Beating Time: Methodological Questions Arising From the Evaluation of a School-Based Arts Project

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Abstract

This article reflects on the evaluation of an innovative educational arts project at a primary school in Liverpool. Based on an animated film version of Janáček's *Cunning Little Vixen*, an opera populated by animals, this child-led project was considered to be a successful endeavour. Yet there remain unanswered questions over how this success might be defined and indeed what conventional methods of evaluation research can hope to capture. The article draws on debates from the new wave of childhood studies and considers how some of the recent theoretical and methodological developments in this field, particularly around post-qualitative research, could and should influence the way that evaluation is carried out. Yet there are tensions between the complexities that these developments raise and the intention of evaluation which is to provide straightforward answers.

Introduction

In the spring of 2017, I carried out an evaluation of a week-long arts project that was conducted by the European Opera Centre (EOC) at a primary school in a socially and economically deprived ward of North Liverpool (Foster, 2018). The project involved Year Five children (aged 9-10) writing, staging, rehearsing, and performing a short opera during the course of a school week. The evaluation was a straightforward one, using standard qualitative methods of observation, interviews, and focus groups. It was, in fact, a much shorter and more conventional evaluation than others I have carried out that have run into years in duration and have included participatory and arts-based methods (see Foster, 2016). I took the project on because I was keen to work with the EOC and respected the ethos of the project that they were planning to undertake, which would take opera to children who were otherwise unlikely to experience it. The evaluation was funded by Edge Hill University. It was intended to be of use to the EOC in assessing what worked well and what improvements could be made to this educational endeavour, and also in drumming up funding for further educational projects. The project was a pleasurable one to witness: lively and creative, and temporarily turning the school into a thrum of energetic and largely joyful productivity for five days as children were introduced to new ideas, techniques and experiences.

As the EOC's project was time-bound, so of course was the evaluation. A report was duly submitted to the Centre several months later which aimed to capture the meaning and outcomes of the project from the viewpoint of its various protagonists. Yet I have continued to reflect on both the project itself and my evaluation of it, identifying and working through some of the tensions that arose. Snatches of the songs that the children composed replay themselves through my mind at unexpected times and I wonder what the children are doing now. There are discordant notes too. I wonder about some of the quieter or seemingly less relevant voices to which I neglected to pay much attention.

This has led to insights into what the evaluation captured and frustrations at what it failed to grasp. My thinking on methodological issues has also progressed, inspired by developments in childhood studies and its increasing emphasis on post-qualitative research (see Spyrou, 2017; Rautio, 2013; Myers, 2014). Post-qualitative research frequently draws on Deuleuzian-inspired ideas—a "thinking with" Deleuze (Mazzei and McCoy, 2010, p. 503)—and also the new materialism exemplified by Barad's (2007) work. In particular, I have been influenced by debates on the reliability of voice, relational ontology, and the notion of time as multidimensional. At the same time, I have adhered to the understanding that knowledge production involves taking political and ethical responsibility (Spyrou, 2017), and evaluation research in particular advances certain interests over others (Greene, 2013). I have thus attempted to navigate the risk that the "highly cognitive, intellectual, and abstract character" of post-qualitative theory might detract from such ethical commitment (Greene, 2013, p.754).

The passage of time that has occurred since the evaluation has also removed many traces of the children's performance and I am left with interview and focus group data, a series of photographs, and a crumpled programme. Readers of this article do not get to see the events that are discussed; moreover, like Ulmer (2017) I am starting to think that it is no longer enough to produce "piecemeal" (p. 834) knowledge through the presentation of quotes from interviews or snippets of observations. The aim of the article is to consider some of the tensions around measuring the success of educational artistic projects, and to query the questions we tend to ask and the methods we tend to use to do so. Whilst the article does draw on the interview and focus group data, and indeed presents a series of quotations from these, it simultaneously questions their validity and suggests that research is never tidily completed.

