

Chapter 7: The Benefits of Participation

Introduction

“Youth theatre means... drama workshops, first class theatre, a social group, an ideas factory, a source of inspiration and entertainment, a place to express yourself, a crowd of lunatics, a stepping stone to greater things, a great thing in its own right.” – Co. Sligo Youth Theatre Member

Participation in youth theatre can lead to a multitude of different personal, social and artistic outcomes. The diversity of outcomes is influenced by the variety and quality of existing youth theatre programmes and by the fact that outcomes are often determined by the needs and interests of each individual youth theatre member. As one member from Dublin Youth Theatre put it, “Youth theatre is meant to be what you need it for.”

However, the common principles and practices that link the youth theatre sector and define its ethos make it possible to distinguish some common benefits of participation. Youth theatre members, leaders and stakeholders identified the following benefits of participation:

- Improved theatre skills;
- Increased appreciation of theatre and the arts;
- Increased creativity;
- Improved workshop skills;
- Progression to third-level drama and theatre training and professional theatre;
- Training in facilitation and direction for senior members and FETAC qualifications;
- Increased levels of confidence and self-esteem;
- Increased numbers of friends and an increased ability to make friends;
- A more developed sense of personal and group identity;
- A sense of belonging;
- Increased self-discipline and commitment;
- Improved abilities to articulate and express feelings and opinions;
- A sense of happiness, fun and well-being;
- Increased levels of activity;
- A sense of personal and group achievement;
- Increased understanding and knowledge of relevant issues;
- Increased ability to take risks and be spontaneous within a safe environment;
- A sense of empowerment;
- A sense of escape and relaxation.

This chapter provides an overview of the impact of participation on youth theatre members. It draws largely on material collected in interviews, member workshops and questionnaires and maintains the integrity of the young people’s voices throughout. The young people who contributed to this study through questionnaires and practical workshops were very positive about their experiences of youth theatre and were committed members of their own groups. The research project did not capture the voices and opinions of any members who may have experienced negative outcomes and the research project did not seek out young people who had decided that youth theatre was not for them. The findings of this chapter should not be viewed as a complete series of outcomes but rather as a discourse on the benefits of participation.

In the Member Workshops, youth theatre members were asked to agree or disagree with the statement “Youth theatre has the potential to completely change your life.” The statement was intentionally provocative to create debate and discussion about the outcomes of participation in youth theatre. From the 111 young people who responded to the statement, only 14.41% disagreed. They opposed it on the basis that for them, youth theatre was about fun or was simply a hobby. They felt that it could change some elements of your life but that it didn’t completely change who you were or what you were going to do with your life.

An overwhelming majority of members, 85.59%, believed that youth theatre did have the potential to completely change your life. They responded:

“It will make it a million times better. Cause you will probably come in here like really on a downer and then you’ll come out so happy. If you spend one year here it’ll be the best year of your life. It’ll just make it better.” – Waterford Youth Arts Member

“It’s already changed my life because I was very shy and I didn’t like meeting new people and just the

few months that I've been here I'm a lot more outspoken and I like it here as well. And it's made a big difference to my weekends as well." – Roscommon Co. Youth Theatre Member

"I'm not very academic, right? I don't do good in school, right? Then it's like I met some random people on the street one day and they go "Hey, do you want to go to drama?" and I go "OK". So I went to drama and I was like "Oh my god. This is what I've been looking for. It's fantastic". Cause really... honest to god I was like... you know it's something I enjoy. It's something I'm good at. It has really changed my life because I actually know what I want to do now." – Cavan Youth Drama Member

The benefits of participation are explored under the following headings:

- 7.1 Artistic Benefits of Participation
- 7.2 Social and Personal Benefits of Participation
- 7.3 What do Young People Value about Youth Theatre?

7.1 Artistic Benefits of Participation

"Youth theatre is about learning new theatrical skills and developing old ones. Youth theatre, to me, is about pushing yourself, sometimes just outside your comfort zone in order to learn and produce pieces of art." – Manorhamilton Youth Theatre Member

Youth theatre members and leaders describe a number of different artistic outcomes of participation in youth theatre. The artistic benefits are explored under the following headings:

- 7.1.1 Increase in Theatre Skills
- 7.1.2 Increase in Appreciation of Theatre and the Arts
- 7.1.3 Increase in Creativity
- 7.1.4 Increase in Workshop Skills
- 7.1.5 Youth Theatre as a Pathway to Professional Theatre

7.1.1 Increase in Theatre Skills

Youth theatre members and leaders believed that participation in youth theatre contribute significantly to the development of drama and theatre skills. Youth theatre members aged 12 and over were asked to complete the sentence "Taking part in youth theatre has helped me to..." by selecting suitable phrases from a list on the questionnaire. The phrases relating to drama and theatre skills featured strongly among the choices of the 440 members who completed questionnaires:

- 65% selected "To improve my theatre skills and knowledge";
- 60% selected "To improve my drama workshop skills".

Youth theatre leaders were asked "How does participation in youth theatre impact on young people?" in their questionnaires. They were requested to select relevant impacts from a set list or add their own. Again, the impacts relating to drama and theatre skills featured strongly among the choices of the 56 leaders who completed questionnaires:

- 85.71% of leaders selected 'Improves young people's drama workshop skills';
- 83.93% of leaders selected 'Improves young people's theatre skills and knowledge'.

The development of drama and theatre skills remains central to a young person's experience of youth theatre. The opportunity to participate in workshops and productions is the primary reason given for joining a youth theatre (Chapter 5.2.2) and for a section of youth theatre members, the development of drama and theatre skills is the principal outcome.

"Youth theatre is a place which helps young people to develop their talents, skills and abilities." – Waterford Youth Arts Member

"A safe place to develop artistic skills" – Dublin Youth Theatre Member

“Youth theatre means learning about drama and performing in plays.” – Roscommon Co. Youth Theatre Member

“Youth theatre means a lot to me. I can become better at acting and my other skills when I have people to guide me.” – Celbridge Youth Drama Member

“Youth theatre to me is a chance for young people everywhere to come together and explore the art of performance and all that goes with it e.g., directing, writing...” Waterford Youth Arts Member

In general, youth theatre members describe the growth of drama and theatre skills as part of a balanced package of artistic, personal and social outcomes. The development of drama and theatre skills can also create strong, personal outcomes. Skills development can lead to competence in many different drama and theatre areas and in turn, competence can impact directly on levels of confidence and self-esteem.

7.1.2 Increase in Appreciation of Theatre and the Arts

Youth theatre members generally define the learning that takes place in youth theatre in terms of skills development. However, throughout Centre Stage +10 members also described a growth in their appreciation and understanding of the aesthetics of theatre. Of the 440 youth theatre members who completed the sentence “Taking part in youth theatre has helped me to...” on the questionnaire:

- 53.18% of members selected ‘To understand and love theatre.’

Leaders were also convinced that this was a strong artistic outcome for young people. Of the 56 leaders who answered the question ‘How does participation in youth theatre impact on young people?’ on the questionnaire:

- 87.50% of leaders believed youth theatre “Improves young people’s understanding and appreciation of theatre”.

Youth theatre members described this increase in their appreciation and understanding of theatre:

“Youth theatre means a place that can help me discover the true meaning of plays, people and other works of art.” – Celbridge Youth Drama Member

“Being in youth theatre means that I can participate in plays and be able to appreciate other productions more.” – Na Crosáin Youth Theatre Member

“It helps me to open my mind to other art forms. I get used to all types of theatre.” – Cavan Youth Drama Member

Youth theatre members also believed that involvement in youth theatre had increased their interest in other art forms. Of the 440 youth theatre members who completed the sentence ‘Taking part in youth theatre has helped me to...’ on the questionnaire:

- 56.14% of youth theatre members selected ‘To be more interested in other art forms like dance, film, music or art’.

Leaders commented that this interest in other arts forms was nurtured by the multi-disciplinary nature of theatre. Youth theatre members can experience music, dance, design and other art forms through their engagement in theatre. Of the 56 leaders who answered the question ‘How does participation in youth theatre impact on young people?’ on the questionnaire:

- 73.21% of leaders believed that youth theatre ‘Increases young people’s interest in other art forms’.

