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Campbell, A., & Forbes, T. (2021). *Collaboration between the IMPACT CAMHS Young Persons Mental health Arts project and QUB: (An ESRC Impact Acceleration Account Funded Project)*. Economic and Social Research Council.

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

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Collaboration between the IMPACT CAMHS Young Persons Mental health Arts project and QUB: (An ESRC Impact Acceleration Account Funded Project)

Dr Anne Campbell, Dr Trisha Forbes (SSESSW) February 2021

1. Introduction

The prevalence of young people's mental health problems has increased exponentially over the last two decades and it has become a major public health concern. 12.6% of children and young people in Northern Ireland (NI) experience common mood disorders such as anxiety and depression- a figure that is approximately 25% higher than in other UK nations (Bunting et al 2020). More than 20% of young people in NI experience significant mental health issues by the time they reach 18 years of age (DHSSPS, 2010; Khan, 2016, Bamford, 2006).

The sudden lockdown of society in the UK from 23rd March 2020 affected the lives of everyone involving the requirement for people to stay at home (except for very limited purposes), the closing of non-essential shops and community spaces, and stopping all gatherings of more than two people in public spaces. For young people, many schools and other support services came to an abrupt end with peer contact extremely limited. As such, concerns have arisen as to the potential impact of lockdown measures in terms of This new range of stressors is thought the number of young people at risk of developing mental health difficulties and of compounding pre-existing mental health difficulties for those receiving services before lockdown.

A survey by the Royal College of Psychiatrists of 1369 of its members at the beginning of May (RCPsych., 2020) found that 43% were seeing an increase in urgent and emergency cases including patients who had suicidal thoughts or were self-harming, with the highest percentages of such responses seen in Northern Ireland (50%). At the same time, 45% of respondees reported a decrease in routine appointment attendance- suggesting that self-isolation, shielding, school closures, and fear of engaging with health services because of the risk of infection may be barriers to engagement.

Results from a national consultation process with stakeholders and service users devised ten priorities for working with and researching young people's mental health. Two of these priorities focused on the questions:

1. How can young people be more involved in making decisions about their mental health treatment?

2. How can Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and partner agencies work together in a more effective manner in order to improve the mental health outcomes of children and young people? (Young people's research UK, 2019)

The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust CAMHS aims to promote emotional wellbeing and to deliver care, treatment and preventative mental health services to children and young people aged 0 – 18 years of age who experience significant and enduring mental health difficulties. The IMPACT CAMHS project was initiated and developed in 2018 by a group of service users aged 11- 17 years alongside two clinicians from the team. The current CAMHS /QUB partnership sought to investigate the impact of the Arts-based project on the lives of the young people with a range of challenges impacting upon their emotional wellbeing such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Gender Dysphoria, Depression and Anxiety.

1.1 Aims and Objectives

Aim

The partnership examined how young people, family members and workers benefitted from a co-produced Arts initiative which was established to enhance participants' mental health outcomes.

Objectives

To utilise a co-production approach to assess the sustainability of a group-based Arts project (IMPACT) for CAMHS service users in Belfast Health and Social Care Trust NI. The group had already been initiated prior to the collaboration between QUB and CAMHS.

To gauge the group members' self-reported improvement in their social interaction skills, coping skills and engagement with school and family via an audit evaluation.

To conduct a small scale impact audit of the programme in order to provide the basis for roll out of the project across other Statutory CAMHS programmes in NI and the UK.

It was anticipated that the partnership would also have a corollary effect on the lives of the family members. It was hoped that the family unit would benefit from any improvement in social skills and resilience that the project engendered in the young people.

2. Methodology – Audit Evaluation

The partnership team, including Dr Anne Campbell, Dr Trisha Forbes and two founding Arts group clinicians Shauneen O'Connor (Senior Social Worker) and Sarah Ombler (Social Worker) from the CAMHS (Belfast Trust) met regularly to discuss and further develop the Arts-based initiative.

As regards the audit evaluation, semi structured interviews were convened with (and by) 5 young people from the group to ascertain the expectations, hopes and perceptions of participants during the programme implementation.

Telephone interviews were convened with family members (n=4) to gauge their perceptions of the benefits of the programme for the young participants. A survey was also administered to therapists (n=8) who have direct contact with the young people on the project. The interviews and surveys focused on the worker and family members' perceptions of the impact of the programme on the young person's social life, home life, attendance and interaction in school.