The article begins with a scene-setting description of the EOC's project, "The Vixen." There follows a brief outline of the methodology employed in the original evaluation and in the critique of this presented in this article. The following three sections address some of the questions that post-qualitative research raises in relation to the methods used in the original evaluation. The article concludes by arguing the importance of the arts and the need to move away from seeking measurable outcomes of arts programmes. There are, perhaps, lessons to be learned from *The Cunning Little Vixen* in this regard.

The Vixen

This was the EOC's first school-based project and it aimed to give all 61 Year Five children at a North Liverpool primary school a supplement to their creative education. The school set aside the usual timetable for the week, enabling five days to be devoted to the project. Opera "brings together people in the seemingly impossible task of collaboration, and in the spirit of sharing" (Hunt, 2017, p. 10), and this was very much the case in this project which was conceived and developed (initially through an already-established relationship between school leaders and the Centre) over the course of several months and a number of lunchtime meetings at the school. Given that an opera is about much more than music, the EOC wanted the project to address four discipline areas: art and design, drama and movement, music, and production. This was also intended to meet the aim that all the children should be involved in the project, whether or not they wanted to perform. The Centre recruited eight project facilitators to work with the children: two in each of these areas. The majority of these facilitators were recent graduates from a local university with which the Centre had links; one was a more experienced stage manager, and another was undertaking a Master's degree in Music.

The project was based on the world's first hour-long animated opera: a cartoon film of Janáček's comic opera, *The Cunning Little Vixen* (*Prˇíhody lišky Bystroušky* in Czech which translates more accurately to "Little Sharp Ears"). This was envisaged, some time ago, by the Centre as an innovative vehicle to bring opera to people who might never otherwise

experience it. The project was taken up by BBC Television and versions have been made in English, Spanish, Catalan, Czech and French (with the EOC selecting, training and recording the cast for each version). The story reflects the cycle of life, the passing of seasons, death, and rebirth. The titular vixen is captured by the Forester but escapes his covetous grasp and flees to the forest where she marries and bears offspring. She dies at the hands of the Poacher at the end of the opera but is survived by her litter of cubs. The opera is populated with a cast of animals and insects: in addition to the vixen and her cubs are a philosophical cockerel, comical chickens and a curmudgeonly old badger, a pesky mosquito and a hungry frog, and a woodpecker that assumes the role of a priest. *The Cunning Little Vixen*, in the words of one critic, "combines jocular humour with melancholy nostalgia" (as cited in Sheppard, 2011, p. 155).

During the first two days of the week, children attended workshops on each of the four discipline areas. They were then able to choose which of these to focus on for the rest of the week whilst developing a short opera. The children were supported to take charge of this process, from deciding on the story, composing music and making costumes, to undertaking risk assessments, designing marketing materials and greeting visitors. The opera was performed on the Friday to the rest of the school, families, and invited guests. This was a lot to fit in to a week, even without formal lessons, but it was achievable not least because the children were all very familiar with the *Cunning Little Vixen* from the outset. Year Five teachers had introduced the children to the animated film and delivered a series of lessons based on the opera. There was a palpable sense of excitement on the first day, as children arrived at the school knowing that there were going to be no lessons all week. Nor were they confined to their classrooms. Rooms around the school had been commandeered for their use, and the children were able to move "freely" around.

Methods

The qualitative approach taken in the evaluation (Foster, 2018) seemed an appropriate way to explore the outcomes of the EOC's project, not least because the project aims had deliberately been left loose. The project had been carefully planned, and it was clear it should offer a group of children from a highly economically and socially underserved area the opportunity to experience a range of artistic disciplines. Yet, it was considered something of an experiment because the Centre did not know how the children would engage or respond. Moreover, it was crucial to the Centre that the project should be child-led, and so there needed to be room for the children to shape the project.