7.1.3 Increase in Creativity

Youth theatre members and leaders believed passionately in the individual creativity of all participants and proposed that youth theatre was an environment that valued and fostered creativity. Of the 440 youth theatre members who completed the sentence ‘Taking part in youth theatre has helped me to...’ on the questionnaire:

- 67.05% of young people selected ‘To develop my creative abilities’;
- 12.71% of young people ranked this as the most important impact.

Of the 56 leaders who answered the question ‘How does participation in youth theatre impact on young people?’ on the questionnaire:

- 100% of leaders believed that youth theatre ‘Improves young people’s creative abilities’;
- 18% of leaders ranked this as the most important impact.

Youth theatre members recognised a creative impulse in themselves and found that youth theatre exposed

them to environments and challenges that encouraged their creativity to develop. Both members and leaders associate creativity with a strong sense of originality and individualism.

“It’s a place where I can go to develop creatively and learn to express myself and be free in myself.”
– Cavan Youth Drama Member

“It means being happy with your creativity and being the best you can be in theatre.”
– Kildare Youth Theatre Member

“It’s really enjoyable and it’s a great way to express creativity.” – Activate Youth Theatre Member

“Creativity is fundamental to being a human being. Whether it’s baking a cake or whether it’s making a skirt, it is fundamental to the human condition to be creative. And for them to have those little lightbulb moments where they go.. woah... this feeling inside me is a new one and it marks me as an individual. I work in youth theatre for that moment. The moment when someone realises that this marks me as a person in the world. And a creative being can go into anything, you know? You can be creative in so many areas as human beings.” – Activate Youth Theatre Leader

7.1.4 Increase in Workshop Skills

Youth theatre members believed that the majority of their drama and theatre skills were developed through the workshop experience. Some members who had experienced different kinds of drama classes felt that the workshop experience was unique to youth theatre. They believed that the workshop experience actively engaged them in the development of skills and provided a rounded experience of drama in a creative, accepting environment. Youth theatre members also valued opportunities to be spontaneous and original through improvisation work and to explore different themes and ideas that were relevant to them.

“Youth theatre gives me an opportunity to do workshops which I did not do in my previous drama training.” – Cabinteely Youth Theatre Member

“Before I started the youth theatre I was doing just normal drama class and I just felt as if I wasn’t getting anything out of it except just my exams and stuff. Then when I came to the youth theatre I was like, you know, I was able to do more... like more acting and more learning about drama than just doing speeches and monologues and stuff. It’s more hands on and stuff.” – Activate Youth Theatre Member

“If it works out that I do theatre, it’s been really invaluable and I’ve learned so many like improvisation skills especially that I couldn’t learn in other kinds of drama groups.” – Co Sligo Youth Theatre Member

“My first ever workshop was... I was very young. I was the youngest in the group and it was very daunting and I remember I was picked first for this imagination thing that you had to make a certain garden, a certain magical place. And I’d only done speech and drama and all this and I was... I did not know what I was doing but ever after that I realised that it’s ok to do stuff in front of people- spontaneous. And that has changed.” – Co. Sligo Youth Theatre Member

“You kind of become more aware of different situations that might occur through improvisation... through drama, you know? Different themes that might come up through improvisation and things like that... being more aware of different issues.” – Co. Roscommon Youth Theatre Member

Youth theatre members participate in regular workshops because they enjoy learning new skills, having fun and creating work together. They felt that regular participation was important because on a personal level, you could always improve your skills but also because they felt that the group might need you to be there. Youth theatre members demonstrated attitudes that were marked by an unselfish concern for the development of other members and the wellbeing of the group. Youth theatre members who participated in Member Workshops as part of *Centre Stage +10* were asked to respond to the statement ‘Workshops are a waste of time for experienced members.’ 93.55% of members who took part in the workshops disagreed with this statement. Youth theatre members stated:

“You can only get better...” – Cavan Youth Drama Member

“There’s no harm can come of working together every day and keeping skills. If you’re just going over old stuff then you’re still introducing new members and doing new youth theatre stuff for them. It’s always good to keep... and work together as a group rather than somebody drifting in and out whenever there’s different stuff going on.” – Co. Sligo Youth Theatre Member

Youth theatre members are also learning workshop facilitation and planning skills while they are workshop participants. This skills development was particularly strong in youth theatres where leaders discussed why they were including activities and included regular feedback throughout the workshop rather than leaving it to the conclusion of the workshop. The development of these specific skills is not a common objective for youth theatres (unless youth theatres are focusing on the training of senior members) but they are often a by-product of good youth theatre practice.

To explore the development in facilitation and planning skills around the country, youth theatre members were asked to create their ideal workshop during Member Workshops. In small groups, youth theatre members were asked to create a good workshop plan that named the activities they would like to include and their reasons for including the activity. Table 7.1 represents a sample of workshop plans created by members in 3 different workshops and shows a range of understanding and skill.

Table 7.1 Workshop plans from Centre Stage +10 Member Workshops

| Workshop | Activity | Reason for Including Activity |
|----------|--------------------------|--|
| 1 | 1 Physical shake out | 1 [No reason given] |
| | 2 Song | 2 Vocal warm-up |
| | 3 Zip Zap Boing | 3 Energy |
| | 4 Chair Race | 4 Team work |
| | 5 Tableaux | 5 Group dynamics, think creatively, focusing |
| | 6 Playback | 6 Acting - improve |
| | 7 Improvisation | 7 For fun |
| | 8 Song / shake out | 8 Wind up, warm down, bond |
| 2 | 1 Dodgeball | 1 Fun, warm-up |
| | 2 Ship Game | 2 Fun |
| | 3 Park Bench Game | 3 Fun |
| | 4 Frank Miller Game | 4 Fun |
| | 5 Imaginary People Party | 5 Good for improvisation |
| | 6 Emotion Squares | 6 Fun |
| 3 | 1 Improvisation | 1 Connecting with audience |
| | 2 Zip Zap Boing, Change | 2 Fun, energy, concentration |
| | 3 Image scenes | 3 Creativity |
| | 4 Popcorn | 4 Make sure you’re listening, working together |

7.1.5 Youth Theatre as a Pathway to Professional Theatre

Youth theatre can provide a pathway for young people who want to work professionally in theatre. A significant percentage of youth theatre members are interested in working professionally as actors or within the theatre sector in general and every year youth theatre members progress to third-level drama courses or actor training programmes. Youth theatre members were asked to indicate their career aspirations through the questionnaire for members aged 12 and over. Of the 439 members who responded:

- 30.98% of members wanted to be an actor;
- 20.27% wanted to work in theatre;
- 19.36% wanted to work in the arts.

Children as young as nine expressed an interest in becoming professional actors. Some young people find that youth theatre clarifies their future ambitions and provides them with an opportunity to work towards their aspiration.

“I love being able to feel like a different person and want to be an actress.” – Rathdowney Youth Theatre Member

“It helps me pursue an acting career and it’s great to meet people.” – Co. Roscommon Youth Theatre Member

“It is a great way to learn more about theatre and to help me with job opportunities in theatre.”
– West Cork Arts Centre Youth Theatre Member

“I do think that there are some people who just look at theatre and know it’s going to be their life. That’s it. End of story.” – Activate Youth Theatre Leader

“I’ve always been interested in acting and I had never, like, told anyone that I wanted to be an actress but I did secretly want to do it. And just after my... it was a first-year one-act, it was a very small play called ‘Chatroom’ and I played one of the main characters in it. I was really good in it and like people had said it to me and it was kind of after that that I decided to say like.. to confirm that this was what I wanted to do. Because I was always afraid like because I’d seen, you know, like my dad [an actor] and stuff... it is hard, you know? And I know there’s a lot of sort of, kind of... “You want to be an actress, who doesn’t?” sort of thing. It was only after that I went “No this is really what I want to do”. – Dublin Youth Theatre Member

Youth theatre leaders believe in providing progression routes for young people who are interested in studying drama and theatre at third level or working in professional theatre. Some youth theatres would consider their programme of activities as ‘training’ in its own right, others advise on the selection of courses or support young people through audition processes. Ireland has recently seen an increase in third-level, academic drama courses but a decrease in practical actor training programmes that fall within the third-level ‘Free fees’ scheme. Within this context, youth theatres remain one of the few financially accessible options for young people who are specifically interested in actor training.

