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# Exploring young people's aspirations through community drama

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores young people's aspirations and the influence of community drama in shaping these arts-focussed aspirations. Research was undertaken using creative drama methods with young people who attend a youth drama group. The young people identified career and personal aspirations, recognising the hard work and support that it can take to achieve their goals. Youth drama was discussed as supporting the development of these young people's aspirations to enter careers in the arts industry, but also in other areas, as well as helping to develop transferable skills that could support the young people in their future and current aspirations.

## KEYWORDS

Drama; young people; aspirations; youth; creative methods

## Introduction

Within education, the creative arts (including music, drama, dance, and visual arts), are often considered secondary to core subjects such as Maths, Science, and English, in part because they are often not considered to offer the same level of development of key skills (Mansour et al. 2018). This perspective sits within a cultural norm that education is the way in which people achieve their aspirations and become socially mobile (Brown and Lauder 2011).

Conversely, existing literature illustrates the impact that targeted drama interventions can have on, for example, young people's (mental) health (Diba and D'Oliveira 2015), the development of cultural understandings (Roberts, Lobo, and Sorenson 2017), the creation of self-concept (Mansour et al. 2018; Orkibi et al. 2017), writing and information literacy (Zhang 2021), and educational attainment (Grant 2017; Rose-Krasnor et al. 2006). Whilst research into the construction of aspirations by young people exists (see, for example, Archer and Yamashita 2003), this is limited (Grant 2017). The perceived impact of community drama on young people's current and future aspirations has received scant attention in published literature. It is this gap which this paper seeks to address.

Much existing literature around aspirations and young people has focused on educational and familial contexts, and their impact on aspirational achievement (Campbell and McKendrick 2017; Baker 2017). Alongside this, there has been increasing focus within government policy on the importance of educational achievement in relation to aspirations, and

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specifically social mobility and inequality (Spohrer, Stahl, and Bowers-Brown 2018). Some authors argue that education should play more of a role than families in supporting young people to define their aspirations (HM Government 2011). Campbell and McKendrick (2017) note that a greater understanding of young people's aspirations is needed that explores a more capable model, that acknowledges young people's agency and skills, rather than a deprivation model; the latter of these implies that those from more disadvantaged backgrounds have lower aspirations (Spohrer, Stahl, and Bowers-Brown 2018).

The concept of aspiration is an important topic for consideration in relation to young people's outcomes (Archer, DeWitt, and Wong 2014), but also in relation to their current experiences. There is a growing awareness in extant literature of the importance of hearing from young people themselves in developing policies which affect them, something which Spohrer, Stahl, and Bowers-Brown (2018) note is often missing in relation to aspirations. Developing research which considers their views and experiences in relation to community-led support and training initiatives is therefore key. The research discussed in this paper was developed in consultation with an established youth drama group and experienced creative arts teachers with the aim of exploring the concept of aspirations in relation to young people's own views and experiences. We also explored young people's perspectives of the impact of community youth drama on current and future arts aspirations. Aspirations within this study are defined in terms of the hopes and ambitions of young people (Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston 2015) to achieve something in the future (Quaglia and Cobb 1996). Quaglia and Cobb (1996) also suggest that these encourage people to act in our present lives to achieve these aspirations.

The research setting is a community youth drama group, 'Silhouette', which is based in Northampton, UK. Established in 2018, the organisation welcomes young people on weekday evenings (Monday–Thursday), and at weekends. At the time the research was conducted, over 100 children were members, aged between 7 and 17 years. Silhouette is situated in an area that falls in the 10% most deprived areas nationally, and in which most members reside. The ethos of the organisation includes providing a space for young people which offers safety and support, offering them an environment where they can be themselves, develop relationships with peers, and learn new skills, for example creativity, teamwork, and communication.

## Method

A creative, qualitative approach was designed to explore the impact of community drama on young people's aspirations. Creative research methods enable researchers and participants to work together in exploring themes and experiences in ways which do not rely solely on the spoken word (Ward et al. 2018). The rationale for using this format was to enable the young people to engage with the research in a way that was familiar to them. Rainford (2020) discusses the use of creative or arts-based methods as offering a way to conduct research in a format that is familiar with the participant group, and which provides an opportunity to think about the research topic in a different way to the more traditional approach of an interview or focus group, one that offers opportunity to play and collaborate in exploring or expressing meaning.

The young people invited to participate in the study were existing members of a community youth theatre group who had previously met the research team during one of

their drama sessions, where youth workers were present, and the initial concept of the research project was discussed. Twenty young people between the ages of 15 and 18 attended a day-long research workshop (November 2019). This workshop was open for all members of the youth theatre group within this age range. An information sheet and invitation were written in language aimed at this cohort and were reviewed by the community drama group lead prior to sharing through the drama facilitators. These were designed to be shared with parents, families, and guardians to ensure appropriate approvals were gained for the young people to participate. Consent was gained from both the young people and their parents/guardians prior to the data collection workshop.

