Building resilience through group visual arts activities: findings from a scoping study with young people who experience mental health complexities and/or learning difficulties

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Abstract

Summary: This article reports research that aimed to identify and evaluate potential resilience benefits of visual arts interventions for young people with complex needs. The study involved a review of the 'arts for resilience' literature and a case study of 10 weekly resilience-building arts workshops for 10 young people experiencing mental health complexities and/or learning difficulties.

Findings: We found a significant existing evidence-base linking visual arts practice to individual and community resilience (over 190 references), across disciplinary fields including art therapy, social work, community health, visual arts practice and

geographies of health. Visual art activities were utilised to both educate young people about resilience and enhance young people's overall resilience. Qualitative research material developed from the case study shows that even short-term visual arts interventions can impact on young people's resilience – crucially participation was extremely beneficial to young people's sense of belonging and ability to cope with difficult feelings (topics which arose repeatedly during interview, focus group discussion and observation).

Applications: Our review and findings from this small case study provide some initial insights into the resilience benefits of participation in visual arts activities. This, combined with the resilient-based practice framework presented here, could aid the effective targeting of interventions for social workers and others working with young people with complex needs. Alongside this research paper, an arts for resilience practice guide has been produced by the project team (including young people). It contains instructions on how to conduct a range of practical visual arts activities that we identified as being resilience-promoting.

Key words: Visual arts, resilience, young people, learning disability, mental health

Building resilience through group visual arts activities: findings from a scoping study with young people who experience mental health complexities and/or learning difficulties

Introduction

Young people's social workers frequently see service users engage in forms of visual arts activity through school, youth and community groups. However, while the overall resilience benefits of young people's participation in regular extra-curricular activities are now well recognised (e.g., Newman, 2004), there is relatively little discussion in the social work literature about the specific benefits for young people that might stem from participation in group visual arts programs. In fact the positive aspects of these programs are often assumed. Furthermore, while there appears to be an established link within the wider 'arts for health' evidence base between participation in arts activity and people's overall wellbeing (Clift et al., 2009; Ings, Crane, & Cameron, 2012; Secker et al., Hacking, Spandler, Kent, & Shenton, 2007; Staricoff, 2004), the mechanisms through which this might be achieved for young people with complex needs remains relatively under-explored. This paper reports on a research study that

aimed to identify and evaluate the possible benefits of visual arts interventions for young people with complex needs.

The research study has a specific focus on the resilience benefits of visual arts activities for young people experiencing mental health difficulties and/or learning difficulties. Resilience is understood here as an outcome associated with the capacity to do well despite adverse experiences. Building resilience has been identified as particularly important for disabled young people and young people with mental health challenges (Hart et al., 2007). Resilience-based practice offers a strengths-based approach to evaluating and addressing the needs of young people. A body of empirical research demonstrates the pragmatic value of well-designed resilience-based approaches (Aumann & Hart et al., 2009; Daniel & Wassell, 2002; Hart & Heaver, 2013). Furthermore, such approaches to evaluating and designing interventions for and with young people are experiencing growing popularity in social work professions (Ungar, Dumont, & MacDonald, 2005).

Interestingly, as a result of funding incentives and a growing sense of social responsibility amongst some contemporary artists there has also been a shift in arts communities over the past two decades away from the concept of 'art as object to be individually contemplated' to ideas and practices oriented toward well-being, process,

relationship and community (Bourriaud, 2002; Gauntlett, 2011; Kester, 2004; Lacy, 1995). Thus, lately we find social work research exploring the ways in which artists now share common objectives with social workers (Gray & Schubert, 2010), and artists exploring the contribution they can make to the subjects of social work (Sutherland & Accord, 2007). This research paper is the result of a collaboration between a social and cultural geographer interested in arts practices (Macpherson) and two academics in child and community health who have expertise in resilience (Hart and Heaver).

