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Participatory Group Textile Practice as a Route to Support Mental Health and Social Interaction in Secondary School Pupils

Catherine Howard, Sonja Andrew and Bruce Carnie

Coming to textile work after a lengthy and fulfilling career in secondary and tertiary education, Catherine Howard has significant experience of school leadership having held both Deputy and Assistant headships in Birmingham, Sandwell and Coventry and qualifying as an OfSTED inspector. Now retired, she remains heavily involved with school governance, the local community and works with the Samaritans.

Catherine is interested in stitch as a means of communication and in the power of that process. Her Master's in Design and Applied Art (Wolverhampton) focused on the silk industry in Coventry and culminated in an exhibition at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum. The work also won her a prize for Critical Writing from The Textile Society in 2020. She has exhibited work in both the UK

ABSTRACT The mental health of young people in the UK today has become a significant cause for concern, particularly as the impacts of COVID-19 lockdowns, school closures and bereavements are recognised and assessed. Schools are charged with identifying and supporting pupils who are struggling with their mental health and wellbeing, and with delivering a prescribed mental health curriculum for pupils of each age range. It is widely accepted that involvement with creative activity can make a positive contribution to the sense of well-being; however, curriculum changes in each sector have diminished creative opportunities in schools leaving many children, particularly those from lower income communities, without regular access to the arts and, as a result, limited opportunity to enhance their wellbeing in this way. This paper outlines the methodology,

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implementation, and findings from a pilot study with secondary pupils in a Birmingham inner-city through school as part of a research investigation into the relationship between the mental health of young people and participatory group textile practice. Working primarily with a core group of eight pupils aged between 11 and 15, all with experience of poor mental health, the project progressed from idea generation to completing and sharing the final textile outcome. As a six-week group hand-stitch project, the study focused on the impact of the shared process on the pupils, benefits to individuals in terms of personal development and wellbeing, and the positivity generated through successful completion of the project. A participant-observer qualitative methodology was implemented in the research, with questionnaires also informing the project evaluation.

KEYWORDS: Textile practice, mental health, secondary education, wellbeing, stitch

Introduction

This paper documents a pilot study that aims to explore how engagement in a participatory hand stitching textile project could contribute to therapeutic provision and intervention for secondary school pupils with mental health issues. The Oxford English Dictionary (2021) defines wellbeing as “the state of being healthy, happy, or prosperous; physical, psychological, or moral welfare” and mental health as “health of the mind as distinct from physical health; the condition of a person or group in respect of the functioning of the mind.” Mental health issues amongst young people are acknowledged to be on the increase and have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ghosh et al. 2020; British Medical Journal 2020; Broglia et al. 2018; Nuffield Trust 2021; Singh et al. 2020; Sonuga-Barke 2020; Weisbrot and Ryst 2020; Young Minds Media Centre 2019). Creative responses to mental health issues have been explored for adults but there is less evidence of such interventions with young people. The pilot study is therefore positioned within a wider research investigation to determine whether young people at Key Stage 3 and 4 (aged 11–16) with existing social, emotional, or mental health (SEMH) issues identified by their school, can gain therapeutic benefits from textile processes such as hand stitch via a series of group workshop interventions.

The Historical and Contemporary Impact of Slow Stitch, Participatory Projects

There are records of an extensive range of historic participatory projects, varying in provenance and purpose, dating back to the 11th century Bayeux Tapestry (Lester-Makin 2018). Other examples include the Changi Quilts, (Australian War Memorial Museum 2017),

and the Ukraine. Now researching for her doctorate at the University of Leeds, she continues both her academic interests and her belief in the wide-ranging power of education. Participatory projects and shared working are of great interest, but in her personal practice Catherine focuses on work that communicates an often political or social message.

Crossing the disciplines of design, semiotics and narratology, Dr Sonja Andrew employs the creative process as a mode of research inquiry. Her main research focuses on textile semantics, communication, and cultural memory, exploring multi-modality through visual and tactile communication on cloth, and the influence of context on audience perception. In 2014 the Arts and Humanities Research Council selected her work on textile semantics and visual narrative for an Image Gallery Award and publication in their centennial book ‘Beyond the Trenches, Researching the First World War’. Sonja exhibits internationally, with designs jury selected by peer review for exhibitions in Ukraine, Lithuania, China, South Korea, Portugal, Belgium, and the UK. In 2016 she received an excellence award for her installation 'The Ties That Bind (II)' in the Lausanne to Beijing International Textile Biennial and was invited to Adidas to run workshops on perception and memory with their design teams. She has undertaken art-science collaborations with the Cancer Research UK Institute in Manchester, creating pieces for the exhibition ‘The Fabric of Research’ for European City of Science 2016, and more recently worked with biophysicists at the University of Leeds, developing creative responses to their scientific research as part of the 2019 ‘Creative Labs: Biological Sciences’ programme. Sonja’s commissioned work includes pieces for the United Bristol Healthcare Trust and Wells Cathedral, and her designs are featured in ‘Textiles, The Art of Mankind’, a global review of contemporary textile practice. An academic and a creative practitioner, Sonja is an Associate

