



## **ACA Listening to Children – 20 November 2017**

### **Attendance:**

#### **Action for Children's Arts:**

Vicky Ireland MBE – vicky.ireland@virgin.net

Chris Abbott – chrisabbottkcl@gmail.com

Mimi Douulton – mimi.douulton@childrensarts.org.uk

Trevor MacFarlane, director of culture for Labour in the European Parliament

Amy McGann, Director of Learning, Southbank

Tamsin Ace, Head of Festivals Southbank – lead on Children's festival, Imagine

Pete Dowse, creative producer ChickenShed

Emily Drabble, head of children's Book Promotion at BookTrust (representing Lauren Child)

Grainne Powell, artistic director Sticky Fingers Arts, NI

Saskia Metcalf, Creative Development Manager at Z arts, Manchester

Sarah Argent, freelance actor based in Cardiff – associate of Theatre Yolo, Polka and Unicorn

Sophie Cornell, programme talks and events at National Theatre

Lisa Prime, BAFTA children's producer and programmer

Mairi Hayes, Community Drama and Diploma Manager CSSD

Caroline Marcus, independent consultant in Museums and Galleries – project director at Kids in Museums

Kumiko Mendl, YellowEarth Theatre and 1000 cranes

Jude Merrill, formerly Travelling Light, now freelance

Kate Robinson, NeverGrey Director

Peta Swindall, Executive Director Little Angel Theatre

Pamela Walker, Imagine, Scotland

Peter Glanville, Artistic Director at Polka

Polly Simmonds, head of Creative Learning at Polka

Jonathan Meth, freelance - theatre, disability and higher education

Laurence Walker, A New Direction

### **Apologies:**

Jayne Kirkham, APPG Children's Media and the Arts clerk

Adel Al-Salloum, Spark Arts

Elaine Grant, Mousetrap

Daniel Harrison, Young Vic

Jane Sillis, engage

### **VI introduction of ACA work so far**

**Mairi Hayes** – part of role at Central is managing the Youth Theatre Company. This welcomes children and young people aged 6-17, who come every Saturday during term time. The ethos is having fun, and a space to play – it is a non-auditioned activity. They work through the term towards a sharing, rather than a formal performance.

About 180 young people were involved in the pilot of Listening to Children in the summer term, using questions from Missing Conversations. Feedback across the board (teachers and students) was that it was an exciting and engaging way to spend the term.

*Specific comments: Sam Adams – worked with 6-8 year olds said she was surprised by how engaged they were with British history. They seemed to enjoy expressing their knowledge in discussions. Green space came up repeatedly as a theme. Initially started with a positive reflection on our country, then Sam worked with them to create a nuanced exploration of war etc. (Script students created attached).*

*13-14 year olds particularly interested in mental health services, the threats they felt to their values – acceptance around religion, culture, sexuality, gender. Jack – teacher – thought he would have to guide the conversations but everyone was bold and sensitive.*

*15 year old group started with interesting conversations but decided it was too serious, so instead created some fun scenes around being British.*

Youngest groups engaged the most – devised a script themselves. At first they wanted to 'get the right answer' but then reached a turning point, became emboldened. 6-8 year old group created something that really could be developed.

**Polka (Polly and Peter)** – Young Voices' Panel (YVP). 90,000 children come through the theatre doors every year. For most children it is their first theatre trip. Important to excite and engage them, spark imagination. Work creatively with YVP aged 8-14 to discuss all work on and off stage: workshops, classes, operational issues. Use YVP to ensure that what they are doing is authentic. We as adults can't constantly be deciding what is important for children and what they want to engage with. YVP attends board meetings, meetings with Pete and with Creative teams, come to R&D sessions, give feedback to directors and writers. They watch all productions and hand in reviews. Involved in local events as ambassadors for the theatre. Anyone can join, includes Youth Theatre students and freefallers (children referred by their school).

In September 2017, **VI** went to visit Polka YVP about Listening to Children and to discuss the National Theatre's *Missing Conversations* questions. *She asked: If I had a magic wand and could make things better what would I change? Responses: The environment, ban smoking, fix earthquakes with magic glue, rubber tube from school to bedroom, change my house into chocolate.*

A couple of YVP members came to a meeting with the architect about design for the new building. They have contributed to what they want future Polka to look like.

