Changing the World through Arts and Kindness

Evidence from People United projects 2007-2017
“A nation is built on its shared culture; a shared culture is enlightening, humanising and inclusive. People United’s work over the last 10 years embodies this. Through their pioneering work focusing on arts and kindness, they demonstrate how artistic and cultural practice can provide a voice that brings people together, champions compassion and challenges intolerance.”

Darren Henley, Chief Executive, Arts Council England

“This is vital work. People United is at the forefront of establishing and using rigorous social science theory and methodology in their work. At a time when society can often feel divided and fractured, People United’s work is a wonderful example of an approach that inspires kindness and creates a real sense that other people matter.”

Professor Dominic Abrams, Director of the Centre for the Study of Group Processes, School of Psychology, University of Kent

“People United are prepared to take risks to test theories around how art making can change society. They approach projects differently – altruistically, giving artists the room to experiment with ideas that may or may not work. This is rare, and this courage and tenacity to address meaningful themes through artists’ practices, is very much welcomed, leading to significant experiences for the people who take part in the work.”

Maria Amidu, artist
People United is a creative laboratory and arts charity. We explore how the arts can inspire kindness, community and social change. This report brings together 10 years of research around our work to show that the arts can play a practical and imaginative role in building a kinder and more caring society.

This report outlines People United’s niche position within an exciting and emerging research landscape that links the arts with psychology and civil society research on wellbeing, resilience, social cohesion and active citizenship. People United’s work has always been underpinned by research, and in our 2012 *Arts & Kindness* paper, we presented a theoretical model of how the arts can grow kindness by influencing learning, emotions, connections and values. This report provides evidence of the theory in practice.

People United’s mixed method approach to research, demonstrated through illustrative case studies which sit at the heart of this paper, verifies how arts participation can result in increased empathy, willingness to help others and self-efficacy. The case studies evidence what difference has taken place, whilst an in-depth analysis and contemplation of why this change has happened identifies key themes and characteristics which have emerged from a decade of participatory arts practice. These specific insights suggest that with the right ingredients in place, arts interventions can have a transformative effect for people and communities.

There is no simple formula for creating change, and the processes that lead to personal and community development are complex. But the data we present here, alongside in-depth analysis, strongly make the case that the arts can and do change lives for the better.

**Key findings**

1. This research provides empirical support for the concept that arts engagement can foster kindness: kind attitudes, intentions and behaviour.

2. Specific results from our projects demonstrate that participatory artistic interventions can:
   - **Increase empathy** – the ability for people to relate to others
   - **Increase kindness intentions** – the motivation to help, share with and care for others
   - **Increase connections** – the development of social bonds and a sense of community
   - **Reduce bias** – helping diverse groups see each other differently
   - **Increase self-efficacy** – strengthening people’s belief that they can make change happen

3. These effects persist across a range of arts activities (e.g. music, poetry, film, singing, making, performance) and over time; in one project, increased empathy and kindness intentions were sustained by participants a year after the initial arts intervention.

4. Arts participation has a unique range and combination of characteristics, from engaging emotions to embracing failure to challenging the status quo, which together can activate both the desire and the capacity for individual and social change.

5. Holistic interventions that incorporate multiple arts activities and approaches appear to be most effective in promoting kindness; the key challenge is to replicate these models at scale, while continuing to work with authenticity and intuition.

We believe kindness can be radical. Through the arts, our work poses the question: how can we create kind schools, a compassionate healthcare system, ethical institutions and caring communities? At a time of global uncertainty and societal fragmentation, there is a real and pressing need to grow empathy and compassion and to challenge existing structures and systems. Working together, we can change the world through arts and kindness.
People United is a creative laboratory and arts charity. We explore how the arts can inspire kindness, community and social change. This report brings together our key research findings from over the last 10 years to explain how we understand the relationships between the arts and kindness, to demonstrate the impact of some of our most significant and well-researched projects, and to share what we have learned through our work about the power of the arts to effect change.

This report is useful for:

- **arts and cultural professionals**: to show how the concept of kindness can be incorporated within creative practice and to further debate about the contribution of the cultural sector to social change
- **policy makers and commissioners**: to grow the evidence base that the arts can play a pivotal and specific role in delivering social outcomes
- **researchers and academics**: to illustrate the potential of research that explores the relationship between the arts and prosocial behaviour, and to suggest priorities for further work in this field
- **public and voluntary sector** (teachers, educationalists, health professionals and community development practitioners): to inspire ideas and possibilities for working with the arts to promote individual growth and stronger communities
- **active citizens** and anyone who has a desire to build a kinder and more caring world: to share what we have learned, to inspire and connect.

**About People United**

People United was set up in 2006 with a belief that the arts and culture have a practical and imaginative role to play in how our society develops. It was also established with a sense of urgency, responding to inequality, injustice and intolerance, poverty and environmental destruction. These challenges are manifold and complex, but are often characterised by a lack of concern for, or connection with, our fellow human beings and the world around us.

**PICTURE OPPOSITE: Figure of 8**, 2013, Janetka Platun. Installation at Brixton Ice Rink. Commissioned by People United in association with the National Theatre (‘Belonging’ Artist Commission).
Introduction

We use the arts – and their ability to provoke, question, soothe, disrupt or surprise – to open our own and other people’s eyes to the very best in humanity.

People United supports and makes work that is deliberately experimental. It can involve any art form and use any creative process. Our methodology involves risk, participation, inquiry and experimentation. As a values-led and collaborative organisation, working side-by-side with artists, participants and partners to see what emerges, we have come to expect the unexpected. We take time, listen, sometimes fail, and try where possible to work out of our comfort zone.

We are a small team of five arts professionals. Much of our work takes place in Kent, where we are based, but also more widely through our partnerships across the UK and internationally. We work in schools, communities, festivals, hospitals and parks as well as streets, care homes, offices, beach huts and major cultural venues. Our allies in helping us deliver our mission are artists, researchers, teachers, arts organisations, community leaders, policy makers, youth workers, funders and the multitude of different participants we meet along the way.

Our work involves the following:

- **Artist Commissions** are wayward sparks of creativity. Working with forward-looking partners, including Turner Contemporary, Southbank Centre and Manchester Museum, we commission artists to illuminate universal themes such as courage, values, belonging and empathy. The work always involves people in some way, as participants, inspiration or producers. Usually, legacies lie in the future work of our artists, new partner initiatives or how participants view and act in the world around them.

