decide how they would like to participate.	Two 40-minute sessions	James, Yas, Kieran, University Researcher
2. Sharing our stories	The session was facilitated by The Comedy Trust's Community Outreach Practitioner and lead researcher. Within this session, the young people talked about their experience and discussed ideas to creatively capture their journey on the programme. The group all collectively decided on an animation for evaluation. We used Post-it Notes and flip-chart paper to capture the discussion.	One hour	James, Yas, Kieran, University Researcher, Project Manager, Community Outreach Practitioner
3. Animation creation and design	These sessions focused on content for the animation. Facilitated by a practitioner, the group took part in drama-based activities to generate ideas and encourage open discussion surrounding their experiences. Following these discussions, each member of the group captured their thoughts through the creation of storyboards, ready to come together for the animation. This session proved particularly helpful in gaining an insight into what the young people took away from their experiences on the programme.	Two one-hour sessions	Yas, Kieran, University Researcher, Project Manager, Community Outreach Practitioner Freya joined second session
4. Recording	Transcriptions of the previous session were shared with the group. Young people added and amended their storyboards, and made changes to their animation script until they were happy with a final version. Following this, members of the group helped to set up the recording equipment and supported one another in rehearsing their parts and recording each other. All audio for the animation was recorded in this session, ready to be sent to the animators for them to produce a first-draft animation video.	One two-hour session	Yas, Kieran, Freya, University Researcher, Project Manager, Community Outreach Practitioner
5. Ongoing consultation	Outside the sessions, the audio was edited by TCT's team. The young people were involved in the design of the video, including the imagery used to depict them and the names chosen for their part in the animation. Several drafts of the animation were shared by the external partner, and members of the participatory research group were able to provide feedback to the animators until they were happy with the final version.	Shared the first edit via email, and then held discussions to check everyone was happy	Yas, Kieran, Freya, University Researcher, Project Manager, Community Outreach Practitioner, Animators
6. Post-animation feedback	Once the animation was complete, we held a celebration focus group to collate feedback on the animation process and to discuss ideas for how TCT may develop their research approaches. During this session, the participatory research group highlighted the importance of being led by young people in determining how they want to share their stories.	One hour	Yas, Kieran, James, University Researcher, Project Manager

We asked the young people to comment on the wording of the tool, for example, 'I am feeling useful'. It was felt that this use of language limited the young person's opportunity to decide what they took away from participating in the TCT programme. In addition, the young people felt that the wording of the tool did not fit with the nature of the programme:

> They are just morbid really, aren't they? (Yas)

It was not just the wording of the standard tool that the young people found problematic; they also discussed how the whole approach of filling in a form did not fit with the creative nature of the programme.

A standardised tool does not fit with the nature of the programme

The sessions developed as part of the Feeling Funny programme are focused on creating a fun space for young people to talk about how they are feeling. The young people discussed how filling in the standard tool could impact negatively on their mood:

> Feels like it brings the whole mood down … can we talk about how depressed you truly are now the session is over … The whole programme is about joy, fun and laughter, then after one hour session you are like well, now it is time to be miserable again, remember what I came to get away from, no offence, slight offence. (Yas)

The young people highlighted the importance of providing participants with the opportunity to decide how they would like to share their experiences, rather than restricting them to a set of predetermined responses. TCT work with a diverse range of young people from the ages of 12 to 24, so finding a tool that would be suitable for all presents many difficulties. For example, some of the older young people advocated that participants had the opportunity to talk about their experiences instead of filling in a form:

> I felt like a child when I was filling it in … people find it easier to express what they are feeling by talking about it. (James)

The young people were able to offer powerful insights into the issues they encountered when completing the standard tool. We wanted to be led by them in order to explore the development of more creative methods to capture their experiences.