The QUB project staff took notes for the interviews rather than recording and transcribing due to costs incurred by the transcription process. The data was analysed using a manual thematic data analysis technique (Burnard, 1998).

Findings from the Audit Evaluation

3.1 Young people

Five young people completed the survey/interviewed each other about their involvement in the IMPACT CAMHS group. Themes emanating from the data included initial involvement, choice / decision-making, friendship, confidence, independence, acceptance, speaking out about mental health, improved social skills and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initial involvement

The young people either heard about the formation of the group through their counsellor in CAMHS or from a leaflet/poster in the Young People's Centre. There was some indication that the young people had to "build up the nerve" to attend the group initially. One of the young people emphasised the importance of encouragement required from staff in terms of their own attendance and felt this would be important in regard to other prospective members joining the group.

Choice/Young Person-centered decision-making

It was reported that the group was originally structured more by the staff, with topics covered such as sexual health and education. However, as time passed, the members of the group themselves now choose what they want to do, and what direction the group should go in. This element of choice emerged as a theme.

"I like how we are involved in making choices about what we do in the group."

"We have choice in the group and can direct the group in a way we want to help others with mental health."

IMPACT CAMHS has developed a very strong rights-based approach, providing responsibility, decision-making and power to the young people to shape the decisions that affect them.

Friendship

The main way in which the group has evolved, and a strong theme to have emerged from the data, is the firm friendships that have been built and maintained among the young people. This has contributed greatly to the confidence of the individuals involved, and the group has gone from strength-to-strength, with the bonds among members forming the backbone of the group. The relationships between group members were likened to family on several occasions.

The young people also reported that they have developed friendships with peers in school as a result of the IMPACT CAMHS group.

“The group made me more confident. I feel like I can talk to people at tech rather than sitting in the corner.”

Confidence

The friendships formed between group members have greatly contributed to the confidence of the individuals involved; a very common theme among respondents.

“The group has given me more courage and confidence.”

The young people expressed that some of the activities they have come to be involved with as a result of the IMPACT CAMHS group, have greatly exceeded their expectations as to what they felt they were capable of – for example, performing in Stormont Parliament Buildings for World Mental Health Day and recording an EP.

There is a sense that the young people have been encouraged out of their comfort zone in many regards, to accept challenges, and this has meant that their confidence has soared.

Some of the young people talked about how they used to worry how other people perceived them, but they have now realised their own self-worth and no longer concern themselves overly with what people think of them.

Independence

This confidence that the young people have developed has also helped them become more independent. There were reports that involvement in the group has meant that the members are now able to make their own way to the IMPACT CAMHS meetings, to school, etc. rather than relying on lifts or being accompanied by parents/carers.

“I never thought I’d be in a place where I can just hop on the bus.”

Acceptance

There was a definite sense from the young people's data that they had found a sense of place or home within the IMPACT CAMHS group, and that they felt accepted.

"I have felt it is a place where it is OK to be myself."

"I felt in the group that I can say what I think and won't be made fun of for this... ..I find the group supporting and accepting."

Speaking out about mental health

Involvement in IMPACT CAMHS has helped the young people become more expressive and eloquent in how they talk about their own feelings and their own mental health journey.

One of the young people discussed how they are now much more open to talking about their mental health, and they have been able to challenge their mum's perception of mental ill health as having a stigma:

"I tell her it shouldn't be hidden, should be treated as normal. She's getting better."

"I was more quiet and closed before attending the group."

Improved social skills

"The group has given me the ability to talk to others."

Several of the young people referred to how, prior to becoming involved with IMPACT CAMHS, they were reluctant to leave their bedrooms/homes at all. This is no longer the case, and the group has motivated them to go out, and provided them with a safe space to meet.

Impact of COVID-19

It was unanimous among the young people that the pandemic has had an impact on the group. Lockdown prevented the group from being able to physically meet up. The majority of respondents found virtual/online meet ups difficult and really missed the face-to-face, personal interaction.

"So many people were talking at once, it was so strange."

One of the young people mentioned being very self-conscious looking at themselves on the camera.

"I feel I took a back step in my mental health at this time. I felt very depressed and had no motivation to attend the group virtually."

3.2 Parents/Carers

Four parents/carers were interviewed on the telephone as part of the evaluation of the IMPACT CAMHS group, about the experiences of the young people. Themes extrapolated from the data focused on friendships, confidence, motivation, normalization of mental health challenges, shaping career choices, opportunities, improved family relations and potential improvements.