- **Place-based projects** are our 2-3 year in-depth interventions on the ground. We work closely with artists in communities, listening to what people want to celebrate or change about where they live. We always start with the positive, taking time to build trust and relationships, and making sure all arts activities or events are co-developed, co-created and co-produced. When it is time to step back, we work hard to support ambassadors from the community so that they can take things forward in their own way.

- **Research** underpins everything we do. This is made possible by our relationships with outstanding research practitioners, including our long-term research partner, the University of Kent. Whether through film, surveys, interviews, observation or questionnaires, research tells us why and how we are having an impact, and when we are not. It helps us to be self-aware, to question our assumptions and, most importantly, to deliver our mission better.

- **Supporting others**: each year, we support over 50 artists and organisations in developing their practice and sharing our ethos and processes through consultancy, training, away days, guidance and mentoring. Our resources (teaching materials, posters, articles, films, papers, music scores) are disseminated freely to multiply our impact.

People United sees itself as a catalyst. It is important to us that our work inspires others, activating a ripple of positive action far and wide. Our ambition is to bring flashes of inspiration and connection that will grow, multiply and spark new ways of seeing and being in the world.

About this report

In 2016, People United celebrated its tenth anniversary. With a decade of projects, artist commissions and academic evidence behind us (involving over 20,000 people directly and over 100,000 as audiences across the country), we believe more than ever that the arts have a special role to play in bringing people together and breaking down barriers. We felt that this was the perfect time to share with our partners and the wider cultural sector what we have learned about the potential of the arts to be a superconductor for kindness.

This report is one of a trio of research papers examining the theory and practice of our work. Our first, Arts & Kindness (2012), explored the theory behind kindness and introduced our model of how the arts can help create kinder, more caring communities. This research report provides evidence of that model in action by summarising the outcomes of some of our most significant projects. A third publication (in 2019) will examine and reflect on our artistic processes and methodology.

This report begins by outlining the wider research context of arts and kindness and goes on to explain People United’s approach to research. The main section of the report presents five case studies of People United projects, showing what we were trying to achieve in each project, how we gathered evidence and what the impact was in both the short and longer term. We then reflect on the most important and effective characteristics of our arts practice, before considering future opportunities and challenges in conclusion.
1. Why Kindness?

Arts and Kindness: the bigger picture

The word ‘kindness’ derives from the old English ‘cynd’, encapsulating concepts of ‘family’, ‘native’, ‘character’ and ‘kin’, and the idea that people are linked across generations and geography. People United uses the term kindness to mean consciously acting to benefit (and not to harm) other people. It’s a simple idea, but one that feels increasingly important given the profound political, economic, social and environmental pressures that communities around the world are experiencing today.

In the UK, hate crimes have been rising since 2012/13; the mental wellbeing of the population has decreased over a 3-year period including the proportion of people who feel they do not have someone to rely on; and young people in the UK have the lowest levels of ‘trust and belonging’ in Europe, according to the latest government statistics. What connects these issues is the need for preventative work that brings people together, enables the creation and exploration of shared meaning, supports inclusive values and catalyses positive action. People United believes that the arts, culture and creativity have a significant role to play in making change happen.

Wider learning

These are complex issues and we are a small organisation. We plough a distinctive furrow - focusing on arts and kindness - but our work does not take place in isolation, and over the years we have been influenced by a wide range of research and thinking.

Within the arts there has long been interest in and debate about how the arts have an impact on society, from contributing to health and wellbeing, to bringing people and communities together, to inspiring civic engagement and political action. An overview of research in these areas is not in the scope of this report, but our work has been informed by, and talks to, multiple sources of evidence and reflection. This includes recent learning from the Arts Council England’s Creative People and Places programme, the inquiry into the civic role of arts organisations led by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the ArtsWorks Alliance developed by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Aesop (arts, health and social care), the research of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Cultural Learning Alliance, and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing.
We are also stimulated and challenged by the extensive body of work and discussions around socially engaged practice across diverse art forms and platforms. This includes, but is not limited to, the debate around the transformational impact of the arts, aesthetics and ethics of participatory work, temporary community, and participatory and collaborative arts practices.

We draw from a range of public and civil society research across sectors, including work commissioned by the Carnegie UK Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (kindness within communities), John Ballatt and Penny Campling’s Intelligent Kindness (compassion within healthcare) and the Jubilee Centre (character education and virtues).

Our work has natural links with psychology – the study of people’s thoughts, feelings and behaviours – and with social psychology in particular. Over the last ten years it has been fascinating to learn about the theory of prosocial behaviour – action that helps or benefits another person – and to understand concepts such as bystander intervention (when someone intervenes to help a stranger) and elevation (the feelings and motivations that people feel after witnessing acts of compassion).

Our partnership with the University of Kent has helped us to understand issues that are central to our work, such as how role models develop in people’s lives, and the positive and negative consequences of strong group identities.

Our model

In 2012, we carried out a literature review to bring together learning on the potential of the arts to grow the conditions that lead to kindness. Drawing from a range of academic disciplines, we proposed a model (Figure 1) of how the arts can lead to more helping attitudes and behaviour through four pathways or ‘mediators’.

Researchers at the University of Kent and the University of Lincoln explored the relationship between arts and kindness in the national population using data from ‘Understanding Society’ (a nationally representative longitudinal sample of 30,476 people in the UK). They found that over a period of two years, an increase in people’s engagement with the arts predicted an increase in volunteering and charitable giving, even after major personality traits, demographic variables, wealth, education and other forms of social participation were taken into account.

Of course, it may be that the relationship works the other way around – that volunteering and charitable giving encourage people to get more involved in the arts in some way – but the researchers found that the evidence of this reverse effect was significantly weaker. They concluded that their findings were consistent with the hypothesis that the arts offer an important vehicle for facilitating a cohesive and sustainable society.

People who attend or participate in the arts are more likely to volunteer and give to charity

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Since 2006, People United has been working with the renowned Centre for the Study of Group Processes, part of the School of Psychology at the University of Kent. Our partnership has benefitted from working extensively with Professor Dominic Abrams, an international expert on group behaviour, prejudice and understanding. We have also worked closely with Dr Julie Van de Vyver at the University of Lincoln and academics at other institutions (Canterbury Christ Church University) and independent researchers.