Professor in the School of Design at the University of Leeds, with a range of peer reviewed publications in her field. s.m.andrew@leeds.ac.uk

Dr Bruce Carnie has over 3000 registered designs that have been commissioned and placed into production. Bruce has worked with a wide spectrum of national and international design companies such as Collette Dinnigan, John Kaldor, Top Shop, M&S and Donna Karan to Target and K-Mart. The research conducted for this design output is arguably interdisciplinary in its basis where design meets creativity, commercial viability, business, manufacturing, end user, marketing and branding. It has involved generating designs through the use of innovative technologies and fostering partnerships across boundaries, including business, government, industry, not for profit organisations and community groups; notably he has worked with Australian indigenous communities in central Australia. The quality of his research output can be evaluated through the acceptance and the contribution that the design work has had upon the various industry and community sectors.

Bruce has been a guest lecturer at many Universities internationally over the past twenty five years, including Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University (RMIT); University of Ulster; Glasgow School of Art; Brunel University; University of Wolverhampton; University of Huddersfield; Delft University; Nanyang Technical University, Singapore; University of Dundee, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design; University of the Arts London, Central Saint Martins School of Art, Victoria University Wellington and Edinburgh College of Art. He has several peer reviewed publications covering the fields of Design Management, Service Design, Sustainable Design and Innovations in Textile Design.

Gee's Bend Quilts (Leahey 2018; Luo and Williams 2018b) and the Great War Altar Frontal for St. Paul's Cathedral (Hunter 2019). Such work is credited as highlighting participants' hitherto unknown skills and building resilience and community cohesion, with the processes of making acknowledged as often more important than the outcome because of those additional benefits (Gauntlett 2011: 245; Knott 2015: 89; Setterington 2018: 95). Working together to achieve a major outcome, as seen in the Bayeux Tapestry (Lester-Makin 2018) and the more contemporary Keiskamma Tapestry (Schmahmann 2015), or the many smaller pieces made by the quilters of Gee's Bend, Alabama (Leahey 2018; Luo and Williams 2018a, 2018b), has been one approach which arguably builds a sense of belonging and shared achievement amongst the participants.

Whilst these and other examples are drawn from a variety of periods, sites and cultural contexts, it can be argued that the commonalities in terms of the significance of both the participatory processes and the outcomes are important. For all their diversities, these aforementioned examples speak to a universality of impact and the timeless relevance of the relationship between humankind, textiles, and a shared sense of purpose; the processes of "making together" serving important personal functions. Such functions may not have been as well understood, interpreted or articulated as they are in contemporary society, but the previously mentioned examples do offer some indications of their significance in the field of participatory projects and of their impact on self-pride and sense of belonging as aspects of community building and increasing social capital which, cumulatively, lead to wellbeing.

There are also contemporary examples of craft-based interventions with groups from disadvantaged or disaffected sectors of society such as ethnic minority groups, the homeless, and prisoners; some established with the specific aim of improving mental health and well-being among participants (Browne and Rhodes 2011; Art Works 2013; Shercliff 2014; Desmarais 2016; Green 2017; Setterington 2018). Again, there are identifiable commonalities in the outcomes of these interventions, although there are variations in almost all aspects of their approaches, for example some groups come together regularly at a set time and place and others require contributors to submit an element for a final piece; groups vary in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, previous knowledge and experience, recruitment methodology and the amount of choice offered to participants, as acknowledged in the Good Practice Guidelines (Stitching Together Research Network, Shercliff and Twigger Holroyd 2020).

Several projects state their aims of improving health and well-being through creativity and increased social capital such as Affective Materials (Desmarais 2016) which focused on craft hobbies in community settings, or Spinning Yarns, a textile-based craft group for vulnerable men that brought therapeutic benefits for group members (Green 2017). Group participants have been identified as benefiting

from praise and approval thus engendering pride and feelings of self-worth through opportunities for validation and celebration (Art Works 2013; Shercliff 2014; Desmarais 2016; Setterington 2018).

There is a paucity of such research projects with school pupils. However, Setterington, in her work Threads of Identity with a group of male pupils from Burnage Academy for Boys in Manchester in 2016 (Setterington 2018, 2020), provides a source from which comparisons may be drawn. Setterington (2020) describes this work as involving 15 boys from year 8 (aged 12 and 13) along with the Head of Art and two teaching assistants from the school and 4 other adults. The purpose of the twelve-week project was one of memorial and remembrance of a 12-year-old Bangladeshi boy, victim of a racist killing in the school grounds 30 years previously. Predicated on her continuing work with signature quilts Setterington introduced the boys to the theme and purpose and led them through a process which included drawing, testing and exploring options, planning, making and sharing the final outcome.

