'Reclaiming place in a tourist town': Preliminary findings from a social theatre research project run by young people during COVID-19

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1. Introduction

Extensive research shows how important it is for young people's felt sense of identity and belonging to have a meaningful connection to place within the community (Thomson, 2007). The social and emotional wellbeing that comes from having a special connection to favourite places in the community is well documented, with studies demonstrating the negative consequences for children and young people if those connections are severed due, for example, to natural disasters creating irreversible changes to place and community (Gibbs et al., 2015). Overcrowding due to tourism influx can also jeopardise young people's connection to place and their sense of belonging due to towns primarily accommodating the needs of tourists (Canosa et al., 2018). This research note presents preliminary findings that highlight how young people's experiences of living through a 'tourist-less' time due to the pandemic has provoked a desire for more socially and environmentally just tourism in their community.

2. Background

The worldwide COVID-19 health crisis has made the risk of disconnection from place and community more evident, particularly in countries where total house quarantines are or were in place. Children and young people were certainly not the 'face of the pandemic' being largely spared from the direct health effects of COVID-19. However, the United Nations policy brief on 'The impact of COVID-19 on children' (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2020) and preliminary findings from a worldwide consultation with children about their experiences of the lockdown, showed increased mental health issues due to the challenges of house quarantines, home schooling, job and income loss of families, and increased family violence and abuse rates (Global Kids Online, 2020).

Through a social science lens, Lupton and Willis (2020) argue that pandemics are essentially social phenomena 'infused with and understood through situated and shifting meanings and practices'. As such, they are to be understood and analysed by devoting attention to the sociocultural dimensions. The study reported on in this research note builds on these concepts linked to sociocultural theory (Rogoff, 2008) and Childhood Studies

(Kellett, 2011) by exploring the lived experiences of young people in their social and cultural environment, growing up in a particular tourist destination, and at a specific point in time, during the April 2020 COVID-19 lockdown in Australia. As such, the research note presents preliminary findings filling a critical gap focusing specifically on young people's experiences during a pandemic (Mukherjee, 2020). The research note also highlights the importance of collaboratively researching with children and young people in host communities, responding to recent critiques surrounding the lack of empirical studies on host-children (Buzinde and Manuel-Navarrete, 2013; Canosa et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2020), and the lack of participatory and collaborative projects where the 'researched' becomes the 'researcher' (Canosa et al., 2017).

3. Study aim and methods

This research note presents preliminary findings from a participatory social theatre research project run by young people which commenced in February 2020 and coincided with the Australian COVID-19 lockdown in April 2020. Participatory Social Theatre is a collaborative theatrical genre that devises performances using social messages as its source, to enact social change. Participants research social issues they want to address and use performance as a means of education and advocacy (Finn et al., 2004).

The project aimed to engage a group of young actors ($n = 12$, between the ages of 15 and 21 years), members of the Byron Youth Theatre, to actively participate as co-researchers by interviewing their peers about the lived experiences of life in a tourist destination. The co-researchers were also involved in a series of workshops to develop their skills as researchers and engaged in collective discussion and reflection around the different phases of the project (data collection, analysis and development of the theatre production). All data from the workshops ($n = 3$), peer interviews ($n = 8$) and in-depth interviews with co-researchers ($n = 8$) were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis in NVivo12.

Findings aim to provide evidence for the co-researchers to create an original social theatre performance devised and performed *by* and *for* young people to spark a conversation and awareness in the community with their peers on the impacts of tourism. There is growing evidence

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Fig. 1. Young people's perspectives of life in a 'tourist-less' town during COVID-19

that participatory approaches to research produce more meaningful insights into young people's lives and extend the right to voice their opinions on issues that are rarely considered to be in their domain such as tourism development (Canosa et al., 2017). Involving young people in this way also promotes significant outcomes. For instance, in the childhood studies literature, participatory approaches to research *with* and not merely *on* young people are emerging as important tools of empowerment and pedagogical development (Kellett, 2011).