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, the paper reviews the arts for resilience literature and identifies a continuum of arts for resilience interventions which are currently being conducted in Anglo-American contexts, with young people who are deemed to be in some way at risk, face complex needs, or who experience learning difficulties and/or mental health complexities. Secondly it explains the Resilience Framework that has been adopted here to structure this review and explains the utility of such a framework for social workers interested in reflecting on the worth of arts interventions. Thirdly the paper explains the case study research which consisted of a series of arts workshops that were part of this United Kingdom research council-funded research. Fourthly, the paper identifies some key resilience benefits of visual arts interventions, and structures these using the terminology of the Resilience

Framework. This section uses qualitative material from the arts workshops in order to draw some tentative conclusions about the possible resilience benefits of group visual arts activities. Finally some of the limitations of this study are considered and a call is made for further, more in-depth longitudinal research on this topic.

The resilience building qualities of visual arts activities: a review of relevant literature

A structured review of existing research findings in the field of resilience and visual arts practice was carried out as part of this study. This drew on the academic literature in the fields of resilience research, disability studies, arts for health practice, community health and geographies of health and impairment, and on 'grey literature' housed on community and policy websites. There is a very limited field of research which specifically explores the resilience benefits of visual arts interventions (Coholic, 2011), however there is a host of 'arts for health' research articles which mention resilience and can be related to this concept. We used EBSCO (which searches the following databases: The Allied and Complementary Medicine Database (AMED), Applied Science & Technology Index (ASTI), Art Full Text, Art Index Retrospective, Business Source Premier, Communication & Mass Media Complete, Criminal Justice Abstracts, E-Journals, eBook Collection, GreenFILE, Hospitality & Tourism Index, Library,

Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA), PsycINFO, Regional Business News, ARTbibliographies modern and Web of Science). No date restrictions were applied. The search included resilience keywords in the title, and keywords related to age group, arts intervention and improvement in the abstract.

We utilised a 'Resilience Framework' (see Figure 1) to select keywords for the literature search and help structure the review of existing research findings. The framework draws on five key components of resilience that prior reviews and research have identified as crucial to young people's wellbeing and personal development – these are Basics, Belonging, Learning, Coping, and Core Self. In sum these refer to the capacity of a young person to feel safe, commit to a group and belong, develop their learning, cope with difficult feelings, help others, develop self-understanding, and foster a sense of identity. This framework is explained in more detail in the subsequent sections. An expert advisory panel made up of relevant academics and practitioners also advised us on further significant literature which we may have otherwise over looked. In total over 190 articles and books were consulted during the course of this review. The largest amount of literature gathered from our scoping review was from the fields of art therapy and psychology, and is primarily about how art enhances resilience through helping young people develop a 'sense of belonging', and 'cope with

difficult feelings'. Our research review focussed on studies that specifically mentioned

resilience in relationship to young people with mental health or learning difficulty.

Almost all of the relevant research found was small scale, predominantly qualitative

research based on single case studies. Exceptions to this are noted in the text.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Figure 1: The Resilience Framework 2012 children and young people (YP). Adapted

from Hart et al. (2007), available from www.boingboing.org.uk.

Prior qualitative research studies show that participation in a group visual arts activity

can stimulate a sense of belonging (Skudrzyk et al., 2009; Parr, 2006), foster new social

interactions (Askins & Pain, 2011) and mirror pro-social experience lacked in a wider

community setting (Cumming & Visser, 2009; Slayton, 2012)[i]. Prior case study

research has also shown that arts practice can be particularly appropriate in engaging

diverse groups and those with learning difficulty because it also enables forms of non-

verbal dialogue and mutuality (Bethards, 2003; Elkis-Abuhoff, 2008; Gabriels & Gaffey

2012; Macpherson & Bleasedale, 2012).

