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Charles Darwin University

## 'It's like exercise for your soul'

### how participation in youth arts activities contributes to young people's wellbeing

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3 **‘It’s like exercise for your soul’: How participation in youth arts activities**  
4  
5 **contributes to young people’s wellbeing.**  
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8  
9 **Abstract**

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11 Active participation in organised youth arts activities is generally considered ‘good’ for young  
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13 peoples’ social and emotional wellbeing. There is, however, less known about *how* youth arts  
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15 participation helps to create wellbeing benefits. This paper details a retrospective narrative study that  
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17 sought to understand not only what wellbeing benefits 17 participants attributed to youth arts activity,  
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19 but more specifically, how these outcomes occurred. The concept of liminality, within a spaces of  
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21 wellbeing approach, is used as a framework to explore and understand participant’s stories of their  
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23 time at Corrugated Iron Youth Arts, in Darwin, Australia. A pattern of transformation involving  
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25 three phases emerged through an analysis of participant stories. This involved (1) joining in, (2)  
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27 developing skills and gaining experience, and (3) becoming a ‘real’ performer. These stages have  
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29 strong resonance with contemporary conceptualisations of liminal experiences, and provide further  
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31 evidence for the value of youth arts activity as a space for the development of social and emotional  
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33 wellbeing.  
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39 **Key Words**

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42 Youth arts, theatre, circus, narrative, wellbeing, liminality.  
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3 **'It's like exercise for your soul': How participation in youth arts activities contributes**  
4 **to young people's wellbeing**  
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8 **Introduction**  
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10 Participation in organised youth arts activity has been found, for the most part, to improve  
11 aspects of young people's social and emotional wellbeing. Wellbeing benefits have been  
12 associated with dance (Gardner, Komesaroff and Fensham 2008; Oliver 2009), theatre  
13 (Bradley, Deighton and Selby 2004; James 2005) singing (Hampshire and Matthijsse 2010),  
14 as well as combinations of these and other art forms (Grunstein and Nutbeam 2007; Hadland  
15 and Stickley 2010; Karkou and Glasman 2004; South 2005; Wright et al. 2006). Youth arts  
16 activities are thought to contribute to self-confidence and self-esteem (Bungay and Vella-  
17 Burrows 2013), 'emotional/mental health, family reintegration, employment options, suicide  
18 prevention and crime prevention' (Mills and Brown 2004 in Houbolt 2010, 48).  
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31 There is however, less understanding of how wellbeing benefits occur in youth arts  
32 participation. In this paper we present a qualitative study using narrative methods to explore  
33 the processes of participation in youth arts activities (theatre and circus) in an attempt to  
34 understand how wellbeing benefits occur. We have embraced a 'spaces of wellbeing'  
35 approach to frame our understanding, and within this adopt Atkinson and Robson's (2012)  
36 use of the concept of liminality to explore how youth arts activity can generate spaces of  
37 wellbeing. These concepts are explained and literature on the benefits of youth arts  
38 participation is overviewed. The narrative research method is described before we present  
39 our findings as a three-part 'process' story. We consider our findings in relation to the  
40 literature, and the concept of liminality before returning the idea of youth arts as a space of  
41 wellbeing.  
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## Background - Youth Arts and Wellbeing

The role of the arts in the wellbeing of individuals, groups and communities has been increasingly described and debated over recent decades. While there is ongoing concern about what constitutes evidence in the field, (Matarasso 1997; Fox 2013; Clift 2012; Raw et al. 2012) there is a cautious acceptance that participation in arts can be good for you.

Multiple studies have highlighted the positive effects of community arts participation (Daykin et al. 2008; Elphick 1980; Kay 2000; Lowe 2000; McHenry 2009). These include increases in self-esteem, confidence, artistic skills, communication skills, the creation of positive social connections, feelings of belonging and sense of identity and community.

Similar benefits can also be found in youth specific arts participation (for example: Mattingly 2001; Hager 2010; Cassidy and Watts 2004; Beare and Belliveau 2007). Building on earlier work by Daykin et al (2008), Bungay and Vella-Burrows (2013) reviewed 20 studies that explored the effects of participation in extra curricula creative activities (music, dance, singing, drama and visual arts) on the health and well-being of children aged between 11 and 18 years. They found positive effects 'on behavioural changes, self-confidence, self-esteem, levels of knowledge and physical activity' (Bungay and Vella-Burrows 2013, 44).

Structured youth arts activities have also been found to provide supportive relationships, a sense of belonging, and a commitment to school or group (Trayes, Harré, and Overall 2012; Kemp 2006; Barrett and Smigiel 2007). A shared love of performing can forge strong bonds between young people and create meaning in their lives (Barrett and Smigiel 2007).

How and why these positive impacts occur is less well understood. Some argue that the possibility of creating and/or co-authoring stories is a key element of transformative youth arts projects. In youth arts there is potential for relationships between power, authority and voice to be exposed and utilized in identity formation and re-formation through story.

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3 Projects that open up space for meaningful, creative expression and that incorporate ‘re-  
4 authoring and co-authoring of alternative stories and preferred identities (with the) potential  
5 power of audience as witness’, can change the way young people see themselves and others  
6 (Stiles 2004 in Houbolt 2010, 48). The re-constructing of personal and group identity  
7 through activities promoting self-expression, reflection and self-understanding has been noted  
8 by authors in the USA and UK as a key element of increasing self-esteem in young people  
9 (Kemp 2006; Nathan 2013).

10  
11 Youth arts activities have been found to offer young people emotionally diverse experiences  
12 (Larson and Brown 2007; Sinclair 1997 in Trayes, Harré, and Overall 2012, 156). These can  
13 be particularly intense, providing emotional highs or ‘hot spots’ which are characteristic of a  
14 performing arts environment (Dworkin, Reed, and Hansen 2003; Larson and Brown 2007;  
15 Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin 2003). As Trayes, Harré and Overall (2012, 157) assert, these  
16 experiences ‘tend to be highly appealing to young people’, and can create strong and lasting  
17 connections. Being treated like an adult, having a sense of freedom and control are also  
18 elements of arts participation which may appeal to young people. Trayes Harré and Overall  
19 (2012, 156) point out that ‘Several studies have shown that structured youth activities provide  
20 a powerful context in which young people can develop the competencies needed for  
21 adulthood’. The desire to be challenged artistically and physically and striving for  
22 ‘professionalism’ are also aspects of structured youth arts activity that are associated with  
23 promoting wellbeing (Trayes, Harré, and Overall 2012; Barrett and Smigiel 2007).