**Jonathan Meth** – opening to regional reports.

**Sarah Argent, Wales** – Theatre Yolo started off doing a project with 3-5 year olds, based on the work of Vivian Gussin Paley (who wrote a range of books about how she incorporated story gathering and re-enacting into daily nursery school life). Sarah devised a project about going into schools and gathering stories from children inspired by a suitcase of objects. Worked with about 100 children in three nurseries across Cardiff, many of whom had English as an additional language and were from areas of high deprivation. Lots of work with individual children – giving them as long as they wanted to work 1-1. Wrote name at top of page in notebook then scribed their story as they told it. Children experienced amazement that their story was creating a piece of text – many couldn't write yet. The story was then read back to them. Inspirational to see the pride and fascination they had that an adult was spending that much time listening intently to them. Stories then shared with teachers, and three performers worked on bringing them to life – only using images and words from children's stories. Why and how did it engage children to the extent that it did?

Current show at Polka about siblings (My Brother, my sister and me): went into nurseries and primary schools to ask children about siblings. Recorded their stories verbatim. Finding time to delve into what they think, feel and are concerned about.

**Pamela, Imagine** – 'Wee Night Out' project: sits across festival, creative development programme and education; a partnership with Festival Fringe Society and Lyra Arts. Developed with Lyra and a group of 10-15 children, some of whom they had worked with before – whereas others were invited to join. The children go to experience the festival fringe, working with Noel Jordan – festival director, who curated a programme of nine shows suitable for those children to go and see. They see work for other ages, as well as their own, that Imagine could potentially present.

A budget has been put aside for children to potentially curate a slot in Imagine festival. During their time at the festival, children critiqued shows, talk to professionals about their feelings on the pieces, and gained experience of picking work as a festival director. After three days they came back to discuss work, talking through logistics and budget of hiring different performers.

Now in its second year – more children went to the festival this year, aged 10-16. The large age difference proved challenging, and made conversations around critiquing shows more difficult to wealth of difference in understanding. Imagine have committed to programming a show the children chose next year and hope this will go onto a third year, subject to development incorporating three further areas of Edinburgh.

Takeover – young people aged 8-25, five young curators programming opening weekend. Numerous artists in residence, one currently working with children at an autism-specialist school. Lots of projects in Scotland about genuinely listening to and working with children.

**Grainne Powell** - started talking to children during Northern Ireland conflict because nobody else was. Initially was given six weeks to engage with children in conflict areas and find out what their experiences were, so went out and played with children aged 2- 7. This 6 week period developed into what is now Sticky Fingers Arts, which exemplifies how to work with children and use play to create work for children. There is no focus on an end goal.

Example – children had input into new playground design. Project was about developing space that children and schools could engage with; training architects on how to engage with children; and how we translate information from playing with children, into communication back to policy makers and government officials.

Sticky Fingers recently took over a 49,000 sq ft building – handed it over to children and asked 'what can we make in this space?' The Imaginarium opened in July – over summer it had 7000 people through the doors. There is a child advisory board on programming etc. Now the children have decided Sticky Fingers should have a programme for 0-18 year olds. In Northern Ireland, they listened to children cause they had better ideas than the adults. If you're making a space for children, consult with the people who are going to use that space.

The difference in Northern Ireland is that the children most affected by Brexit don't consider themselves British, they're Irish.

**Saskia** - Z-arts has a 225 seat theatre, multi-arts facilities, for children aged 0-13. Some of the most deprived children in the UK live near them. They believe that you can't be a children's and families arts centre without speaking to children. Started off with a project sponsored by European Commission in UK – My Europe. Asked children in divided communities, issues with race and riots – what does it feel like to be

European? Paired them up with artists of European heritage to answer the question and created a piece of art. Took over Z-arts to perform their work. Schools and families were invited to watch, then a report was created about learnings.

It is vital for Z-arts to work with children from most deprived areas. They are the least likely to access the arts once they are frozen out of the curriculum. Parents can't afford it and may not see the value.

Z-arts and the University of Liverpool put together a project called My Planet, which asked children to create their own planet. This was delivered in schools over 4 weeks and all content of curriculum was taught through the creative arts. Taught digestive system through comedy, playdough volcanoes etc. They now want to go back and explore the idea further, asking the children what they don't engage with in the curriculum and how learning through the creative arts can help them engage with it more. How we can help support their learning better?

Music Project running for 8 years. My Life, My Voice, My Place, My Future – methodology. About song-writing, story-writing, poetry etc. It's about their experiences, their stories, direction etc. so they can see the benefit of taking part in activities at Z-arts.

Speak Your Mind – part of Big Imaginations Festival. Got young people to review shows.

Bright Sparks membership – for families. Used to deliver activities for free, but now charge £15/year (with a subsidy available) to ensure people commit to activities. Children from this are on the advisory panel - which discusses safeguarding, marketing etc. Safeguarding is often missed by organisations listening to children – how can we make children feel safer in our venues?