Whilst her aims were to explore male identity and to challenge stereotypes around embroidery through the production of a poignant and important memorial, Setterington (2020) reports other outcomes which include benefits such as the development of conversation amongst the boys. Other projects have also documented that the activities involved provided a valued opportunity for constructive conversation between participants, the slow, repetitive nature of the work facilitating the dialogue as participants relaxed, whilst concentrating on and looking at their work rather than one another, (Gauntlett 2007; Shercliff and Twigger Holroyd 2016; Stitchlinks 2018). Expanding on that, Setterington (2018) valued the "cross-cultural, intergenerational and gender-based debate" between the mostly female adult staff and the teenage boys that permeated the sessions. She also noted the positive feedback from the boys' families at the final assembly at which the outcome was shared; when they endorsed the boys' reports that they had enjoyed both the project and the opportunity to learn new skills and had found it calming and beneficial in increasing confidence.

One other piece of similar school-based research, albeit focusing on sculpture, mosaics, and theatre, is documented in the summative report and evaluation of the Art Works projects (2013), run by Nottingham University and partners. This work identified a positive impact on a range of factors including improved self-confidence, self-esteem and resilience, enhanced communication and social skills, and increased social capital and greater social inclusion - all of which have congruence with outcomes of other participatory projects both historic and contemporary.

Mental Health of Young People Pre- and Post-COVID

Attitudes to mental illness have been the subject of media, charity, and anecdotal attention during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even prior

to the pandemic, resources to support those with poor mental health have been thought to be inadequate and those targeting young people less beneficial than those for adults. The Nuffield Trust (2018) reported National Health Service figures that showed that almost 400,000 young people were in touch with health services for mental health problems, particularly depression and anxiety; of those two thirds were not receiving any treatment.

The Nuffield Trust (2018) analysed mental health and well-being trends among young people in the UK between 1995 and 2014, revealing a six-fold increase in those who reported having a long-standing mental health condition. The upward trend could be attributed to rising awareness but an increase in anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions was evident from 2011. The number of teenage girls hospitalised because of self-harm increased by 37% from 2012/2013 to 2019/2020, (Nuffield Trust 2021) and both the number of teenage suicides (British Medical Journal 2020) and the demand for university counselling services (Broglia et al. 2018) have risen. The charity, Young Minds Media Centre (2019), reported that suicide was the most common cause of death for both boys (16.2% of all deaths) and girls (13.3%) aged between five and 19 in 2017.

The Children's Society's, Good Childhood Report (2020) focused on indicators including happiness in school, with family, with friends, and happiness about appearance, choices, and leisure time. The assessment of overall life satisfaction revealed a larger percentage of young people who scored below 50% than in previous years, continuing a downward trend. The scores signify low levels of well-being and are drawn from work with different age groups and cultures. The report also highlights the ineffectiveness of mental health provision for young people, particularly as a preventative measure. Early research on the effect of the pandemic carried out by Millar et al. (2020) identified three areas of impact that the lockdown has had and indeed is still having on the mental health of young people; those are direct impacts on young people, impacts on family and home settings, and impacts on education. Their conclusions were drawn from a consideration of both primary and secondary data and reports.

Ghosh et al. (2020) have identified that young people may be less likely to have been affected seriously by COVID-19 as a physical illness but have been more impacted by the psychosocial aspects of life during the pandemic. The significant consequences of being locked down and separated from their usual routines and relationships in contexts over which they may have little or no real control, began to be seen in the summer of 2020 and continue to emerge. Studies of direct impact report increased levels of anxiety, loneliness, distress and worry, evidenced amongst those quarantined. In the context of family, the impact of Covid lockdown is most strongly felt in those from disadvantaged communities; black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) families and those affected by violence and abuse. In terms of education, disadvantage has exacerbated weaknesses and

inequalities leaving children with anxieties over the future, worries about returning to school and a sense of loss in not having been able to participate (Millar et al. 2020). The Scottish Government's COVID-19 Advisory Sub-group on Education and Children's Issues reported in November 2020 that school closures had had a detrimental effect on the well-being of young people. Adolescent mental health was reported as being affected particularly badly with the greatest impact falling on vulnerable young people. As mental health provision is already depleted and likely to be under greater strain after the pandemic, schools are being tasked with taking more responsibility for the mental health of their students, (GOV.UK. 2020a, 2020b). Underpinning that is an expectation that schools provide some interventions and offer access to others. If it is accepted that well-being, or at least strategies to achieve it, can be taught as Seligman (2011) suggests, then schools must explore how they might move forward.

Creativity in Schools – A Lost Solution?