24  
25 Finding a safe place to ‘be yourself’ is another reason why youth arts activities are beneficial  
26 to young people (Trayes, Harré, and Overall 2012, 174). Being able to create art with others  
27 requires the ability to be open, spontaneous and embrace playfulness (Karkou and Glasman  
28 2004, 61). The creation of a welcoming environment, with a clear program structure and a  
29 non-judgemental atmosphere, is also thought to enhance feelings of safety and encourage  
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3 creativity and participation (Karkou and Glasman 2004, 61). Others have highlighted that  
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5 youth theatre can create an environment of risk-taking, and freedom to explore the ‘the  
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7 socially unacceptable and tiresome elements of “teen-hood”’ (McDonald 2006, 8).  
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10 While literature about youth arts mostly assumes a positive association between wellbeing  
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12 and participation, some authors have highlighted more challenging aspects such as stress,  
13  
14 boredom, anxiety, and conflict (Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin 2003). Hampshire and  
15  
16 Matthijsse (2010) looked through the frame of social capital to provide a more complex  
17  
18 understanding of *who* benefits from participation in youth arts. Using insights from critical  
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20 theory (specifically the work of Bourdieu), Hampshire and Matthijsse (2010, 708) found that  
21  
22 young people with ‘relatively privileged backgrounds’ (particularly females) had positive  
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24 experiences, gained new friends and increased confidence. For others the experience of  
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26 participation was more complex, and could involve the risk of isolation from existing peer  
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28 groups and social networks.  
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33 Others have pointed to problems with research and evaluation about arts programs. It has  
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35 been argued that too strong a focus on positive outcomes has thwarted a serious consideration  
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37 of the ‘pathways and processes’ through which youth arts participation might impact  
38  
39 wellbeing (Daykin 2007). Raw et al (2012) argue that a preoccupation with debate over  
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41 definitions and acceptable evidence in the arts and health field, has led to a lack of  
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43 descriptions, analysis and theorizing about the mechanisms of practice. In summary, it is  
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45 generally accepted that participating in youth arts can be good for young people, yet there is  
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47 less knowledge about *how* benefits occur.  
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52 In this paper we seek to understand the wellbeing benefits people attribute to their  
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54 participation in youth arts activity, and how any attributed benefits occurred. Our interest in  
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56 the topic derives from a number of experiences. (Author 1) has been a performing musician  
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3 and song-writer for over 30 years and as academic has been interested in community arts and  
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5 wellbeing for ten years. (Author 2) has been the executive producer of Corrugated Iron  
6  
7 Youth Arts (CIYA) for the past decade and has been delivering arts projects with a focus on  
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9 active community participation and supporting young people and early career artists for over  
10  
11 25 years. Our research partnership stemmed from a mutual seeking of knowledge for  
12  
13 practice improvement and theory development.  
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### 16 17 **Defining key concepts**

#### 18 19 *Youth arts*

20  
21 Youth arts is a non-school based activity that involves young people aged 12 to 26 years.  
22  
23 Activities focus on creating, participating and/or engaging in facilitated artistic or cultural  
24  
25 activity. The activities explored in this paper are drama and circus; involving skills training  
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27 workshops, story development and script writing, rehearsals, performances, direction, light  
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29 and sound set up and operation, stage management, publicity and promotion.  
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#### 33 34 *Wellbeing – A spatial and relational approach*

35  
36 There are multiple approaches to defining wellbeing, with most definitions encompassing the  
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38 physical, emotional, social, economic and spiritual aspects of life (Hamilton and Redmond  
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40 2010). Atkinson (2013) argues that many contemporary conceptualizations of wellbeing can  
41  
42 be described as a ‘components approach’ (Atkinson and Joyce 2011; Atkinson, Fuller and  
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44 Painter, 2012). This approach has three problematic features. ‘Identification and  
45  
46 theorization of the independent elements that comprise wellbeing’, an understanding that  
47  
48 wellbeing is ‘a quality that inheres to the individual’ and a growing use of the term as a  
49  
50 ‘synonym for health’ (Atkinson 2013, 3-4). A conceptualization of wellbeing as situated and  
51  
52 relational is posited by Fleuret and Atkinson (2007), developed further by Atkinson (2013)  
53  
54 and later Atkinson and Scott (2015). In this approach, subjective wellbeing is an ‘effect of  
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56 complex relations, constituted and constitutive of both place and time, as assemblage and as  
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3 always becoming' (Atkinson and Scott 2015, 3). Wellbeing is an effect of the spaces we  
4 inhabit, the elements and entities in the spaces, and the relationships between these. This  
5 conceptualisation of wellbeing informs what Fleuret and Atkinson (2007) call the 'spaces of  
6 wellbeing' approach. Such an approach has four 'interrelated spaces of resource  
7 mobilisation' within which the work of a range of theorists and researchers can be integrated:  
8 'capabilities (Nussbaum 2000), social integration (Putnam 2001; Wilkinson and Marmot  
9 2003), security (Shaw 2004) and therapeutic processes (Conradson 2005; Smyth 2005).'  
10 (Atkinson 2013, 7).

11  
12 In an exploration of how positive wellbeing benefits were attained through young people's  
13 participation in arts programs, Atkinson and Robson (2012) proposed that Turners theory of  
14 liminality could provide a useful frame for analysis, particularly when taking a 'spaces of  
15 wellbeing' approach (2012, 1348). We have followed Atkinson and Robson's (2012)  
16 example, and adopted the concept of liminality as a way to help us understand what occurs in  
17 the youth arts space in enhancing wellbeing.

### 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 ***Liminality***

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Liminality originally described the middle phase of a three-part 'rite of passage' process that  
is key to individual social or spiritual transformation. The idea was first articulated by van  
Gennep (1909) who proposed that such transformations start with a preliminal phase in which  
a separation from usual social life occurs. This is followed by the liminal phase where  
transition occurs through formalized rituals and process that bring disruption and challenge.  
The process ends in a postliminal phase of reincorporation of the transformed individual into  
daily life. The middle, liminal stage, was further developed through application to post-  
industrial societies by Turner (1969, 1974, 1982, 1994). It has been described as a social  
limbo (Turner 1982) in which 'specific spaces of betweenness' are created (Moran 2013, 342).