Friendships

There was emphasis, from all the parents interviewed, on how much friendship has played a part in the IMPACT CAMHS group. As in the young people's feedback, the parents likened the relationships formed between group members to be like family bonds.

"They're all so close"

They also described how the young people have been finding it less difficult to interact with others outside of the group, and how they have been able to form friendships in other settings.

Confidence

It was unanimous among the parents that being a part of the IMPACT CAMHS group had resulted in their young people developing in confidence. Some of the parents felt that this confidence seemed to stem from the situations and opportunities that arose for the group, such a presenting and performing on a number of occasions, most notably for World Mental Health Day 2019 at Stormont. The parents also emphasized how good the opportunity to record an EP was for the young people's confidence.

Motivation

The parental data indicated that the IMPACT CAMHS group has been instrumental in motivating their young people in terms of getting them out of their rooms/the house. "He would have been in his bedroom by himself otherwise or sitting on the phone."

"It makes him get washed and dressed and he wants to look his best for it."

It was highlighted that, particularly in terms of motivation, the parents felt that the COVID-19 lockdown had an impact on the young people in a negative way. During lockdown, when they were only able to meet as a group in a virtual capacity, some of them felt demotivated to attend at all, as it was not the same experience for them.

"Nothing beats that face-to-face interaction."

Normalisation of mental health challenges

There was emphasis from the parents on how being a part of the IMPACT CAMHS group has in a sense normalized mental health problems for the young people. One of the parents described how the group made her daughter realise, “she’s not the only one with challenges”.

One parent, however, voiced a concern around this normalization of mental ill health, in that they felt their young person was in danger of emulating mental health issues that other members of the group were displaying.

IMPACT shaping career choices

There was clear evidence from the parental data that the young people’s involvement in the IMPACT CAMHS group has helped to shape their decision-making in terms of their choice of Further/Higher Education courses and potentially their future career choice.

“The group was hugely important and influential to her.”

“He would like to do counselling when he gets a bit older, and that decision has really been shaped by being a part of the group. It’s really opened up his future to him.”

Opportunities – i.e. Stormont and EP

The parents in particular emphasised the significance of the opportunities afforded to the young people as a result of their involvement in the IMPACT CAMHS group. Specifically, the parents who attended Stormont for World Mental Health Day 2019 were particularly impressed by just how much the group has improved their young people’s confidence and ability to articulate their mental health journey. They also recognised the importance of the CD recording to the young people.

Improved family relations

The interviewees spoke about how there was a notable difference in the young people’s inclination to interact with other members of the household because of their involvement in the group.

“He wouldn’t have wanted to talk to people before.”

Potential improvements

The parents mainly emphasized, when asked about what they felt could be improved about IMPACT CAMHS, how they would like to see it continue to be funded, so other young people can benefit from similar experiences to those that their children were afforded.

Other comments

“It was a total life saver for her”

“IMPACT has been a lifeline for her”

“I couldn’t praise the group enough”

3.3 Staff members

Eight staff members completed questionnaires comprised of open-ended items, regarding their perceptions of the IMPACT CAMHS group. Several key themes emerged, primarily around the ways in which the group benefited the young people.

Confidence

It was unanimous among the eight staff members who worked with these young people that their confidence had greatly improved as a result of being a part of the IMPACT CAMHS group. Many of the staff members remarked on how the young people had reverted from being shy or introverted, to being capable of standing up in front of a crowd to present or perform, most notably during the 2019 World Mental Health Day conference at Stormont.

Motivation

All the staff members mentioned motivation as a way in which involvement in IMPACT CAMHS has benefited the young people. They described how the young people would previously have been reluctant to leave their house or even their bedroom, and are now much more motivated generally. They were reportedly significantly motivated regarding the EP project.

Motivation seems to have been the main thing, which was effected by the COVID-19 pandemic, when the group were no longer able to meet up in the physical sense. Staff members talk about how, during lockdown, the young people did not have the same level of motivation to meet up in a virtual capacity. It seems that the social element of physically being able to get together had a big part to play in the success of the group.

Socialisation/ Social/communication skills

All of the staff members remarked on how involvement in the IMPACT CAMHS group led to a vast improvement in the members’ social skills. In many instances, they described how the young people had been shy or introverted prior to becoming a part of the group, and perhaps had social or communication difficulties, but IMPACT CAMHS has helped them

develop extensively in this realm. One staff member described how the young person 'shone within the group environment.'

