

## Arts Explorers: It's a Stage They're Going To

*The Audience Business – David Jackson*

***“Arts explorers: it's a stage they're going to” looked at the results of a year long project with young people that devised a programme to enable them to experience and enjoy what being an audience for the arts is all about. The Audience Business took a diverse group of young people on a journey of arts exploration and in turn learned from them about what we have to do as arts professionals to communicate, contact and encourage young people to be part of our audience.***

The Audience Business is an audience development agency based in Edinburgh. The Arts Explorers project set up partnerships that aimed to address the perception that the arts are “not for me” and was supported by the Edinburgh Youth Social Inclusion Partnership. It was intended that the project would be an inclusive project that would be shaped by the young people, rather than a straightforward participative project. The action research premise of the project was that the young people would learn to be an audience at the same time as the organisations learned from the experiences of the young people. Consequently the aims were to demystify the arts in the eyes of socially disadvantaged young people aged 14-18 and to develop a framework that could be used to replicate the project in the future.

The strategies employed to meet the aims of the project were to:

- identify a broad cross-section of excluded young people living in Edinburgh and encourage them to get involved;
- work with and through youth workers in order to ensure that young people were involved in shaping the project;
- give young people the opportunity to participate in an enjoyable and innovative introduction to the arts;
- use discussion and feedback sessions as a tool to create a positive frame of mind and reduce perceptions of feeling excluded;
- encourage one group to video their exploration.

The project involved five youth groups representing thirty-six young people. Most participants had no experience of attending mainstream arts events apart from school trips, and these were mainly to pantomimes. Of the fourteen boys and twenty-two girls, there were seven young people from an ethnic minority group; six young people with visual impairment and two young people with a physical disability. The young people were aged from 13-16.

The young people involved in the project were required to take part in an introductory meeting. They were then allowed to choose a minimum of four different arts events to attend, but these were include at least two different art forms. The young people were also expected to be involved in three workshops designed to enhance their audience experience and attend eight feedback sessions. The project was monitored via informal face-to-face interviews with the young people; feedback forms completed by the youth workers following all visits; the workshops and discussion sessions and informal communication between the youth workers and The Audience Business. One group's experience was video monitored and the MARS

monitoring system, provided by the Edinburgh Youth Social Inclusion Partnership, tracked changes in the participants attitudes as well as recording statistical information.

### **Statistics**

- 100% of participants reported that they had enjoyed taking part.
- 79% said they were more confident as a result.
- 79% said they were more interested in the arts as a result.
- 83% said they had learned to do new things.

### **Soft Measures**

- Youth workers observed positive changes in the young people.
- There was a growth in individual feelings of empowerment and self-confidence.
- Youth workers, as a result of the project, were more aware of opportunities for young people to be involved in the arts (it was felt that previously there had been a lack of knowledge in the youth service about how the arts might engage with or support their efforts).

### **Comments**

- "The project has opened my eyes to the different arts on offer".
- "It's been really good for me; I feel much more confident".
- "I never considered going to plays or concerts before this".
- "Older people go because they feel comfortable".

### **Observations**

The project was time intensive and expensive, with a total cost of £20,000. The project also suffered from having to cope with personal changes, from the result of pressure on the events that were on offer and from the fact that the youth organisations had competing priorities. This meant that a learning point for future projects was to allow additional planning time. It was also observed that in some circumstances the lack of youth workers knowledge posed difficulties.

The project highlighted that there were four key elements to running a successful project on these lines: Investment; Interpreters; Information and Involvement. A methodology was also formulated for future projects:

- identify suitable groups;
- establish the relationship;
- create interest;
- make the visits;
- discuss the experiences;
- explore an artform;
- encourage feedback;
- ensure reporting and monitoring.

The middle four stages, from creating interest to exploring the artform, need to be kept flexible and adapted to suit the project. And while monitoring is included as the final stage, this needs to take place throughout using the three 'S's: Statistics, Sayings and Scenes, as anecdotal and circumstantial evidence can be extremely valuable. The second arts explorers project has become easier, partly as it is now a known brand, and more cost-effective and some of the participants from the first arts explorers project are becoming volunteers as arts activists for phase two.