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3 While original conceptualisations of liminality involve one long period of separation from the  
4 norms of everyday social life, evolving understandings have shifted to make room for the  
5 transformations that can occur through consistent participation in short, repeated separations.  
6  
7 This allows for an analysis of the transformative processes that may occur more gradually,  
8 over extended time periods (Atkinson and Robson 2012).  
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14 Turner identified the time of liminality as 'anti-structure' (1974). Social structure is an  
15 observable, regular, uniform patterning of actions that are well understood in a given society  
16 (Turner 1974). Anti-structure is a time of where such patterning is no longer certain, and  
17 assumptions about the world are challenged. This dissolution of the known way of things is  
18 disorientating, creating a fluid, unknown situation which provides space for new ways of  
19 being and doing. Anti-structure is 'threshold of change across which we step and over which  
20 we move' (Elliot 2011, 97). Within the liminal time and space, the concept of  
21 'communitas' is critical. This involves the spontaneous creation of new ways for people to  
22 relate to one another based on trust and equality, rather than on pre-existed social roles and  
23 rules. Communitas is disruptive because it involves the formation of relationships that are  
24 'free from the culturally defined encumbrances of (his) role, status, reputation, class, caste,  
25 sex or other structural niche' (Turner 1982, 48). Strong bonds are formed on the basis of the  
26 shared rituals and processes. Communitas may be short-lived, but is critical to the liminal  
27 experience.  
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47 Recognising the differences in social structures and processes between the pre- and post-  
48 industrial societies, Turner (1974, 1982) developed the idea of the 'liminoid' as a way of  
49 understanding liminal-like experience 'in settings where entry and participation are optional'  
50 (Atkinson and Robson 2012). Liminoid 'resembles without being identical with "liminal"'  
51 (Turner 1974, 64) in that liminal qualities are retained, with the concept of anti-structure  
52 being particularly highlighted. The key differences are that liminal experiences are  
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3 traditionally a ritualised, socially structured part of a compulsory rite of passage. In the  
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5 associated post-liminal phase an individual is reintegrated into a social system both  
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7 expecting, and accepting of, this change. A liminoid experience on the other hand, is not  
8  
9 part of a ritual sequence but a matter of choice (perhaps a leisure or play activity that may  
10  
11 still have transformative value) (Thomassen and Balle 2012).  
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15 Liminality has been used to understand the processes of participation of young people in  
16  
17 youth development programs (Foster and McCabe 2015; Nolas 2014). In the arts arena, it  
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19 has provided insight into the processes of change that occur for artists in and through the  
20  
21 creation of their art (Elliot 2011). In a consideration of how we might ‘confront the drive for  
22  
23 evidence’ for the wellbeing value of arts practice, Raw et al. (2013) discuss the potential of  
24  
25 the concept of liminality (highlighting the work of Atkinson and Robson later published in  
26  
27 2012) for building theory about the function of art making in relation to health.  
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### 30 31 **Method**

32  
33 A qualitative, narrative method that allows for a deep exploration of stories about youth arts  
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35 participation (Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach, and Zilber 1998) was selected for this study as it is  
36  
37 effective in developing a rich understanding of experiences. Kohler Riesman (2008)  
38  
39 advocates narrative analysis as a way of conducting case-centred research where  
40  
41 understandings of human agency, identity and culture are sought. We have taken a  
42  
43 retrospective or ‘looking back’ approach, so that participants were able to reflect on at least  
44  
45 two years of youth arts activity in order to be able to understand a process of participation.  
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47 Retrospective qualitative research has been used to study experiences of young people who  
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49 are now older (in some cases many decades older) in a range of contexts (for example: Baker  
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51 2005; Chama and Ramirez 2014; Spencer, Tugenberg, Ocean, Schwartz & Rhodes 2016).  
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53 Ethical approval to conduct the research was received by the Charles Darwin University  
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55 Ethics Committee.  
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3 A research partnership between Charles Darwin University and Corrugated Iron Youth Arts  
4 (CIYA) provided access to potential participants. CIYA has been operating for over 30 years,  
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6  
7 and is the only youth arts company in the 'Top End' of the Northern Territory of Australia.  
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9  
10 CIYA provide an annual workshop program in drama and circus skills, school holiday arts  
11  
12 programs, community outreach arts and theatre programs, as well as producing a range of  
13  
14 large and small performances (theatre, circus, comedy) each year.  
15

16  
17 A combination of purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used (Tranter 2010).  
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19 This provided access to a diverse range of adult participants who participated in CIYA  
20  
21 projects for at least two years when there were between the ages of 12 and 26. Author 2, the  
22  
23 Executive Producer of CIYA, used the organizations' networks to contact people who had  
24  
25 participated in CIYA at different time periods (from the 1980's to the present time) and for  
26  
27 whom current contact details were available. Information about the study was also included  
28  
29 in the CIYA newsletter. A total of 23 people initially expressed interest in being interviewed;  
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31  
32 due to availability issues, 17 were interviewed by Author 1. Only people over the age of 18  
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34 were able to participate, as they needed to be able to reflectively 'look back' at their time in  
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36 youth arts. We acknowledge that this sampling approach is likely to provide participants who  
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38 are still connected with the youth arts sector in some way, and therefore may be more likely  
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40 to have had positive experiences.  
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44 Most interviews took place in person, with five occurring via Skype or telephone. Interviews  
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46 were unstructured, with five topic areas used to elicit a range of stories (how and why people  
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48 joined youth arts activities, stories about change or development, things they attribute to their  
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50 time in youth arts, what stories might they tell others about the benefits and challenges of  
51  
52 participation, what are the standout memories). Interviews ranged from 40 to 75 minutes in  
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54 length, they were audio recorded and later transcribed. Participants were emailed a copy of  
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56 their interview transcript to check for accuracy.  
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### *Analysis*

A categorical content approach to narrative analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach, and Zilber 1998, Sarvimäki 2015) was considered appropriate for this study as it allows for the consideration of multiple texts (or cases) concerned with a particular phenomenon. This approach involves searching for themes across many people's stories (Kohler Riessman 2008) to formulate a common story. The analysis involved a process of reading and re-reading the transcripts with two main questions in mind. What were the stories about outcomes of participation in youth arts, and what were the stories about the processes involved? Outcomes identified by participants were documented from all interviews, and coded thematically. Process or 'how' stories were drawn inductively from each interview then compared across interviews. Emerging themes, then an emergent common story, were developed. The common story was emailed to participants to check that it resonated with their own experiences. Participants were asked to let us know if they had any comments or feedback. Ten participants responded with positive comments, agreeing with our analysis. Two participants requested clarification around remaining anonymous, and five did not reply.

