

A collaborative youth project between three community based organisations

A person wearing a green and black plaid shirt is holding a large, white, cloud-shaped speech bubble. The person's hands are visible at the edges of the bubble, and their face is obscured by it. The background is a solid teal color.

# Limerick Our City: Our Story

A snapshot review undertaken by: Maria O'Dwyer | Framework Research

**Our City: Our Story** is a collaborative project between three Limerick community-based organisations – Southhill Hub, Narrative 4 (N4) Ireland and Learning Hub Limerick, piloted in February 2020. The project was designed to address the dual but inter-connected issues of geo-cultural division and mental health issues for young people in Limerick City. It brought together two youth groups from different parts of the City (Northside and Southside) to explore how engagement with social media can contribute to anxiety, using storytelling as the channel for that exploration.

The overall objective of this collaborative piece was to provide young people with skills to improve their resilience, by being able to interrogate (a) the meanings of what others post on social media and (b) how they are affected by and/or react to images they see on various platforms. The ever-evolving digital world is a significant contributory factor to a decrease in self-regulation, perspective, peer support and empathy levels in youth <sup>1</sup>, any/all of which can have an impact on mental health. **Our City: Our Story** is, therefore, a creative approach to supporting young people to interact with social media in a more critical manner, in order to achieve correlating awareness in terms of their self-esteem, agency and resilience.

The project ran during the school midterm break last February over a three-day period (18<sup>th</sup> -20<sup>th</sup>) from 11am to 4pm. It involved joint working between the management and youth work teams in Southhill Hub and Learning Hub Limerick. As both organisations take the view that posting on social media is another form of storytelling, they partnered with N4 ‘a global network of educators, students and artists who use art and storytelling to build empathy between students while equipping them to improve their communities and the world’ ([www.narrative4.com](http://www.narrative4.com)).

1 Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B. & Osher, D (2020) Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development, *Applied Developmental Science*, 24:2, 97-140

# Review of project from perspective of youth participants

It should be noted from the outset that a formal evaluation of the project was not plausible for multiple reasons (quick turnaround from project planning to delivery, budgetary constraints, lack of lead-in time to co-produce a methodology etc.) Learning from the project is, however, critical to the possibility of replication on a bigger scale in the future, sustaining collaborative youth work across the City and documenting the lived experience of those young people involved. What follows are some objective observations and recommendations from an external researcher who book-ended the project, meeting with those involved in its opening and closing sessions. While not in any way exhaustive, such learning captures the voice of the young people involved and presents their 'before and after' perspectives of such an intervention.



Open invitations were extended to youth group members in both Southill Hub and Learning Hub Limerick to take part in the project. On the first morning, in the Learning Hub base, seven young people presented for participation – two from the Northside and five from the Southside, comprised of two females and five males aged between 13 and 16. They were joined by two Youth Workers <sup>2</sup> from Southill Hub and one from Learning Hub Limerick, and facilitated by an artist who is a trained N4 facilitator.

The two geographically separate groups had not met prior to this point. During an introductory session, they shared names and expectations and were briefed on the objectives and content of the next three days: They would build their own personal empathy through simply listening to the experience of others, ‘walking in someone else’s shoes’ and would use art, some outdoor exercise, shared meals and story-telling as a way to ‘get to know each other and themselves’.

The ice-breaking exercise of ‘two truths, one lie’ - along the reluctance to input into the development of the group charter – highlighted the vulnerability and awkwardness involved when, in the process of identity, young people seeking a sense of belonging and their unique place in the world are still trying to figure out social situations and can be socially anxious <sup>3</sup>. This manifested itself primarily in shyness about explaining their interest in the project, dismissal of empathy as ‘something teachers are always banging on about’ and a reluctance to wear name tags.

Similarly, during a check-in circle where everybody passed a ball and described their energy level, the majority of levels were self-reported as being low or very low.

## Expectations of participants

After taking part in the ice-breaking exercise, the researcher asked all those participating what they expected from the project. While unclear as to whether their responses were shaped by a sense of genuinely not knowing what to expect or the afore-mentioned initial awkwardness that is an integral part of youth work, there wasn't a consensus on what the project or their involvement entailed:

'I don't know, something about not being hit too hard by the shit you see online'

'Anything is better than being bored at home'

'Don't know, don't care'

'I don't have a clue what I'm doing here to tell the truth'

When asked if they felt they might meet new people and learn some new things over the three days, responses were mixed:

‘It’s good to try new stuff.....you get sick of always doing the same stuff like’

‘I know enough people’

The very brief before picture was therefore one of disinterest, influenced largely by the tangible sense of needing to establish where each belonged in the group (the quiet one, the funny one and so forth). This was counter-balanced however by the commitment from each to see the three days through, indicating a certain level of curiosity and willingness to engage. None had any previous experience of the storytelling format but all undertook to take part.

Over a three-day period, the group enjoyed informal exchanges (i.e. chatting over pizza) and more planned activities (representing their sense of self visually through a mask-making workshop). Once more comfortable with their peers and the facilitator, the third day was designated for the story exchange.

- 2 One qualified and one student on placement
- 3 [www.childorg.com](http://www.childorg.com)



N4 describes story exchange as

‘an evidence-based methodology, which teaches young people social and emotional skills and improves wellbeing. The story exchange increases peer support and instils a sense of resilience and belonging by reducing feelings of isolation’<sup>4</sup>.