### **Data collection workshop**

Data collection took place over a day-long workshop. This was run at a time and place when the young people normally attended the youth theatre, and it was made clear that their participation had no impact on their place or other activities at the drama group. The data collection workshop was run by two researchers who had previously visited the group and with specialisms in drama, research with young people, and creative methods. On the day, the researchers were re-introduced to the group to re-establish the relationship between the team and participants. The workshop was designed with a developmental approach in mind and hinged on drama-based methods which served to enable young people to develop their thinking around the subject of focus, whilst also gradually building rapport with the research team. Participants themselves were known to each other; meeting regularly as part of an ongoing community drama group. The workshop followed a session plan as outlined in [Figure 1](#). The day was divided into three sections each with its own aim. The three aims were to: 1. Understand what success looked like in the context of young people's lives, 2. Understand how young people feel their aspirations can be achieved, and 3. Understand whether engagement in youth drama affects or develops young people's aspirations.

1. **Introductions:** The researchers introduced the project and themselves. The researchers reviewed issues of consent and confidentiality of the project.
2. **Ground rules:** These were discussed and agreed by the group – these were written on flipchart paper and placed on the wall for the duration of the day. These included: respect for each other's opinions, confidentiality outside of the group, listening to other people, no swearing or aggressive behaviour etc. As a starting point the researchers had developed some overarching key themes on which these discussions will be based.
3. **Warm up activities:** Recognised drama based warm ups were run to build rapport between researchers and young people and to encourage them to think creatively, e.g. name games (not recorded as data).
4. **Theme 1: Aim:** Understanding future aspirations: what does success look like in the context of your life?  
**Activity:** Word association activity (thought shower to identify key words about aspirations as identified by the young people) - words were displayed throughout the day as a word cloud on the walls;  
**Activity:** Visualisation undertaken through a mindfulness exercise where they envisaged a person achieving success.  
**Activity:** Frozen frames (creating visual representations of the key words, leading to a group statue).  
**Recording data:** Video, photographs of individual stills and statue, word association notes, researcher reflective notes.
5. Refreshment break
6. **Theme 2: Aim:** How do you feel your aspirations can be achieved?  
**Activity:** Separated into smaller groups (4-5 people), asked to identify 5 things they feel would help them to achieve their aspirations (e.g. family, education). Ask each group to create a character which defines success for them and ask them to create a vignette/s of the characters' life journey, focusing on the 5 supportive element they have identified (for up to 5 mins duration). Each group then showed their vignettes/s to the whole group, followed by a question and answer session for each vignette.  
**Recording data:** Video, photographs of the vignettes, researcher reflective notes.
7. Lunch break
8. **Warm up activity**
9. **Theme 3: Aim:** Does engagement in youth drama affect or develop your aspirations? If so, how?  
**Activity:** Young people were placed to two groups to have a dialogue about a central issue. The topic was: *Youth theatre will help young people to achieve what they want to in the future*. Each member of the two groups assumed the role of a character including, but not limited to: a teacher, a parent, a young person, a drama group facilitator, a careers advisor. Two young people volunteered to lead the discussion in the form of a debate for and against the key topic. Each member of the group took it in turns to discuss the issue.  
**Recording data:** Video process, photographs of the discussion, researcher reflective notes.
10. **Cool down activities:** which bring the group to a close (not to be recorded as data).

**Figure 1.** Session Plan.

The day started with introductions and aims for the day. The group then worked together to set the ground rules for the workshop. These were written and pinned to the wall so that they were always visible and could be reflected on as the day progressed. Before each of the key creative activities, a warm-up activity took place in the form of games. Games act to break potential barriers, to engage people on equal terms, develop spontaneity, discovery, interpersonal communication and to enable participants to relax, value the process and to enjoy it (Pillay 2000; Taylor and Warner 2006). As Epskamp (2000) reminds us, developing change may be central to applied drama, but it is also there to 'divert and entertain' (125) and Alexander (1983) writes that while the process of drama may be difficult and demanding, it should also be 'joyous' (3). Taylor and Warner (2006), writing of the work of Dorothy Heathcote, discuss the function of drama as not just the product of a play or workshop but rather the experience and reflection on engaging in that experience. Games were therefore thought to be an integral part of the day to bond the group, to develop their creative process and to be enjoyed.

The workshop then used two warm-up exercises to act as a focus for the remainder of the day. These included asking the young people to create a word cloud about what aspirations meant to them, where they wrote and pinned their contributions to the wall. This was followed by a visualisation exercise where the young people lay on the ground while the lead researcher talked them through a mindfulness exercise where they envisaged a young person achieving success. Participants were then asked to write down notes about their visualisation to support the creation of an individual statue that represented what they had pictured. As a group they showed their statues simultaneously. The use of 'warm-up' exercises, or orientation (Spolin 1983), also serve to focus the attention, help the group to get to know each other, work collectively, break down barriers and develop the skills required for drama work, such as listening, openness, and observation skills (Spolin 1983; Prendergast and Saxton 2013). These two exercises worked alongside the games to encourage a creative atmosphere.