### **Findings**

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants and the findings. The table is ordered according to the decade participants began their involvement with CIYA. Outcome and process theme codes are listed for each of the 17 participants. Seven participants were male and ten were female. They were aged between 10 and 22 years when they were involved in CIYA activities and their involvement occurred from the mid 1980's through to 2012. The average number of years of participation was five, with a range of two to ten years.

Participants had been involved in regular theatre workshop programs and all had participated in at least one large production. Some participants were also involved in circus, clowning or

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3 dance workshops and performances. Participants' ages at the time of interview ranged  
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5 from 18 to 45 years and none were attending CIYA activities at the time of interview. As  
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7 Table 2 demonstrates, 11 of the 17 participants (64%) have continued their participation in  
8  
9 the arts, either as a career or recreational activity. Table 2 also highlights that current  
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11 participation in the arts is less for those who were involved in youth arts longer ago (in the  
12  
13 1980's) while the four participants who were involved most recently, are still engaged in the  
14  
15 arts.  
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19 [Insert Table 1 and Table 2 here]  
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21

### 22 ***The benefits participants associated with participation (outcomes)***

23  
24 Participants felt that involvement in youth arts generally provided beneficial outcomes.

25  
26 These six outcomes, presented in order of how many participants discussed them, are listed  
27  
28 below. The number of participants who expressed that outcome is included in brackets, and  
29  
30 direct quotes are in italics.  
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33  
34 (1) Social connection (14 people). A *'feeling of belonging'* and a *'sense of community'*.  
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36 The formation of *'lifelong friendships'* and *'support'*.  
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40 (2) Confidence (13 people). Gaining *'self-confidence'* and *'social confidence'*.  
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43 (3) Self-knowledge/identity (11 people). A sense of *'self-development'*, *realizing my*  
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45 *capabilities'*, critical thinking skills, recognizing their *'unique identity'* and for some, forming  
46  
47 *'a clear direction'*.  
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50 (4) Interpersonal skills (10 people). The development of *'leadership skills'*, *'empathy'*,  
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52 *'creative thinking'*, and *'communication skills'*.  
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56 (5) Improved mental health (7 people). The experience of *'reduced anxiety'*, *'emotional*  
57  
58 *health'* and a feeling of *'satisfaction and aliveness'*.  
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3 (6) A new 'physicality' (4 people). Experiencing '*physical fitness*', and gaining a  
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5 positive '*body awareness*'.  
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8 While an analysis of relationships between variables (such as gender, age, length of  
9 participation) and outcomes was not the focus of this study, there are some notable linkages  
10 raised in terms of the outcomes seen in Table 1. Two participants (7 & 17) appear to have  
11 experienced only one or two beneficial outcomes, while seven participants experienced four  
12 or more, even though they were involved for similar timeframes. It is also noteworthy that  
13 the benefit of 'social connection' was discussed by all but three participants (two female and  
14 one male). This may be an effect of the narrative method (as participants were not prompted  
15 to discuss particular outcomes), but potentially raises the question of why social connection  
16 may be an outcome for some, but not all.  
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### 29 ***How arts participation creates benefits for young people.***

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31 The 'how' findings are presented as a story with three broad phases. The phases were  
32 developed inductively from the initial coding of the themes and reflected the structure of each  
33 participant's overarching narrative of their time at CIYA. Each phase includes multiple  
34 themes drawn from these narratives. While each participant story included at least one  
35 theme from each of the three phases, none included every theme. Stories did not always step  
36 through each phase in a linear fashion, but sometimes moved back and forth across phases.  
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38 The phases are therefore best considered broad parts in the common story, which usually  
39 occurred in the order presented here.  
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49 Themes are coded with letters (which correspond to Table. 1) and ranked within each phase  
50 in order of how many participants discussed them. The number of participants associated  
51 with each theme is noted in brackets. All participant quotes are in italics.  
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3 *Phase One: Joining in.*  
4

5 A. 'Finding my people' (13 people)  
6

7 Participants talked about finding a place where they '*fit in*' and '*felt less strange*' in contrast  
8 to others areas of their lives such as school. The importance of finding others (including  
9 instructors) with whom bonds of '*common purpose*' were formed was discussed. The  
10 following quote highlights the way theatre brought people together quickly:  
11  
12

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14  
15  
16 *'I think acting and drama does that, it creates a sort of rapid, you know, more quickly*  
17 *than perhaps in other social situations, creates a group dynamic of trust and*  
18 *comfort.'*  
19  
20  
21  
22

23  
24 B. Exposure to different others (11 people)  
25

26 Access to '*different*' others, who excited, challenged, inspired, and sometimes '*changed*'  
27 participants, was discussed. Difference was discussed in terms of age, ethnicity, knowledge,  
28 sexuality and politics. Access to relationships that were not managed or mediated by parents  
29 or other social controls were viewed as important.  
30  
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34  
35  
36 C. Fun (11 people)  
37

38 Being '*silly*', experiencing '*fun times*' through warm-up games and being allowed to '*play*'  
39 was important. The non-competitive and low-pressure environment was often contrasted with  
40 other aspects of young people's lives such as sporting activities.  
41  
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44

45  
46 *Phase Two: Developing skills and gaining experience.*  
47

48 D. Freedom, safety, risk. (15 people)  
49

50 Freedom from everyday '*social hierarchies*' was important for participants. Freedom meant  
51 '*not being embarrassed*', being able to use '*imagination and dreaming*' to create with no  
52 judgement of '*right and wrong*', and feeling able to '*make your own choices*' artistically.  
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3 might be physical (injury) or social and emotional, described as being placed in *'the*  
4 *uncomfortable zone*', or *'feeling the fear and doing it anyway'*. Yet participants felt *'safe to*  
5 *create*' and *'pushed in a supported way'*. A sense of safety was created by experienced and  
6  
7 positive instructors, who were seen as role models and mentors who were *'really pushing*  
8 *boundaries but in a safe environment, but encouraging the kids to really push their comfort*  
9 *levels in performance'*.