Our academic colleagues have helped us to develop an approach to research that is both practical and robust. We combine quantitative and qualitative methods, bringing together data from various sources to understand how the arts can have an impact on how people think, feel and act.

Quantitative perspective
In partnership with the University of Kent, the quantitative aspects of our research measure the impact of People United’s projects and the changes our work has brought about in individual participants and the wider community. This type of research involves defining the outcomes we are trying to achieve, finding a reliable way of measuring them, and collecting data from large numbers of participants to see how successful our project was in achieving the intended outcomes. Our approach generally involves:

- **Measurement scales** that have been tested and validated by other researchers; for example, Figure 2 shows the kind of questions that we use to measure kindness intentions among children.

- **Pre and post data** collected from participants before the project starts and after the project has finished (and in the case of one of our schools’ projects, returning a year later to measure whether the change has been sustained).

- **Control groups** that closely match the demographics of the participating group. These provide us with a point of comparison, and help us understand whether there has been a higher level of change than might otherwise have been expected in the school or community where our project has been taking place.
Qualitative perspective

In parallel with our quantitative work, we seek to understand why and how change takes place during a People United project by working with independent qualitative researchers. They undertake interviews, discussion groups and observations to understand how participants experienced the project and the processes that led them to feel and think differently about themselves or others.

We also learn from the perspectives of artists, project partners and staff through reflection journals and Away Days, as well as from the artistic material produced during projects including personal stories, images, films and blogs.

Interviews are scheduled at different time-points throughout the project, and focus on the methods and impact of the work, as well as exploring links between creative practice and kind thoughts, feelings and actions. Analysing this qualitative material helps to provide colour, nuance, context and meaning to our quantitative data.

Research challenges

For this report we have chosen to share the findings of some of our projects with the strongest evidence of impact. However, research and evaluation are not always straightforward, and over the course of our work we have reflected on several challenges:

- **Complexity:** nurturing change is complex. No single intervention can provide a simple answer. Likewise, research, especially within whole communities, can only tell part of the story. This is not to diminish research but to understand that any piece of research can only illuminate an aspect of a life or a wider ecosystem.

- **Fear of failure:** rigorous research and evaluation adds another level of pressure and vulnerability – what if the findings are not valid or do not show progress? This is a risk faced by all organisations that are committed to research, particularly those working in iterative and experimental ways in challenging environments. This is where having a university partner is useful, to remind us that the learning from interventions that do not work is as valid as the learning from projects that work well.

- **One size does not fit all:** our work is bound by a clear focus, but our creative methods are flexible and adapt to context, circumstance and the wishes of our participants. This is how we see our research and evaluation too; we will use the best tools available but will be thoughtful about their use, for example, when starting to work with a small group of vulnerable adults with low literacy, observation and one-to-one conversations might be more effective than in-depth, academically valid questionnaires.

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**Q1** A child from your school is lost and looking for their friend. The child asks if you could help find the friend. **Would you help the child?**

**Q2** You see a child from the other school who is playing on his own. He looks sad and lonely. **Would you go over and play with him?**

**Q3** A child from your school asks if she can borrow one of your crayons to colour a picture. However, it is a crayon that you are using. **Would you let her borrow it?**

**Q4** Some children are making fun of a child from the other school and that child is getting upset. They leave and the child begins to cry. **Would you go over and comfort the child?**

**Q5** A girl from your school is flying a kite and it gets stuck in a tree. She needs you to help her get it down and asks for your help. **Would you help her?**

**Q6** You are playing football with some friends, but a boy from the other school comes over and asks if he can borrow a toy car. **Would you let him borrow it?**

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Figure 2: An example of pre and post questions used to measure children’s kindness intentions
Chapter 3

Making a difference: evidence from People United’s projects

This section of the report documents five People United projects from the last ten years: *We All Do Good Things, Arts & Kindness Week* and *Treasure* were projects in schools; *Wonderstruck* was an artist commission in partnership with Manchester Museum; and *Creative Champions* supported a community in Newington, Kent to create their own work. These projects all aimed to explore and encourage the concept of kindness and enable participants to think about themselves and the world in different ways – not by imposing particular messages or morals, but by creating the conditions and space for change to occur (or not). Each project was evaluated using several methods and we collected a range of information, from the number of attendees to the ways in which artistic practice developed during the project. Here we focus on what our research and evaluation revealed about the links between our participatory arts practice and kindness.

PICTURE: *For Me, For You, For Us*, 2017, Lucy Steggals and People United, as part of the *Fairground* programme at Tate Exchange. Photo: Jason Pay.
Inspiring young people to help – We All Do Good Things

About the project

We All Do Good Things was an arts programme celebrating kindness in three primary schools in Kent and Halifax during the 2007/08 academic year. People United took a whole-school approach to the project, involving 1,800 pupils, 100 staff and 2,000 parents and members of the community over the course of the entire year. Professional arts practitioners (Nikki Dennington, Liz Foreman and Lou Sumray) led and coordinated distinct creative activities in each school including writing stories, making comics, putting on performances, poetry and music workshops, with a range of artists from Andrew Motion (the then Poet Laureate) to Zimbabwean musician, Lucky Moyo. Through these art forms, children explored the meaning of kindness, shared kind experiences and developed their own practical actions such as printing a kindness newspaper for the local community, making smoothies for the local emergency services and creating radio programmes for other schools.

What were we trying to achieve?

We All Do Good Things aimed to focus on the positive – to celebrate, share and encourage the kind things that people do and to show the potential for good in everyone. People United wanted to encourage not just specific acts of kindness, but the idea of kindness as a way of being. By working with pupils, staff and parents for a full school year we hoped to help the schools embed a creative approach to learning and strengthen its connections with the wider community.

Results

- Children who took part in We All Do Good Things showed a significant increase in their willingness to help, share with and care for others – even a year after the project had finished – compared to the control schools.
- Children learned how to represent kindness through the arts in deeper and more meaningful ways.
- The project ‘opened the schools’ doors’ to parents and their local communities and enabled new relationships to be formed.

For the children who took part in We All Do Good Things our research focused on:

- Kindness intentions – children participating in the project would become more motivated to help, share with and care for others, including children they did not know, as well as their friends.

How did we gather evidence?