Of the 440 youth theatre members who completed the sentence ‘Taking part in youth theatre has helped me to...’ on the questionnaire:

- 51.36% of members selected ‘To improve my chance of making a career in the arts’;
- 6.08% of young people selected ‘To improve my chance of making a career in the arts’ as the most important outcome.

Of the 56 leaders who answered the question ‘How does participation in youth theatre impact on young people?’ on the questionnaire:

- 76.79% of leaders selected ‘Increases likelihood of young people achieving a career in the arts’.

Though the majority of leaders believed that youth theatre could create pathways into the professional arts sector, they considered it to be one of the lesser outcomes as they rated it number 14 out of 17 possible outcomes.

“Well if you’re going to have a professional career then the place to start is in youth theatre. Cause that’s where you can develop your skills. – Independent Youth Theatre Member

“It is a great way to enter into the ‘theatre world’. If it was not for youth theatre I don’t know how I would have gained access into this field. I love to act and perform and believe youth theatre is a great way for young people to express themselves creatively.” – Rathdowney Youth Theatre Member

“It certainly develops them as artists and that’s something we’re only really seeing now. The very first wave of members we had are finishing up in university. They’re keeping in touch with us so we see what they’re doing and where they are. We’ll do the audition workshops with them if they’re interested. Show them how to do it and just basically talk them through the auditions. And I know that maybe two years previously, there’s no way those members would have dreamed of doing auditions, you know? It gives them the tools to be able to compete for those sought after places.” – Co Wexford Youth Theatre leader

A significant number of youth theatre leaders felt strongly that youth theatre should never be regarded as ‘training’. They believed that individuals could be discreetly supported and encouraged to pursue further theatre training but that it should not be advertised openly as the automatic next step for ‘talented’ youth theatre members. Some leaders and members believed it contradicted the basic purpose of youth theatre and would disrupt the ethos of equality amongst members. Leaders felt that youth theatre should encourage young people to pursue their dreams but that leaders should be careful not to foster unreal expectations that could possibly prove damaging to the young person in the long run.

“We’re not aiming to produce professional actors, you know? If they have the talent, ok they’ll be encouraged through NAYD projects, through the senior group [senior amateur drama group]... but basically they go in there and they have fun. We have fun. They have a bit of craic. It makes them into better people, you know?” – Backstage Youth Theatre Leader

“Youth theatre isn’t just a stepping stone to professional theatre. That’s not what your youth theatre wants. Cause if that’s what your youth theatre wants then it wouldn’t be a youth theatre. It would be a talent agency. That’s not the point of youth theatre. The point is to have an appreciation for drama and theatre. It’s there for you to grow.” – Dublin Youth Theatre Member

“We have something very powerful that we offer young people and [we try to] make sense of how best to use that in the interest of young people, how best we make that effective, how best we make sure that the dreams we offer them are real, achievable dreams – not some fake dream of stardom, but the dream that you might take better control over your life and the direction that your life takes.”¹

Some youth theatres, such as Roundabout Youth Theatre and Co. Carlow Youth Theatre, provide opportunities for young people to get involved in further training while they are still members. They provide progression for young people through FETAC accredited training as part of their youth theatre programme:

“Youth theatre also gives me the chance to get involved in further training (FETAC) and allows me make decisions and take responsibility as a junior leader.” – Roundabout Youth Theatre Member

7.2 Social and Personal Benefits of Participation

Youth theatre members and leaders describe a rich combination of personal and social outcomes of participation in youth theatre. In the Member Workshops, youth theatre members were asked to agree or disagree with the statement ‘Youth theatre is only about developing theatre skills.’ Of the 111 young people who responded to the statement, 97.30% disagreed. Members believed that their participation in youth theatre resulted in a multitude of personal and social outcomes.

“I think they actually get a little microcosm of life. I think they get a little bit of everything from being in youth theatre. I think it ticks so many boxes for them. I think they get an immediate social life. I think they get a family. I think they learn to trust other kids. I think they get to explore parts of their personality that they can never explore in another setting. I think they get to play at being confident when they’re not confident. I think they get to play at being the creepy guy when actually they’re the cool dude. I think they get to understand so much more about themselves and who they are. And they get to have fun and go places and they get to travel. And that’s just... they get a little microcosm of life. And I know that the kids who are there love it and they give up so much to do it.”

– Co. Limerick Youth Theatre Leader -Lough Gur

“Youth theatre is a place where you can go and if you’re having a bad day it will make you feel better. It’s a place where you feel accepted and although you don’t need to, it’s a place where you can be someone you’re not and have fun at it.” – Celbridge Youth Drama Member

The personal and social benefits are explored under the following headings:

- 7.2.1 Confidence and Self-Esteem
- 7.2.2 Making Friends and Building Relationships
- 7.2.3 Development of Identity
- 7.2.4 A Sense of Belonging
- 7.2.5 Self-discipline and Commitment
- 7.2.6 Improved abilities to use Speech to express Feelings and Opinions
- 7.2.7 Happiness, Fun and a Sense of Well-being
- 7.2.8 Being Active
- 7.2.9 Personal and Group Achievement
- 7.2.10 Increased Understanding and Knowledge of Relevant Issues
- 7.2.11 Empowerment
- 7.2.12 Escape and Relaxation

7.2.1 Confidence and Self-esteem

Confidence is the most commonly cited outcome of participation in youth theatre. Members and leaders believe that youth theatre can lead to significant increases in confidence levels:

¹ Neelands, Jonothan, *Essentially Youth Theatre*, Youth Drama Ireland, Issue 10 2007-2008, NAYD, P13

Of the 440 youth theatre members who completed the sentence ‘Taking part in youth theatre has helped me to...’ on the questionnaire:

- 80.45% of members selected ‘To become more confident’;
- 39.50% of members selected ‘To become more confident’ as the most important outcome.

Of the 56 leaders who answered the question ‘How does participation in youth theatre impact on young people?’ on the questionnaire:

- 100% of leaders selected ‘Builds young people’s confidence and self-esteem’;
- 56% of leaders selected ‘Builds young people’s confidence and self-esteem’ as the most important outcome.

Youth theatre members and leaders often find it difficult to define confidence or explain how it increases as a result of participation but they know it when they see it or feel it. Some young people equated it with being outgoing, being more vocal or more forward with their opinions. Children as young as 9 listed ‘building confidence’ as an actual activity within their regular youth theatre workshop. Confidence is regarded as a treasured asset. The majority of youth theatre members described confidence that arose from a belief in their own abilities, ideas and judgements. They describe confidence that develops through their youth theatre experiences and its impact on the rest of their lives.

“In school (like before I joined youth theatre) when I’d be reading in class, I couldn’t read. I’d be shaking and my voice would go really weird but now I don’t do that any more.”

– Co. Limerick Youth Theatre Member – Lough Gur

“Before youth theatre I was always afraid of speaking... that someone would ask my opinion and I’d say the wrong thing or they wouldn’t agree with me and I’d just be like “Ok. You’re right”. Even in class if I was asked to read out an essay I wrote myself I just wouldn’t be able to. I’d be “Please don’t ask me. Please don’t ask me” kind of... and kind of when I did my first play with the youth theatre I kind of realised “I can talk and people do kind of listen” and I just kind of got more confidence in speaking and stuff.” – Lightbulb Youth Theatre Member

“I am more confident and feel better about myself. I also made new friends. I am more mature.”

– Rathdowney Youth Theatre Member

“It is a chance for me to gain confidence in a way I really enjoy!” – Portlaoise Youth Theatre Member

“You probably can’t tell by now but I’m like probably one of the shyest people who you’ll ever meet if you don’t know me, which is kind of hard! I get quite shy but just youth theatre... one day we were... just plain acting, you know, a regular workshop and just all of a sudden it was like ‘I’m more confident’. [laughs] I felt way better about myself and it was good to like, know that we’re all a group and that we’re like a little family... and that we’re all there for each other. And we are youth theatre and we rock.”