16  
17 E. Treated 'like an adult' (12 people)

18  
19 Having ideas taken seriously, being responsible and having the opportunity to do things  
20  
21 without parental involvement or judgment, were all seen as ways in which young people were  
22  
23 treated *'as adults'*. Participants felt CIYA was *'a space where you felt listened to and able to*  
24 *make contributions that were actually really valid and important to you at the time'*. This  
25  
26 was often contrasted with school or family life where *'you wouldn't feel as listened to'*.  
27  
28 Trusting that young people could handle *'adult themes'* and concepts was also important.  
29  
30 Developing and performing productions considered *'hard-hitting'*, *'socially relevant'*,  
31  
32 *'controversial'*, and that *'really dug pretty deep into the youth experience'* had a big impact  
33  
34 on young people. The experiences of traveling and performing away from home, often at  
35  
36 night, was also considered important in terms of learning, growing and becoming a more  
37  
38 *'adult self'*.

43  
44 F. Physical spaces to explore (12 people)

45  
46 The physical places where workshops, rehearsals and performances took place were  
47  
48 highlighted. *'The botanical gardens'*, *'a shopping centre'*, *'up a Banyan tree'*, in an *'old*  
49 *jail'*, *'an old produce market'*, *'an airport'* and a *'sports stadium'* are examples. These  
50  
51 places were important because they symbolised *'escape from the drudgery of school routine'*  
52  
53 and provided a *'dynamic space to explore creativity'*. Some discussed their *'love'* of a  
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3 particular theatre where they first performed, noting it's *'feel'* and sound. A particular  
4  
5 rehearsal space held special meaning for some, because the space looked and felt *'like real*  
6  
7 *theatre'* with its large wooden floor, huge mirror and light filled space.  
8  
9

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11  
12 G. Intense/challenging relationships (11 people)

13  
14 Intense, creative, collaborative relationships and moments were also part of the story. The  
15  
16 drama and intensity of performance was sometimes mirrored in interpersonal relationships.  
17  
18 At times young people felt over-worked and upset with an *'angry'* producer or a *'frustrated'*  
19  
20 instructor. At other times participants felt *'excluded'* or *'ostracised'* by their peers for  
21  
22 periods of time. Because participants were involved in CIYA for an average of five years,  
23  
24 their stories of anger, frustration and exclusion tended to have enough time to resolve  
25  
26 positively, with remarks like *'I won them over in the end'*. Yet these challenging dynamics  
27  
28 highlight the critical role of the instructors in facilitating positive group interaction and the  
29  
30 previously mentioned balancing of risk and safety in emotionally charged environments.  
31  
32

33  
34 Some participants grappled with the *'star system'* that could occur in a small organisation.  
35  
36 This had varying impacts upon *'the stars'* themselves, who expressed feelings of guilt at  
37  
38 frequently being selected in lead roles, and also on those who did not get chosen. One  
39  
40 participant noted *'some times of sadness in there. Because you're a kid and like you're*  
41  
42 *learning your lines and [wondering] whether you're good enough or, you know?'* A  
43  
44 connection between this *'star system'*, class, social and cultural capital, was made by one  
45  
46 participant, who observed: *'Kids of parents who are in the arts community - I think that*  
47  
48 *they're always going to be more welcome in arts things than kids who are not'*.  
49  
50  
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54  
55 H. Body learning (10 people)

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3 Getting to know and learning to use their own bodies through performing was an important  
4 element of the stories. Being *'incredibly active'* and learning to use *'physical expression'*  
5 helped some to gain knowledge and awareness about their own strength and power. For  
6  
7 others, it helped with issues of negative body image. One participant pointed out: *'it gave me*  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14 *confidence in my own body and I guess began to break down some of those body image issues*  
15  
16  
17 *I had when I was pretty chubby'*.

17 Yet, there were struggles; rapidly changing bodies could cause confusion and embarrassment.  
18  
19 Four participants talked about their difficulties in having to wear revealing or particularly  
20  
21 unflattering costumes, three people *'hated'* their shape and size at the time. One participant  
22  
23 had to get changed down to her underwear on stage, which was *'pretty confronting'* because  
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*'there was all of that kind of weird, adolescent, kind of sexual shame'* and the tension with  
*'wanting to be grown up and wanting to be able to do all of those things, but also being*  
*really terrified'*. Some situations appear to have been handled better than others by the  
people involved, highlighting the links with the previously discussed theme of 'freedom,  
safety and risk', as is made clear in the follow quote:

*there was something about having to don the costumed body and having to present*  
*yourself in an intimate way in a public space as a lover onstage, or it might be a*  
*revealing costumed body, rather than whatever it is that you wear to hide..... It was*  
*a good thing to be pushed outside of that comfort zone because that's what live*  
*performance and the arts entails. There was an element of, I suppose, controlled*  
*risk involved at an age where boys and girls are very sensitive to issues like body*  
*image and sexuality and those sorts of things. I suppose, it was not always*  
*comfortable to be pushed, but it was the best possible forum in which to be pushed.*

I. Different skin (8 people)

1  
2  
3 Taking on different roles, wearing costumes and masks, writing and performing characters  
4 who were *'different aspects of yourself'* was another element of the story. The expressions  
5 *'trying on different skin'* and *'stepping into different shoes'* were used in stories about the  
6 experience of creating and inhabiting *'whole different worlds'*. One participant discussed  
7 how this allowed them to  
8  
9

10  
11  
12  
13  
14 *'start to see yourself differently and your place in the world differently.. in theatre*  
15 *you get out of your skin, you get out of your shell, and in that process you become*  
16 *more confident.*  
17  
18  
19

