



## Evaluation for Investing in Children Membership Spennymoor Youth Theatre Group

Spennymoor Youth Theatre Group Performing Arts School was formed in 1995 and provides arts tuition and theatrical performances for the young people of the north east of England. SYTG PA is a registered charity and aims to provide performing arts training to all who have an interest and talent regardless of their financial background. The Project also offers young people the opportunity to study for a diploma in performing arts. The majority of young members are of secondary school age but there are also a number of primary school age children involved. SYTG PA also provides education and support via a website to existing members and any young person who is unable to attend classes.

The work of the group is structured around six week education modules based on particular areas of performing arts including *acting for beginners, stage presence, mime* and, for more technically minded young people, *sound recording, photography, stage lighting and sound recording*. These are just a few of the modules on offer and the group prides itself on the range of opportunities available to young people.

At my first meeting I was struck by the sheer energy of the place and what looked like extremely hard work. There was an order and discipline to the evening that I didn't expect but I was assured by the young people I met at a later visit was both necessary and enjoyable. One young person said she loves the tension that comes before a major show!

The main decision making body is the SYTG Committee which meets once per month. This is made up of adult volunteers, no young people attend. Young people can raise issues at the meeting via the young people's contact person, Pauline, a parent of one of the young performers.

I visited the project again throughout February and March 2007 and met with volunteer staff and young people. My first question was why don't young people attend the committee meetings? The young people explained that the system in operation is what they prefer as the contact person is someone they can trust and rely on. I recorded the following comments from my meeting with Ryan, Emily, Sam, Lauren, Steph, Matt and Kirstie.

*"It works really well this way; just imagine if we wanted to complain about a member of the committee, no one would dare raise this at the meetings so nothing would change. If we do have issues like this we can rely on Pauline"*

*"We asked if we could have Fleeces to wear over our t-shirts and we are getting them"*

*"We wanted to get involved in more direction and now this happens"*

*"The contact person volunteers for the role so we don't exactly choose her. But we would only accept a person we felt comfortable with so in a way we do decide".*

*"We can fill in evaluation sheets to record our views"*

*"The good thing is that all of the staff are really good so we don't have to rely on Pauline all the time"*

The following comments are from young people's BLOGS.

*"SYTG is great because the staff are really helpful, you make loads of new friends, you get to try things you've never done before"*

*"These people [the staff] make everything happen, because believe me it is not easy putting on a major production. Treat all the staff with respect and use their advice as it is invaluable and remember they do not get paid for doing this, it is all their free time and love of theatre".*

*"I love drama so much and I'm pleased to say that SYTG has improved my confidence".*

An issue which young people felt strongly about was the audition process which involved new members performing in front of the whole group which could be over 60 young people and staff. Most of the young people I met went through this "very stressful experience" and wanted it changed. New members now audition in a separate room in front of a small group of young people.

We went on to discuss any instances of where young people's concerns had not been dealt with or were still waiting to be decided. The group gave three examples.

*"we would like young people to have the opportunity to run a module themselves"*

*"It would be a good idea for each module to be based on age or experience as I think some of the newer or younger members might feel a bit intimidated by the ability of the older more experienced members"*

*"we don't get to choose the shows we do, I know we can't do just anything but we should be able to at least choose from a list of what's available"*

I'd already raised the question of who chooses which production with Pauline and she was of the opinion that overall the young people liked the surprise of being told what the next show was to be. Perhaps this is an area for more detailed discussion; the young people told me they were satisfied that these issues would be resolved.

## **Conclusion**

At first glance the decision making process at SYTG is 'traditional' to say the least. The committee is made up of adults and most of the major decisions are taken at the monthly meetings. Young people don't attend the meetings but are represented by another adult, the young people's contact person. The young people who attend the drama sessions join in smaller groups or modules which are led by adult drama tutors, all volunteers.

However, it is a process the young people seem particularly happy with and I have learned from conversations and my own observations that young people here are surrounded by very supportive people. The young people seem satisfied that they can influence the direction of the project and can point to examples of where they have made changes. I was told by one young person that the biggest benefit she gained from performing was improved confidence and self belief. This is certainly true of the young people I met who seem to have been encouraged to express themselves both artistically and through their views and opinions.

I'm happy to recommend that Spennymoor Youth Theatre Group Performing Arts School receives the Investing in Children Award for 12 months and I look forward to seeing how the participation of children and young people is sustained and developed in the coming year.

**B.Stock**

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