Z-arts is chair of family arts festival of Manchester, working with Curious Minds, the Bridge organisation in the North West. They ensure children's voices are heard in organisations predominantly made up of city counsellors etc.

Going to use Takeover days as a new model for offering work experience.

### **Jonathan – thanks to four speakers. Questions?**

**Emily Drabble** – how much do people know about this work in the wider world? How are people disseminating these voices and this information? Imagine if all this resource was in one place – or does something like that already exist.

**VI** – part of Listening to Children is to draw these stories together and celebrate them.

**Caroline** – quite a few speakers have mentioned Takeovers. Kids in Museums tries to be a community of best practice. By sharing practice between experienced and novice voices, we can critique each others' work. Young people take over as producers, programmers and change makers.

**VI** – Dia Burkett started Kids in Museums. If you haven't done a takeover, go and look at their website and see what they've done

**Jonathan** – do you take journalists on this journey with you? If not, why not?

**Peter** – relationships at Polka have mainly been with academic institutions. For example with Rose Bruford, PhD students come in to evaluate the work. Engaging journalists with children's arts is hard.

**Emily** – environment has changed. Teams reduced, more limited and local press.

**Laurence** – we are doing a take over next week. Using networks with political classes in City of London to disseminate message. Working to take over city hall on 1 Dec – become a mayor for a day. Local schools around city. Children in primary and secondary schools – working with school counsellors. Using that mechanism to take kids, work with design companies who understand how to tell story – make campaign and pitch etc. Take their asks to the mayor and deputy mayors and present on 1 Dec. Worked with Mayor's fund and their media partners to present these issues to the public using billboards, the tube etc.

**Sarah** – Wales has devolved powers for education. Lucky to have cabinet ministers who are passionate about arts and learning through play, and well informed. Different stories in different nations – in Wales things are moving away from the focus on play. Edging back to a more formal education system.

**Saskia** – we need other people to be advocates for us, industry and employment. Part of work Z arts is doing is working with people who funded the project: NorthWest Business Leadership scheme. They recognise this is producing creative and curious learners who are needed to sustain industry.

**Pamela** – Nicola Sturgeon is behind the arts in Scotland. Passionate about children and their development. Also strong support from culture minister, Fiona Hislop. As such a small society, there is a close connection with politicians. Having businesses on board with projects, means they advocate for children having arts in their classrooms and at school.

**Chris Abbott** – why don't we get our stories out there? The heyday of education authority was when there was an interface between arts and education, and cooperation between different sectors working with children. Been lost in England with demise of education authority. We could talk to Academy chains, school cluster groups etc. This is how to disseminate information more widely. Only time people talk to children now in schools is during OFSTED inspections.

**Kate Robinson** – moving away from speaking to government. If you want people advocating on your behalf, get children to campaign on your behalf – better direction to move in.

**Trevor** – provocation: does your sector sometimes shout too intensely for very brief periods of time and then disappear? Eg. one day working with children, then an organisation does nothing for a year. Rather than being loud and doing a massive campaign, can we keep access to these voices – constant child's voice.

**VI** – the conversation so often doesn't include children. So many problems with teenagers could have been addressed if we had focussed more on the child.

**Trevor** – example, when we are making policy for children at the European level, arts gets on the health and wellbeing agenda. We engage with children all the time in making these amendments. Larger organisations don't get in the room with children frequently enough.

**Jonathan** – mainstream theatres, providing art form for an entire community – prepared to provide takeover. It is possible to have an impact in a day.



**Trevor** – arts for children is not high enough on the agenda, and it's not going to get up to the top any time soon so what can we do in the meantime? Go cross sector, help big business engage a child on their board.

**Emily** – Premiere League primary stars competition is an example of high profile creativity.

**VI** – spoke to Peter Bazalgette about Creative Industries document, which only mentions children once.

**Jonathan** – trying to reach high level politicians isn't going to work. So widen definition of community to include business etc. and then work with community not politicians.

**Caroline** – Takeover Day grew out of Children's Commissioner Takeover Day – it has grown into the takeover challenge. Is this only for teenagers or children and young people? Takeover Day sounds tokenistic in itself as it's just a day – Kids In Museums had to stick with the name – but it is about being more than a day. There is a day celebrating it, but the challenge to organisations is to embed it into regular programming throughout the year.

**Kate Robinson** – your work is impactful cause it's a one off in their lives. They are amazed it is happening to them. Is there an argument for educating them that they have a right to these experiences more than once? Empowering them to be their best advocates.