Sense of belonging/identity

Through the high levels of acceptance, the young people have experienced from their peers in the IMPACT CAMHS group, and the firm friendships they have forged, the staff members feel that the group has really impacted in a positive way on the members' sense of belonging and identity.

"Young people spoke a lot about the sense of belonging they got from being part of the group."

"Young people feel they belong to the group and it is clearly THEIR group and not something we have just created and they have joined."

Sense of pride/achievement

Staff members highlighted how the young people had expressed a real sense of achievement through acts such as speaking at conferences and recording their EP.

Activism

The group seems to have progressed from being more of a support structure for members, to playing a more outward-facing role within the community:

"...a very active forum for highlighting issues with young people's mental health and the role of CAMHS."

Empowerment/Giving YP a voice

The young people have been given a platform to have their voices heard and have been effectively guided in how to communicate their emotions, views and opinions. Their confidence appears to have soared in terms of speaking out about various matters, including their own mental health journeys. Within the group, the young people are comfortable verbalising their anxieties to their peers. One staff member describes how within the IMPACT group setting, "...they have been met with reassurance and support from others."

The young people's confidence in speaking out, however, extends beyond the IMPACTCAMHS group, with young people now feeling a sense of empowerment to the extent that they are comfortable speaking in front of groups of people about their mental

health and performing music whereby they have composed lyrics themselves about their own thoughts and feelings.

Areas for improvement

Staff members would like to see more investment in the IMPACT CAMHS group, both in terms of time and money, to assist the group to continue and grow. There was also a need expressed for the work of IMPACT CAMHS to become core business within CAMHS.

There was reference to the fact that IMPACT was now a closed group and that other young people are therefore missing a fantastic opportunity.

3. Conclusions from the Audit Evaluation

- There was a successful collaboration between the team at QUB and IMPACT CAMHS group, which precipitated discussions and actions as regards the sustainability of the group and a reflection on the success of the project in the following areas.
- The group afforded young people consistent opportunities for choice and autonomy as regards their involvement in the group and the planning and realization of project goals.
- There was strong evidence of the initiation and development of strong friendship bonds within the group. The enduring connections created by the group interaction enhanced self-esteem and confidence at individual and group levels.
- It was reported that levels of confidence had been enhanced by group participation. Many of the young people had moved from shy and introverted dispositions to performances of their deeply personal musical compositions in public. In addition, the group presented at the 2019 World Mental Health Day conference at Parliament Buildings in NI.
- The group had a significant positive impact on the members' sense of belonging and identity.
- There was a strong level of opinion from all respondents that the young people had been given a platform to communicate their emotions, views and opinions. More

specifically, it was clear that young people had become highly articulate in how they expressed their feelings about their mental health journeys.

- It was clear that all parties were anxious to secure sustainable investment in the IMPACT CAMHS group. There was also a consensus that extra resources were needed to facilitate the sustainability, growth and expansion of the groups.

5. Group Outcomes

Young people from the IMPACT CAMHS group co-produced and wrote music and lyrics which they professionally recorded to create their own EP including five original songs, and the young people used their own artwork to illustrate the personal meanings behind the lyrics. This has now been released on many platforms including Spotify, YouTube and many social media channels- as such, the music has reached an audience of thousands of people to-date. The group are very keen that their music reaches as many people as possible, to spread the intended message of hope and recovery from mental health difficulties which may help others in their own journeys. The group have agreed to perform for the NI Arts and Mental Health festival, which will help them to expand their audience, and the group are excited to feel the buzz of performing again, continuing to challenge themselves. .

The group also produced and hosted a seminar for social work practitioners from across NI to disseminate the results of their programme to -date and to perform their music and demonstrate excerpts from their exhibition. The Northern Ireland Social Care Council agreed to host the event which aimed to disseminate the success of the project and showcase its transferability to other Trust areas in NI. Feedback indicated that Social Workers felt inspired to implement co-production and creative ways of working within their own areas of work, and that it had helped them to challenge their preconceptions of mental health.

It must be recognised that the success of this group is wholly due to the hard work, dedication, and talents of the young people involved. It is hoped that the music, artwork or indeed the feedback outlined within the contents of this project report will inspire every reader to feel hope and possibility in terms of their own mental health journey, and also regarding creative ways of supporting others known to them personally or professionally.