When I agreed to carry out the evaluation, I explained to the Centre and the school why I would take a qualitative approach. The school intimated that they had envisaged testing the children's Maths and English ability before and after the project. I suggested that not only was

this was at odds with the philosophy of the child-led, exploratory project that was about enriching the children's lives, it was also problematic methodologically. For such an evaluation strategy to be sufficiently rigorous, it would require large, standardised samples and ideally a longitudinal aspect (i.e., measuring change over a prolonged period of time). I have since heard that that Maths and English testing *will* be going ahead in future iterations of the project, which is disappointing. Yet there were also flaws in the approach that I took to the evaluation, and these are explored below.

A number of complementary methods were employed in the evaluation in an attempt to capture the diversity of stakeholder perspectives: ethnographic observations that took place throughout the week-long project, and during planning meetings and post-project reflection meetings, focus groups with children, focus groups with parents, and nine stakeholder interviews. These semi-structured interviews were carried out with the EOC's Chief Executive, three teachers from the school, two teaching assistants from the school, the Senior School Improvement Officer assigned to the school, and two of the EOC's facilitators. Approaches to research ethics were designed in consultation with the school and ethical approval was granted through the university's Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Three focus groups were carried out with 54 of the 61 children that took part in the project. The children were a mix of boys and girls and predominantly White British (88% of pupils at the school were White British). Parental consent and children's assent were required for participation. Whilst all parents/carers consented, several children opted out of the focus groups or left early because they did not want to miss an IT lesson that was taking place at the same time. The focus groups were held in a Year Five classroom during the week following the project, and children were divided into the groups that they had worked in for the project: one focus group was carried out with the Drama and Movement group; a second with the Art and Design group; and the third focus group included the children from both the Music group and Production group (there were fewer children in Music and Production, hence they were combined). The resultant data was analysed thematically for the evaluation report. I return to that data in this article, but my analysis now is coloured by having had considerable time not only to think about the evaluation research but also to update my reading of post-qualitative research and the new childhood studies.

As Cox (2005) discusses, the view of research as a linear process marked by particular points of entry, immersion, and exit from the field misses something:

> This view is one-dimensional; it neglects the recursiveness of the research process, the rich and varied ways that we experience and re-experience specific moments in time. It allows us to think that once the research results are disseminated we are done with the

awkward yet necessary struggle to articulate who we are in relation with those we study. (as cited in Hallowell et al., 2005, pp. 24-5)

Given that I wanted to re-think the way that I had done the evaluation, I also needed to distance myself from the original methods. In an attempt to think about doing research differently, I took St Pierre's (2012) words as inspiration:

> I imagine a cacophony of ideas swirling as we think about our topics with all we can muster – with words from theorists, participants, conference audiences, friends and lovers, ghosts who haunt our studies, characters in fiction and film and dreams—and with our bodies and all the other bodies and the earth and all the things and objects in our lives. (p. 471)

St Pierre and Jackson (2014) discuss how coding becomes redundant when we move beyond Cartesian ontological realism that assumes there are data existing "out there" (p. 715) just waiting to be collected and coded. Given that I felt the words in my transcripts did not capture the essence of the EOC's project, instead of a systematic re-coding of the data, it made more sense to draw on a melding of memories, imagination, fragments of data, and my readings. It is therefore this blend of phenomena that enables the following discussion of how we might evaluate children's arts programmes in new ways.

The following three sections address questions that post-qualitative research raises in relation to the methods used to conduct the evaluation. *Hearing voices* considers the context in which children's voices emerge and the representational decisions that are made in capturing them. It raises problems inherent with focus group research and draws on Johansson's (2016) "confabulative conversations" (p. 445) as a potential alternative approach. *Thinking relationally* takes as a starting point the relations that the children developed with non-human characters of the opera. It draws on these relations as a way of thinking about what the evaluation of arts programmes is actually trying to measure. *Memories of the future* explores different understandings of time. It begins with the narratives of childhood that adult participants in the evaluation drew on, then considers how time tends to be understood in evaluation research. It suggests a more complex, less linear, conception of time might be useful, giving the example of Myers' (2014) research with kindergarten children.