The University of Kent supported the completion of questionnaires among pupils before the project, immediately after the project and one year after the conclusion of the project. Questionnaires were completed by 169 pupils in years 1, 3 and 5. As well as asking pupils about their willingness to help other children, the questionnaires also asked whether they would be willing to help and comfort someone in a team they were competing with. The same research was carried out in control schools with similar demographics.

Professor Sacha Powell, then a Principle Research Fellow at Canterbury Christ Church University, undertook qualitative research (including observation, group activities and discussions) to explore how children’s understanding of kindness developed during the project and what changed for schools as a result of their involvement.

The quantitative research found that kindness intentions increased significantly in the schools that took part in We All Do Good Things, as shown in Figure 3. This increase was sustained: a year after the project, children had a higher level of willingness to care for and help others; in contrast, over the same period there was a significant decrease in kindness intentions in the control schools.
Making a difference: evidence from People United’s projects

As part of an increase in overall kindness intentions, children became more willing to help and care for competitors (in this case children from other schools), as shown in Figure 4. Kindness intentions towards competitors increased significantly in the participating schools, but not in the control schools.

The qualitative research found that children enjoyed participating in We All Do Good Things. It was a novel and exciting experience, involving new activities, different people and unfamiliar technology and materials. The children worked together towards a clear shared purpose and enjoyed challenging, supporting and extending each other’s ideas as the project progressed. The activities gave children a voice to express something personal and unique about themselves, linked to the project’s underlying message that everyone has the capacity to do good things.

Interestingly, when asked about what they had learned during the project, children focused on creative skills, teamwork, dealing with challenges and mastering goals rather than the concept of kindness itself. However, by analysing the artwork produced by the children during the project, the researcher concluded that they had learned how to represent kindness in ways that were meaningful and developed in greater depth over the course of the year. In addition, the project ‘opened up’ the schools, engaging parents and the local community, often for the first time.

“I believe, through this project, that we have given our children one of the greatest gifts of all - they are now so aware of kindness and the impact it can have on others that they have become more caring, sensitive and empathetic citizens; and I know they will take this with them through the rest of their lives. As the ripples of their kindness spread out, who knows what effect that will have on our local community and the world beyond.”

Headteacher, Saville Park Primary School, Halifax

Legacy

Following 500 stories, a series of regional radio items, a full-colour magazine, two public performances and three community exhibitions developed as part of the project, we produced a free school resource based on what we had learned from the project which was distributed to every primary school in Kent. This was the start of our work across primary schools, directly leading to a regional kindness challenge where many pupil-led school councils devised their own kindness acts: from cooking for alms-house residents to inclusive theatre performances. It was also the foundation for our research partnership with the University of Kent, and therefore fundamental to all our future work.

Figure 3: Average scores for kindness intentions in participating and control schools, before and immediately after We All Do Good Things, and one year later. Note: Questions were answered on a 5-point scale, where 1 is low and 5 is high. * Indicates a statistically significant difference.

Figure 4: Average scores for kindness intentions towards competitors in participating and control schools, before and immediately after We All Do Good Things, and one year later. Note: Questions were answered on a 5-point scale, where 1 is low and 5 is high. * Indicates a statistically significant difference.
Growing empathy – Arts & Kindness Week

About the project
In 2015, People United was invited to develop a large-scale participatory arts project called The Best of Us in Newington, Kent, celebrating human character strengths: people’s capacity for courage, compassion, forgiveness and hope. As part of this project, we ran an Arts & Kindness Week in Dame Janet Primary Academy: integrating multidisciplinary artists Bob Karper and Nova Marshall into a week-long programme of creative activities designed to help the school explore and embed kindness, with resources, InSET and follow-up support for teachers.

What were we trying to achieve?
We believe that a kind and caring school environment can play a powerful role in the happiness and wellbeing of pupils. Our Arts & Kindness Weeks create opportunities for children, teachers and parents to explore kindness qualities, to celebrate and reflect on the positive role models in their lives and to understand the benefits of being kind to ourselves and others. We support schools to take forward activities independently and to embed the practice of kindness in their school development plans.

During Arts & Kindness Week at Dame Janet Primary Academy, our research focused on three main outcomes:

- **empathy:** children would be more able to share the experience of how other people feel
- **values:** children would explore what matters most in life and consider the importance of experiences such as helping others
- **kindness intentions:** children participating would become more motivated to help, share and care for others.

How did we gather evidence?
Validated questionnaires were completed both before and after Arts & Kindness Week by 141 pupils in years 3 to 6 at Dame Janet Primary Academy. Questionnaires were also completed at similar points by 113 pupils at two control schools with similar demographics in Basildon.

To measure empathy, pupils were asked how much they agreed with statements such as ‘I get upset when I see someone getting hurt.’ To explore the values of children taking part in the project, we asked them how important they thought it was to help others (‘help value’) and how important they thought it was to be rich and powerful (‘power value’).

As well as the quantitative research, we asked qualitative researcher Tess Luetchford to attend Arts & Kindness Week to observe how children participated in the project and their physical and emotional reactions to new ideas and activities. Tess also carried out informal interviews with teachers and pupils.

Results
- By the end of Arts & Kindness Week, levels of empathy had increased significantly among children at Dame Janet Primary Academy (but not among children at the control schools).
- Values were influenced during the project so that children placed less importance on being rich and powerful.
- Kindness intentions increased significantly among the children that took part (but not among children at the control schools).
- Teachers welcomed the opportunity to engage children in a creative, collaborative process that brought abstract ideas to life in an imaginative way.

During Arts & Kindness Week there was a significant increase in empathy among pupils at Dame Janet Primary Academy, as shown in Figure 5. There was little change in empathy levels in the control schools.
Making a difference: evidence from People United’s projects

Figure 5: Average scores for empathy in participating and control schools, before and after Arts & Kindness Week. Note: Questions were answered on a 5-point scale, where 1 is low and 5 is high. * Indicates a statistically significant difference.

At the end of Arts & Kindness Week, pupils at Dame Janet Primary Academy placed less importance on being rich and powerful than they did at the start of the project. The average score for power value decreased from 2.8 to 2.1, as shown in Figure 6. There was no significant change in the average score for power value in the schools that did not take part in Arts & Kindness Week.

Figure 6: Average scores for power value in participating and control schools, before and after Arts & Kindness Week. Note: Questions were answered on a 5-point scale, where 1 is low and 5 is high. * Indicates a statistically significant difference.