The young people were then asked to form four groups to develop a group statue, or tableau, that incorporated their individual statues and represented an aspect of achieving success. These statues were presented to the whole group. After each presentation, there was an opportunity to discuss what had been observed. The young people were asked if they wanted to change groups, with only two individuals changing to be part of a new group with peers more closely aligned to their age. Each group then devised a short five-minute vignette, using role-play to explore how aspirations can be achieved, before again presenting this to the wider group. The final part of the day was to carry out a debate on whether youth drama supports young people's aspirations. The group was divided into 'for' and 'against' groups, with two individuals self-selecting to be the debate chairs. Each group took on a character by self-selecting from a list of suggested options, such as: teacher, parent, youth worker, young person, drama group facilitator, and careers advisor, or choosing their own character. Only one individual chose their own character, wanting to identify as an actor. Whilst embodying these roles, they participated in a debate, in character, either for or against the statement *Youth drama supports young people's aspirations*. Where quotations are used in the findings section, the attribution refers to the

character being played by a young person. Guidance at each stage of the day was provided to the group in terms of what was being asked of them, questions and prompts to support their creative ideas and the researchers spent time with each group to ensure they had time to discuss ideas.

The workshop was video recorded using two static video cameras that captured the action taking place in the room. These were moved by the researchers for key moments, such as the presentation of vignettes and statues to ensure that these were fully captured. One of the researchers took supporting photographs of the activities of the day to provide a different perspective of the data, and written notes made by the participants were also included in the analysis. Specific consent was gained from all participants to capture this range of data.

The design of the workshop was planned to enable the young people to be able to share their thoughts through metaphor and characterisation; creating a safe space through which to put their ideas forward. Within this research, the opportunity to explore identity through a range of different mediums, characters, and roles, enabled the young people to step back from discussing their own selves, but to explore scenarios in a safe context with some distance in place. This approach was influenced by the field of applied drama, and the use of drama techniques that the young people were familiar with through their work with the youth drama group. Drama offers the opportunity to tell a story and to share experiences. It offers this in a safe environment where the status quo can be challenged, where feelings can be explored and ideas shared (Prendergast and Saxton 2009). One of the ways in which this works is the 'distance' the dramatic process provides from real life (Prendergast and Saxton 2009), or as Taylor (2003) describes, people are able to 'deconstruct' their behaviour and in so doing can find different ways to act.

## **Analysis**

The data were analysed using thematic analysis through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic data analysis. This includes an initial stage of familiarisation, followed by the creation of initial codes and identification of themes. These themes are then reviewed, defined, and named before a final write up. This framework of analysis was used to analyse the data collected from the videos and researcher field notes. The videos were analysed using both camera perspectives of the same event. The dramatic work and the group discussions were included in this analysis. The rehearsal process and games are not included in this paper. These focused on the play and bonding within the group, rather than a focus on exploring aspirations. The videos were watched by the research team and notes were made by each researcher about what they had observed and heard and what they identified as key moments or conversations. The researchers re-watched the videos several times to familiarise themselves with the action. From this observation a video analysis framework was developed, to write out in full what occurred during the action, the researcher's assessment and reflection of the action, and a transcription of supporting text. This framework was adapted from Ridder's (2007) video analysis framework (see Table 1). Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was used to identify the themes from this final table of data and the field notes. The process is described in detail in

**Table 1.** Extract from video analysis.

Video No.; Camera A video 2 (timeframe): Meaningful event: Group statuses	Assessment of event 'I feel/think ...' or 'The student seems to ...'	Reflection of event How can you see this response, emotions, engagement, interactions	Supporting text Transcription of clip
<i>Description of the event, who was involved and what occurred</i>	<i>Interpretation of what occurred, taking into consideration the student's perspective</i>	<i>Researcher's reflective comments on the action</i>	<i>Extracts from the transcription</i>
<b>16:13 Skit 3: This depicts the bullying of young people who are involved in drama. The central character was shared by all members of group. Bullying was shown to be stopped by onlookers. Parents depicted to disown the central character. Friends supports and involved in celebrations when the character succeeds.</b>	<i>This group are the first to share the role of the lead character and support roles. Each 'scene' therefore has a different cast member acting as the lead. We have reflected previously that as a group this one seems much more balanced in development and rehearsal than others.</i>	<i>From the first scene it is clear that there is bullying behavior towards the central character, whose name is identified at the outset, presumably to ensure continuity and understanding when cast members switch roles. There is a wealth of emotion and noise is built quickly. A sense of explosion from the character and being overwhelmed, the impact that this treatment can have on an individual. Second 'scene' similar beginning – bullied, lots of noise, being circled by other characters. Drama is introduced here – 'you are highlighting your script', 'give me back my script'. Called out for being a nerd. Then supporter arrives to challenge the bullies, gives them short shrift, but they don't leave together. 'Scene 3' they have moved to what we assume is a home environment, with parents who challenge the fact that the young person has achieved a part in the school play. This is negatively received, with the parents voicing their own expectations around what aspirations should be for this young person. The scene results in the young person being disowned by the family.</i>	<i>Extracts from the skit: 'You are not my daughter.' 'You disgust me.' 'I'm sick of you performing arts people.' 'I always knew there was something wrong with you performing arts people.' 'I'm sick of you people judging me for something that you probably couldn't do.' 'Come here. Maybe you're not so bad after all.' Staged at awards ceremony for main character, 'I want to thank everyone for coming here tonight. If it wasn't for my best friends of all time who help me through a really dark place ... Come on up. [Join celebration]'</i>