However some studies point out that participant experiences of art interventions are

not always entirely positive. Sometimes feelings of belonging within arts groups were

found to be only partial, and feelings of otherness and difference can be exacerbated in these settings (Parr, 2006). For example, some participants were found to self-evaluate their own artwork unfavourably in comparison to others (Parr 2006). There has also been legal case study research to show that in the wrong contexts, conducted by underqualified practitioners, it is possible for arts interventions to cause serious harm to participants who have mental health complexities (Springham 2008). All prior research projects in the arts for resilience field point towards the need to provide arts activity in a safe, supporting, unthreatening environment (for example see Coholic, Eys, & Lougheed, 2012; Cumming & Visser, 2009). Exhibiting the work of young people in a gallery setting has also been found to instil a sense of hope and enhance self-esteem (MacLean, 2008; NIAD Art Center, 2012).

Prior research reports that participation in appropriately structured and supported visual arts activity can help people understand themselves better and cope with difficult feelings (Chambala, 2008; Jessup, Cornell, & Bundy, 2010; Raghuraman, 2000). The art therapy literature provides a qualitative evidence base for this claim, for example studies have shown how arts activities can help with externalising difficult

thoughts, and with the recovery from mental health difficulty (Dyer & Hunter, 2009; Lamont, Brunero, & Sutton, 2009). Other research with those who experience mental health complexities and learning difficulties has also found a reduction in the occurrence of behaviours associated with mental illness, and increases in personally expressive behaviours, as a result of participating in visual arts activity (e.g., Malley, Dattilo, & Gast 2002; Rapp-Paglicci, Stewart, & Rowe, 2009). Arts activities were also found to aid adolescents in developing their sense of identity, as well as preserving their autonomy, by giving them a sense of mastery and control (Chambala, 2008; Jessup, Cornell, & Bundy, 2010; Raghuraman, 2000; Roaten, 2011).

The majority of studies mentioned above have been on a small scale and hard to generalize from. One significant exception to this approach to researching arts interventions is a (Secker et al.2007) which brought together 22 arts for mental health projects from across England into a common evaluation framework that allowed statistical significance to be drawn from a wide range of identified social inclusion, mental health and empowerment measures. They concluded that arts participation increased levels of empowerment and had potential to impact on mental health and social inclusion. However it was acknowledged that further work needed to be done in

order to construct a measure that distinguished between psychological (individual) empowerment and genuine social empowerment.

Coholic has conducted a significant body of research in the arts for resilience field (Coholic, 2011; Coholic et al., 2012, Coholic et al., 2009), using arts activities as a therapeutic tool in themselves, and a means through which to enhance the mindfulness of young people. In recent work (Coholic et al., 2012) the only comparative study we have found in this area was conducted. They compared two groups of young people with complex needs, one which practiced mindfulness techniques (including breathing and meditation work, and emotion pictures), and the other a more standard arts and crafts group. They hypothesized that the children that took part in the mindfulness based program of arts activities would do better on measures of resilience and self-concept than the group who took part in the standard arts and crafts group. It was found that arts activities in the former group – which incorporated a specific mindfulness component – helped with emotional regulation, social and coping skills, and improved aspects of the young people's self-awareness, self-esteem and resilience. The young people in this group had higher scores for resilience after taking part in the program however they did not have higher scores for

self-concept. The study was limited to 36 participants some of whom experienced autism and other disabling conditions which meant they needed significant assistance in filling out the resilience and self-concept scales. Also the study did not attend to any possible negative consequences of a greater focus on mindfulness rather than solely the art activities. In our own research we have attempted to construct an accessible resilience scale questionnaire that is easy to fill out for participants with a range of capacities. We also provided young people with an introduction to the idea of resilience rather than just evaluating their resilience. These aspects of our research are detailed in the methods section.