**Sarah** – the teacher's perceptions of the children changed. They know they must find ways to spend time with the children listening and make it an on-going part of their education. Difficult with teacher/pupil ratio in classroom.

**Grainne** – parents can see a difference in their children. Children are referred through social services etc. for behavioural issues, and special needs. Children are now saying this is their space.

**Saskia** – concept of My Planet is putting children at heart of decision making. There are 1200 homeless children in Manchester. It's hard to campaign for something when the children don't speak English as a first language, teachers are under-resourced etc. There is no support for these children. Durham Commission will fill the evidence gap that this industry has been missing for years.

**Chris** – if you give children the chance to speak they will often come out with more profound things than expected.

**Trevor** – next year there will be a massive push for healthy relationship education. Missed opportunity with YouTube vloggers. Children know who they want to listen to. If you get a vlogger who is engaged and interesting, they will bring you new audiences.

An offer of support and help regarding European (artistic) identity beyond Brexit. Work through Tracy Brabin MP and Tom Watson MP in UK Parliament. Tell them what needs to be in the policy document and they will use it – copy and paste-able stuff!

On a European level, casual group called Quality of Childhood might be of interest. Invitation to VI to speak on behalf of ACA about arts and wellbeing. Invest a lot in children through UK based organisations. Child to Child; EuroChild. Children's Right's InterGroup – Trevor could introduce ACA. Will follow up with an email. Asking everyone present to invite local counsellors etc. to events.

Invite politicians' staff. Health and Wellbeing agenda is probably the only one to use at the moment.

**PAUSE****Break-out groups - a platform presentation at the National, what can we do?**

Summaries:

**Laurence** – we had a wide range of conversation, ideas began to coalesce around *Missing Conversations*. Take up the opportunity from National Theatre to present something around the process the National Theatre went through with *Our Country*, and how children were missing from the conversation. Out of that – as a coalition of people who work in this area and are willing to contribute, other theatres and cultural organisations might be able to contribute. Is there an opportunity to partner with a mental health organisation such as Place 2 Be?

**Mairi** – it's such a big idea. Idea of *Missing Conversations* feels coherent. Mairi likes the idea of children giving us the answers. One school in London – children talking live, and then film of children from other areas. Discussion with BFI Into Film could create content regionally.

**Jonathan** – any way children could be more involved? EG. setting of the questions

**Mairi** – did discuss having children write the questions.

**Lisa Prime** – theme of mental health week next year is being ourselves.

**Peter Glanville** – is there a way of this idea being something that happens across the four nations?

**Mimi** – events in Scotland, Ireland, Wales at same time?

**Sarah** – subvert the idea so it's a digital platform. The only people who will come to physical platform will be London locals. Engage National Scotland and Wales as well, or Citizens Theatre in Wales etc. – who hosted *Our Country*?

Should each of us go back to our own context, interview children. Ask National Theatres to provide us with a digital platform to share this content. Could it be linked to BBC or Channel 4? Maybe there is a day when this could happen? Written contributions, video, photographs – an upmarket Facebook group.

**Kate Robinson** – always a public forum, where people can check into progress.

**Grainne** – would this engage with the general public?

**VI** – the reason we are talking to the National is we launched there 20 years ago. We can throw that idea out.

**Sarah** – asking all the National Theatres, or other tour venues for *My Country* to put this onto their websites. They said *My Country* was a work in progress, here is our development of the idea. Commission Carol Ann Duffy to write a poem about how Brexit might impact children. Could we ask for an NT live interval film that is the voices of children?

**Peta** – ask creatives what influenced them as children.



**Emily** – children taking over the National theatre. Grainne suggested them taking over Westminster. Opened up to all Parliaments. Testaments of children is very important. How do Children in Need get their message across? How can we make an emotionally manipulative message?

**Grainne** – changing the language to fit the people controlling money and policy. We need to be creative and imaginative in the language we use to clearly get our message across. We need to get them to realise their serious work would be easier if they were engaging with the arts – dealing with social issues etc. A lot of the projects Children in Need showcases are arts projects, but they show how they are dealing with diversity, Special Needs etc. How do we engage other sectors who don't speak our language?

**Emily** – on behalf of Saskia (left), hasn't visited a forum like this before. Would like to do more of this.

**Peter Glanville** – humour is a great way of engaging people. Children doing stand up comedy.

**Pete Dawse** – leaving mics around and seeing what children said into them.

**VI** – a great day to focus us, we can now fashion something that starts to make sense. Please keep sharing ideas, and maybe we could have another meet-up.