Ward (2019) and Thoft et al. (2021). This enabled the capture of how the participants engaged with the creative methods and an analysis of the creative outputs in line with the aims of the study. The example below describes one of the skits showing the impact of bullying on a young person getting a part in a school play and how support from friends can help them.

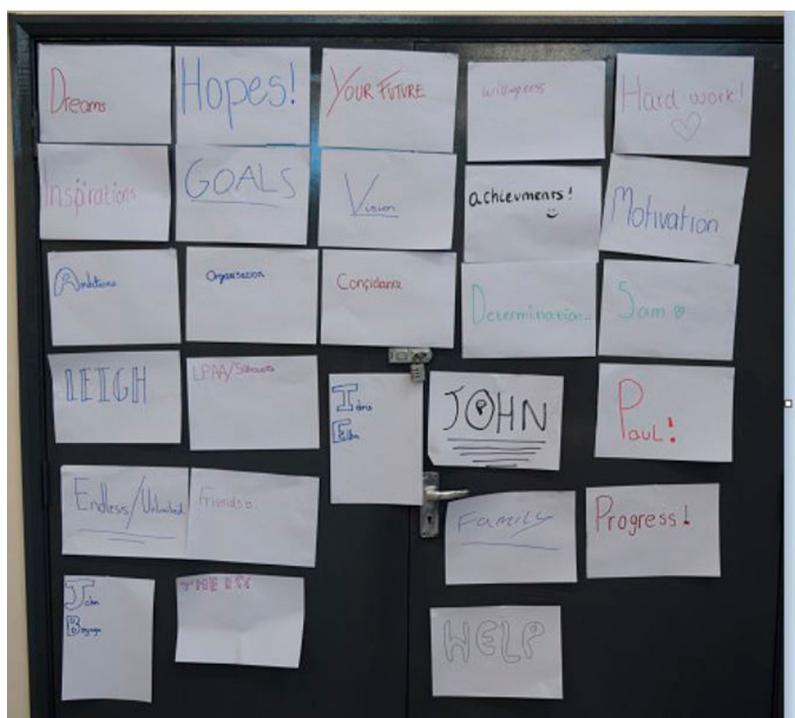
## Findings

### *Meaning of and achieving aspirations*

Aspirations were thought of in terms of longer and shorter-term goals or future careers. The young people spoke about wanting to be in certain careers, mainly linked to being an actor or in the arts profession. However, other aspirations were discussed in relation to completing school and the stepping stones to achieving longer-term goals.

The young people were asked to explain what aspirations meant to them. They talked about these in terms of synonyms such as 'dreams' or 'goals', but also associated this with how to achieve these, for example through working hard and intrinsic values such as 'confidence', 'ambition', or 'motivation'. The term was also associated with individuals; famous people they held in high regard, icons in the arts industry, or people in their lives who they felt were helping them to achieve their goals (primarily staff members from their drama group). See [Figure 2](#).

This theme of what aspirations meant to the young people was explored further through the statues exercise. Here participants devised tableaus of scenes that depicted success. These showed the varied expectations the young people had about aspirations. These were depicted through celebrations of success, the diversity of aspirations, and the support required to achieve their goals, for example, one group illustrated a character being held to the sky, supported by those around them. Another depicted stages of growth (seeds of success), beginning with the planting of seeds, moving towards growth and development with support (depicted through pruning). The group shared



**Figure 2.** What 'aspirations' means to you.



**Figure 3.** 'Planting New Relationships'.

the meanings they had gained from each other's statues, exploring issues of how to achieve success, opportunities, and relationships.

Alongside the meaning, the young people also considered ways of achieving aspirations. One of the statues showed the progression to success, rather than what that success was or what led to it. One of the statues, 'Planting New Relationships' (see [Figure 3](#)), shows the group 'planting the seeds of life', a metaphor that suggests aspirations take time to nurture and that they can grow stronger and taller over time.

The group depicted an initial idea that grows, metaphorically and physically and culminates in the celebration of success, with the final facial features showing how success can lead to joy or happiness. Several of the statues referred to the 'uplifting' nature of success, depicting this through euphoric poses of arms outstretched, heads held high and smiles, also physically showing that little steps build up, depicted by being taller or higher up than the starting poses.