– Roscommon Co. Youth Theatre Member

Youth theatre members describe a confidence that is partnered by a growth in self-esteem. This growth in self-esteem evolves from a belief in their own merit as an individual person.

“Building confidence and self-esteem as well and kind of building yourself up as a person through drama.” – Roscommon Co. Youth Theatre Member

“It helps you develop self-confidence and self-esteem and helps you become a more, you know... a confident and outgoing person.” – Cavan Youth Drama Member

Self-esteem is promoted in youth theatre through the security that young people find in their relationships with other members and leaders, a sense of belonging, an absence of discrimination or bullying, a sense of purpose, responsibility and achievement as well as their developing competency in drama and theatre. A high level of self-esteem is the sum result of many of the other outcomes of participation.

“We did an improvisation night and it was my first time getting up in front of an audience with absolutely nothing prepared and you don’t mind standing up in front of your youth theatre group cause they’ve all done it before or are going to do it next so it’s grand. But the first time in front of people who’ve never seen it before and it was just kind of an eye-opener and youth theatre just gave you the confidence just to get up and do it.” – Co. Sligo Youth Theatre Member

7.2.2 Making Friends and Building Relationships

Youth theatre members and leaders also commonly cite an increase in friends and the ability to make friends as an outcome of participation in youth theatre. Members who completed questionnaires gave it a higher overall rating than increased confidence:

Of the 440 youth theatre members who completed the sentence ‘Taking part in youth theatre has helped me to...’ on the questionnaire:

- 83.41% of members selected ‘To make new friends’;
- 13.26% of members selected ‘To make new friends’ as the most important outcome;
- 48.41% of members selected ‘To get on more easily with lots of different kinds of people’.

Of the 56 leaders who answered the question ‘How does participation in youth theatre impact on young people?’ on the questionnaire:

- 94.64% of leaders selected ‘Increases young people’s friendships and ability to make friends’;
- Only 4% of leaders selected this as the most important outcome;
- 87.50% of leaders selected ‘Improves young people’s ability to relate to a wide variety of people’.

Close friendships gain greater significance within the teenage years. Many youth theatre members described a lack of friendships or a complete absence of a social life before they started youth theatre.

“I didn’t really have a social life before I started drama.” – Cavan Youth Drama Member

“This was kind of like before I joined the youth theatre... I’m going to be honest and say that I didn’t have that many mates at school at the time and then em... I joined IYT and I was just thinking “My god, I’ve got so many more friends here than I do in school” and then it made me feel a whole lot better about myself.” – Independent Youth Theatre Member

*“The girls who join the youth drama tend to be the ones on the edges of the school. But once they’ve joined, the edges become more crowded, you know? Instead of being apart, they’re all together. They’re from different years and they have something to talk about. They walk along the corridor and they have faces to smile at and it brings them out of themselves –just knowing people who are friendly.”
– Celbridge Youth Drama Leader*

Young people found that making friends within youth theatre gave them the confidence and ability to make more friends outside of youth theatre:

“Just joining the youth theatre and actually making loads of friends and everything. It gave me a lot more confidence to make friends outside of youth theatre as well. – Co. Sligo Youth Theatre Member

“When I started out I didn’t, like, know everybody at the youth theatre. There were some people and I didn’t have a clue who they were and then I actually made friends with them and then I was like “Oh my god I can make friends”. So then when I was on holidays, I actually like made loads of friends because I found out that I was able to do it like. – Lightbulb Youth Theatre Member

A youth theatre can provide opportunities for young people to meet a wide variety of other young people from their local area, particularly if the youth theatre actively recruits members and promotes inclusion. This type of environment can act as a microcosm of the larger community, where young people from different backgrounds engage with each other and are united by a common purpose.

“I think it’s just a bit of an eye-opener for you like... when I first went to youth theatre I was really young so I hadn’t... I was just after starting secondary school and I was just getting used to all the different groups being in the town, like your Shams, your Emos, your whatever and I was just kind of wary of them other groups and like “No you can’t associate with them. No, you can’t be seen with them”. I think members of all those different groups were at the youth theatre so you kind of came together with them and like, it didn’t make a difference or whatever.” – Letterkenny Youth Theatre Member

Youth theatres can also provide opportunities to engage with a wider community of young people through projects, exchanges and festivals. Leaders believed that this was particularly important for some of their members from rural and disadvantaged urban areas where young people’s experiences were often limited to their own immediate surroundings.

“In terms of moving beyond their own community, they can go and perform in a festival and there are young people there from a whole range of other backgrounds, classes, and communities. In terms of broadening young people’s experience beyond their own immediate environments – I think youth theatre is uniquely positioned to do that. People can go there and participate and I think that it opens huge amounts of doors for young people.” – Senior Youth Work Manager, CYC

“I went to the Young Critics in Dublin in October. We met each other on the Friday evening and by the Sunday evening we were like one family and we didn’t want to leave each other and we just... I don’t know I just really... I didn’t know that you can get close to people that quickly.”

– Roscommon Co. Youth Theatre Member

Leaders and members felt that youth theatre offered an environment where young people could create different types of relationships with young people of the opposite sex. Young people felt more comfortable being themselves and were therefore able to build real friendships with members of the opposite sex. They were not tied to the same behaviour and friendship patterns that existed in schools where a relationship meant being boyfriend and girlfriend. Youth theatre provided an opportunity for some members to actually meet and work with members of the opposite sex for the first time, as a significant proportion of young people attend single sex schools.

“I think there’s an enormous freedom suddenly given to them in terms of how they look at other people... not as a sexual being, not as a future boyfriend but as a fellow person, another human being in this space, in this world who can create together something out of nothing, you know? I think that’s amazing.”

– Activate Youth Theatre Leader

“Youth theatre means I get to meet girls. Real girls.” – Activate Youth Theatre Member

Leaders and members also mentioned the supportive relationship that can exist between the adults and young people in youth theatre outside the more formal settings such as school. They described the impact this relationship can have on how young people communicate with and interact with other adults:

“I think they’re able to deal with adults on a much more straightforward level, you know? Cause the interaction... it’s not a hierarchy in here, you know? And there’s a mutual respect thing that goes on with anybody who’s in a position of power as it were, you know?” – West Cork Arts Centre Youth Theatre leader

7.2.3 Development of Identity

Adolescence is a time of transformation. Young people experiment with new ways of thinking and behaving and face the overwhelming task of determining who they are and identifying who they would like to be. Members believed that their participation in youth theatre activities revealed new and interesting things about themselves and helped them on that journey of self-discovery.

“You realise new things about yourself that you didn’t know, you know?” – Waterford Youth Arts Member

“You learn about yourself mostly”. – Co Roscommon Youth Theatre Member

“You express yourself and find your, kind of, true person [laughs]” – Co. Roscommon Youth Theatre Member

A leader at Co. Wexford Youth Theatre reported that one young member said “Youth theatre is the one place where I don’t have to act”. Members are clear that youth theatre can provide them with a space where each young person can ‘be themselves’, portraying that unique set of characteristics that constitute his or her own individual personality.

“It is a place to be myself” – Co. Roscommon Youth Theatre Member

“I love youth theatre. I have a completely different group of friends when I go to drama on a Sunday and I love it. I am completely myself and I don’t feel conscious about what other people here think about me.”

– Co. Roscommon Youth Theatre Member

“A place to hang out and improve my acting skills. To meet new people. To be myself.”