20  
21 Engaging with new and/or challenging subject matter (such as HIV, youth suicide, and aging)  
22 provided participants with a window into other lives, allowing them to safely *'try out'* aspects  
23 of themselves and see how they might fit. The following quote explains further:  
24  
25

26  
27 *Stepping outside your ordinary patterns of existence and the effort to take on a*  
28 *character or whatever, suddenly it's like having another language...[it] gives you*  
29 *insight into your own [life].)*  
30  
31  
32  
33

34  
35 J. Shared achievement (8 people)

36  
37 Sharing the highs and lows associated with creative development and performance helped to  
38 create a sense of group identity and belonging, and could also be a very intense and  
39 emotional experience as the following quote demonstrates:  
40  
41  
42

43  
44 *The most important thing is collaboration. The performing arts nurtures*  
45 *collaboration and team building and for the time that one is involved in a production,*  
46 *then that production and the people in it become like family and a bond is created. It*  
47 *is a very intense experience.*  
48  
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54  
55 *Phase Three: Becoming a 'real' performer/artist*

56  
57 K. Realizing you have 'real skills' (14 people)

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2  
3 Participants stories often included realizations (some sudden, some gradual) that they had  
4  
5 gained '*real skills*' and practical experience in various aspects of performance and  
6  
7 production. This made people see themselves as a '*real actor*', performer, writer or  
8  
9 producer. One participant stated: '*I got real skills. Applicable skills. My voice, stage*  
10  
11 *technique, physicality, movement. And I took those on to make a career out of it*'.

12  
13  
14 L. 'Exercise for your soul' (12 people)

15  
16 Bringing a live production together; the people, costumes, stage, light, sound, props and  
17  
18 general paraphernalia of the theatre, was '*very exciting*', '*captivating*', '*transcendent*' and  
19  
20 often described as '*a high*' by participants. Some described the experience as '*addictive*'  
21  
22 The thrill of overcoming fears and nervousness, using your skills and knowledge, and  
23  
24 working with a group of people to create '*real theatre*', provided sensations of being  
25  
26 '*uplifted*'. One participant described the feeling as '*exercise for your soul*'.

27  
28  
29 M. Eyes of others (9 people).

30  
31  
32 The importance of having your performance witnessed by others, as well as being witness to  
33  
34 others performances, was expressed in the stories. Watching characters '*emerge and interact*  
35  
36 *with the audience*' and seeing '*other people in your class doing their thing*' provided feelings  
37  
38 of satisfaction, capability and group pride. Simply being in a position to '*show off to your*  
39  
40 *friends and family*' was an enjoyable experience. The following quote provides some  
41  
42 understanding of why.  
43  
44  
45

46  
47  
48 '*There is something about the immediate validation of performing... That*  
49  
50 *immediate kind of ego boost that comes with people coming up to you and saying ..*

51  
52  
53 '*That was great*'... '*You were excellent*'. *As a teenager, there aren't many*  
54  
55 *opportunities to have that kind of validation. There's something about a*  
56  
57 *performance that allows for that.*'  
58  
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## Discussion

### *Links to processes and outcomes found in the literature*

The beneficial outcomes of participation in youth arts found in this study are similar to those found in other literature. For example; improved self-confidence, gaining new skills, and increasing physical activity (Bungay and Vella-Burrows 2013), improved mental health (Mills & Brown 2004 in Houbolt 2010, 48); supportive relationships and communication skills (Trayes, Harré, and Overall 2012; Kemp 2006, Barrett and Smigiel 2007). **In addition to these findings, our outcome analysis points to the need for further exploration of why some people experience fewer, greater or different kinds of beneficial outcomes than others.**

The ‘process’ findings in the present study are not entirely unfamiliar either, as aspects of the three phases can be seen in the existing literature. The *Joining In* phase highlighted a sense of belonging also found by Trayes, Harré, and Overall (2012), Dworkin, Reed, and Hansen (2003), Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin (2003), Larson and Brown (2007), Barrett and Smigiel (2007). The attraction of fun without judgment has also been noted elsewhere (Karkou and Glasman 2004). The issue of identity formation and change articulated by Nathan (2013), Kemp (2006), and Houbolt (2010) are further understood in the present study. This is seen in the middle stage theme of *trying on different skin* and also links to the first phase theme of being exposed to *different others*. Others have also highlighted the importance of being treated like an adult (Barrett and Smigiel 2007; Trayes, Harré, and Overall 2012) risk-taking (McDonald 2006), feeling safe to express (Trayes Harré, and Overall 2012) and the importance of the audience as a witness (Houbolt 2010). **The overall story and the elements of risk, emotion, learning and achievement found in Elliot’s (2011) exploration of the art-making experience resonates with process themes articulated here.**

1  
2  
3 While all participants in our study discussed at least one aspect of each of the three phases of  
4 the common process story, some interesting complexity is apparent. For example, all but  
5 three participants (one of whom was involved for ten years) discussed the third phase theme  
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While all participants in our study discussed at least one aspect of each of the three phases of the common process story, some interesting complexity is apparent. For example, all but three participants (one of whom was involved for ten years) discussed the third phase theme '*realizing you have real skills*' (K). It is interesting that the same three participants experienced the thrill of arts as '*exercise for your soul*' (L), indicating that while they experienced the elation of youth arts activity, they may not have believed they were particularly good at it. Further exploration would be worthwhile to better understand the complexity of the processes.

### ***Youth arts as liminal experience***

Thinking about the findings through the frame of liminality provides a deeper understanding of the transformative elements found in the common story. The preliminal phase is where separation from the 'usual' patterns and interaction of day-to-day life occurs (van Gennep 1909). In this youth arts context, the separation is not a single long-term event. It is, as Atkinson and Robson (2012) describe in their study, a series of regular and repeated separations over a long period of time. Young people enter the youth arts space and begin interacting with new, often different others. In the *Joining In* phase, the usual norms of school, family and formal activities are suspended as young people are given permission to have fun with 'different' others in non-competitive, sometimes 'silly' activities in new physical spaces. The anti-structure of liminal experience is present from the *Joining In* phase and continues into the middle phase through the dissolving of the usual ways of being and interacting with different kinds of people.