In addition, the help value reduced significantly in the control schools, but not in participating schools. As shown in Figure 7, by the end of Arts & Kindness Week, children in participating schools were significantly more willing to help, share and care for others.

Figure 7: Average scores for kindness intentions in participating and control schools, before and after Arts & Kindness Week. Note: Questions were answered on a 5-point scale, where 1 is low and 5 is high. * Indicates a statistically significant difference.

The qualitative researcher noted how creative activities, such as dancing, helped to relax the atmosphere in classrooms so that both pupils and teachers felt more able to chat, exchange ideas and encourage each other. One teacher explained that the emphasis on English, maths and science in the curriculum meant that children had few opportunities to experiment with the arts, and that Arts & Kindness Week offered a valuable opportunity for children to engage with abstract concepts and to work together to create their own stories – "something they do not usually have access to."

“I have heard of some fantastic activities being carried out across the whole school and the positivity and friendliness displayed by all of the children during this week has really made me smile.”

Community Liaison, Dame Janet Primary Academy

Legacy

During the project, the school staff were keen to develop ways to connect different classes together. This inspired Kindness Exchange boxes to be made and filled during the week and exchanged between classes. With our support, a Kindness Schools network is now developing in the local area, beginning with pupils passing the filled boxes to six other schools for their pupils to enjoy and begin their own explorations of kindness. The Arts & Kindness Week programme will expand to run in multiple schools across the country, linked with pre and post research.
1. Why Kindness?

Making a difference: evidence from People United’s projects

Breaking down prejudice – Role Models

About the project
In 2014, People United supported artist Bob Karper to undertake an artist residency on the theme of Role Models. He developed the commission into a project entitled Treasure, connecting children from Lunsford Primary School in Kent with residents from nearby care homes. Through poetry, projection, song, photography and performance, these young and old participants worked together to explore the people who they treasured in their lives. As part of the residency, every child in the school (210 children) achieved their Arts Award Discover certificate and at the end of the four-month project, children, parents, care home residents and their families spent an evening at the school celebrating all the work that had taken place.

What were we trying to achieve?
Treasure aimed to bring children and older people together to experience other people’s stories and reflect on why some people serve as an example to others. By facilitating close collaboration between both young and old participants, we hoped that Treasure would foster understanding between generations and encourage children and older people to see each other in a different light.

We hoped that after the residency, our research would show a change with relation to three main outcomes:

- **attitudes and bias towards older adults**: children would have more positive attitudes towards older people and be more willing to help, engage and cooperate with an older adult
- **role models**: children would have developed a broader understanding of the kinds of people who can serve as valuable role models in life
- **creative learning**: children would have a greater knowledge, experience and understanding of different art forms.

How did we gather evidence?
The University of Kent carried out quantitative research to investigate how children’s perceptions and feelings changed during the project. Validated questionnaires (using pictures and different scenarios) were completed by 153 pupils in years 1 to 6 before Treasure began, and again after the project was finished; for example, pupils were shown a picture of an older adult and asked about their perceptions of that person and their willingness to help them. To measure bias (specifically, psychological concepts of ‘cooperation bias’ and ‘subtle bias’), children were shown pictures of young people and older people and asked how much they would like to make up a story with someone from each group, and accept and eat a chocolate bar from someone in each group. The questionnaires also asked children to draw a person they look up to and to write down as many arts activities as they could think of.

Results

- After taking part in Treasure, children showed less prejudice towards and more willingness to cooperate with older people.
- Children developed a broader understanding of role models and, by the end of the project, were more likely to name their parents as people they look up to.
- Children’s understanding of the arts improved significantly.

The most substantial change to occur during Treasure was a reduction in pupils’ bias towards older people; for example, before the project, the children who took part were significantly more likely to want to interact with a younger person than with an older adult. After the project, this bias had disappeared, as shown in Figure 8 and Figure 9.
As well as being less biased towards older adults, children were also more willing to help an older person by the end of the project (although there were no changes in more general attitudes towards older people).

“*He [artist Bob Karper] has changed the way I see old people. Just because they are older you shouldn’t treat them different.*”
Pupil, Lunsford Primary School

Children’s understanding of their role models changed during the project. Before Treasure began, 15% of children named or drew their parents as people they look up to (other role models mentioned included friends, celebrities, teachers and professions such as policemen). After the project, children were significantly more likely to choose their parents as role models (28%).

Finally, by the end of Treasure, children could name significantly more arts activities than they could at the start, such as painting, sculpture, singing, dancing, drama and poetry.

**Legacy**
Following the project, the school kept in contact with one care home and facilitated additional meetings between children and residents. Based on the residency, we produced *Hunting for Treasure* (available for free on our website), a resource for primary schools exploring values, role models and the SMSC curriculum through arts-led and creative literacy-led activities. The artist has replicated the project, with equal success, in schools and care homes in East London, and this was the inspiration for our future *Arts & Kindness* Weeks developed in collaboration with the US-based Random Acts of Kindness Foundation.
Finding joy and new perspectives – Wonderstruck

About the project
In 2014, People United commissioned theatre-maker Daniel Bye, director Sarah Punshon and musician Boff Whalley to create Wonderstruck, a large-scale collaborative performance in Manchester Museum inspired by the museum’s extraordinary collections. Four community choirs and a range of performers from Greater Manchester worked with the artists to create, over an eight-month period, a large-scale performance combining text, movement and song. The choirs presented the work to over 2,000 people in a weekend of surprises at Manchester Museum.

What were we trying to achieve?
Wonderstruck was an opportunity for the artists and everyone else involved to take creative risks and push the boundaries of participatory practice. We wanted people to feel surprised, challenged and connected as they explored the idea of wonder and worked together to create and perform a unique artistic work. Our research focused on two key outcomes:

- **joy**: artists, participants and visitors to the museum would have a joyful and uplifting experience
- **new perspectives**: people would be encouraged to think in new ways: about themselves, about the museum and about the world.

How did we gather evidence?
We evaluated Wonderstruck using metrics that have been developed by cultural organisations in the UK and Australia to evaluate the quality of their work. The metrics ask people how much they agree or disagree with statements such as ‘Captivation: it was absorbing and held my attention’ and ‘Relevance: it had something to say about the world in which we live.’