A continuum of arts projects and interventions in which social workers and service users may be involved

The literature review revealed that there is a whole range of different arts projects and interventions in which social workers and service users may be involved. We have tried to simplify these down to a continuum of possible 'arts for resilience' interventions that are currently being practised in Anglo-American contexts. It should be noted that most existing art interventions and community art projects have not been designed with specific resilience objectives in mind. In fact while the 190 articles reviewed mentioned resilience, in a lot of the articles the concept was poorly defined. However

there are a number of programs (predominantly based in the United States) that specifically link arts activities with fostering particular resilience-related outcomes in participants (e.g., Coholic, Lougheed, & Lebreton, 2009). Prior arts for resilience workshops identified through our systematic review of research have included:

1) Using visual arts to help communicate pro-health, pro-resilience messages;

2) Using visual arts to help young people cope with difficult feelings which may be difficult/impossible to articulate;

3) Using skills-based visual arts workshops to help young people develop a range of core components of resilience;

4) Using arts activities to help foster social empowerment and communicate the lived experience of participants to wider communities;

5) Using visual arts methods to help young people talk about their own resilience individually or in a group;

6) Choosing a component of arts practice (such as mindfulness of feelings) which is known to be resilience-promoting and focusing on this activity.

Research suggests that the most successful arts for resilience programs tend to combine more than one of the strategies identified above (Coholic et al., 2009). However there is also a wider arts for health evidence-base which shows that any

participation in arts activity is likely to enhance overall wellbeing (Clift et al., 2009; Ings et al., 2012; Secker et al., 2007; Staricoff, 2004). It is evident from the review and wider reading that arts alone is unlikely to enhance a young person's resilience, furthermore there is not a 'one size fits all approach', rather wider structural, institutional and socio-economic determinants of an individual's capacity to be resilient also need to be addressed. For example, the benefits of arts projects have been shown to be experienced differently depending on participants' existing social capital and networks (Hampshire & Matthijsse, 2010), and the socio-economic structure of a participant's local area (Stewart, 2011). The extent to which particular aspects of a young person's resilience will be enhanced through visual arts activity will also depend on the nature of the intervention, and whether it is designed to support individual or communal outcomes (White, 2009).

Limitations of existing research

Research in this field is dominated by small scale, one off qualitative studies, unfortunately our own research does not deviate from this path due to limitations of research funding (this was funded as a small scale scoping study). With the exception of Coholic (2011) existing research on the benefits of visual arts practice which mention resilience have tended not to give a clear definition of what is meant by resilience. We have tried to redress this issue in our own research by utilising a

resilience framework as a means of classifying and evaluating the possible resilience benefits of visual arts activities.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Figure 2: Artwork and activities conducted as part of the visual arts for resilience research project. Photo credit Emily Gagnon.

Methods: Researching the resilience benefits of the arts workshops

The research component of this study involved a case-study of 10 weekly visual arts workshops, held in Spring 2012. These workshops were developed and delivered in conjunction with our community partners: Art in Mind, which is a Brighton-based volunteer project for young people aged 16-25 with experience of mental health issues; boingboing, a social enterprise focusing on supporting children and young people to develop resilience; and Inclusive Arts Practitioner Sue Winter (whose Masters thesis had begun to explore the links between visual arts practice and resilience). Participants for these workshops were aged between 16-25 years and were

recruited through Art in Mind and another partner charity, Amaze, who support the parents of children with disabilities. The research and workshops were funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council's Connected Communities Program. This research council program promotes the co-development of research between community partners and university researchers.

The series of 10, 4 hour long, art workshops introduced 10 young people who face mental health complexities and/or learning difficulties to a range of visual arts skills and the basic ideas behind the Resilience Framework (outlined below). The aim of the arts activities was to help the young people explore and develop aspects of their core self and sense of belonging. Sustained attendance was achieved by 9 out of 10 recruits for these workshops.

Out of the ten young people who made up this research study, 6 faced mental health challenges involving depression and anxiety issues and 4 experienced learning difficulty. This included one young person with autism, three with moderate learning difficulty, one of whom also had attention deficit disorder. There were 4 males and 6 females and all were aged between 16-25. For the purposes of confidentiality more

detailed information on each participant in the study has been withheld. The co-produced nature of this research including the collective publishing of an 'arts for resilience' web resource means that we have chosen not to fully anonymise this study.