– Backstage Youth Theatre Member

Participation in drama provides unique opportunities for young people to experiment with different ideas, opinions and emotions through the safeguard of role and character. Members are free to reinvent themselves through the roles that they take on in youth theatre and can break free from any roles that are assigned to them within real environments such as school. Members describe exploring characters that are completely different to themselves:

“You can be a person on stage that you’re not off-stage” – Lightbulb Youth Theatre Member

“I moved up from the middle group to the older group this year and like, the change... you wouldn’t even imagine it like. I was... last year in the play I was like this really, really girly, girl and then this year I’m the fella who got stabbed.” – Lightbulb Youth Theatre Member

“It means being able to act like a person who is completely unlike you and you don’t have to worry what people think. It’s a place where you can be completely yourself.” – Cabintely Youth Theatre

*“I love it because when I’m on stage it’s like I’m a different person and it’s so much fun.”
– Backstage Youth Theatre Member*

Members suggest that youth theatre can provide a framework through which young people ‘grow-up’ and become adults. Youth theatre provides some young people with a way of developing an identity and a role that is independent from home and school. Youth theatre can offer activities that provide increased levels of responsibility and independence, members particularly mentioned festivals and exchanges that involve travel.

“It’s about growing up, a lot of it. Cause a lot of people are there since they’re kids and then when they leave... we’re adults [whispers]” – Celbridge Youth Drama Member

“You get to travel to criticism [NAYD’s Young Critics project], which was unbelievable... to kind of taste adult life.” – Lightbulb Youth Theatre Member

“I think for some young people it’s the moment where they mark themselves as separate from their parents and from another value system. And they can investigate value systems and I think that’s important in your development as a human being.” – Activate Youth Theatre Leader

7.2.4 A Sense of Belonging

Young people’s need to develop their own unique personality is balanced by a need to fit in and belong. Youth theatre members state that they find a powerful sense of belonging within their youth theatre. Youth theatre activities and the other young people help them feel accepted, secure and strong within a non-judgmental environment. This sense of belonging empowers young people to create, to take risks and to make statements about their world. It can also help to give young people the strength to be themselves, an individual within the group.

“Often in youth theatre, the first struggle is to use drama and theatre ritually to help the group see themselves as a community: understand how they might bond, explore the values that they might have, reshape those values to get a sense of belonging, a sense of community – and out of that sense of community comes a sense of power. We know that about young people: that’s the attraction of gangs, that’s the attraction of hanging out with tough other people - it makes you feel powerful. Part of what we’re offering in youth theatre is an opportunity to feel that power in a very different way, as a positive force, as a power to change, as a power to communicate.”²

Youth theatre members were asked through questionnaires whether they believed youth theatre helped them to feel accepted and feel that they belonged somewhere. Of the 440 youth theatre members who completed the sentence ‘Taking part in youth theatre has helped me to...’ on the questionnaire:

- 40% of members selected ‘To feel accepted and feel that I belong somewhere’.

Of the 56 leaders who answered the question ‘How does participation in youth theatre impact on young people?’ on the questionnaire:

- 87.50% of leaders selected ‘Increases young people’s sense of belonging and acceptance’.

Interestingly, youth theatre members mentioned this personal outcome more frequently when asked open

questions such as “What does youth theatre mean to you?” as part of the ‘12 and over’ questionnaire and throughout Member Workshop activities. Youth theatre leaders also raised this sense of belonging as a key outcome for their members.

“I think they get a sense of belonging. That’s probably the main thing they get, I would say.”
– Co Wexford Youth Theatre Leader

When interviewed, Celbridge Youth Drama Leaders mentioned that they had recently spoken to their group about what their youth theatre meant to them. The leaders reported that they spoke about friendships, about the sense of community and the sense of belonging. This last outcome was important to many of the members who had recently moved to Celbridge, a developing town within the Dublin commuter belt:

“They talked about a sense of loneliness. Loads of them said that they had come into Celbridge relatively recently and didn’t know that many people here. But now they know loads of people and didn’t have that sense of loneliness anymore, didn’t feel so isolated.” – Celbridge Youth Drama Leader

Many youth theatre members find it difficult to ‘fit-in’ or find a peer group that they can belong to at school. They describe feeling ‘weird’ or different in comparison to the other young people in school and members describe the relief and excitement of finding out that other youth theatre members were just as ‘weird’ as them and had similar interests and tastes:

“When I went to school.. like I didn’t fit in anywhere and I suffered from depression for around 3 years. Then when I joined Dublin youth theatre everyone was like me– not exactly like me, but everyone was different and like that was the great thing. Everyone liked writing and people liked drama and the same music and stuff. So it was great to, like, to fit in.” – Dublin Youth Theatre Member

“I enjoy meeting people with the same interests. I feel like part of a team and feel liked for what I am.”
– Griese Youth Theatre Member

“Youth theatre is like a family, a herd, a pack... youth drama to me is a community of actors and weird people and it just makes you feel at home with a family you know? Of people just like you and you don’t get judged because everyone’s the same.– Waterford Youth Arts Member

“To me, youth theatre is a place with people who act as if they want me there and don’t ignore me because I’m different.” – Backstage Youth Theatre Member

Youth theatre members describe how the non-judgmental and accepting attitude of members and leaders helps them feel like they belong. This supportive environment is key to enabling young people to feel that they fit-in and it can be promoted through youth drama activities and the facilitation style of the leader as well as through the behaviour of other members.

“Youth theatre is a place where I feel like I can be myself, without worrying about people judging me. It’s a place to make friends while learning about something I love.” – Co. Carlow Youth Theatre Member

“Youth theatre means to me: life. I guess it kind of gave me something to live for because it allowed me to fit in and meet people who like what I like and it allowed for me to be myself and express myself.”
– Co. Roscommon Youth Theatre Member

“This youth theatre lets me express myself through art and to be around people who are open minded and accept anyone.” – Celbridge Youth Drama Member

Members often describe their youth theatre peers as ‘family’ and one Dublin Youth Theatre members referred to her youth theatre as a “home away from home”. The vocabulary that members use to describe this sense of belonging indicates that it is not short-lived or transitory in nature, but a firm relationship structure within their lives. One youth theatre member from Co. Roscommon Youth Theatre described a moment when she realised what her relationship with her youth theatre represented in her life:

“When we finished *The Crucible* we all sat together and photos were taken and I think I left youth theatre after the performance. Like I left and came back recently. When I was gone, I came across the photos and I think for me it was more or less the realisation that I was at such a big loss because it was ... I was missing something because.. we are like a family, you know? And when you feel like you’ve lost part of your

² Neelands, Jonothan, *Essentially Youth Theatre*, Youth Drama Ireland, Issue 10 2007-2008, NAYD, P 13

family. It just makes you feel like you're missing something of yourself, so... I don't know for me, it was just the realisation that I did really need this kind of thing and that it was a huge part of my life and a really good motivation." – Co. Roscommon Youth Theatre Member

A sense of belonging can have invaluable impacts on the self-esteem of young people. Building self-esteem within the group is also essential to enabling each person to see themselves as part of a whole, with something special and worthwhile to contribute to the group. It can give young people a powerful sense of purpose and worth.

"Youth theatre has been the most positive experience for me. It makes me feel useful and that I belong somewhere and I have something to offer." – Co. Sligo Youth Theatre Member

"Being in youth theatre makes me feel like part of a team, an important part of a team." – Griese Youth Theatre Member

"A place to make friends and to feel wanted." – Waterford Youth Arts Member

7.2.5 Self-discipline and Commitment

Youth theatre requires discipline and hard work from members. It also involves high expectations of young people and what they can achieve. Young people's participation in youth theatre is voluntary and their free choice to commit can increase their investment and create a positive working environment. Young people can learn the value of commitment and self-discipline when their regular attendance and contribution to a common goal results in an achievement they can feel proud of. Increased motivation can also be a key outcome for some young people. Members value opportunities to take on real creative responsibilities where they can contribute their skills and imagination. Where this occurs, members describe an increase in motivation and raised expectations of what they can achieve.

"Like if you're doing a big production like, you have to be committed and focused and sometimes be... like an adult." – Dublin Youth Theatre Member

"I live in the country about an hour away and it's not giving up a few hours every week... or a day every week but it's giving up the whole day, like. And like a lot of my weekends are taken- but I don't mind because I like drama." – Activate Youth Theatre Member

"I think that in an ideal situation the ability to focus and concentrate and follow something over a long period of time – I think that's really great. I think that's really important. Putting a lot of long-term effort into something and then maybe having the high... the satisfaction of a performance, you know? That's a whole process that's very worthwhile in itself I think. For somebody to put themselves through – in terms of application and focus and sense of self and creativity and achievement." – Community Arts Co-ordinator, Leitrim Arts Office

Youth theatre can involve a sense of urgency as members and leaders work towards real deadlines. The challenge of creating and performing an ensemble piece of theatre encourages young people to rely not only on their own resources but also on the commitment and productivity of other members of the group. The theatre process is structured in a way that demands group support as people work together to reach a common goal.