Challenge 2: the development of creative and participatory methods that align with TCT programmes

Aware of the limitations of employing a standardised tool to capture impact, we set out to develop research methods in collaboration with young people that would be aligned with the nature of TCT programmes. There is a growing body of literature which supports the employment of more creative methods, especially when working with children and young people (Brady and Preston, 2020; Caslin, 2019; Hewitt et al., 2018). The importance of young people taking on the role of researcher has also been acknowledged (Elmore et al., 2019; Hopkins et al., 2017). By placing young people at the heart of this project, we hoped to develop approaches that are flexible, creative and responsive to their needs, so that they are truly reflective of their experiences, and enable us to hear their stories (Elmore et al., 2019).

What we learnt from listening to the young people

The young people were able to clearly articulate some of the key issues they encountered when using the standardised tool. However, it is important for TCT to be able to capture the impact of their programmes, so we wanted to work alongside young people to develop more creative, reflexive, flexible and participatory methods (Cook et al., 2017; Holt, 2004; Dunn and Mellor, 2017; Lee et al.,

2020). The young people who formed the participatory research group were invited to take part in a series of research workshops after the programme. The aim of these sessions was to provide space for young people to share their stories and gain an insight into how they felt being part of the programme had impacted them. All of these sessions were recorded and transcribed, then shared with the research team to enable us to identify key themes. Although adult initiated, we knew from the outset that there were particular issues we wanted to explore, and it was essential that the young people felt valued and empowered throughout the research process. The work of Blaisdell et al. (2019) proved useful, as they advocate an intergenerational approach to eliciting voices. Adults should not be afraid of having a role in shaping the agenda; however, it is vital that they are responsive to the needs of the young people. These sessions took place after the sessions that explored the SWEMWBS. Unfortunately, James was not able to attend all of these sessions due to personal circumstances. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the research workshops.

We felt that it was essential that the young people themselves were able to communicate what they had taken away from their experiences with TCT. Throughout the project, the young people who formed the participatory research group played a significant role in designing the research approaches that would be adopted to hear their experiences. During our sessions with Yas and Kieran, we created storyboards to highlight all the ways they felt that they had benefited from taking part in the programme. Rather than having set predetermined outcomes, the young people were able to identify for themselves what they considered to be the significant ways that taking part in the programme had impacted on them (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018; O'Brien and Dadswell, 2020). From our conversations, we can provide an insight into their journeys.

Yas

When Yas first participated in the programme, she was 18 and attending a youth organisation. Throughout her time in education, Yas has experienced a range of mental health issues, including anxiety and depression. The staff at the provision were keen for her to take part in the Feeling Funny performance programme, as they felt this would help to develop her sense of well-being and her confidence levels. Although she expressed that she was initially apprehensive after the first session:

> It has given me more faith in myself to try new things. I remember after the first week, I absolutely hated it, but then at the end it was actually like I did get something out of that now. It has pushed me to do more things I wouldn't necessarily want to try. (Yas)

The staff at the youth organisation also noticed a positive change in Yas after she completed the programme. She has remained engaged with her educational provision, and it has helped her with her career aspirations, as she stated that she now draws on her experiences from the course in her work life:

> I feel I now have the skills to be more witty. One of the jobs I am in, I am constantly being told I am hated by the kids on a regular basis. They are just like 'Oh God, I hate you', so now I feel a lot more witty, so I am, like, sure you do hate me, but my name is not God, remember. (Yas)

For Yas, a further outcome of taking part in the programme has been the new friendships she has developed:

> The new friendships have been a big part. If I was honest, Kieran and James would not be the first people I would socialise with outside of here, but now that is different. (Yas)

This was felt to be particularly beneficial for Yas, as she had a tendency to isolate herself, but since attending the programme, she has sustained the new friendships that were developed. This is also significant when looking at how she scored on the SWEMWBS. For the question 'feel close to other people', her score indicated that there was no increase in this; however, this was highlighted as one of the key ways in which participating in the programme had impacted on her.