Aspirations were often talked about in relation to success. What success meant to these young people varied, and it was clear from their contributions that they drew on a range of sources of information and advice from others in framing this. Most prominently, educational contexts were considered an influence on how others perceived the value of their aspirations, and particularly those which related to drama or performing arts. The following quotation, taken from the feedback from the vignettes, signals one young person attempting to explain why parents might not want their child(ren) to pursue a career in these subjects, with the perceived challenges that this journey would bring.

Sometimes when your parents don't want you to do it, they want you to be a doctor, or an engineer or a lawyer ... it's not because they don't want you to do it, it's because they know it's really hard ...

Because there is this small stigma around actors and actresses, trying to make it and being told, 'oh, you know, what are you going to do in 10 years' time if you're broke'. It's like that opera singer who became homeless and she was found in a subway station and someone filmed her singing and now she has been taken onto a show. And there is this small stigma around homelessness and acting.



**Figure 4.** Knocking on the Door of Opportunity.

In the first example, the young person notes that parents may prefer their offspring to pursue an alternative path. The examples used here of becoming a doctor, an engineer or a lawyer begin to illustrate how challenging the young person considered a future theatrical career may be. As well as being challenging, the young people recognised the stigma associated with a career in acting and that it can lead to low income and even homelessness, showing their concerns about this as a career pathway, as the second quote above discusses.

The young people spoke about aspirations in relation to success. Another statue, titled 'Knocking on the Door of Opportunity' (see [Figure 4](#)), highlights a theme that success is not something that will just occur but takes work, luck, and perseverance to achieve.

This sense of achievement in different aspects of their lives was an important theme that they returned to during the day. Feedback from the young people identified the connections they made with the statues and their concepts of aspiration, feeling a sense of inspiration to reach their goals. They each had different aspirations but there was commonality in how they felt these could be achieved ('It shows that everyone's idea of success is different and no one's success is the same.')

### ***Relationships***

The importance of relationships was explored through the statues the young people created. The statues depicted the importance of relationships for young people to achieve their aspirations. Support was received via a range of avenues including from peers, parents, at times strangers or – as we have noted previously – the importance of other adult role models, such as the group leaders in this case.

For a child, we all agreed that having an adult we trust, and trusted relationships with adult role models was really important.

Having people around to support you to get to your journey.

Having people around, like, who will lift you up when you need lifting up, and people you lift up.

In one of the statues, three members of the group are depicted holding up the fourth member of the group, a statue simply titled 'Success' as a way of depicting the role of others and the 'uplifting' nature of aspirations. In another statue, titled 'Diverse Uplifting', the group depict individual poses representing their own aspirations, but they connected physically to each other, for example through holding hands. This physical connection across the group again points towards the way that success is not perceived as an individual outcome but one that best occurs with support, encouragement, and guidance from others.

This sense of connection, working as a team and the need for support from others was also identified through the feedback the group provided on each statue and related to not only their definitions or representations of their aspirations but also on how they worked together to depict this through the statues, with the following comments made about the Diverse Uplifting statue:

I thought it was a group of people going into success together ... something you all go through together.

I think it shows you need to lean on each other to get where you want to be.

It was teamwork, we were helping each other to know what to do.

In one of the skits that was created, we also saw how support can come from unlikely places. In highlighting the challenges that can befall people who aspire to acting, in this case hardship, marginalisation and prejudice, they explored the ability of strangers to affect their journey towards aspirations. The power of strangers to help or hinder was apparent. In this skit, an aspiring young actor was homeless and without work. She is befriended by a group of other young people who support her training and offer her accommodation, playing a key part in her eventual success. This success was depicted by winning an award for her acting and celebrating this with her new friends. We also saw examples of the judgments of casting directors who relied on preconceptions in relation to appearance to decide that an actor was not suitable for a part, to the kindness of strangers helping a fallen actor on the street to realise their aspirations. This is evidenced through a skit of a young boy going for an audition to be turned down because of his height. He returns to his family to share his disappointment and receive encouragement. The young boy returns the next year to audition and returns home successful, with family leaping in happiness at his success.

The importance of relationships was a theme reflected not only in the *how* of obtaining their future aspirations, but also in relation to *what* those aspirations might be. Throughout our data collection, we observed the young people expressing, listening, discussing and redefining their aspirations with others; the presence and importance of the role of peers in their community played out in their creations during the project, but also in subtle ways during the nuances of their interactions. One example of this is reflected in discussions about race which were captured during the day. During their preparatory discussions, one of the groups considered embedding racial inequality as a theme within their work and spent some time considering whether they felt prepared to illustrate their experiences to a wider audience in this way. In the event, they opted not to continue with this theme, opting instead to use another aspect of appearance, in this instance height. Their discussions during the preparation phase illustrated the awareness that

they as a diverse group in terms of ethnic background, had about the challenges faced by their peers every day, and the perceived impact this would have in relation to the achievement of their aspirations in future. These challenges were also associated with judgements others had about their abilities and interest in performing.