The innovative aspect of this method is that it measures and compares views from different groups: in this case, the artists leading the project; participants involved in creating and performing the work; members of the public who watched the performance in Manchester Museum; and a small number of expert ‘peer reviewers’ who we selected because of their knowledge and experience of community and participatory arts.

We also carried out a mix of qualitative research including interviews, observation and film.

Results
- Wonderstruck was a joyful experience for those involved; it achieved high metric scores for captivation and enthusiasm, and participants explained how it had renewed their passion for singing.
- As well as being emotionally engaging, Wonderstruck was a brand new and technically accomplished artistic work, receiving high scores for concept, presentation and rigour.
- Wonderstruck gave people a new perspective on museums – as dynamic, social spaces that connect visitors to each other, their city (in this case, Manchester) and the wider world.

Joy was evident from the qualitative and quantitative feedback. An analysis of words used by participants to describe their experience of Wonderstruck reveals their feelings of joy and exhilaration at being part of a creative, collaborative process, as shown in Figure 10.
The enthusiasm and positive emotions were reinforced by the average scores awarded to Wonderstruck across ten core metrics by participants, members of the public and ‘peer reviewers’ (Figure 11). Scores were particularly high across all groups for concept, rigour, captivation and enthusiasm, suggesting that people who participated in and watched the performance experienced Wonderstruck as an unusual idea that was executed well and captured their imagination. The high scores for local impact suggest that people recognised the significance and value of the event taking place in Manchester Museum.

Several participants explained that Wonderstruck had boosted their confidence and encouraged them to deepen their involvement in singing, including joining new choirs. “I’ve had quite a difficult time since moving here, and the project provided me with a pop-up singing community and a sense of belonging. It was quite a brave thing for me to do, and it really helped to boost my self-confidence.” Participant, Wonderstruck

Participants, members of the public and peer reviewers commented that Wonderstruck had given them a different experience of museums and highlighted the importance of meaningful creative experiences: “It has given me food for thought about what works in terms of how museums work with their communities in a global context using collective response, music and performance.” Peer reviewer, Wonderstruck

“In a dour, reactionary world it’s important that positive, human-centred, alternative (anarchic?) experiences are promoted and enabled.” Participant, Wonderstruck

For the artists who led the work, Wonderstruck was a ‘joyful’ project that was ‘enormously hard but hugely rewarding’ and an inspiration to continue working with and through the arts to enable social change: “Working with People United will hopefully inform and strengthen my commitment to make art that can talk about the world, that can be part of our ongoing debate about changing the world.” Artist, Wonderstruck

**Legacy**

Wonderstruck lyrics and songs were reproduced and used by other choirs (including at the Horniman Museum, London) and informed Manchester Museum’s themes within The Study, their space for exploring big ideas and strange and wonderful things. After Wonderstruck, musician Boff Whalley founded the Commoners Choir, which tours nationally singing songs about the world, its inequalities, injustices and hope.
Making a difference: evidence from People United’s projects

Building self-efficacy and confidence – Creative Champions

About the project
Working with artist-in-residence Nova Marshall, Creative Champions is an intergenerational group of residents from Newington in Ramsgate. It was formed as part of the wider three-year People United project The Best of Us, in partnership with Newington Big Local. The Creative Champions members met weekly to create their own work. They curated exhibitions and events, programmed an annual arts festival called Best Fest (a first for the community) and fundraised for and developed an urban art project that highlights and celebrates community spaces. They also travelled outside Ramsgate (often for the first time) to visit Turner Contemporary in Margate, and Tate Modern, the Tower of London and Postman’s Park in London.

What were we trying to achieve?
The philosophy of the Creative Champions group was to be led and guided by the participants. Our qualitative research focused on:

- self-efficacy: we hoped that through taking part in the project, participants would feel a sense of agency, a confidence in their own abilities to tackle a task or challenge
- connectedness: we hoped that the project would enable participants to develop new relationships and increase their sense of connectedness and belonging.

How did we gather evidence?
Qualitative researcher Joe Bonnell (lead researcher), Tess Luetchford and filmmaker Tim Knights met, interviewed and observed Creative Champions at different time-points over 18 months, and observed and informally spoke to participants at a range of events. The interviews were qualitative in nature and were designed to explore participants’ experiences of being part of the Creative Champions group and their wider engagement with the arts. The interviews were transcribed and analysed to draw out key themes, emerging outcomes and issues around how the project was working. In addition, detailed interviews were carried out with People United staff and artist-in-residence Nova Marshall to help make sense of what was working and why.

Results

- Participants in Creative Champions demonstrated a clear increase in self-confidence, self-expression and a sense of self-efficacy, which strengthened over the course of the project.
- This boost in confidence resulted in many participants developing their own initiatives and leading activities within their community (from a young participant wanting to run their own creative session, to the group taking an active role in the design and implementation of Best Fest).
- Connectedness with others also appears to have increased for those closely involved in the project. Friendships have formed and participants have connected and bonded with people who they would not otherwise have had a connection with.
- While there were significant benefits for participants, there was limited evidence that the core message of kindness was clear to the wider community.

The qualitative research demonstrated that there is something inherent in the ‘doing’ of art in a safe, inspiring and non-judgemental environment that can quickly build people’s self-confidence and, in turn, their sense of self-efficacy. This was certainly true with Creative Champions.

“I’ve been in Young Creative Champions for a year and a half... At first I was shy but now I’m really confident.”

“I think definitely one thing that’s really highlighted in my mind is it’s brought confidence to people... So it’s given me that last little tiny bit of confidence that yes I can, I’m there, and do it. I’ve had people say to me in the past why don’t you go and join in whatever performance thing, and I’ve always had that little tiny element that’s gone, but are you good enough. And now it has actually changed my way of thinking, that last little bit of the confidence is there, that I didn’t even recognise, I didn’t imagine for one minute before that it could help me in that way but it has, and that’s People United as a whole, attending the groups.”

The project opened up a sense of possibility among participants as they began to see that they could do things on their own. One Creative Champion was considering taking the next step towards running her own community project for others:

“I’m inspired by this project and I’m inspired by the people I’ve met...ordinary people who have banded together with a common goal and have just set out and got on with it and done it, they’ve achieved their goals. And that shows me that things are possible so long as you just work towards it...”