The qualitative research component of the case study involved: participant observation and a reflective diary by a researcher (Macpherson) at the workshops, one focus group discussion (mid-way through the research) which aimed to introduce young people to the resilience framework and explore how they thought the arts activities might contribute to their resilience, and nine semi-structured, end of research, interviews with the young people who regularly attended the program. The interviews and focus group were designed to enable the young people to reflect on their own resilience and the resilience benefits of the workshops, interviews, focus group work and observation were useful in this research context because they do not discriminate against people who have difficulty with reading and writing. On-going co-learning and evaluation at the workshops, amongst the researcher, inclusive arts practitioner and support workers, was achieved through weekly reflective meetings.

Cleary these qualitative research approaches, with a group of young people from diverse backgrounds, had their own limitations and difficulties (see Kitzinger, 1995, for a discussion of focus groups). Some young people did not have the capacity to engage verbally for any length of time, and therefore some of the more articulate young

people are over-represented in the material quoted here. However, photographs and researcher notes from participant observation were intended to represent the diversity of experiences and benefits for these young people.

The research material was analysed through transcription and coding of the data sets. Coding was structured according to the core concepts found in the resilience framework introduced in this article. The results were then shown to participants and discussed with them to aid validation. Coded interview transcripts were also looked at by the whole research team in order to ensure rigour (although see Barbour, 2001, for a discussion of the limitations of these approaches to qualitative data validation).

As part of this research we constructed our own accessible measure of resilience to be filled out by participants pre and post case study intervention. Despite the enormous research field on resilience measures, there is no existing self-evaluative measure of resilience that is in a format and language that might be accessible to people with learning disability. We made our own resilience measure accessible by re-wording and developing questions from an existing valid measure (Connor & Davidson, 2003) and combined this with questions based on the Basics, Belonging, Learning, Coping and Core Self objectives found in the Resilience Framework outlined in this paper. We

found the Connor-Davidson (2003) set of statements a helpful starting point for our own questionnaire because they were fairly simple, accessible, and reflected well what we were trying to achieve through the workshops, although admittedly some of the questions we selected maybe regarded as leading (see appendix for a copy of the questionnaire we used). Furthermore this questionnaire still needed to be explained to some participants and therefore it could be criticized for being not visual enough to be truly accessible.

The Resilience Framework

The Resilience Framework utilised here to structure our analysis and introduce young people to the idea of resilience was originally produced through an ongoing partnership between academics, practitioners, parents and young people (Hart et al., 2010; Hart et al., 2007), complementing other approaches to resilience-building that have been well-documented in the literature (e.g., Daniel & Wassell, 2002; Daniel, Wassell, & Gilligan, 1999; Gilligan, 1999). It was formerly known as the Resilient Therapy Framework, but participatory research and practice development has seen its identity change to the Resilience Framework so that young people themselves can more readily relate to it and put it into practice. The framework summarises a range of

interventions and approaches which support the nurturing of young people's resilience by communities, families and young people themselves. It is made up of five compartments, based on the five key components of resilience that are crucial to young people's wellbeing and personal development – namely Basics, Belonging, Learning, Core Self and Coping. Within each of these categories are a set of interventions and approaches identified within the literature, and from our own practice and experiential knowledge, which are designed to increase resilient responses to adversity. Versions and elaborations of the framework have been produced for use by practitioners, parents and young people themselves and are available for free online (www.boingboing.org.uk). The Resilience Framework provides practitioners who deliver part of a young person's care plan opportunities and routes to intervene. It is ecological, thereby addressing many aspects of a young person's life, including developmental, social, psychological and physical spheres, recognising the inter-relationship between these different areas. There is a political and socio-economic aspect to the framework – interventions with approaches that enhance a disadvantaged young person's material wellbeing are given important consideration. Many of the components of the framework come as no surprise to social workers and other experienced practitioners. However, it is consistently reported to be a handy,

useful aide-mémoire and strategic tool to implement resilience-based practice with young people and their families (Aranda, 2011; Dhanjal, 2012).