"Youth theatre means being part of a group that are motivated, fun and hardworking. I enjoy working with my friends towards putting on great performances." – Co. Limerick Youth Theatre Member - Abbeyfeale

"I suppose when we started doing the tech run... I knew that we meant business after that and it wasn't fun, so we'd to knuckle down." – Co. Limerick Youth Theatre Member – Lough Gur

"In the Crucible... I think it must have been one of the last nights or something. Everybody ran backstage and sort of ended up in a big hug thing... which landed on each other. I was at the bottom! It was just like everybody came in and everybody had done something together, we'd all achieved it, it was the first show I'd done with the youth theatre and it was quite a new... because quite a lot of the old members left and we had sort of a new thing and yeah... everyone just sort of bonded as a group there and you realise 'Hang on a second, we're all together, we might be dressed as Puritans but hey we're having great fun'. And nobody really wanted to finish... everyone was absolutely wrecked and it had been really hard cause like we were under so much pressure and people with lots of lines were under immense amounts of

pressure and so after that you just didn't want to leave, you just wanted to stay there all night and just go and do another show, just keep doing shows all night." – Roscommon Co. Youth Theatre Member

7.2.6 Improved Abilities to use Speech to Express Feelings and Opinions

Youth theatre members believe that participation in youth theatre can improve their communication skills and they make strong connections between the development of confidence and being 'more talkative'.

Of the 440 youth theatre members who completed the sentence 'Taking part in youth theatre has helped me to...' on the questionnaire:

- 50.23% of members selected 'To get on better and communicate better with people'.

Of the 56 leaders who answered the question 'How does participation in youth theatre impact on young people?' on the questionnaire:

- 96.43% of leaders selected 'Improves young people's social and communication skills'.

Youth theatre helps young people interact with each other and assists the development of communication skills. Youth theatre members identified 'communication' skills as being important rather than vocal skills such as diction, clarity or projection. They value communication because it increases their ability to relate to each other. Members and leaders mentioned communication skills such as non-verbal and verbal communication, active listening, expression of thoughts and feelings, questioning, affirming and communicating without making other people feel 'wrong'.

"It is a place where I can have a lot of fun but still help me with my communication skills with other people. It helps me think about my future and what I'd like to be when I grow up."
– Physically Phishy Youth Theatre Member

"It means being able to communicate better with others. Being able to express my feelings and opinions more." – Cabinteely Youth Theatre Member

Youth theatre members argued that work in youth theatre stretches their thinking skills and their use of language as well as their communication skills. Youth drama activities, discussions and feedback sessions as well as Youth Participation structures can provide opportunities for young people to identify and articulate their opinions and express their individuality through language.

"Youth theatre means speaking and expressing my mind, learning new things, making new friends and getting into characters that are totally different to me." – Portumna Youth Theatre Member

"It means being yourself and expressing yourself" – Portumna Youth Theatre Member

"Youth theatre means getting on well with people, meeting new people, getting a lot more confidence to talk to people and get my opinions across better." – Cabinteely Youth Theatre Member

"I love youth theatre because I've made lots of new friends I wouldn't have known otherwise. It helped me to become more confident and talkative. youth theatre is so much fun." – Portlaoise Youth Theatre Member

Youth theatre members believed that improved communication skills and confidence impacted on life outside the youth theatre but could also contribute to their ability to make friends within the youth theatre.

"I just enjoy being able to come to it and meet new people from a new town that I moved to. But the part that I enjoy about it most is when we actually sit down and talk about stuff and everybody gives their views and stuff and learns new things from everybody... having discussions like."
– Letterkenny Youth Theatre Member

7.2.7 Happiness, Fun and a Sense of Well-being

Youth theatre members describe youth theatre as ‘fun’. It is one of the most popular words used to describe youth theatre by members aged 6 to 23. The creation of a ‘fun’ environment is not the primary objective of many youth theatres but its impact on the happiness of members should not be underestimated. Youth theatre members value a place where they can come and ‘have a laugh’, where they can be cheered up, where they can enjoy themselves.

Of the 440 youth theatre members who completed the sentence ‘Taking part in youth theatre has helped me to...’ on the questionnaire:

- 46.82% of members selected ‘To feel better or happier’.

Of the 56 leaders who answered the question ‘How does participation in youth theatre impact on young people?’ on the questionnaire:

- 80.36% of leaders selected ‘Increases young people’s sense of well-being and happiness’.

Fun and happiness contributed significantly to the well-being of youth theatre members:

“Making friends and having a good laugh.” – Waterford Youth Arts Member

“It makes me feel happy.” – Stage Craft Youth Theatre Member

“When I have a bad day at school or something, going to youth theatre makes me feel good about myself and lets me forget everything bad.” – Backstage Youth Theatre Member

“Youth theatre has made me more confident, happier and has helped me to make friends.” – Cavan Youth Drama Member

“A place where you can have fun and feel comfortable being yourself.” – Co. Carlow Youth Theatre Member

Youth theatre members describe feelings of happiness that originate from the creative process as well as from fun environments and friends. Creativity, team work and personal and group achievement can contribute significantly to the well-being of young people:

“In my first year in DYT and... so I was about 14 and it was the first play I’d done. I think it was my first year one-act and it was the feeling of how close you get to the people, particularly in that performance I did. It was like, a dark... we did “4:48 Psychosis” by Sarah Kane which is like, a really dark play. And I was only a baby and we got, like, really close to the people, like, in the cast. And a lot of them were older than me. They were, like 18, 19 and I was only 14 and I don’t know why it affected me so much but I just... cause we were friends, we weren’t just in a cast together, like we were buddies. I remember having a dream when we went home and I was flying in my dream and I’d never had a dream about flying before and I knew it was because I was just so happy at that time, just being in that performance, you know what I mean? And like obviously then in most performances at the end, when it’s over you feel so sad, you actually nearly cry, like. Because you know you’re never going to have that time again, you know what I mean?” – Dublin Youth Theatre Member

7.2.8 Being Active

Youth theatre gives young people something to do. For some youth theatre members a significant outcome may be the opportunity to leave their house at the weekend and get involved with drama and other young people. On another level, youth theatre can help young people become active members within their local community.

“Somewhere to go, something to do, an opportunity to get involved with theatre.”
– Waterford Youth Arts Member

“It can give them something to do and something to focus on in a town that has very little”
– Co Wexford Youth Theatre Leader

“It’s something to do on a Saturday morning instead of sleeping in bed. Its great fun.”
– Na Crosáin Youth Theatre Member

Youth theatre may provide some young people with more positive recreational options and the opportunity to spend time and work with their friends in a safe space.

*“Youth theatre gives us a place to meet up with our friends that doesn’t involve going to the pub.”
– Celbridge Youth Drama Member*

Becoming active as a youth theatre member may also increase activity levels in other areas of a young person’s life. For example, a Clondalkin Youth Theatre leader mentioned one member who gained confidence in youth theatre and then became interested in debating.

7.2.9 Personal and Group Achievement

Youth theatre is an environment where the celebration of young people and their achievements is encouraged. Young people have the opportunity to perform and also to show appreciation as audience members within workshop and formal performance settings. Having your work shown to others and valued by them generated feelings of pride. Members derived a great deal of pride from the productions that they had created. The final production was theirs. This sense of ownership had been supported through a collaborative creative process. Good youth theatre practice ensures that members have real creative ownership, taking on real responsibilities and tasks throughout the creative process and seeing the project through to its conclusion.