It is timely to extend this work to explore how participatory social theatre - and the creative process of being involved in the research, production and performance of a theatre piece - improves our knowledge and understanding of the complex issues that play out when growing up in a community with a continuous flow of visitors and temporary migrants. This is a particularly important methodological advancement in tourism studies given the neglect of creative, disruptive and transformative methodologies such as ethnodrama, ethnotheatre and social or popular theatre (Mura, 2020; Wilson and Hollinshead, 2015). It also allows for the sociocultural dimensions of young people's lived experiences to be fully explored both during the research and theatre production. This study endeavours to meet these gaps in research practice to foster more authentic understandings of young people's experiences of growing up in a tourist town.

4. Reclaiming place

Australia was one of the few countries that successfully contained the spread of the COVID-19 virus, bringing partial lockdown measures into effect relatively early on (O'Sullivan et al., 2020). This scenario created a unique opportunity for families, children and young people to socially isolate whilst still enjoying relative freedom to go outdoors and connect to nature in their home towns. This connection to place was significantly heightened for local residents of popular seaside tourism destinations on the East Coast of Australia such as Byron Bay.

Since the data collection phase of this project coincided with the Australian COVID-19 lockdown and the temporary end of both domestic and international travel, the lived experiences of the young people living in the Byron Shire were significantly different from their 'normal' experiences in the tourist town. The young co-researchers felt it was important to document this unprecedented moment in history, with preliminary sentiments and perspectives of the pandemic concerning tourism, summarised in Figure 1.

Discussions with the co-researchers during online mapping activities and face-to-face workshops show they care deeply about their community particularly when witnessing the negative impacts of tourism activity including, for example, littering, anti-social behaviours and illegal parties in national parks. In Figure 1, the co-researchers reflect on the heightened connection to place they experienced due to the lack of tourists as a positive outcome. Not only do young people's ecological consciousness transpire from these quotes but during the project, their sensitivity to social problems (e.g. housing affordability, homelessness and disrespect for Aboriginal sacred sites) often emerged in discussions of 'overtourism' in their community.

Findings suggest young people in Byron Bay long for a more socially and environmentally just tourism. In advocating for change, they want to be active citizens in making decisions to ensure a sustainable future. Young people's concerns for the environment have, in fact, tripled in Australia since the publication of the last Mission Australia survey findings in 2018 (Mission Australia, 2019). Recent research also shows that youth activism is on the rise and young people want to have a say in the governance of our communities, cities and nations (Canosa, Graham & Wilson, 2020; Jourdan and Wertin, 2020; O'Sullivan et al., 2020).

Hence the findings of this research will be further workshopped by the young co-researchers in 2021 to create an original theatre performance devised and performed *by* and *for* young people. The social messages conveyed in the performance will function as an educational, as well as, an advocacy tool to lobby for sustainable tourism solutions in their community. If reclaiming special places was identified and so crucial for young people in this research, surely this is a good opportunity to reimagine tourism based on the rights of residents of host communities, including children and young people and the important contribution they can make to the community to evoke positive change.

5. Conclusion

The economic difficulties the COVID-19 pandemic has caused are widespread, and recovery of the tourism industry will be slow, and as such, now is the time for local tourism destinations to think strategically about these locations and the steps towards recovery. In considering the views of young people in this study during the pandemic, and the subsequent changes identified by them that occurred in their town, a balance is needed between preserving the livelihood tourism provides in a community and a more socially and environmentally just tourism industry (Crossley, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Hearing the voices of children and young people who live in these communities provides insight into the range of issues they experience, however, to achieve sustainable solutions they must be invited to meaningfully participate in tourism policy and planning in their communities. Only in this way can we reimagine tourism based on the rights of the youngest residents of host communities.

Authors Bio

The research team has an interest in participatory and transformative research to empower young people to lead change in their communities. Antonia, Catharine and Peter research in the space of community wellbeing, youth's rights, arts and creativity education at Southern Cross University, Australia. Lisa is the Director of Byron Youth Theatre and Aiyana (age 17) and Rory (age 16) are young actors and co-researchers on this project 'Our Home Holiday Town'.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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