If creativity reduces stress and anxiety, creative opportunities in schools as therapeutic interventions may be able to enhance the wellbeing of young people. The Durham Commission on Creativity and Education (2019) determined that the current education system is largely knowledge based and so only partially equips young people with the life skills they need. Confidence and resilience are inadequately embedded with insufficient opportunities to learn and utilise creativity, critical thinking, and imagination. The current system perpetuates the perception that creativity and knowledge are mutually exclusive. The Commission acknowledged that creativity is not taught solely through subjects traditionally deemed creative but thrives in a creative culture and ethos in which can be developed personal well-being, resilience, and happiness and where young people can reach their full potential.

A range of studies have established that creative activity enhances aspects of well-being, (Csikszentmihalyi 1996; Fancourt et al. 2019; Gauntlett 2011; Kenning 2015). The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts Health and Well-being (2017) reported on a two-year enquiry which determined that the arts could help in tackling both social and health conditions and that active participation in a creative activity can be particularly beneficial for those with depression or mental illness, improving both happiness and quality of life. A variety of creative opportunities are explored in the enquiry, but schools are not included as one of the routes through which creativity and the arts may support the well-being of young people.

Fancourt and Finn (2019) offer a scoping review of the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing, which was prepared for the World Health Organisation, European Region. The document focuses firstly on prevention of mental ill health and promotion of healthy lifestyles, then on management and treatment of specific illnesses and end of life care. Whilst considering the role of

the arts in supporting child development there is positive comment on the potential for arts improving social skills and understanding, although most of the examples cited in the document focus on music and drama as interventions.

There is a growing body of work which considers the importance of leisure activities as coping strategies for dealing with stress. The current picture of reduction in, if not absence of, services and provisions that might be available to support individuals means that schools and other agencies have to seek out alternatives that aim to have a positive effect on wellbeing and mental health. As an example, Pollanen (2015) reports that women who were using craft-based activities for leisure commented positively on those activities as a source of satisfaction and optimism that helped them to counteract anxiety and negativity through making positive relationships and finding support from others. It is this, and other similar work with adults, that has led to considering work with children that can translate, for some, into a lifelong interest and coping strategy.

Creativity and Wellbeing Pilot Study – Methodology

At the beginning of 2021 contact was made with a Birmingham through school, part of a national academy chain, and plans were developed to carry out a pilot study with pupils in year 9 as soon as COVID-19 regulations made that feasible. The academy has 1600 pupils aged from 3 to 16, 99.9% of whom are drawn from ethnic minorities. It stands in a particularly deprived and impoverished area of inner-city Birmingham, one which struggles with unemployment, crime, poverty, overcrowding and poor quality housing, homelessness, substance abuse and violence.

The lockdowns and changes in COVID-19 regulations in schools caused several delays and deferrals until in May 2021 the opportunity arose to integrate the pilot study with an upcoming mental health initiative. The ensuing textile work facilitated the exploration of pupils' attitudes to both the process of making and the achievement of completing the outcome, which would then become the impetus for the launch of the school's campaign to raise awareness and develop understanding of poor mental health.

The pilot study was the first opportunity for field work within a wider research investigation examining the potential impact of participatory projects using textile processes such as hand stitch on the wellbeing of young people. The focus of the pilot study was to explore rather than explain or describe, and to assess the immediate impact and likely potential of participatory textile work with children. Hood (2006) notes that theorising research paradigms is a complex field, and it seems unlikely that any work will fit exactly into a single compartment. Equally important to consider is the extent to which the study of the philosophies and epistemologies intertwine and overlap.

There are inherent complexities in the research question: "Can young people at Key Stage 3 and 4 (aged 11-16) with existing social, emotional, or mental health (SEMH) issues identified by their school, can gain therapeutic benefits from textile processes such as hand stitch via a series of group workshop interventions?," particularly when schools offer potentially dynamic contexts and are subject to changes often imposed by external influences. McGuigan (1997) offers the relaxed view that researchers often make decisions about their methods as they progress, which may offer some reassurance to a researcher but should not be allowed to undermine the need for rigour and consistency. He emphasises that the fundamental premise by which researchers should operate is to select methods which meet the needs of the research rather than endeavouring to make the research fit round a given methodology.

Furthermore, in the context of COVID-19 restrictions and concerns the researcher was working as both participant observer and workshop leader. The pilot study was, as the name implies, an exploratory journey into the potential fieldwork and this experience has assisted in informing the development of a mixed-method design model which aims to allow for flexibility and responsiveness to the dynamics of the fieldwork context. When working in a school during a pandemic there is potential for changes beyond the control of the researcher to be imposed upon the content of the study and the methodological framework that underpins it. Aspects of qualitative research methodology, defined to make sense of human experience are essential to this type of study (Robson 2011: 17; Bhandari 2020). Stickley (2012: viii) suggests that qualitative research is particularly suited to arts activities and that it can be "made creative, non-intrusive and fun."