The arts activities developed during the case-study research aimed to introduce young people to the resilience framework and help them explore aspects of their core self and sense of belonging. For example, one session focused on mono-printing and encouraged participants to communicate something about themselves and the city they lived in using this media.

Findings

The resilience measure we constructed showed only slight positive change in respondents' wellbeing, pre and post intervention. It proved, however, to be a useful jumping off point for further, more in-depth discussion with some participants about the nature of their own resilience. We have structured these qualitative findings into a set of statements about the resilience benefits of visual arts interventions supported by quotes from the qualitative material and researcher notes.

Visual arts can foster a safe space, helping young people connect, and develop a sense of belonging through verbal and non-verbal means

> Emily: *...definitely ... I belong...when I'm doing all my art I feel like I belong here and it's a happy big family just doing art together and stuff, so it does make me happy when I come here.. and I belong to, like, the group, so it's quite nice just to know that.*

Prior research shows that participation in a group visual arts activity can stimulate a sense of belonging, foster new social interactions and mirror pro-social experience lacked in a wider community setting . This was echoed in our own research findings. Participants also developed a sense of responsibility towards the group, and were motivated to return, knowing they were working towards a final exhibition (with 9/10 regularly attending our sessions). For example, one participant who faces mental health complexity, when asked in interview, "What kept you coming back?" stated that:

> Laura: *It is good for me, I learn from it and I wouldn't have any art in my week or in my life if it wasn't for doing stuff like this. As well I feel responsible towards the group because once you are part of a group you are responsible to it and*

> *you let people down if you don't show up… so a commitment to do it until you*
> *are finished and be part of the exhibition.*

Another reported:

> Gemma: *I think.. because I've started the project I like to see how it.. how it*
> *continues, and how it's going to end, and because there's an end product with*
> *the.. the exhibition, I feel that coming every week and contributing is really*
> *important, something important to me, because I feel then that once I've*
> *started something I like to see it through to the end.*

The project brought together young people with moderate learning difficulties and young people with mental health complexities. This is a relatively unusual and potentially challenging combination of young people, however we found that the young people learnt about each other through spending time together, and a focus on doing accessible arts activities made the group dynamic work (see also Winter et al., 2012). Participants who were less confident at expressing themselves verbally could share enjoyment with others through acts of making, doing and assisting each other (see Figure 3). Confirming prior research findings which have shown that arts practice can engage diverse groups through enabling forms of non-verbal dialogue and

mutuality (Bethards, 2003; Elkis-Abuhoff, 2008; Gabriels & Gaffey 2012; Macpherson & Bleasedale, 2012).

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Figure 3: Participants decorate a table cloth together. Photo credit Emily Gagnon.

However, we must be careful not to over-romanticise arts participation and its potential contribution to young people's resilience and sense of belonging. Sometimes feelings of belonging within arts groups are only partial. For example, some participants seemed to self-evaluate their own artwork unfavourably in comparison to others , confirming Parr's (2006) findings. Therefore it may be important that in a diverse group activities are chosen which flatten traditional perceived artistic 'skills differences', and instead introduce activities that result in collaborative outputs or new skills, and reduced colour palette choices which can enable outputs with which all participants are satisfied (for details of suggested activities see our arts for resilience practice guide, Winter et al., 2012).

Visual arts can develop young people's confidence, their ability to focus, and their specific artistic skill set

> Emily: *I've learned to, like, mix colours better... cos, I was choosing colours and then, I don't know the girl's name who was doing colours next to me but she told me that if I put gold and silver together with the pink and the purple ...it would.. er.. substrate and stand out more..... so I'm going to definitely take that [idea] home with me.*

The program of visual arts activities introduced participants to a range of visual arts skills, including mono-printing, painting, plaster casting and stencilling. Participants also shared their learning with each other. Learning a specific skill set and helping others have been shown to help build resilience (Hart et al., 2007). However, individuals also need to be engaged in tasks which match optimal levels of skill and challenge in order to facilitate learning. Thus activities in a diverse group need to be chosen which can accommodate a range of skill levels and capacities. Crucially we found that skills and learning objectives need to be balanced against the benefits of a non-judgmental environment in the art room. A number of young people mentioned the non-judgmental atmosphere as one element of the program which kept them coming back.

