

Using Media and creativity to explore mental health and wellbeing with young people

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Introduction – Addressing unmet needs

Now more than ever, both in the UK and globally, it is essential to create safe spaces for children and young people to have a dialogue about mental health. It is estimated (Young Minds, 2015) that three children in every classroom have a diagnosable mental health condition and one in ten young people have self-harmed and even these figures are thought to be significantly underestimated. The World Health Organisation recently recognised that suicide is the primary cause of death for teenage girls, which is a shocking statistic (World Health Organization, 2014) that illustrates clearly that young people are experiencing significant levels of distress and need. In a climate of economic “austerity” however, it is unlikely that Children and Young People's Mental Health (CYPMH) services will meet the demand.

Looking to address this, we find significant barriers that prevent children, young people and families from engaging with what is on offer. A lot is written about how mental health stigma prevents young people from engaging with services, fearful this might imply that they are seen as “mad”, have a vulnerability, or weakness and they are therefore inhibited from accessing support early. When they do present, they are often experiencing significant distress, that is harder to address and those that do access services, may experience a mismatch between their expectations and an understanding of their difficulties.

Consequently, there is a significant group,

unwilling, or unable, to access the support available. Our work has focused on finding ways of helping young people engage with a dialogue around mental health and access support that is meaningful and has positive impact.

Background – Finding common ground

It is generally acknowledged that regardless of age, interests, or ability, one of the most effective ways to motivate young people, is through practical projects on subjects that interest them and that, in essence, is why Individio Media Ltd (IML) was established 30 years ago. To understand our goals and values, it will be instructive to start with the story of how the two authors came together to collaborate.

Working for the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) to develop and manage a media resources facility in London Docklands, the first author, Dominic, used video across the whole community and realised how effectively it motivated young people. Tapping into their interest and understanding of film, television and media made many young people want to try it for themselves. The potential to develop this work further, particularly with disengaged young people, drove Dominic to set up IML, expressly to work on educational, youth development and social value projects.

Nick is a young people's psychiatrist who has worked within the NHS for many years, through an outreach service, with young people with significant mental health needs, such as psychosis,

severe depression, or suicidal behaviour. As a community practitioner, Nick is highly aware of the gaps that young people are falling through, often resulting in isolation, detachment and disengagement and believes that they need support and services that are more creative and individually tailored.

A young intern introduced Nick and Dominic to each other, seeing that both were trying to engage young people in “opportunities for change”: Dominic, from an educational background, with professional media skills and Nick, informed by a psychiatric, psychological and developmental perspective, of the support needed for young people. From this has come an approach that works with young people and addresses their mental health needs, tailored to where they “are at”, at their pace and working towards goals important to them.

Walk the Talk – Addressing need at the cutting edge

In January 2011 a 14-year-old student was fatally injured, following an altercation with a man carrying a knife. Many of his friends were present and the loss was profound, affecting the whole school, his family and the community. A core group of friends remained profoundly traumatised and at significant risk of harm, refusing multiple services and interventions and becoming increasingly isolated and detached. As a more creative way of approaching support, Nick developed an intervention (the K.Dot project) in partnership with IML, the school and the Kiyon Prince Foundation mentoring programme.

With grant funding, the group made a tribute film, helping them feel that their friend was appreciated, valued and remembered. It also offered a dialogue and narrative about trauma, grief and loss that was profoundly moving and

powerful, bringing a packed school auditorium to tears and giving these young people “permission” to move forward and get their lives back on track.

Talk About Tottenham offered a similar opportunity for young people at a Tuition Centre, who were marginalised and excluded from mainstream education (and society), often because of underlying emotional and mental health needs. The narrative film they made about living in Tottenham, was based on interviews with elders in the community and the process enabled them to be involved and create something of their own, learn new skills and feel proud that their parents and peers appreciated how much they had invested into their work.

Shift towards early help and prevention – Mental health is everyone’s business

Both Talk About Tottenham and K.Dot involved young people with significant needs and were aimed at helping them through their recovery. But given the demand for Children and Young People’s Mental Health services, we need to offer support for young people earlier, reducing the need to access specialised services. Rather than see mental health as an arena for “professional experts”, we need to work alongside young people to find solutions.

Time 2 Talk (T2T) emerged from work around K.Dot, with the focus on the whole school community, rather than those with specific need. Commissioned by Haringey Council department for Public Health as part of their mental health stigma campaign, it aimed to offer an evidence based “Whole school approach”, raising awareness about emotional wellbeing and mental health and challenging mental health stigma.

The project evolved over two years, starting with narratives of young people’s experiences of

significant mental health need, which were introduced to pupils. From this a forum theatre piece was developed for school assemblies and turned into a film that informed a module of three lessons about mental health, now embedded into the school curriculum. Students were also invited to train as peer mentors, offering support to the students as well as guidance to teachers and parents about young people's mental health - facilitating a dialogue across the whole school community.

T2T empowered young people, creating changes that allow for greater awareness about mental health and overcoming some of the barriers that prevent young people from accessing support. Creativity was key to engaging them and ensuring that they felt sufficiently skilled-up to bring about change within their wider "system", and the strength of this work was being able to offer a "bottom up" model, giving the students agency over their opportunities for change and generating a dialogue that states: "Mental health is everyone's business".

Providing the tools for change

The use of film and other creative media enables young people get on board, feel comfortable with the tools and be aware of what is "good" and what can be "valued". Many young people, who repeatedly experience exclusion, can find the feeling of being valued, or appreciated, frightening - fearful this may trigger further humiliation or trauma. Film-making and creative media enables them produce something of value and to have a sense of achievement, as happened with K.Dot and Talk About Tottenham. When able to be proud of what they produced, without fear of being under attack, then the potential to learn from this experience is available.

Most importantly, this work is about relationships and agency. Young people need to

feel able to trust those they work with, as change comes through trust, and hence the focus on relationships. But they also need a sense of agency in the process of change. If the work is done "to" them, rather than "with", they will not translate this experience to other areas of their lives. So the tools for change must involve young people at all stages, allowing ownership and a vested interest in making the project succeed.

So, what's it all about?

In summary, these projects succeed because of four over-arching principles:

1. Enabling a sense of Agency by ensuring young people feel involved and have agency within the project at all times
2. Providing Creativity by working creatively with young people through media/tools they understand and feel comfortable using
3. Thinking Developmentally by working where young people are at - rather than where others/services want them to be at
4. Working Relationally by constantly focusing on the relationships around the young person, in order to foster Trust, because without Trust there will be no Change

This work is therefore about a relational approach to mental health and the building of resilience. The key features that work for these projects should be what we seek to offer through established CYPMH services. The difference is the setting, the creativity and the flexibility. But if we are determined to have an impact on the current level of need, we must ensure that mental health is not something only for the specialist, rather, it is viewed from a salutogenic rather than a pathogenic perspective.

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