During making it may be said that the stitching itself becomes the methodology in so far as the process is a form of mindful craft practice through which stitchers can achieve more positive physiological and mental states. Stitch is an under-explored research tool which has not generated the interest invested into knitting or crochet as wellbeing practices (Swinnerton 2014). This realisation drew Swinnerton to undertake her work on mindful stitch that yielded encouraging results in terms of social inclusion and improved mood amongst participants.

Participant observation is a qualitative method that was employed in the pilot study as it enables the researcher to be in the chosen context alongside participants whilst they are engaged in the activities, observing progress and interaction first-hand as it occurs. Robson (2011) also suggests that the method suits researchers who feel it is more ethical to enter the research field overtly rather than to remain remote from it; in this pilot study the disclosure of the nature of the research to the participants was key. Alongside observing the activity and helping pupils with their contributions it is inevitable that there is informal conversation during the sessions which may involve all or some of the parties. Observation notes made at the time or very shortly afterwards play an important part in the process.

Semi-structured interviews, another qualitative approach, were anticipated as a method of collecting data at the end of the series of workshops because their inherent flexibility would have permitted the researcher freedom in the wording, ordering, and prioritising of questions (Robson ibid). However, the various restrictions in place due to COVID-19 removed this option. Self-completion questionnaires were therefore developed as an alternative method of gathering qualitative feedback data at the end of the pilot study.

Questionnaire design requires a researcher to be alert to the language and comprehension needs of respondents and to consider the order and structure of questions. Open questions allow respondents to determine their approach to the answers in their own way and permit the researcher the opportunity to garner unexpected or unique data (Rowley 2014).

A further qualitative method used is visual enquiry. Photography, identified by Pink (2007) as a visual research method, was used to record the process of the workshops, but attention had to be paid to ethics protocols, the anonymity of respondents, and the school photography policy which allows parents to opt out on behalf of their children.

It might be argued that when conducting research that is based on arts practice the products of that process, the art works themselves, are open to consideration and analysis as research data. Emmison and Smith (2007:1) propose that visual enquiry can be extended to the study of the "seen and observable." Cox et al. (2014) support this view, identifying visual data as pre-existing, or generated by the researcher or participant, the latter defined as possibly including "drawings, portraits, cartoons and other visual artefacts." This suggests that the textile work created by participants, both as a final outcome and the component parts that constitute the artefact, could be included as visual data.

Creativity and Wellbeing Pilot Study – Implementation and Outcomes

Over a period of two months, visiting the school weekly, the researcher worked primarily with a group of eight participants. These pupils had applied to be Mental Health Ambassadors representing the Key Stage 3- and 4-year groups and had gone through a selection process by staff and students for the role. Aged between eleven and fifteen, the four boys and four girls, from ethnic minority groups, had all experienced poor mental health in different ways including self-harm, anxiety, eating disorders, overdosing and depression. Some of the group had family members or friends who struggled with their mental health.

Each week a member of staff was allocated to the session to adhere to safeguarding regulations; whilst all staff were willing and co-operative there was no consistency in this allocation. No additional, external support for the researcher was permitted due to

COVID-19 restrictions. There were also occasions when other pupils joined the group because of internal organisational issues, a situation which will be familiar to those working in schools and one that was accommodated on each occasion. Those accommodations did have the potential at least to change, if not disrupt, the dynamic of the group.

The premise of the research, the University involvement, and the necessary documentation and permissions had been communicated in a preliminary group meeting. The importance of the work, which was substantiated by the involvement of a senior member of staff and the link to the University, had the effect of reducing any reluctance to join in. Framing pupil involvement to help others and promote the cause they had so recently signed up to was also powerful in achieving the co-operation of the whole group.

Once the permissions were returned, the first stage of the project was a planning meeting between the pilot study researcher Catherine Howard, the Assistant Headteacher who had set up the Mental Health Ambassadors scheme, and the core group of eight students. The discussion hinged on the way forward and the group was able to reach a consensus on the messages they hoped to convey to their fellow-pupils on the matter of mental health. These included: it is acceptable to express your feelings and to feel the way you do; you are not alone; others feel the same way and understand; others want to support you; it is not weak to express your feelings; it is not only just your own burden to carry; poor mental health can improve and get better like poor physical health. One pupil summed up his views with the words, "It is like you are a prisoner of your own mind," which led another to suggest that "your mental health holds you back, it weighs you down."

The researcher had planned and provided a variety of stimulus materials that included kantha wraps from India and Bangladesh as examples of simple running stitch which has visual impact. It was important to provide context with cultural relevance to engage with the pupils and to draw the activity into their field of reference and acceptability. Giving approval and validation to culturally specific items by sharing them as interesting examples is a positive approach which has the potential to make pupils feel included. Also offered were stitch samples made by the researcher; two and three dimensional samples from projects previously run by the researcher, and laminated illustrations of other work, both historic and contemporary from the UK and abroad, such as the Changi Quilt; Same Sea, Different Boat; Threads of Identity (Setterington); Sew Near Sew Far (Setterington); Bee Kind (Woolly Mammoth) and the Aids Memorial Quilts from both the UK and USA. Illustrated books such as Slow Stitch, (Wellesley Smith 2015); Resilient Stitch, (Wellesley Smith 2021) and Mark-making in Textile Art, (Parrott 2013) were shared.