Themes from the middle, '*Developing Skills and Gaining Experiences*' phase generally reflect the continuation of the disorientation and dissolution indicative of anti-structure (Turner 1974; 1982). There is a metaphorical shedding of skin, and immersion in different

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2  
3 physical and emotional worlds. This sometimes involves subverting the usual ways places  
4 such as parks, shopping centres and airports are used; changing them into creative spaces  
5 where young people's arts activities are juxtaposed with the regular day-to-day goings on in  
6 such places. Experiences of freedom from parents and other social controls was also part of  
7 the dissolution of young people's norms. Freedom occurred through performing away from  
8 home, being out at night, delving into controversial or edgy subject matter and establishing  
9 relationships on their own terms. Being able to take risks and try out different and emerging  
10 aspects of evolving identities was critical to the creation of new and different relationships  
11 (with self and others). The strong bonds created through these shared experiences of young  
12 people is indicative of the Turner's (1982) concept of *communitas*.  
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26 Subversions of power in the *communitas* (Turner 1982) of the liminal space are seen in the  
27 relationships between young people and their instructors. We see participants recognize their  
28 power to create, and to relate differently to each other and the adults around them. In similar  
29 findings to Atkinson & Robson (2012), we found multiple stories of control being shared  
30 between instructors and young people. Participants in our study felt they were taken  
31 seriously, given responsibility and treated '*like adults*'. Stories continually contrasted feelings  
32 of being in control, belonging and learning in the CIYA space, with their often very different  
33 experiences of interaction with the 'usual' structures of school and other institutions.  
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44 The final phase of the common story can be viewed as an integration back into the usual  
45 systems, and a coming out of a liminal phase (Turner 1974;1982). Participants recognized  
46 the way they had changed through evolving into a performer with '*real skills*' and/or coming  
47 to understanding the role of arts as '*exercise for your soul*'. For many, this 'different  
48 someone' was reflected back to them through the '*eyes of others*' – peers, friends and family  
49 who were important to them. It appears that these changes had long term effects for many  
50 participants. Table 2 shows us that more than half (64%) of participants have continued their  
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3 involvement in the creative arts, either as a career or as a hobby. This could be a result of the  
4  
5 sampling method used (which is likely to include people still linked to performing arts). Yet  
6  
7 it also suggests that liminal experience of youth arts activity may provide the transitional  
8  
9 spaces needed to foster profound and long lasting change for some participants.  
10

### 11 12 *Challenges to liminal experience*

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14  
15 Our research has provided us with a number of questions about liminal experience in this  
16  
17 youth arts context. Questions centre on the influence of mainstream (often oppressive)  
18  
19 cultural 'norms' and the way these can encroach on the liminal space. In linking our  
20  
21 findings to the existing literature, we began to think further about '*exposure to different*  
22  
23 *others*' (B), specifically questioning just *how different* the 'different' people referred to by  
24  
25 participants in this study were from themselves. There are examples of the isolation and  
26  
27 exclusion described by Hampshire & Matthijsse (2010) and Hansen et al. (2003) in our study,  
28  
29 primarily seen through the identification of a 'star system'. One participant in our study  
30  
31 made a very clear link between social and cultural capital and this star system. For three  
32  
33 participants (1,7,12), no mention of '*finding my people*' (A) was made, and while two of  
34  
35 these discussed social connections as an outcome, all three remained involved with CIYA for  
36  
37 only two or three years (when the average was five). As Hampshire and Matthijsse (2010)  
38  
39 point out, such issues raise the question of *who* youth arts benefits. No socio-economic data  
40  
41 was collected for this study, so we cannot adequately address the issue here. However, the  
42  
43 questions about who participates and what are the mechanisms (social, cultural, economic)  
44  
45 that encourage or discourage participation requires further thinking. As does an  
46  
47 understanding of just *how different* others can be in the liminal space, and how diversity may  
48  
49 impact the dissolving and disorientation of anti-structure.  
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3 Some participant's stories highlighted times when the dominant power relationships were not  
4 subverted. Incidents involving body shame and embarrassment for example, provide a  
5 challenge to the development and maintenance of *communitas*. When dissolution is  
6 occurring, there needs to be great care and consideration about *what* things dissolve, how  
7 they dissolve, and what is created in its place. Questions of power within the fluid liminal  
8 space must be addressed or the risk of simply reinforcing existing social inequities arises.

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17 The need to purposefully create and actively manage safe and creative liminal spaces is clear.  
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19 However, maintaining a boundary around the liminal space can be difficult when  
20 participation is voluntary and intermittent. Encroachments from inequitable, unjust external  
21 systems can damage the trusting and supportive new relationships required for *communitas*  
22 and dissolve the important separation from outside that is critical to the liminal space.

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28 Participants in our study repeatedly articulated the importance of good instructors, mentors  
29 and supportive group dynamics in creating the crucial balance between risk and safety needed  
30 for this creative space.  
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### 34 35 36 ***Youth arts creating a space of wellbeing***

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38 We have conceptualized wellbeing as an effect of spaces people inhabit and create, the  
39 entities (human or otherwise) in those spaces, and the relationships between these (Fleuret  
40 and Atkinson 2007; Atkinson and Robson 2012; Atkinson 2013). Arts practice can create  
41 'transitional spaces within which openness is enabled to explore new possibilities for identity  
42 and action, spaces in which new resources can be built and mobilised for personal wellbeing'  
43 (Atkinson and Robson 2012, 1349). Our study demonstrates a range of examples of such  
44 exploration and the associated development of resources (capabilities, social integration,  
45 security and therapeutic processes) that can be mobilised for personal wellbeing. This is  
46 evident when we consider the benefits participants associated with their participation: social  
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3 connection, confidence, self-knowledge, interpersonal skills, improved mental health and a  
4  
5 new physicality. These benefits are examples of Atkinson and Robson's four types of  
6  
7 resources that can be mobilised for personal wellbeing (2012). As such, our findings concur  
8  
9 with Atkinson & Robson's proposition that 'arts-based practices that can successfully  
10  
11 generate such spaces of wellbeing' (2012, 1349).  
12