*“I enjoy acting and get a sense of fulfillment when I have done a play.”
– Co. Limerick Youth Theatre Member - Abbeyfeale*

*“When our production was staged I had a great sense of achievement. It takes my mind off school and study.”
– Co. Limerick Youth Theatre Member - Abbeyfeale*

“When we did A Matter of Honour... it gave us so much confidence actually like when it was finished because like... we were actually performing it at a youth festival and then... when you had people coming up to you that you didn’t know at all, saying to you “Well done last night”, like it really just gives you a great confidence boost. – Celbridge Youth Drama Member

Members were also proud of what the group as a whole had achieved. The creative process emphasises inclusion and members believed that everyone contributed to the achievement of a good production. Members felt strongly that they worked as part of a team, listening, co-operating and trusting each other.

One Member from Co. Sligo Youth Theatre who took part in a Centre Stage +10 workshop compared a picture of a strong chain to a youth theatre performance and explained his selection by saying “there’s no weakest link. Everyone is pulling together.”

Of the 440 youth theatre members who completed the sentence ‘Taking part in youth theatre has helped me to...’ on the questionnaire:

- 50.23% of member selected ‘To work better in a team’.

Of the 56 leaders who answered the question ‘How does participation in youth theatre impact on young people?’ on the questionnaire:

- 98.21% of leaders selected ‘Increases young people’s ability to work in a team’.

“It’s about group skills as well. You’ve got to learn, you’ve got to be able to work within a group. We learn team-work. We learn listening to other people’s opinions. We learn a lot of stuff other than just theatre skills. – Roscommon Co. Youth Theatre Member

“Over the last few days before performing we were under serious pressure and stress but everyone, kind of, tried to come together and it was really, really nice to be part of a group. I hadn’t been part of a group like that in years so it was really, really nice.” – Roscommon Co. Youth Theatre Member

7.2.10 Increased Understanding and Knowledge of Relevant Issues

Many youth theatres provide opportunities for young people to explore issues through drama. This may happen through a process-based workshop, discussions or a rehearsal process and is particularly common within youth theatres run by local youth services. Youth theatre members in general did not believe that an increased

understanding of issues that affected them or their local community was a significant outcome of participation. This style of work is not customary in all youth theatres and young people's lack of experience of this aspect of work may have impacted on the questionnaire statistics. Many leaders and members are reluctant to become involved in issue-based work because they feel it often involves a patronising, didactic message. Some leaders also mentioned that they find the themes and issues that are commonly explored with young people, limited. They preferred to explore a wider selection of what they felt were more 'challenging' issues and themes through theatre texts.

Of the 440 youth theatre members who completed the sentence 'Taking part in youth theatre has helped me to...' on the questionnaire:

- 16.36% of members selected 'To know more about issues that affect me and my community'.

Of the 56 leaders who answered the question 'How does participation in youth theatre impact on young people?' on the questionnaire:

- 78.57% of leaders selected 'Improves young people's knowledge of social and personal issues'.

Some member, leaders and stakeholders spoke positively about the benefits of exploring issues that are relevant to young people's lives. Youth theatre can provide a safe context in which to explore these issues, articulate opinions and imagine and empathise with other people's situations. Exploration and discussion can empower members to take positive creative actions or take positive actions within their own lives.

*"It means to have fun, to be more aware of issues that affect me and people my own age."
– West Cork Arts Centre Youth Theatre Member*

*"It means working on serious issues in a relaxed atmosphere and it helps improve my confidence in sharing ideas."
– Kildare Youth Theatre Member*

*"Again it becomes an opportunity for them to explore a whole range of issues; positive issues, negative issues, really broad issues so it can broaden their whole education base. The feeling of empowerment - this is something they can do something about. If they are concerned about something in their community, they can do a piece of drama around it. The piece of drama can highlight the issue or it can become an educational tool that they can be part of and they can use."
– Senior Youth Work Manager, CYC*

7.2.11 Empowerment

Members and leaders believed that youth theatre can give young people a greater sense of authority and assertiveness. This empowerment is nurtured through active Youth Participation structures where young people can give their opinions and contribute to the running of their organisation and where youth theatre leaders respect and value the input of members. Youth theatre can also empower members by offering activities that provide increased levels of responsibility and independence to members.

*"To me youth theatre means... being able to contribute my ideas."
– Cavan Youth Drama Member*

*"I build my confidence and participate in new things, give my opinion and get involved in making decisions."
– Co. Carlow Youth Theatre Member*

*"It gives people the opportunities to be independent and to take on responsibilities and commitments."
– Dublin Youth Theatre Member*

*"There is empowerment... and it does develop but I think the empowerment takes longer than the confidence, you know? Somebody has to be in the youth theatre for a good length of time, you know? That power of having a decision followed through and again followed through, you know? It takes a few times before...because obviously it's a different set-up in the school than out-of-schools, you know? So for them to trust that environment and to trust their decisions takes time"
– West Cork Arts Centre Youth Theatre Leader*

7.2.12 Escape and Relaxation

Youth theatre members see youth theatre as a break from other stresses in their lives, particularly academic pressure. Members state that they feel relaxed in youth theatre. The sense of comfort and acceptance that members

experience within the youth theatre environment may also contribute to this sense of relaxation.

“It is a place where I can go to have fun and learn at the same time. It also lets me forget about things like school.” – *Physically Phishy Youth Theatre Member*

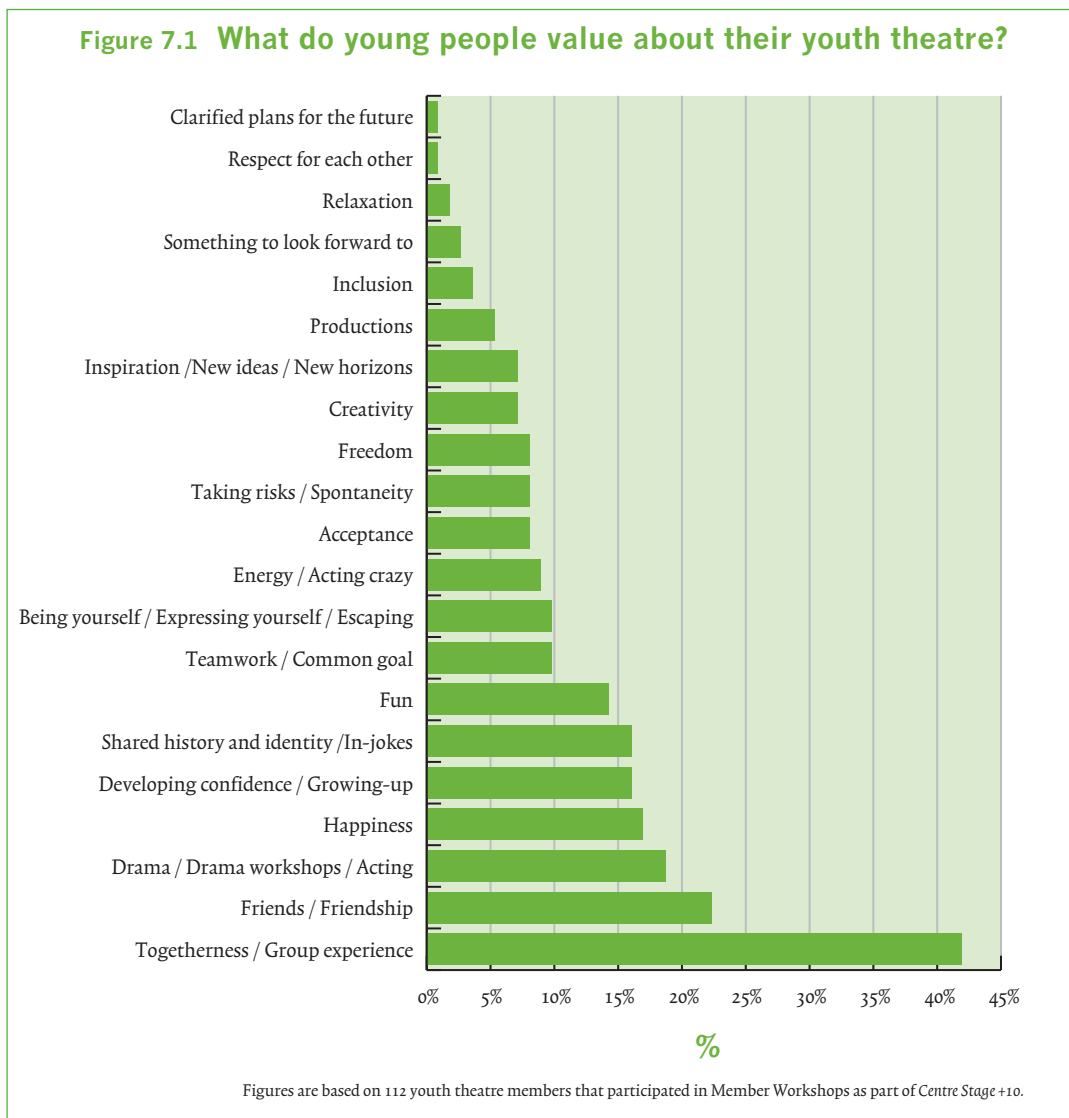
“It means relief from stress, enjoyment, a perfect mixture of work and satisfaction. It enables me to do what I love to do and to meet like-minded people.” – *Activate Youth Theatre Member*