Kieran

Kieran is 20 and is currently studying at university. Kieran stated that he enjoyed taking part in the programme from the start. Taking part in the programme had a significant impact on Kieran's sense of well-being. He started the programme with one of his friends, who was attending the same provision, and he described their excitement at starting the programme:

> We went in because we both like comedy, we like laughing, we thought this might be, at first it was just something fun to do. I was just starting to take little things away, when I weren't doing it, I was taking it outside, you know. Like I said before, finding the good side of life. (Kieran)

Although staff at the provision did not necessarily feel lack of confidence was an issue for Kieran, they noticed that since attending the programme there was a significant increase in his confidence levels and his willingness to try new activities. During conversations with Kieran, it became clear that prior to starting the programme he had found it difficult to express his feelings:

> That's what it helped me build on, if I'm honest, it helped me open myself up a bit. Now I can calmly ask people, listen I'm struggling right now. (Kieran)

Kieran specifically wanted to highlight how the use of comedy had helped him to feel more confident. Having the opportunity to laugh and be silly had a really positive impact on how he was feeling, and he felt that other young people would also benefit from having this opportunity:

> Because some people can be having the worst time, you would be surprised how much the tiniest little thing can brighten up their day so much. I think someone who was very depressed, very down on themselves, if they were to come to this for six weeks consistently, I think it would brighten them up, give them a boost. (Kieran)

We discussed with the young people what might be a good way to capture and share their experiences. We explored a range of different options. They knew they wanted something that could be shared via social media, and that was creative, accessible and fun, to reflect the nature of the programme. Within the literature, there is increased recognition of the role that arts-based methods can play in research process and production (Blaisdell et al., 2019; Barton, 2015; Cook, 2020). Such methods clearly align with the aims of TCT programmes, they enable us to bring 'fresh' approaches to determine the impact of TCT work (Van der Vaart et al., 2018), and they are deemed particularly useful when seeking to hear the voices of young people (Blaisdell et al., 2019). We looked at a couple of examples of films that had been made by young people, and decided to make an animated video. As part of the funding from CERI, we were able to employ a professional artist to produce the video for the young people. Both TCT and a researcher from Liverpool Hope University took on the role of facilitator, with the young people being responsible for writing the script, providing the voice-over, and helping to design the look of the video. As James was not able to join all of these sessions, we were joined by another young person, Freya. Freya had previously taken part in the TCT Stand Out stand-up comedy programme, which was run in her school for young people struggling with their confidence. As a result of that, she joined the Feeling Funny Youth Club in order to continue with her journey into comedy. Freya was keen to share her experiences, and by including Freya we were able to demonstrate the diverse range of young people who engage with TCT. Through the process of talking with the young people, we were able to gain an insight into what they gained from taking part. The young people were able to articulate how they felt taking part had impacted on their sense of well-being. This approach of creating a film to showcase the stories of young people has been referred to as 'participatory video' (Blazek and Hraňová, 2012). Participatory video is deemed particularly useful in bringing communities together to share stories in an easy and accessible way (Lunch and Lunch, 2006). It is also essential that control and responsibility for production remain in the hands of

the young people (Blazek and Hraňová, 2012; for the video made by the young people, see The Comedy Trust, 2019).

If we had only based the evaluation on the young people's SWEMWBS scores, we would have never known the impact that the programme had on the young people who took part in the programme. Dunn and Mellor (2017) highlight the importance of capturing the process, and not just focusing on the end product of research. It was through the process of making the animation video that we were enabled to get a more detailed insight into how the young people experience the programme.