Gemma: *… I've been made to feel very welcome, the atmosphere it's.. it's a brilliant atmosphere cos it's just, "hey we're doing this, try it if you like, if you don't like it try something else", and I quite like that atmosphere.. quite unstructured I think. Cos if there's a structure I tend to worry about, "oh but I'm not doing it the right way…" but the fact that it's just, "oh here's some things you can do, pick which one you want and do it however you like."*

Regarding confidence development and skills progression, interestingly two of our participants have now proceeded to further arts study. They both report this as being partly as a result of our workshops. In fact one is now following an MA in Inclusive Arts Practice as a result of participating. A volunteer participant is hoping to embark on a PhD related to the topic of resilience, working with academics involved in this study. Again, taking part as a volunteer in the workshops was cited as one of the reasons for this move.

Coping with difficult feelings

The young people facing mental health complexities repeatedly identified the importance of art for externalising and accepting difficult feelings. This confirms findings of prior research in this area. They stated how art was empowering because it

gave them the autonomy to work through their own issues, compared to seeing a counsellor. For example, one young woman described how, *"Emotions aren't always verbal things so doing art is a really useful way of expressing those things"* (Lisa).

When asked at interview, "Has coming here helped you to do things at home?" another participant, who was a looked-after young person with learning difficulties, stated:

> Emily: *Yeah... it's built my confidence up, like I can travel on the bus without getting nervous. And when I go home I feel all good about myself and that, I get on better with my family cos if I'm doing art and I'm expressing my feelings about things like college and stuff, and then when I go home and see my family, well my foster family and like, I feel like really cuddly and really happy.*

For those who self-harm, visual arts has been found to be particularly useful because they provide opportunities to exercise the same destructive and integrative urges that underlie their self-abuse (Milia, 1996), a finding which we also found echoed in our own workshops. For example one participant explained, *"I used to self harm….and painting, is like producing fluid, producing blood, it is kinetic, but it is less destructive".*

The art workshops worked toward an end of project exhibition held at the Phoenix arts Centre, Brighton, where friends, family and members of the public were able to view the young people's art work and learn more about both the young people and resilience research. Each young person displayed some of their work, including a tent they had personally decorated, and they produced an artist's statement about their work (a photo montage of some of the outputs and activities from these workshops can be seen in Figure 2). For further explanation of the activity content of these workshops, a film of the research, and a practical guide to conducting arts for resilience activities, see www.boingboing.org.uk.

Limitations of the research

We have presented here a significant body of evidence, from prior (largely small-scale) research, and our own small case study, which shows that participation in regular group visual arts activity can be beneficial for young people's resilience. However, our sample size of 10 participants was too small to reach 'qualitative data saturation' (Pope et al., 2000) and we still need to understand more about how these processes work. Furthermore we cannot assume that changes to those participating in visual arts projects will be unequivocally good or straightforward. There are also competing

perspectives on the extent to which the benefits of art-making are intrinsic to the process of art-making itself, or the necessity of a qualified art therapist to contain, discuss or interpret the outputs of any work. Not all research has found group arts-based approaches helpful to participants – a number of studies point towards the risk that art may allow participants to reconnect with difficult feelings, with which un-qualified or under-resourced facilitators do not have the capacity to deal with (see for example, Fitzsimmons & Levy, 1997; Parr, 2006; Springham, 2008). Therefore, caution must be exercised in this area, and there certainly is not a 'one size fits all' approach that can be recommended here. High levels of support are required if developing a program for a diverse group of individuals with complex needs.