The creative nature of the project showed people that they could produce art, make mistakes and keep their self-esteem and confidence intact because ‘mistakes’ are all part of the artistic process:

“It’s almost like well actually they’ve done all this work; they’ve proved they can do it. I might get involved now because I’m not going to have egg on my face. Pride’s not going to be damaged and actually even at that Best Fest, I made mistakes with the artwork but no-one was bothered because they were just like actually it’s art, move on.”

As well as building confidence and self-efficacy, Creative Champions has increased connections between people:

“Yeah. It does promote community spirit... People that’ll come in maybe that haven’t seen each other before, or may have seen each other but not spoken before, but because that’s..., they’re here for that mutual interest, they sit and chat and then they might.... I think there are 1 or 2 of them that have then met up and gone for coffee elsewhere, they became friends because of.... It does bring people together.”

A key challenge was to find ways to spread the benefits of the project beyond the participants themselves. There was only limited evidence that the project’s underlying message of kindness was clear to the wider community; however, the practice of supporting people to curate and create their own arts experiences has resulted in new creative initiatives with the potential to help the community to see itself differently:

“... It shows, if we can do it, anybody can do it kind of thing. We are good, we’re not all bad over here and look what we’ve done and what we’ve achieved and our works up in lights kind of thing.”

Legacy

Two years on, the Creative Champions are still active; having helped plan and organise the third annual Best Fest community arts festival, they are now beginning to fundraise and plan for the fourth. The weekly group has developed into a weekly arts youth group taking place in the community centre, and young Creative Champions are completing Arts Awards with artist-in-residence Nova Marshall. One Creative Champion is making work and planning his first solo exhibition, another has started a community singing group and one has won a regional award for her positive contribution to her community.
1. Why Kindness?

In this section, we summarise what we have learned through qualitative research across a multitude of People United projects about the power of the arts and creative processes to effect change in people and their communities. The themes below connect with and enhance the four mediators of emotions, connections, learning and values that link arts and kindness in our theoretical model (see Figure 1, page 10).

What follows is not a definitive list of the qualities of creative practice; rather, they are the ingredients that emerged when we reflected on and analysed why different projects achieved different outcomes – what did we do that enabled change to take place? Not all of these properties are exclusive to arts-based activities, but some are closely wedded to the experimental nature of high quality participatory arts practice, and we would argue that the overall combination is powerful and unique to the arts.

01 Saying yes

Many individuals are used to hearing ‘no’ in their lives. Participants we have worked with over the years have explained how our projects have given them permission to try something new, risky or ambitious. Our participatory practice is equitable, adaptable and guided by the people taking part. By saying ‘yes’ to creative choices, over and over again, we can help confidence and self-efficacy to grow.

“Yeah they’d never say no. They’d never say no to anyone... They never said no to anything. And in one creative session they sat there and they’ve got all these books out, and they said come on, what do you want, what do you want to do, what do you like the look of, and they were flicking through, everyone was picking all sorts of things out, and the word ‘yes’ was constant. I don’t think, have they ever said no, no they’ve never said no.”

Participant, The Best of Us

Understanding the difference: key characteristics emerging from People United’s work

**02 Freedom to fail**

With targets, rankings and league tables, there is ever-increasing pressure to succeed. Evidence from our work suggested that through arts participation, people felt able to experiment and fail, and not be reduced by this. There was an understanding that art necessarily involves failure, which created a sense of freedom and possibility.

“If you make a mistake it is good because you learn from mistakes.”
Year 5 pupil participant, *We All Do Good Things*

**03 Playing by different rules**

Participatory arts practice can create its own rules. Our activities are fluid, exploratory and non-competitive, creating a very different learning environment to many schools and workplaces. In our iterative work, success, unlike in sport for example, is not a simple victory over an opponent or constrained by set procedures, but is developed through the process of creating together; what counts is whether participants are able to achieve their creative goals. Art as a form of self-expression validates participants for who they are.

“I don’t want to give too much away, but there were a lot of stairs, and a lot of clicking. And a sense of mischief. Singing in a museum. I think we got the feel of it, the feeling like our parents had given us unexpected permission to jump in a puddle.”
Participant, *Wonderstruck*

**04 Engaging emotions**

It is easy to disregard opportunities to express emotions, but research (for example, by psychologist Barbara Frederickson) shows that positive emotions (such as joy, contentment and love) can lead to greater resilience and increased social bonds. The arts can provide a means to communicate, internally through self-awareness and externally through self-expression. Participants have found that they are able to open up to each other while working on something creative, sharing feelings that are hard to reveal or acknowledge in everyday life.

“I’ve learnt that people are very good at hiding, and actually what you see on the outside is not inside at all. Art, in a way, is an expression of who you really are.”
Participant, *The Best of Us*

**05 Being in the moment**

Creative practice can absorb us. This feeling of being fully immersed or in a state of ‘flow’ is common within the arts. The term ‘flow’ was coined by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihályi after he became fascinated by artists who were completely lost within their work. This absorption can be both satisfying (there is something life-affirming about singing with others at the top of your voice) and lead to personal growth.

“There’s a point in the song, one of the choruses, where we all stand together and sing. When we did it last night was something magical about it. The words and the music were tangible, you could see them in the air, feel them thrumming through the floor. And I closed my eyes and listened and felt and tasted the music, and it’s as if I was staring at a sunset, at the sea, at infinite possibilities. That feeling you get somewhere between your heart and your stomach. You feel like you could fly.”
Participant, *Wonderstruck*

**06 Sharing stories**

Our projects tell real stories of people’s lives. The arts have always told stories; they can help us to express ourselves and to feel that our voice is validated. Stories provide a framework to help people understand experiences that are very different from their own. Through the stories of others, we can witness and hear different voices, encouraging empathy and a sense of commonality, especially valid when experiencing something true and personal. The arts can share alternative narratives.

“I hope that the young people who witnessed and experienced the attitude, enthusiasm and sense of place yesterday will grow up into those adults that couldn’t wait to share their photographs and stories of their lives in Newington in the same proud manner.”
Jason Pay, Photographer, *Best Fest*
Building connections

There is something special about creating work ‘side by side’ with others. Often in our work, this leads towards a bigger, collective result (a festival, a communal work of art or piece of music), a joint endeavour that builds connections, collaborative skills and a sense of equity (we’re all in this together). This bond between people can extend to places too, fostering a sense of identity and community.