### 13 14 15 16 17 **Limitations**

18  
19  
20 Participants were drawn from one youth arts organisation only. As recruitment occurred  
21  
22 through CIYA's networks (newsletters, email contact lists, records of alumni) the sample  
23  
24 leaned towards those still connected to CIYA, therefore more likely to be currently involved  
25  
26 in the arts world. The participants were self-selecting and this could lead to people who had  
27  
28 more positive experiences coming forward. The length of time between participation at  
29  
30 CIYA and the interview was over 30 years in some circumstances, which could have  
31  
32 implications in terms of accurate recollection. We do not wish to overstate the capacity of  
33  
34 youth arts activity, or any activity, as a cure-all for the array of issues a young person may be  
35  
36 faced with. We recognise that youth arts activity may provide very different experiences for  
37  
38 each individual because of their different circumstances and contexts.  
39  
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### 42 43 **Conclusion**

44  
45  
46 In this paper we have provided an overview of the wellbeing benefits 17 people attributed to  
47  
48 long term participation in youth arts activities. In seeking to understand how wellbeing  
49  
50 benefits occur, we found a general three phase pattern of joining in, developing skills and  
51  
52 gaining experience, and becoming a 'real' performer and/or artist. Embracing a spaces of  
53  
54 wellbeing approach, and incorporating the concept of liminality provided a stronger  
55  
56 understanding of the common story of transformation that took place in the youth arts space.  
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3 For most of these participants, CIYA successfully created spaces of wellbeing where they  
4  
5 could flourish and grow. Future research focusing how such spaces of wellbeing can be  
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7 purposefully created and more inclusive would add to this understanding.  
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For Peer Review Only

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Table 1. Participant Overview

ID.	M/F	Type of activity	Time/length of Participation at CIYA	Age of participation	Process codes	Outcome Codes	Current participation
4	F	Clowning, Acrobatic, & Theatre workshops. Theatre & circus Productions.	1980's (4 years)	14–18 years old.	Phase 1: A. Phase 2: D, E, G, H, I, J. Phase 3: K,L.	1, 3, 5.	No
9	M	Theatre workshops. Theatre productions	1980's (2 years)	16-18 years old.	Phase 1: A, C. Phase 2: D, F, H. Phase 3: K, M.	1, 3, 4, 5, 6.	Yes
12	M	Theatre workshops and productions.	1980's. (3 years)	16-19 years old	Phase 1: B, C. Phase 2: D, E, F, G, H, I, J. Phase 3: K.	3, 4, 5, 6.	Yes
13	M	Theatre and circus workshops and productions.	1980's - 1990's. (8 years)	7-15 years old.	Phase 1: A, B, C. Phase 2: D, E, F, G, H, J. Phase 3: K, L.	1, 2, 4.	No
17	F	Theatre and circus workshops and performances.	1980's - 1990's. (4 years)	14-18 years old.	Phase 1: A, B. Phase 2: D, E, F, G, H, J. Phase 3: K, L, M.	1, 2.	No.
1	F	Theatre workshops. Theatre productions.	1990's (2 years)	16-17 years old	Phase 1: B. Phase 2: E, I, G, Phase 3: L	1, 2, 4.	No
2	M	Theatre workshops. Theatre productions.	1990's - 2000's (4 years)	13-17 years old	Phase 1: A, C. Phase 2: D, E, F, H. Phase 3: K,L.	1, 2, 3.	Yes
3	F	Theatre & Acrobatic workshops. Theatre productions.	1990's (8 years)	12–20 years old	Phase 1: A, B. Phase 2: D, F, G, J. Phase 3: K, L.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5.	Yes.
5	F	Theatre workshops.	1990's	11-16 years	Phase 1: A, B, C.	2, 3, 4.	No

		Theatre productions.	(5 years)	old	Phase 2: D, F, G, I. Phase 3: K, M.		
7	F	Theatre workshops Theatre production	1990's. (2 years)	10–12 years old.	Phase 1: C. Phase 2: D, G. Phase 3: K.	3.	Yes
6	M	Circus and theatre workshops Theatre and circus productions.	2000's (6 years)	10-16 years old	Phase 1: A, B, C. Phase 2: E, F, J. Phase 3: L, M.	1, 2, 3.	Hobby
11	F	Theatre and dance workshops and productions.	1990's. (8 years)	12-20 years old	Phase 1: B, C. Phase 2: D, E, F, H, I. Phase 3: K, L, M.	1, 2, 5.	Hobby
15	F	Theatre workshops and a production	1990's. (5 years with breaks)	10-15 years old.	Phase 1: A, B, C. Phase 2: D, E, H. Phase 3: K.	1, 2, 4.	No.
16	F	Theatre workshops and productions	1990's (8 years)	10-18 years old.	Phase 1: A. Phase 2: D, E, F, I, Phase 3: K, L, M.	1, 2, 4, 5, 6.	Yes
8	M	Theatre workshops. Theatre productions	2000's. (7 years)	11– 18 years old	Phase 1: A, C. Phase 2: D, G, I. Phase 3: K, L, M.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5.	Hobby
10	M	Circus, acrobatic, dance and theatre workshops and productions.	2000's (10 years)	10-22 years old	Phase 1: A, B, C. Phase 2: D, E, F, G, H, J. Phase 3: L, M.	1, 2, 3, 6.	Yes
14	F	Theatre workshops and productions	2000's (4 years with breaks)	10-14 years old.	Phase 1: A, B. Phase 2: D, E, F, G, H, I. Phase 3: K, L, M.	1, 2, 3, 4.	Yes.

## Process Key:

- A 'Finding my people'
- B Exposure to different others
- C Fun
- D Freedom, safety, risk.
- E Treated 'like an adult'
- F Physical spaces to explore
- G Intense/challenging relationships
- H Body learning
- I Different skin
- J Shared achievement
- K Realizing you have 'real skills'
- L 'Exercise for you soul'
- M Eyes of others.

## Outcome Key:

- 1 Social connection
- 2 Confidence
- 3 Self-knowledge/identity
- 4 Interpersonal skills
- 5 Improved mental health
- 6 A new 'physicality.'

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**Table 2. Decade of involvement and current arts involvement status**

Decade CIYA participation began	Number of study participants	Current involvement in performance arts (career or hobby)
1980's	5	2 (40%)
1990's	8	5 (62.5%)
2000's (to 2011)	4	4 (100%)
<b>Totals</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>11 (64%)</b>