Our own research has been relatively limited (in terms of timescale, scope and resources), and this type of small-scale qualitative study and review is typical of the arts for health literature more broadly (Staricoff, 2004). The accessible resilience scale we constructed was only trialled on 10 participants and some of these participants with moderate learning difficulty still needed help reading the questions. The scale was useful for helping us talk about resilience in the focus group and interviews, however it needs to be trialled further and potentially revised in order to prove whether it is a valid measure of resilience in young people with complex needs.

There remains an absence of large-scale, longitudinal studies on the resilience benefits of regular arts workshop participation. Furthermore, during the case-study research we focused on the application of existing understandings of resilience in young people (rather than developing a specific understanding of resilience from the perspective of our arts project participants, cf. Irvine, 2008). We understand that implementing and evaluating arts practice through a resilience lens is only one (albeit quite instrumental) way to think about visual arts activity, which results in arts practice being conceptualised as a 'therapeutic tool' or 'mode of intervention' for young people. Our report is limited to this framework and has focused primarily on individual experiences of resilience rather than broader notions of community resilience. Other work explores the social empowerment potential of arts practice (Askins and Pain 2011; White 2009) and the transformational nature of arts practice by young people (e.g., Pahl et al., 2012)

Applications

Many of the projects discussed in our literature review were well-resourced, group-based interventions led by arts specialists. Social workers and other practitioners may

feel that an arts intervention is appropriate for a particular client, however there may

not be a suitable art group that can be accessed. In the absence of such arts groups,

our practice guide can be used by social workers and other practitioners (with caution,

as considered above), to support the development of resilience in individual young

people. Depending on age and cognitive ability, young people themselves can be

introduced to the framework, and prompted to consider how they can build resilience

through arts activities relating to its component parts. The practice guide, which is free

to download (www.boingboing.org.uk), gives examples of specific arts activities that

can be attempted. For commissioners it is important to remain alert to the values

which underpin individual art facilitators' approaches. An excellent 'dos and don'ts' for

those involved in commissioning collaborative community arts projects is available in

the latest Arts Council 'Be Creative, Be Well' publication (Ings et al., 2012, pp. 10-13).

Of course, arts activities are likely to be more appropriate for some service users than

others, and the benefits of such activities should be weighed up against the possible

benefits of other activities. Visual arts strategies for achieving resilience need to be

tailored effectively to the setting and objectives of a community or individual.

Despite these caveats and cautions, our conclusion is that there is much promise in the use of arts-based approaches for resilience-building, and we have some evidence to show that young people with quite different complex needs can effectively work alongside each other to build their resilience through visual arts. Further research and practice development could usefully determine the longitudinal benefits of such approaches, as well as their specific application to practice with individual clients, rather than through group practice. Measuring and evaluating resilience-building for young people with complex needs is an intricate yet promising arena which merits further attention.

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Appendix – Accessible Resilience Questionnaire

Tick the boxes below to help give you and [the researcher] a picture of you and your 'resilience'. Resilience means your ability to deal with difficult times and manage life when it is tough.

Think about the past month and tick the box according to how much you agree with the statement:

	No – I don't agree	A little bit	Quite a lot	Yes – All the time
1. I make time in my life for leisure activities				
2. I am happy with my life up till now				

3. I can take on new challenges and succeed at them				
4. Coping with difficult times has made me a stronger person				
5. I am good at organizing my time				
6. I easily make friends				
7. I have someone who can help me when I need it				
8. I feel in control of my life				
9. I can calm myself down if I feel upset or stressed				
10. I am proud of what I have				

achieved in life				
11. I have a friend or family member who is proud of me				
12. I can learn new skills				
13. I feel I belong (to a group, a community or a place)				

Do you think this arts project has helped you to be more resilient in any way? If so please try to explain how here and over the page:

[i] A questionnaire survey of 44 female and 18 male new art project participants attending 22 art projects in England found statistically significant improvements in measures of empowerment, mental health and social inclusion (Hacking et al., 2008).