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Empowering and Engaging Young People through Arts and Humanities Approaches: A Research Report for PRAXIS

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According to recent data, young people globally are feeling pessimistic about their futures. They are being directly and disproportionately affected by systemic issues that include inadequate access to decent work; education systems that are far from fit for purpose; the failure of governments to represent youth voices or needs; the exposure of young women and girls to multiple forms of discrimination and gender-based violence (GBV); and the growing, existential threats of climate change, conflict, poverty, and inequality. It is not only the seriousness of these issues that is concerning but the scale. Young people represent over a fifth of the world's population. Globally around 1.8 billion people are between the ages of 10-24, constituting the largest generation of youth in history. Nearly 90% of these young people live in lower-income countries, where they make up a large proportion of the population. Their numbers are expected to grow—between 2015 and 2030 alone, about 1.9 billion young people are projected to turn 15 years old.

This is therefore a critical moment. Evidence indicates that unless these multiple, overlapping crises are addressed, serious repercussions for young people at the individual and wider social levels can include economic stress and exploitation, mental health issues and participation in risky and/or violent behaviours. It has never been more important to understand what young people want and need or to engage them meaningfully in defining their lives and futures for themselves. Yet, despite this imperative, youth remains a neglected area in development programmes and there is a notable lack of research on young people in lower-income countries. For example, even though 90 of the 232 indicators developed to measure progress against the SDGs have relevance for young people there is a startling paucity of age-disaggregated data.

It is against this backdrop that this new PRAXIS report focuses its attention on youth concerns and voices in the context of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). A key aspiration of the GCRF is to contribute to progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through the promotion of innovative, partner-focused approaches and the generation of much-needed evidence.

Looking at youth-focused work from across the GCRF, the report reflects on the value of innovative, creative arts-based research approaches for engaging young people and promoting youth voices in ways that go beyond tokenism, enabling positive change where current youth-focused policies and interventions often fail.

Empowering young people through participatory arts in education

Projects in different countries have shown that building reflective capacity for young people helps to foster critical thinking, problem solving, and leadership as well as empowering them to challenge accepted ideas and express their perspectives. Mobile Arts for Peace illustrates this approach.

'Mobile Arts for Peace (MAP): Informing the National Curriculum and Youth Policy for Peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan, Rwanda, Indonesia and Nepal' works with young people in schools, using arts for peace building. Arts-based approaches (music, dance and drama) provide a means of enabling dialogue on issues of conflict and personal security. The MAP project uses a methodology that engages participants through exercises that generate trust and teamwork, alongside developing conflict analysis and problem-solving skills. The MAP methodology provides a space for young people to participate in discussions about issues of concern to them, including sensitive issues related to conflict or gender-based violence (GBV). These issues often emerge from story circles related to an issue or problem that the young people face, alongside other exercises. These stories are then analysed, and themes are developed, to form the

basis of short plays that are written and performed by the participants. The participants respond to these issues by suggesting solutions at local and regional levels.

Articulating youth voices through participatory arts approaches

Many youth-focused GCRF projects have contributed to a growing sense of confidence, worth, and resilience among young people. Some have also provided a conduit for young people to communicate their concerns and ideas to policymakers. For example, a number of GCRF projects have demonstrated the effectiveness of participatory photography and film for working with young people and enabling them to communicate directly with external audiences that included policymakers, as the case study below illustrates.

Bridging the gap between young people and policymakers through participatory film in South Africa

‘Supporting Young People to Become Youth Leaders in South Africa: Shaping the Future of the Isibindi Safe Park Model Nationally’ worked with young people in the municipality of Ekurhuleni, South Africa in partnership with the Bishop Simeon Trust. The participants were invited to critically reflect on films made about South Africa, asking them what stories they would make about themselves if they had cameras. These discussions have fed into a process of supporting the young people to collectively produce a short film on key principles for youth committees elected to run after-school clubs called *Safe Parks*.

The films the young people produced have enabled their voices to be heard on a range of subjects. Significantly, the films cut across generational hierarchies and the cultural norms where children should be ‘seen but not heard.’ They have helped to promote intergenerational dialogue between young people and their parents on sensitive issues such as GBV and other risks faced by youth groups that they had previously felt unable to raise with them. The films have also provided an advocacy tool for expressing resource needs and aspirations relating to the safe parks to policymakers in local councils. According to the Principal Investigator *“In the film [the young people] said ‘We have got nothing and have done a lot with very little. Imagine how much we could do if you gave us some support.’ And out of that they were given land and money to build better accommodation on the land. So they were able to use film to advocate for better resources.”*

Addressing gender-based discrimination and violence through arts-based approaches with young people

Youth provides a window of opportunity for girls and boys, young women and men to question and disrupt these powerful ideas of masculinity and femininity and ask themselves ‘What do I want? Who do I want to be?’ The GCRF case study below has used innovative participatory approaches to engage young people in conversations about GBV, towards addressing the root causes and shifting potentially negative behaviours and attitudes.

Addressing the root causes of gender-based violence with young people through contextually relevant digital games

‘None in Three: Development, Application, Research and Evaluation of Prosocial Games for the Prevention of Gender-based Violence’ has taken the unique approach of developing digital games that would be used in schools as part of a programme of work that sensitively tackles issues of child sexual abuse and violence. The project was piloted in Barbados and Grenada and then later in St Lucia. Qualitative research with victims and perpetrators of violence is also undertaken in each country, which informs the plotlines, themes, and characterisation of pro-social video games that aim to promote anti-violence and pro-social behaviours by improving children’s emotional intelligence skills and helping them to develop empathy with victims. Efforts are made to ensure the games are culturally relevant and authentic in terms of language and the appearance of characters: *“the characters look like someone you would meet on your street or the grandmother in your house, or that is going to be your school.”*

Where the games have been introduced, they have proved incredibly successful, engaging children in an immersive way and opening spaces for discussion about these very complex, difficult, and personal issues. The Principal Investigator noted: *“The game gives young people the language, tools, and permission to talk about violence and abuse and that is in itself important—the fact that we are having conversations in schools about abuse is crucial because the silence is killing us.”*

Conclusion

A key message that emerged strongly through the course of the research for the report is that arts and humanities research approaches should not just be considered ‘nice to have’ inputs when there is sufficient funding. Rather they are invaluable tools for working with young people—particularly those using creative participatory methodologies— enabling results that simply would not be possible using alternative methodologies. In short, they provide opportunities for true downwards accountability, for really listening to and responding young people, and engaging them as allies in social change processes, contributing to their empowerment in ways that have resonance far beyond the life of the projects.

[*Read the full report here*](#)

TAGS: EDUCATION GCRF GLOBAL CHALLENGES PARTICIPATORY ARTS RESEARCH YOUTH