The discussion then moved to the use of visual metaphors and ways the important concepts and ideas that had been identified, could be represented. The following ideas came forward:

- Clothing – hoodies, overcoats, an over-sized blazer to signify carrying your burden on your shoulders;
- Quilt or hanging – suggested by two pupils as being easier to produce;
- Handcuffs to signify being a prisoner;
- A ball and chain to signify being held back and being a prisoner;
- Rucksack(s) to signify being weighed down by baggage, carrying a burden;
- Keys to signify unlocking the burden.

At the suggestion of the teacher the ideas were put to the vote and the ball and chain was chosen with keys and clothing options coming in second and third respectively. The session ended with the decision that the pilot study outcome would be a ball and chain and that the strap line would be “breaking the chain of poor mental health.” The ball would be embellished with stitch that represented the students’ feelings about mental health, the base fabric would be black which the group felt represented the colour of depression and low mood. The chain would have some black links at the point where they were attached to the ball but after a certain point, they would be changed to be multicoloured to show that improvements and positive changes can be brought about.

For each of the following weeks, the hour-long stitching sessions were held in the principal’s meeting room over lunchtime and in time set aside for Personal, Social and Health Education. The choice of room added to the importance of the stitching events as it is not a classroom and has furnishings of a higher specification than that provided in classes. Pupils commented positively on the soft seated chairs and large polished tables. The room was set up with some of the books and samples from the introductory session, and pre-prepared stitching kits were distributed to the students. These kits were presented in brown craft boxes and comprised a pencil, notebook, pincushion with ten pins, two large-eyed needles, a 10 cm embroidery hoop, small scissors and a stitch ripper. An effort was made to colour co-ordinate these items and offer them in an attractive manner such as would be found in a professional adult workshop, thereby adding value and importance to the process and acknowledging the fact that they do not often receive what they perceive as special items within a school context. A mixture of black fabrics was made available including velvet, medium weight cotton, denim, textured voile, lightweight synthetic leather, a permanently pleated polyester, and pieces recycled from school uniform. Pupils were to have free choice and could take as much or as little as they wished.

Six stranded embroidery thread was chosen by the researcher as it would have a strong visual impact against the black fabric. To be most expressive pupils required a good range of colours and so four colour-sorted thread organiser storage boxes filled with floss bobbins were provided, offering reds and pinks; yellows, oranges, creams,

and golds; greens, greys and browns; blues, turquoises, purples and mauves. Unwinding a length of thread from the cardboard bobbins was less problematic than endeavouring to unravel a commercial skein. The researcher observed that the pupils' reaction to the threads and fabric, particularly the latter, was very tactile. They inquisitively picked items up and examined them, felt them, and shared them. Most enjoyed were the velvets which were stroked and commented on several times; one boy noting that women from the Arab community, including his grandmother, used it for clothing. The researcher gave an initial demonstration that covered threading a needle, knotting thread, making simple stitches, use of an embroidery hoop, general health and safety points (including use of large dressmaking scissors which were provided to cut pieces from the black fabrics) and reminders of the COVID-19 regulations in place in schools in England.

Over the following weeks, pupils produced individual pieces to be added to the collective outcome. Each piece was individual and spoke to the ability, confidence and skill of the maker. Some pupils developed a style of stitching which became identifiable while others changed their direction as new ideas came to them or extended their practice when there had been success. On completion each piece was pinned, by the maker, onto a full-size prototype of the final outcome so they could have some input on positioning of their work and could monitor progress towards completion. The final product was fitted over a 75 cm diameter exercise ball and then had the chain links attached (Figure 1). Although the group originally consisted of just eight pupils several others were introduced during the process and these were welcomed, encouraged and their work included. The first chain links had been determined to be black with stitching which read "breaking the chains of poor mental health" and the researcher both made those links and carried out the stitching.

It was then suggested, by the school, that the colourful links which provided the visual metaphor for breaking the chain of poor mental health should be made by 120 pupils in year 6 (key stage 2) who would be moving up to the secondary phase of the school in September. Their involvement was strategic as part of their transition to key stage 3 and had to be managed over one morning in school. Preparation was again critical; patterned and coloured fabrics were cut into 10 cm squares ready to be stitched with white embroidery thread to contrast with the black fabric focus in the rest of the textile artwork. To accommodate the time constraints, it was essential to have all the needles threaded and the yarn knotted in advance. The younger pupils were invited to contribute to the work and were promised that every piece of stitched fabric would be included. Ultimately twenty-five links were produced which made use of 150 stitched squares, these were added to the initial black links of the chain (Figure 2).