Discussion

This paper demonstrates the difficulties of assessing the impact of a comedy programme on the well-being of young people. Cultural organisations want to ensure that their programmes are having a positive impact, so it is essential that they find ways to capture this. It became clear throughout this project that the standard tool alone is not suitable for a programme of this nature. Although there is evidence which supports the use of this tool (Haver et al., 2015; Hunter et al., 2015), it is not considered appropriate by practitioners or by young people involved with TCT. It is important to recognise that there may be particular features of the programme that mean the tool is considered unsuitable – for example, the length of the programme, the diversity of the groups of young people with which TCT are working, and the numbers of young people who take part in their programmes. However, by employing more creative mechanisms, and more ways of engaging with young people alongside standardised approaches, we were able to gain an insight into the experiences of young people who have participated in the Feeling Funny programme, and the stories they wanted to share.

The findings are based on a relatively small number of participants, where emphasis was placed on gaining a detailed and in-depth insight into how the young people experienced the programme (Silverman, 2005). The study does not seek to make generalisations, and it is important that the reader is aware that this paper only provides a snapshot. The paper seeks to encourage professionals to develop more creative, participatory and flexible research approaches which afford the opportunity not only to hear the voices of young people, but also to develop programmes that are responsive, relevant and led by the needs of the community (Elmore et al., 2019; Lenette et al., 2019). Such research intends to provide an account of the specific situation that gets 'sufficiently close to its underlying structure to enable others to see potential similarities with other situations' (Winter, 2000: 1). In addition, although the paper is focused on a small number of young people, it is reflective of issues that TCT have experienced in evaluating all of their programmes. TCT have been aware of these issues, and this was an opportunity for them to capture how the process is experienced by the participants of their programmes. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of this project offered us the opportunity to develop approaches that were led by the participants (Alderson et al., 2019; Doucet et al., 2021; Hodges et al., 2014). It is also important to recognise that a 'one size fits all' approach is deemed inappropriate, as it can undermine the experiences of young people (Dunn and Mellor, 2017). Therefore, although the animation video worked well in this setting, this may not be the best approach for other groups that take part in TCT programmes. We are reminded to acknowledge and address the 'messiness' that comes with participatory research (Cook, 2020; Facca et al., 2020). One of the biggest challenges we encountered was maintaining contact with all of the young people. However, we feel it is important to recognise the commitment shown by the participatory research group; even though James was not able attend all sessions, he did maintain contact with the team, and he was able to rejoin the group at later stages. With this project, we were able to immerse ourselves in the research process to help build trust and develop relationships in a way that is not possible to achieve with a one-off top-down evaluation (Ross, 2017).

It is also important to consider the financial implications of doing this type of research, and to acknowledge the position of cultural and arts-based organisations in terms of accessing funding. It is widely acknowledged that funders tend to prefer certain methodological approaches which privilege

predefined performance indicators (Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Lenette et al., 2019). When we shared the video with TCT funders, the response was very positive; they liked the video, and felt it was a good way to capture the impact of the programme. However, they stated that they would still like the more traditional, quantitative, statistical data alongside this. We do not advocate an either–or approach; rather, we hope to highlight that which may be lost if we do not seek to develop creative and participatory approaches to research. If we are able to highlight what can be gained by taking this approach, we hope to encourage funders to recognise not only the value of this type of research, but also the time and money that need to go into this work.

Through the process of undertaking this project, we learnt that the mechanisms designed to capture the impact of TCT programmes need to be affordable, flexible, accessible, creative and participatory. It is only by adopting these approaches that we will be able to gain a true insight into the impact of the programmes. Through working collaboratively with practitioners, young people and researchers, TCT hope to be able to develop programmes that are responsive to the needs of their recipients (Alderson et al., 2019; Doucet et al., 2021; Hodges et al., 2014). TCT have set up a steering committee to help shape programmes which will include the voices of young people, and the information gained from this project will inform their future research production. There are many uncertainties surrounding arts provision in the UK, and TCT have been hit particularly hard by COVID-19; however, it is hoped that we will be able to build on this work in the future. We understand that change is an ongoing process (Wadsworth, 1998), and we are committed to continue being reflexive and responsive in our work.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by Liverpool Hope University ethics board.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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