In these ways, ideas were shared, constructively challenged, embedded into their creations, and reflected on together before feeding into the next stage of the research journey ('We thought about five points, and that if a person had these five points, they might feel like there's no point in living, that's where we started. Like, [name redacted] she just had nothing to cling onto, then as they progressed like through the thing [skit], that was our message, that you grow as [a] person'). Whilst the dramatic works they presented illustrated the importance of support, so too did the preparatory discussions, rehearsals, and evaluative conversations that are reflected in the researchers' field notes:

One group asks for a facilitator's input. They are considering whether to use race as a theme within their storyline, which focuses on exclusion. They were unsure about whether to do this. In the end they opted to use height instead of race.

Interesting interaction between facilitator and group, where once the group has had the support they deem is sufficient, their circle closes and the facilitator is physically closed out of the group as the momentum again builds.

These examples show how the young people sought guidance for their dramatic work from the facilitators, but also that they were a close-knit group that found support through their kinship and solidarity. The experiences they shared through their dramatic work, and the judgement and challenges they faced to pursue an interest in the arts, perhaps enabled a greater bond between the members.

The sense of judgement from others was evident through the young people's work. In the dramatic works we saw, they played out the challenges that these judgements and assumptions could lead to, illustrating their related disappointments, for example arising through bullying from non-acting peers:

I'm sick of you performing arts people.

I always knew there was something wrong with you performing arts people.

The sense of being voiceless also came across in their delivery, where judgements were made by others before they were given an opportunity to evidence their skills or to voice their opinions. In our analysis, we have labelled these discussions 'your appearance does not fit'. The presence of these judgements was a key theme running throughout the workshop, across the range of activities that were completed. They were portrayed as coming from a range of stakeholders in their lives, including teachers, parents, and theatre professionals. Judgements and assumptions could arise based on gender, ethnicity, or background, and all were considered to have an impact on the journey to achieving aspirations. Although they all perceived that their journeys would differ, the presence of judgements was a consistent factor in their anticipations.

### ***Playing 'for' or 'against': the role of youth drama in supporting aspirations***

Within the debate, participants argued for and against the statement – 'Youth drama supports young people's aspirations' – acting in the position of a range of characters

reflecting the adults in their lives. Drama as a contribution to (or distraction from) education was a recurring theme from most characters on both sides of the argument, illustrating how readily the young people could embody characters who made these arguments in their lives, and how used they were to engage in these discussions. On the against side, drama as a distraction from educational activities and achievements was almost exclusively the argument used by the characters, with examples given of young people taking time out of school, or not having time to complete set homework:

If you start acting, you're just taking time out of school and you could be doing lessons that help you learn, but drama is doing nothing for you ... (Character not recorded)

Drama takes too much time out of the day, I don't get time to do my homework, and people get detentions. (Young person, character)

There was also an argument presented that acting and drama would not offer sustainable career opportunities, either at all, or for the long term. Some argued that drama leads to a career for only a small minority of those who attempt to embark on it, whilst others noted that a career in the sector would be time-limited.

In my professional opinion, I feel that even though drama may have all these [someone else interjects 'advantages'] yes, it is a proven statistic, my friend, that only less than 0.01% make it into the industry. So, all your efforts are being wasted, and for what ... (Careers advisor, character)

When your acting career is done, what happens after. They decide to go back to uni and study something else, so what's the point in the first place? (Teacher, character)

Other 'for' characters argued that participation in youth drama can have a range of benefits. These focussed on the ways in which drama can support young people to develop life skills and friendships. Confidence and identity building was a common theme in their contributions, represented by both parent and teacher characters:

It helps students grow as a person, and it helps improve their confidence. (Teacher, character)

I've got a little one, she's called ... basically, she's a little shy, and she gets bullied a bit, and basically what I said to her is 'do you wanna do dance and drama' and she said 'yeah please' ... (Parent, character)

If you're a young person and you do drama, you develop skills. (Theatre group facilitator, character)

Developing friendships through which young people also found support, was also a recurring theme. A feeling of safety within these friendships was noted, and here we refer our readers back to our earlier commentary about bullying from peers who did not participate in drama and creative arts activities.

... you Mr Teacher, I'm talking to you yeah ... she goes to her lessons yeah, and she comes back home and then goes to her dance, she makes loads of little friends at dance, gets all chatty and stuff. (Parent, character)

So basically, it creates friendships and makes people feel safe, and it helps them focus ... (Teacher, character)

The development of confidence fed into the development of other skills, for example, teamwork. In addition, characters argued that educational engagement benefitted where students' minds were kept 'active' through their participation, supporting their future life prospects.