“Youth theatre is an excellent way of channeling stress. It helps me relax and give me confidence.” – *Cavan Youth Drama Member*

7.3 What do Young People Value about their Youth Theatre?

The young people who participated in the *Centre Stage +10* research through questionnaires and workshops were very articulate about the personal, social and artistic outcomes of their participation. They were also asked to express what they valued most about their youth theatre experience. The majority of members valued the group experience and friendship above any other aspect of the youth theatre experience.

Youth theatre members were asked to choose or draw a picture that reminded them of something special about their youth theatre. 112 youth theatre members who participated in Member Workshops chose 116 pictures and explained why they chose their picture. Their explanations highlight the aspects of the youth theatre experience which young people value the most. Young people mentioned a number of different themes or ideas in their responses and these have been collated in Figure 7.1.



Youth theatre members valued the group experience and friendship above any other aspect of the youth theatre experience. Being with other young people, being part of a group and working together towards a common goal was central to their enjoyment of youth theatre. They also appeared to value general drama and acting experiences more than their participation in productions. Young people also mentioned some aspects of their youth theatre experience that did not arise in discussions around the outcomes of participation such as ‘energy / acting crazy’, ‘taking risks / spontaneity’, ‘freedom’ and ‘inspiration / new ideas / new horizons’. These features of the youth theatre experience make a significant contribution to young people’s enjoyment of youth theatre.

The main results of this task from the Member Workshop are provided in Table 7.2 and include images chosen by the young people and a selection of explanatory comments.

Table 7.2 Main results of Member Workshop Task ‘Choose or draw a picture that reminds you of something special about your youth theatre’

| Picture | Percentage of Vote | Selected Comments |
|---|--------------------|---|
|  | 9.48% | <p>Because it’s a sense of togetherness. It’s... we’re kind of like a family. We come here on weekends and we’re altogether.</p> <p>I picked this picture because it represents all the friends we’ve made, you know? And like, how close everyone is in drama because you’re not afraid to make a fool of yourself in front of everyone. You’re all so close.</p> <p>You’re all there for each other. There’s always someone else to help you.</p> <p>You’re all a team, like. You’re all there when you’re doing productions and all that. You’re a team.</p> <p>I picked it because it reminds me of a play we did last year about a group of friends who stick together because there’s like a murder and stuff. But... it reminds me of when we went to Cork and it was actually my favourite time in youth theatre because we really bonded and it... people were just like... there was a lot of new members and people just took them in so well and made you feel so welcome so... they made you feel really good.</p> |
|  | 8.62% | <p>Because we’re all different but we’re all connected in the same way... or that we’re like... there’s so much history like. We’re all happy.</p> <p>I chose that one because it’s not just like going to drama, it’s like going to meet up with all your friends and stuff... cause you’re all so close. It’s just good fun.</p> <p>In this picture the people are smiling and there’s a big bunch of people and they all seem happy and that’s what it’s like in our youth theatre, do you know like? A bunch of friends getting together and creating new ideas and being happy about it.</p> <p>I picked this one because when I started DYT I met some amazing people and because I was like, unhappy for so long, like... when I started they were all just so great. People I met at the open day, I’m like best friends with now. And it’s like when you go through a really dark time, you realise how important it is to be happy and, like, not to take it for granted. I have a first year scrapbook and there’s a picture that’s like this so that’s why... Cause everybody is really close together and they’re all smiling and very happy and it’s like a big family.</p> |
|  | 7.76% | <p>I chose that one because it makes me happy and it’s always something I look forward to... just drama at the end of the week.</p> <p>The smiley face actually means a lot to me. It reminds me... it’s a sign like that before I joined youth theatre... and now that I’m here, it’s like “Yipee”. I’m happier being in youth theatre.</p> <p>Like you always have something to laugh at or... laugh at you... but we’re always smiling. You could go in with a bad mood and leave in a good mood like. It cheers you up.</p> <p>It kind of explains itself... a big, yellow, smiley, happy face. Our youth theatre is on a Friday as well so, you know, you’re after your whole long week of school and then it’s Friday evening and you’re like ‘Wow’ and then you’re like “Youth theatre – wow”. So it’s like... happy.</p> |
|  | 6.90% | <p>This is creativity and spontaneity and it doesn’t matter what colour crayon you are, everyone’s altogether.</p> <p>I picked this one because it’s kind of like different people altogether and they’ve all got different personalities and they’re all together to make the youth theatre.</p> <p>I picked this one because it represents when we’re expressing ideas and creating characters and just how it helps in building up plays and stuff.</p> |

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| | | Mine are crayons and em... I think we're like this group of crayons because we come together and we're all... they're all different and we're all different people who have different ways of thinking and everyone just brings all their ideas together and we're non-toxic... |
| | 5.17% | <p>This one because we're crazy and we like to jump off sand dunes. It shows that I think we're all really spontaneous and we're all like friends and we're all like a group but we all take chances and we all like, have fun with what we do and stuff like that...</p> <p>For me it just represents the kind of feeling of freedom I suppose and happiness and they're both throwing different shapes and you can show different shapes when you're acting and they could be, you know... after stealing something dangerous or they could be after just... going out to a party, so it could be anything, like... so it's just the freedom and stuff.</p> <p>It's kind of like everyone has fun and you kind of discover who you really are... but you have fun doing it.</p> <p>I like this one because it's like taking risks and doing stuff in drama that you never thought you'd do before, like... really going for a character or something.</p> |
| | 5.17% | <p>I chose this one because for me it represents that I've grown a lot since I started in every aspect of the word and so has everyone I know really. Cause when everyone started drama, everyone was just like... everyone that starts drama new is just really closed and eventually they sprout so....</p> <p>I picked this because the youth theatre is just a group of young people but then you can end up growing like a production, doing a big show... out of just a group of people. Em like we're all in it together and we make more friends and become bigger people</p> |
| | 4.31% | <p>I chose this one because we're strongest when we're in a group and we all work together</p> <p>This is a youth theatre performance.. there's no weakest link. Everyone is pulling together. We're all linked together by the one... drama.</p> <p>This one because... the chain represents all the different people, you know? Doing it together and the chain is going up to the sky, showing that the possibilities are endless.</p> |
| | 4.31% | <p>Because there are girls and I go to an all-fellas school so it's kind of really crap and then I go to drama and there's girls there and it's fun.</p> <p>They look really confident and they look like characters in our new play. It's kind of just... girls altogether cause it's mostly girls in our group. And it's pink.</p> <p>They just look like they're having fun and they're like friends... and just like she said... and it just looks like it's fun.</p> |
| | 4.31% | <p>I picked this because youth theatre just inspires you. It switches on your mind. It gives you ideas and helps you to think of new things, to think of different ways and new ways.</p> <p>I think it's just that everyone is so creative and just comes up with new ideas to improve and...</p> <p>I like the kind of, improvisation... like thinking on your feet, when we do that... like have you ever seen 'Who's line is it anyway'? I wish we did more improv. You can't have enough improv.</p> |