The original intention had been to gain feedback through semi-structured one to one interviews between the researcher and each

Figure 1
Breaking the chains of poor mental health by pupils at the Birmingham through school involved in the study, UK, June 2021. © Catherine Howard.

Figure 2
Detail from breaking the chains of poor mental health by pupils at the Birmingham through school involved in the study, UK, June 2021. © Catherine Howard.

participant. Impacted by COVID-19 regulations it became necessary to issue a questionnaire for completion after the last workshop. Mindful of the age, ability and language levels of pupils, the questionnaire was designed using three open questions which addressed participants' feelings on the main issues of process of stitching, the

outcome, and being part of the group. A further group of four questions focused on whether pupils had shared their experience with friends or family, which aspects they liked best or least, and whether they would be interested in further projects. The questionnaire was issued to the eight original group members (the Mental Health Ambassadors) and to another seven pupils who had contributed from the time they had been included in the group.

Drawn from the completed questionnaires that are part of this pilot study representative examples of responses about the process include: "I have really enjoyed being part of this project because everyone joined in, and we all came up with many different, beautiful designs" (pupil no. 7); "I felt good as though it was calming and relaxing by taking my mind of (sic) everything" (pupil no. 9); and "It felt really calming and everyone participated so it made me feel safe" (pupil no. 13). Feedback about the finished product included: "In my opinion, I think this project was a success and I'm really proud of it. The finish (sic) product looks incredible" (pupil no. 3); and "I feel proud of the finished product. Also, because I was a part of it and that I can show my work to others" (pupil no. 10).

Creativity and Wellbeing Pilot Study - Evaluation

The pilot study led to closer analysis of potential future methodologies for the ongoing research. Although providing positive evidence of students gaining from both the process of making and their pride in the finished product, there is value in working over a more sustained period with a more focused small group to further explore the depth and extent of impact of hand stitch in relation to the ongoing wellbeing in such a group. It is unrealistic to imagine that a six-week intervention can provide long lasting benefit to all pupils. The experience of going into a school as a visitor-researcher is a challenging one as the landscape changes daily and additional extra-curricular activity cannot always be prioritised. Although planning and preparation are crucial, it is likely that any school will face changes in routine that may impact on a researcher's fieldwork, creating unexpected changes. Working on the research during the COVID-19 pandemic added an additional level of complication.

The main issue during the pilot study was the introduction of different pupils to the group, usually without notice, because those individuals needed supervising by the member of staff allocated to the activity or because of the bubble system which was part of the pandemic protocol in England at the time. One session was extended because a further group of students, who had also applied to be Mental Health Ambassadors, were invited by the core members because they wanted to share in the activity. Whilst this was a testament to the process and value of the approval the core group was experiencing it exemplifies why participant–observer researchers need to be adaptable when working in a school environment. The constraints of both COVID-19 regulations and Disclosure and Barring

Service procedures compelled the researcher to multi-task, acting as both participant observer and workshop leader throughout. Conflating these roles in a research study is not ideal as one role can distract from the other. However, to take on a non-participant role in a school setting is unrealistic as pupils expect adults to be helpful and approachable in that context, to be unavailable to pupils would be damaging to the process and introduce barriers that would be counterproductive.

The experience of the pilot study informed research approaches to take forward. The role of participant observer is in fact quite nuanced, while it is physically impossible for an adult to be a complete participant concealed in a group of pupils Kawulich (2005) identified alternative stances, both rooted in the much earlier work of Gold (1958). Firstly, the "participant as observer," which allows the researcher to be a contributing member of the group and for the group to be aware of their activity. Secondly, there is the "observer as participant" position, which permits a degree of participation, secondary to the observation function, and has been defined as a "peripheral membership role" of which the group is aware. The latter has congruence with the researcher's role that emerged during the pilot study. The observer must establish a role within the group (Robson 2011: 319) and to be accepted as an adult in a group of school pupils the most obvious and most appropriate role is that of an educator, a role that allows the researcher to participate and to engage with pupils but from a slightly distant perspective. Being accepted demonstrably by school staff gives the researcher official approval and status, a head start towards being trusted by the group themselves, but one that carries expectations of positive adult behaviour and support. All the workshops and meetings were held in the Principal's meeting room normally out of bounds to pupils, which afforded perhaps another level of acceptance and acceptability, the privilege afforded status and inferred trust and confidence in the group helping to validate the activity to the pupils involved.