Hearing Voices

I approached the evaluation with an ethical commitment to listen to the children involved in my observations and the focus groups. Research "with" rather than "on" children has become increasingly ubiquitous over recent years, stemming from the "children's voice" discourse that has been such a vital aspect of childhood studies. This discourse has a strong political

dimension: as children's rights have risen high on international and national political agendas, so has it been important to bring the voices of children into the debate (Eldén, 2012). Given that knowledge production is fraught with issues of power and control, an attempt to hand over some of this power seems apt. However, there is little straightforward about this in practice.

The new wave of childhood studies, whilst retaining a robust ethical stance in relation to children's lives, draws attention to the lack of criticality when attending to their voices in research. There is a need to take into account the processes which produce them:

> By focusing on the interactional contexts in which children's voices emerge, the institutional contexts in which they are embedded, and the discursive contexts which inform them, we can move beyond simplistic claims to truth and authenticity and begin to look critically at issues of representation. (Spyrou, 2017, p. 86)

Issues of truth, authenticity and representation are addressed in post-qualitative inquiry. The prerequisite of humanist qualitative inquiry that voice must be present—spoken, heard, recorded, and transcribed into words in an interview transcript (Mazzei, 2013)—is challenged. There are myriad decisions that come into play when recording, transcribing, and analysing "data." The transcript itself is an "artefact" that not only provides evidence of the researcher's role in the dynamic but is also produced by them (Alldred & Burman, 2005, p.183). So rather than directly represent reality, voice has been shaped through the research process and the interactions this involves (Mazzei & Jackson, 2009). Indeed, voices that are given a hearing in research have most likely been "censored and disciplined" even before the research questions are asked (Mazzei 2009, p. 46). Such a conventional approach to knowledge production cannot capture a pre-existing truth, especially if we understand interactions themselves to produce the words that are spoken. From a Deleuzian perspective, voice does not emanate from a singular subject but is produced "in an enactment among researcher-data-participants-theory-analysis" (Mazzei, 2013).

In the evaluation, holding focus groups in the classroom was a pragmatic way to manage the process and the school was helpful in securing parental approval for this to take place. However, it was by no means an ideal method for attentive listening on my part. The fact that the groups took place in a classroom setting, with me standing at the front in the position of a teacher, highlighted the power dynamic that is prevalent in all research but particularly that which involves minoritized groups. The class teacher was also present and did not hesitate in prompting the children, particularly when they struggled to answer my question about what they had learned from the project. (This was, in hindsight, a problematic question as I discuss later.)

My approach to the evaluation did succeed in producing some interesting and eminently quotable responses, not least the description of the project as "just like living in heaven for a week" by a Year 5 boy whose mother was a school governor and champion of the project. These were useful to provide illustration of the success of the EOC's project in the evaluation report, but I felt frustrated at the time that, for the most part, the conversations I had with the children were not able to capture the richness and quirkiness of the project that I had observed.

As Johansson (2016) describes, it is common to supplement focus groups with other methods—such as individual interviews and observations—to make up for the supposed "triviality" (p. 456) inherent in the focus group interview. In the evaluation, although I aimed to treat children's voices as equal to adults, there remains a sense that the adults' participation in one-to-one interviews lent a more complete and perhaps more rational addition to the project. People speaking from certain positions have more authority than others; for instance, children do not have the same authority as teachers to identify "good readers" (Alldred & Burman, 2005, p. 185). However, a post-qualitative perspective challenges some of these assumptions. For one, the approach of "more is better" (children's *and* adults' voices) still assumes a "present, stable, authentic" voice (Mazzei & Jackson, 2009, pp. 1–2). The notion that combining other methods with the focus group will produce less shallow, more *in-depth* data might also be a mistake. Assuming a duality between depth and surface whereby something on the surface represents what is beyond is problematic. In conventional qualitative research we do not pay attention to these surfaces "because they are ordinary and thus scientifically uninteresting" (Johansson, 2016, p. 456). Yet, following Deleuze and Guattari (1994, 2012):