And it improves the teamwork skills that they need in school when they do group work. So there. (Young person, character)

So, while a child is out at all these extra-curricular activities, they're building up all these extra skills for life. (Teacher, character)

You say, what are we going to do after, well we've still got the skills and we can do other stuff after. We have got skills from the drama, we've made friends as well, and we've got some businesses. So, we've got friends as well who work in different industries, and there is loads of different careers that can use drama. (Young person, character)

A section of the debate also involved a heated discussion on the readiness of schools to engage in the delivery of drama and related arts. Those in the 'against' team tried to argue that engagement in community drama reduces the time available to students for school and homework, which was readily countered by the 'for' team who noted the importance of allocation of time within the school curriculum to teaching drama.

Basically, you lot are saying it takes up all of your time outside of school, yeah, but if you wanted to do it inside of school or do PE after school or whatever, you know what I'm saying, then maybe you should actually think about putting performing arts in the curriculum for schools. My little girl's sat here going 'mummy mummy mummy, I want to do dance and drama and acting at school', but she can't, because you teachers are too lazy to actually get your butts together and put performing arts in the curriculum so that my daughter can have the education that she deserves. (Parent, character)

The young people found it challenging to offer arguments 'against' during the debate. From our observations, it appeared that they found it easier to present the 'against' case where they could associate with these arguments, for example representing viewpoints they may have heard from adults or peers. This has led us to reflect on the extent to which they experience the topics presented in our discussions here in their daily lives.

## Discussion

One of the strengths of this research has been the use of drama methods to capture the views, thoughts, and experiences of young people in relation to aspirations and creative arts, in particular community youth drama. Working with young people using methods which are familiar to them enables them to locate their contributions in the characters they portray. Young people have been able to share personal experiences within a safe environment, using approaches with which they were familiar, including role play and improvisation. Within the discussion that follows, we draw from data arising from each method used during the workshop day to illustrate the impact of community youth drama on young people's aspirations.

This paper sought to capture the way in which young people identified success in relation to their aspirations. In order to explore this concept, it is also important to consider the young people's interpretation of aspirations. These were similar to Kintrea, St

Clair, and Houston's (2015) definition of aspirations associated to hope and ambition. However, for these young people, aspiration is not a word to be used in isolation: 'aspirations' comes with a set of representations and expectations, located in either themselves, or those around them. For the most part, the young people related their understandings of aspirations to intrinsic values (working hard, having confidence, and being motivated), and extrinsic icons who helped frame what they might aim for in the future. The meaning of aspirations was also closely aligned to action: having an aspiration meant actively working towards achieving it, making it a moveable concept. This was intertwined with what success meant, which the young people closely aligned with growth, representing this physically through big bodily movements and shown through raised hands, lifting up an individual or being taller than others in the tableau/role plays. So, the achievement of success was not depicted by the young people as an individual achievement but one which occurred with hard work, time, and support.

This concept of support is identified in other studies of young people's aspirations. Campbell and McKendrick (2017) discusses the role of family and parents as being key influences in the decision-making process for young people's aspirations. This is furthered by Archer, DeWitt, and Wong's (2014) research which identified that key sources of aspiration were shaped by those nearest to young people at home and at school, such as parents and teachers. The young people in this present study similarly discussed the role of family and of the facilitators at the youth drama, whom the young people held as role models. However, the influence of others went beyond this and incorporated peers and famous actors who they held in high regard. The young people also explored the potential barriers to achieving success, recognising that regardless of effort or support, these may not always be achievable. They explored through their role plays the perceived and realised stigma of engaging in community youth drama by peers and parents, and dramatised the perceived inequalities of pursuing a career in the arts. These were identified as social status, gender, ethnicity, and body shape.

Intrinsic factors such as motivation were regarded by the young people in this study as important in working towards and achieving aspirations. Campbell and McKendrick (2017) also identify confidence and self-efficacy as important factors. Frye (2012), who conducted a study of young people in Malawi, found that they often had high ambitions and that these reflected not only their future goals but also their current identities and reflected how they wanted to be both moral and 'forward thinking' (1608). This sense of morality and identity that is intrinsic to aspirations is further explored by Baker (2017), who identified through interviews with young people that aspirations were related to personal development, while Brown's (2011) work identified a 'holistic' aspiration for many young people based on their wellbeing. This sense of morality is reflected by the young people in this present study, who depicted acts of kindness, of peer support and friendship as integral to the achievement of aspirations. For these young people, it was the collective effort that led to success, and this was both an internalised sense of collaboration and an external action. Like Baker's (2017) young people, this present study also identified that hard work, perseverance, and resolve were integral to success. This also furthers Frye's (2012) study in identifying aspirations as relevant to different life phases, for example achieving GCSE or A-Levels, having families, as well as achieving professional success. Aspirations are therefore shaped and developed, and reshaped by different factors in young people's lives, but fundamentally are related to

what they want to achieve and who they want to be as a person. What is interesting about the findings in this paper, is that while the young people lived in an area of deprivation, their aspirations were not tempered by their current status, nor were the discussions on aspirations focused on this as an influencing factor. Unlike much of the traditional research on young people's aspirations, this project has not found that disadvantaged young people have low aspirations for their future, nor does it suggest that disadvantaged groups are not able to develop their aspirations (Spohrer, Stahl, and Bowers-Brown 2018). Conversely, these young people had high aspirations and a desire to achieve.