Kirby and McKenna (1989) saw it as critical that the researcher fully informs those involved about the research, explaining the rationale and provenance. This was the approach taken in the pilot and it enabled the researcher to be accepted quickly in what was a fairly short period of observation. Explaining that the research was based at a university appeared to add to its credibility. Maintaining pupils' confidence in themselves and the outcome was a key component of the pilot study. Initially, there were doubts expressed by some, with a proposal for a hanging or quilt at the planning stage as that was seen as more achievable. It was important to make obvious progress quickly so that the outcome could be visualised and trust in the researcher and teacher were critical. As confidence and pride grew pupils shared the project with peers, staff and families, reporting that the work had given opportunities to share with and learn from their mothers and grandmothers.

The research question suggests that pride and improved self-esteem might be experienced by participants when an outcome is praised or endorsed but in fact there was much fulfilment to be found in the process of making. Pupils offered members of their extended family or friends the opportunity to share in the making, brought staff and other pupils to see the work, and were happy to later display the outcome at their launch event and also at a local community exhibition on mental health.

Confidence in stitching ability from the pupils in the pilot study was varied, in line with common practice at many schools currently, the through-school does not offer textiles as a curriculum subject at Key Stage 3 or 4 although some students may have had incidental experience of stitch in the primary phase or at home. Therefore, it was necessary to teach stitch basics from the most rudimentary elements of simple straight stitch and pre-empt as many difficulties as possible through good organisation (providing needles with large eyes and yarn on card bobbins rather than in skeins). The pilot study highlighted several points when insufficient detail in the explication led to difficulty. These included pupils forgetting to cut a length of stranded cotton but instead threading the needle with cardboard bobbin still attached; knotting the ends of a cut piece of thread together resulting in thread 12 strands thick which caused an issue when it came to finishing off; stitching over the sides of the hoop and thus incorporating it into the work, and cutting work out of hoops, resulting in many circular contributions. Equipment and stimulus materials were well cared for although there was some breakage of needle threaders and of hoops when over-zealously used, but none were maliciously destroyed.

It was notable that over the process of the creativity and wellbeing pilot study the pupils did engage with one another in conversation, talked about their individual pieces of work and began to explore difficult, sensitive and personal areas in their discussions. Coming from four different year groups and different form groups they were not all well-acquainted with each other from the outset, so it was encouraging for the researcher to witness relationships developing within what had become a calm and relaxed environment. Similar benefits are highlighted in other participatory programmes.

Both genders engaged with the stitching and conversations became less boundaried by year group as the weeks progressed. One pupil was very aware of the significance of the colours and began to research LGBTQA+ colours to support her message about individuality. The workshop gave her the confidence to look those up on a phone and engage in an open conversation with a member of staff whilst seated with both male and female fellow pupils.

The impact of the pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of adolescents has been documented as one of increased anxiety and depression particularly amongst the disadvantaged and black, Asian and minority ethnic communities (COVID-19 Advisory Sub-group on

Education and Children's Issues 2020; Millar et al. 2020). These communities are representative of the Birmingham through-school's demographic in which the creativity and wellbeing pilot study was carried out. It was poignant to see one contribution, completed during the third stitching session, which spelt out the word "ANXIOUS" and was bunched up and drawn together tightly by the stitches, the pupil was able to share that the tightness echoed the feelings engendered by her anxiety. In that same session one pupil asked, "can I stitch how I am feeling now?" She was reassured and encouraged and, at the end of the hour, brought a piece of fabric embellished with large red stitches in different shades and cross hatched, a statement about her urge to self-harm. The lead teacher also stitched and asked students if they knew what it was that supported her mental health; she had stitched a boxing glove which represents her hobby. It may be appropriate to draw comparisons with Setterington's Threads of Identity project in terms of outcome at this stage. The aims and objectives of these projects were different but also had some areas in common. For example, Setterington highlighted the boys talk about their work and the feedback from their families which has resonance with the project under discussion (Setterington 2020:101).

The evaluation processes were affected by the changes enforced by COVID-19 procedures. The open-ended questionnaire was not a fully effective substitute for the semi-structured interview. The limitations imposed by having only a few questions formulated to be accessible by all pupils and appropriate for written answers were such that whilst responses were encouraging, the quality of data yielded through observation notes was higher. Staff absence due to Covid also limited the time to gather the feedback from the teachers involved.

Future Study

The next phase of the ongoing research will be further field work with key stage 3-4 pupils in secondary or through schools, informed by the findings from the pilot study. Preparedness, adaptability and setting up more effective and meaningful qualitative evaluation methods will be key, particularly inclusion of semi-structured interviews if COVID-19 regulations in England enable this. An element of quantitative evaluation will also be explored as a method for data collection, potentially asking pupils to assess their feeling of wellbeing and rate this on a numerical scale at the start of the creative workshop process, which they will then re-evaluate at set points over the workshop period. Definitions of wellbeing to the pupils can be explored with the group in more depth at the start of the workshop period and documented (e.g. via generating a word cloud with the pupils) to assist this process. Additionally, interviews with other practitioners working with disadvantaged groups will be undertaken to further inform the approaches for future creativity and wellbeing workshops.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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