> there is not such a thing as in-depth or shallow data. There are only planes of immanence, on which everything appears, not as representations for something else, but as ontological events without hierarchies. On this plane of immanence … becomings can take place which do not give precedence to what already exists, such as knowledge and opinions, but it rather opens for the not-yet-seen as well as the virtual. (Johansson, 2016, p. 456)

Drawing on Deleuze's and Guattari's ontology of immanence, post-qualitative inquiry might challenge the notion of a coherent and stable subject and instead open up the idea of 'lines of becoming'" (Johansson, 2016, p. 446). Alldred and Burman (2005) note that an approach which questions the conventional model of the individual is particularly valuable for children and other groups who have historically been denied full subject status. Given that children are often viewed as "irrational" and "inconstant" (Alldred & Burman, 2005, p. 177), an understanding that *all* voices are unstable can perhaps be seen to level the playing field.

Johansson (2016) writes about her struggles to work with conventional methods when the philosophical approach to her research—which involved discussing the future with secondary school students—drew from Deleuze and Guattari. Her choice of focus group interview was "blemished by positivistic language and standards" such as coding, validity, in-depth/superficial data, etc (Johansson, 2016, p. 445). She turned instead to the "confabulative conversation" (p. 445) which emerged through her engagement with Deleuzian theory, and which aimed to blur distinctions between reality and fantasy; dream and speculation became important data. Such an approach has the potential for participants to "go beyond established positions, often maintained by an emphasis upon knowledge, and opportunities to connect to each other's voices towards the virtual, provide possibilities to question positions and discourses often taken for granted" (Johansson, 2016, p. 464).

In my evaluation, so much of the focus group data was left out of the final write-up because it lacked coherence. For instance, the following peculiar pun which a boy had offered up did not find its way into the report (although at the time I had suggested it would):

Researcher: Excellent, and what did you learn?

Child 1: Well, for the art people, the strings, the ropes, the strings.

Researcher: Tell me what you mean by that? What does…?

Child 1: Show them the ropes.

Researcher: Show them the ropes. [Laughter]

Child 1: And then, if they're from art, the strings.

Researcher: Oh, okay. [Laughter] It's a very good pun, I will have to put that in my report.

I then moved on to ask other children about what they had learned through the EOC's project, receiving some perhaps more useful—but also more pedestrian—responses:

Child 2: I learned how to like play the same tune on different instruments.

Child 3: I think we got used to working as a team, with all the people.

I wonder now what would have happened had I followed that string and taken the child's lead in the conversation, and had seen if it sparked others' imaginations. In the future, I would

consider the confabulative conversation as a way to approach evaluation research. For now, it has inspired me to look at the focus group data in a new way: to reconsider some of the directions that the conversation took, particularly those strings that I was unable to weave into the narrative of the report.

Thinking Relationally

This excerpt from one of the focus groups centres on the *Cunning Little Vixen* film that the children watched as inspiration to create their own opera:

> Child 1: It had nice music.
>
> Researcher: You liked the music and you remember that, yes?
>
> Child 2: And it was funny.
>
> Researcher: It was funny in parts. Which part did you find funny?
>
> Child 2: The chickens.
>
> Researcher: The chickens. [Laughter] What did you find funny?
>
> Child 3: The vixen weed the badger.
>
> Researcher: When the what, the vixen -..?
>
> Child 3: Weed on the badger.
>
> Researcher: When she weed on the badger. [Laughter] What did you think?
>
> Child 4: When the frog jumped on the forester's face.
>
> Child 5: When the owls were like, "Scandalous."

Throughout all three focus groups, there are multiple references to the animal characters, not only in the film but also in the movement workshops, the after-school workshops that parents were invited to attend, and the performances themselves. "Bluck, bluck, bluck," clucked one boy in a focus group, when someone else mentioned the comical chickens. In another group, a child talked about enjoying the reactions from the audience when the chicken performers in the children's opera "were waving their bums all over!"