Another key aspect explored by the young people was the role of youth drama in supporting and developing their aspirations. This was explored, primarily through the final activity of the workshop – the role-play debate. However, aspects of drama's role in young people's aspirations were central to much of the work that was explored throughout the day. This can be evidenced in the role plays, for example, where the young people explored the impacts of drama as potential careers, as ways to be with like-minded people and to express some of the negative impacts of societal pressures such as bullying and homelessness.

Young people in this study debated that the role of youth drama offers a positive context for aspirations where wider external perspectives can be negative towards a career in the arts, as evidenced through the parental role-play concerns of it being a challenging career with little success and that it can detract from current educational demands. However, a counterargument was also proposed that youth drama can support the development of a holistic person, providing learning skills in literacy, and developing confidence – skills that can benefit a range of careers. Spohrer, Stahl, and Bowers-Brown (2018) discuss the importance of recognising the difference between empowerment and manipulation when exploring young people's aspirations. The way the young people in this study debated the positive impacts of youth drama identified it as a form of empowerment through the range of skills development, and through this research empowered the young people, enabling them to visualise their aspirations through drama. The young people also acknowledged their understanding that drama is a challenging profession and may require a 'plan b'. For these young people, drama provided an important support mechanism for shaping their aspirations. Archer, DeWitt, and Wong (2014) discussed the role of extra-curricular activities in supporting aspirations, with sports and arts activities being key influencers, particularly if they are attended over time (Azevedo 2011). Youth drama, as explored in this project, provides a safe space to develop identity, develop friendships and provide role models to explore who they want to be and what they want to achieve.

Busby (2018), however, cautions that the arts may provide fantastical aspirations to work in the performing arts that may not be achievable. Dreams of becoming the next big star may not be realised, and so Busby suggests that aspirations be cautiously approached within reality. What the young people in this project highlighted was a grounding in reality. They acknowledged the hard work that it took to achieve, be this in the creative arts or in other aspects of life. They identified the challenging nature of entering into the creative arts as a profession, reporting that parents thought this was more challenging than traditionally difficult industries to enter, for example, law or medicine. A report by Campbell (2020) on young people entering the creative arts identifies a number of barriers such as low or non-pay, or potential inequalities of opportunity

through race and gender – aspects also noted in this present study. The young people suggested that aspirations were met through a series of stepping stones that built on success. Furthermore, aspirations were not solely about becoming successful actors, but also about achieving their GCSE or A-Levels, or having a family and so were grounded in their current realities. They also acknowledged the arts were a difficult industry to work in, and while some had ambitious goals, they knew these were ambitious. The perception of the authors was that this may come from the approach of the youth drama they attend, which has a pragmatic approach, but which also fosters opportunities to engage in all aspects of the arts process and promotes this through values of hard work, engagement, collaboration and motivating self and others. This approach is perhaps providing what Campbell (2020) notes as a way to support young people entering into this industry, through a community of like-minded people and organisations, particularly community arts groups, who can provide a ‘community of care’ around young people.

## Limitations

While the use of the dramatic research method was suitable for the young people to engage in this project, this may not be an approach that would suit all young people. It can be a challenging way to work that requires confidence in the facilitators and with fellow participants. This group were known to each other, and the facilitators had spent time with the group to build trust prior to the research taking place. This is therefore a method that can be time-consuming and suitable to particular groups. The authors also acknowledge that capturing broader demographic information about participants would be a valuable addition for future studies.

## Conclusions

This paper has provided valuable insight into young people’s aspirations, and the impact that youth drama can have in supporting these. The approach used in this paper provided the young people with a creative way to voice their thoughts on aspirations, using drama techniques with which they were familiar and could express their experiences and emotions in a safe and supported space. This paper has identified that young people do not see aspirations solely in relation to long-term planning, but as set within their current experience. Furthermore, aspirations are achieved through hard work and are a process of stepping stones to success. The implications of this for practice are in supporting the progress of aspirations through these steps and engaging with young people to identify what these are and how to achieve them. In considering aspirations, we want to be careful not to miss their current experiences.

In this research, we explored young people’s perspectives on the impact of community youth drama on current and future aspirations. In our design, we sought to give participants the space to create and recreate who they want to be and what they want to achieve. The young people told us that through youth drama they learn new skills, develop friendships and learn from role models. They also aligned it with moral values (for example hard work and kindness), the need to work collaboratively with your peers, and the need to foster relationships to gain the support required to achieve their aspirations.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to them containing information that could compromise the privacy of the research participants.

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