## Experience(s) of participants

The researcher revisited the group for a quick debrief at the end of the third and final day. The two days that lapsed between visits by the researcher saw a quantifiable transformation in the dynamic of the group, their interpretation of what the project involved and how they had/would benefit from it. Participants shared their reflections on the project and their experiences directly after finishing the story exchange in the N4 city centre premises. Below are the headline findings from that feedback session:

There was **greater cohesion** among the group. Rather than sitting at opposite sides of the room (reflective of the initial geographical delineation) the group was mixed, chatty and eager to talk about what they had experienced.

‘We just all came together I suppose and made new friends. That has probably been the best bit for me anyway’.

A budding relationship between two participants was indicative of the fact that both the **gender and geographical distance evident in the opening session were no longer issues.**

‘I’ll come away from this a better mixer.....and with a girlfriend!’

4 [www.narrative4.com](http://www.narrative4.com)

The very fact that all participants wanted to talk freely with the researcher reflected

- (a) an established **collective familiarity** within the group and
- (b) a **growth in individual confidence** in terms of speaking to somebody peripheral to the project.

Three young people made specific reference to the **creative elements** of the project, citing it as one of the most positive elements.

One, for example, had expected it *‘to be like school’* so was really happy that *‘we talked away while we made masks and told each other about ourselves without having to write stuff down in a crappy journal’*.

Another cited the story exchange format as something that schools could use as a way *‘to make us want to really listen to each other .....instead of having to listen to a teacher’*.

The change of location during the project was welcomed by participants, and for some, tied in with an increased sense of identity and belonging. One participant’s response, for example, highlighted the neighbourhood polarisation that often exists between cities and their suburban environs, particularly areas of socio-economic disadvantage.

*‘I always walk past these kind of old [Georgian] buildings here in town and I’ve never been inside one because .....we never would belong in here like. But now I’m in here and I think I will be again because we’re..... all the same, we all get to be here’*.

The **respect** shown by the Youth Workers and facilitator was reciprocated by the participants who complimented their approach, patience and relatability. The development of this mutual understanding and respect over the three days is somewhat reflective of the intended outcomes of the project and in particular the story exchange component:

‘Getting young people to share stories breaks down barriers, builds trust and reinforces the idea that they are not alone’ <sup>5</sup>

The focus on social media intended by the project organisers, while threaded throughout the content of the project, was not **an explicit focus** of the youth participants. While they spoke about an increased understanding of the experiences and opinions of others, they didn’t connect it (in their reporting) to social media. As social media is an integral part of their everyday existence and has become a generationally normalised facet of life, it may be that they do not differentiate between real life and online communication or interaction when discussing their experiences.

In terms of **overall satisfaction** with their experience of ‘Our City: Our Story’ 85% (n=6) of participants concluded that they would (a) be involved in the project if an opportunity arose in the future and (b) recommend it to a friend.

<sup>5</sup> [www.narrative4.com](http://www.narrative4.com)

The Youth Workers involved in the project noted the transferable skills that the activities, in particular the story exchange, championed – confidence, public speaking, ability to empathise and active listening. While they referenced the challenges involved in bringing two very different groups together to do ‘something so new to them’, there was consensus that the benefits of the project far outweighed those challenges.

‘Their experiences were really reflected in their stories. Two of them were particularly powerful. Try as you may with lots of different activities and ideas, you’d be hard pushed to get those stories out in your day-to-day work’.

From the perspective of youth empowerment programmes, which are built on ‘the assets of young people through a focus on active participation, mastery experiences, and positive connections in order to improve developmental outcomes and positive transitions to adulthood’, Our City: Our Story fits the brief perfectly. It seems only fitting that the closing comment is given to one of the participants in the final fifteen minutes of the project:

‘I walked in on Tuesday morning all down on myself... and here I am on Thursday excited about all the things I can do with my life. That’s a good thing’.

6 Morton, M. and Montgomery, P. Youth Empowerment Programs for Improving Self-Efficacy and Self-Esteem of Adolescents (2011), *Campbell Systematic Review*, 7:1, 1-18.



The project should be replicated and expanded to include more young people, in order to enable them to experience a progressive and different model of engagement;



Specific funding should be sought and ring-fenced to secure the possibility of this replication and expansion through ongoing collaboration between the three partner organisations involved;



Ongoing attention should be maintained to the cross-community element of the project and to the creative components (visual arts and story-telling), as the combination of both contributed significantly to the positive outcomes of the pilot project;



A replication of the project should seek to partner/collaborate with relevant academic research, to contribute to meaningful knowledge transfer. The Child and Family Research Centre in NUI Galway, for example, studies youth social empathy. A community project such as 'Our City: Our Story' could inform the Centre's tracking and development of policy interventions in the area of youth work;



And an evaluative framework, co-produced with the young people involved, should accompany any further development and roll-out of the project;

Sincere thanks is extended to the young people, Youth Workers, N4 facilitator and management of Southill Hub, Learning Hub Limerick and Narrative 4 Ireland.

Their vision, time and energy in the development of this project mirrors the overall purpose and drive of youth work :

To build young people's self-esteem and self-confidence; to develop their ability to manage personal and social relationships;

to offer worthwhile and challenging new experiences;

and to provide learning opportunities that enable young people to gain knowledge and develop new skills. In just three days 'Our City: Our Story' managed to achieve all of that and more.