“The concept of empathy is something that we think of everyday; however I did not expect that the same crowd who felt like strangers before the show would feel like people in common on leaving.”

Audience member, The Empathy Roadshow

Illuminating universal themes

People United’s work focuses on the potential of people, not their deficits, and on illuminating themes that are common to us all. Our practice highlights and explores fundamental themes such as courage, belonging, empathy and love. We offer a chance for people to think outside their own reality, recognising the connection between personal experiences and universal themes; seeing the world from a different angle.

“What we found was that people generally found courage in the most ordinary of experiences, fighting cancer, breaking isolation, getting married... Few people related courage to fame or history, most people were able to look directly at their own lives or that of their family to discern moments of courage.”

R.M. Sánchez-Camus, Artist, Seek Courage

Challenging the status quo

The arts can offer people a chance to take risks and to challenge existing states of affairs, whether in schools, organisations or communities. Throughout history (from shamans to jesters), the arts have an accepted role to experiment, vocalise and surprise. Our practice asks people to imagine how things might be different; and we challenge our artists and partners to experiment with their art forms and re-examine their own perspectives and values. Being an outlier is important; it gives others the permission to push boundaries too.

“It is about creating systemic change for a more positive future so it asks the audience to engage with the co-creation of a better future. There is something very important in the legacy of the work that I did with People United, the way that the close and deep working practice they have, enables you then to develop.”

Sarah Woods, Playwright, The Empathy Roadshow / The Roadless Trip

The importance of context

The themes described here do not tell the whole story of a participatory arts project - context and process are vital too. The impact of any project will, for example, depend on: the nature of the arts experience (including who leads it, where it takes place, how long it lasts); the background and characteristics of the participants; and the local and national circumstances (social, economic, political and institutional). From 2017-19, we will be working with Goldsmiths, University of London (supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation) to map our own particular methodology and to explore how these moderating factors influence the effectiveness of our interventions, leading to a new resource to share.
Conclusion

Over the last 11 years, People United has explored how the arts can play a positive role in our society. We have used evaluation and research to inspire, challenge, validate and reappraise our work. In drawing together our findings from the last decade, we have reached a number of conclusions about the impact and nature of our practice and the potential for the cultural sector to play a greater role in enabling social change.

"After 10 years of evaluating People United’s approach, we are confident that it has established an effective and powerful way of using the transformative power of the arts to promote kindness and prosociality that benefits whole communities of people."

Professor Dominic Abrams, Director of the Centre for the Study of Group Processes, School of Psychology, University of Kent

Our work makes a difference to people and communities

This report provides compelling evidence that our participatory arts projects and creative interventions have increased empathy and motivations to help, share with and care for others. Our projects have created connections between people, breaking down barriers and preconceptions, and have strengthened people’s beliefs in their own abilities to make change happen.

We have seen these effects take place across different art forms and creative activities, and in many different settings, from schools, museums and beaches to parks, streets and care homes. The processes by which change takes place may vary from project to project, depending on the context, the participants and the nature of the participatory experience, but we see consistent evidence that our work achieves social outcomes that are often sustained over time.

The diversity of our practice is important. By working with a variety of art forms and modes of participation we create multiple ‘entry points’ that enable different people to get involved at a level that suits them. As such, the arts offer an accessible route to promoting kindness, and we believe that holistic approaches that combine a range of approaches and activities are the most effective way of achieving the outcomes we care about.

PICTURE OPPOSITE: Wonderstruck, 2014. Photo: Joel Fildes
Conclusion

The arts have unique properties that enable change to take place

In this report we have reflected on the characteristics of our practice that are most important in enabling change and have tried to draw out what is distinctive and powerful about the creative aspects of our work. We believe that the arts have a unique range of properties, from engaging emotions and embracing failure to challenging the status quo and building connections. These, together, can be catalysts for both the desire to help others and the capacity to make choices and act independently to fulfil that desire. Our projects highlight the potential for a real shift: from engagement to understanding, from agency to action. In this sense, our concept of kindness is radical and can challenge existing systems and structures. Through the arts, we are helping people explore what it means to create kind schools, a compassionate healthcare system, ethical institutions and more caring communities.

Research is critical but complex

Research and evaluation have played a central role in the delivery of People United’s mission over the last decade. Our ongoing partnership with the School of Psychology at the University of Kent has been invaluable, providing academic validation, challenge and new perspectives. We have learned how to combine quantitative and qualitative research methods to bring both rigour and nuance to our understanding and assessment of our work.

But change is complex, and any intervention is dependent on context. Research can never provide a complete picture or a simple causation, from an action here to an outcome there. We are committed to evidencing the impact of our work, but we have learned not to get side-tracked by research concerns. It is important to focus on the integrity of the project, the process and the participants, and to ensure that research and evaluation are appropriate and ethical.

The challenge is to enable change at scale

This report has demonstrated the positive social impact of our arts interventions for the people and organisations that took part. We are a small organisation and we work in an intensive way with groups of participants in specific settings – a network of schools, or a particular geographic location.

Our key challenge is to enable a wider range of people to benefit from our work. How can we amplify the ripple effect of our projects so that participants can share their understanding and experiences of kindness with their wider networks and communities? How can we replicate our models at scale, and over longer time periods, while continuing to develop work that is authentic and intuitive? And how can we collaborate with others in the cultural sector and beyond to develop common approaches and tell a bigger story about the power of the arts to drive social change? These challenges are shared by many organisations working in this field, and we would welcome ideas as to how we might take our work forward together.

Next steps

We are launching an Arts and Prosocial Research Group (APRG) with the University of Kent. This multi-disciplinary group will meet monthly to share new research and insights, debate key issues and support one another. This group will be open to all, we want to grow a community of practice of those exploring the relationship between arts and kindness and related social outcomes.

In 2019, we will publish our next research paper which will build on our theory and evidence of how the arts can promote kindness to focus on the detail of our artistic and community engagement practices: our distinct methodology.

If you are a teacher or academic, an artist or youth worker, or you work within policy or local government, and anything in this report has resonated with you, please get in touch. We hope that together we can find ways to practice our notion of radical kindness.

Contact us for more details at info@peopleunited.org.uk or see www.peopleunited.org.uk

“Art is the highest form of hope”
Gerhard Richter, visual artist
References


2. Ibid.


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