One of the teaching assistants who took part in an interview had a daughter involved in the EOC's project and described how the chickens had infiltrated their waking and sleeping lives:

> I remember one morning – I think it was the Thursday morning – we came out of the house, and [my daughter] walked to the car, acting like a chicken, and making chicken noises. Then, on the Friday, after the production had finished, we were at home, and she'd gone to bed. I woke up in the middle of the night, and I heard chicken noises coming from her bedroom. She was being a chicken in her sleep. (Foster, 2018)

As I re-read and re-listen to the data, the roles of the animal characters dominate. I consider how the new wave of childhood studies draws on relational ontologies:

> To think relationally in childhood studies is not only to destabilise and decentre the field's object of inquiry—the child—and to move beyond claims to truth and authenticity often represented through the notions of "children's voices" and "children's perspectives" but to also expand the network of relations and associations which link children with other human and non-humans across multiple spatial and temporal scales. (Spyrou, 2017, p. 28)

Children might tend to, or certainly be more encouraged than adults to, anthropomorphize or humanize their non-human environment and to apply an "aesthetic-affective openness towards material surroundings: an attentiveness to and sensuous enchantment by non-human forces, an openness to be surprised and to grant agency to non-human entities" (Rautio, 2013, p. 395). I wonder if, had I followed the strings as the children spoke of the animal characters they had worked with over the course of the week, a richer dialogue might have ensued. Perhaps contabulative conversations could have been based on the animals' roles in the opera project.

Rautio (2013) whilst being keen to avoid "the Rousseauian myth of innocent and authentic children who are corrupted through being brought up" (p. 395), suggests that academics take seriously those practices that children spend time engaging in, whether or not we can see the value of these. In one of the children's focus groups, as we explored what the children had learned through the project (rather than—as I wish now—explore these dreams of and relationships with the animal characters), a girl contributed: "How to make animal movements, because I didn't know." Although this skill might never find its way onto a CV, there is something joyous about seeing this as a learning outcome. It calls to mind Sellers' (2010) exploration of thinking differently about curriculum; of thinking from a child's perspective in ways that aim to move toward "perturbing conventional, entrenched developmental understandings" (Sellers, 2010, p. 557). Similarly, Godwin (2015), in her study

on experiential outcomes in learning music, focuses on the, admittedly elusive, criterion of enjoyment. This means relinquishing outcome-driven measures and freeing music education from a cycle "in which to justify its value, priority is given to pedagogical approaches based around assessment, standardized progress and measurable outcomes and benefits" (p. 37).

There are certainly tensions (in this project and in others) over what the purposes of arts activities actually are. Crossick and Kaszynska (2016) reviewed a body of research that suggests education and participation in the arts brings a host of wider benefits for learning outcomes, development, and skills. Interestingly, few of the studies they reviewed were able to identify more than a very modest increase in formal attainment. Crossick and Kaszynska (2016) stress that these skills and qualities—some of which are difficult if not impossible to quantify—should be given due import despite the fact that policy discourse might favour increases in formal attainment. They are also concerned about the trend for considering what impact arts engagement might have on other areas of learning. For instance, there is a frequently cited claim that music improves mathematical performance; rarely would this question be asked in reverse (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016). Collini (2012) takes this a step further, highlighting the absurdity of the situation:

> If we find ourselves saying that what is valuable about learning to play the violin well is that it helps us develop the manual dexterity that will be useful for typing, then we are stuck in a traffic-jam of carts before horses. (as cited in Clark & Jackson, 2017, p. 119)

Children might well offer alternative perspectives on what the arts can offer. Indeed, running with the imagination, fiction, and thought experiments "can often give [adults] the estranging sensitivity that is necessary to experience a breakdown in understanding," defamiliarizing entrenched ideas (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 724). There does, however, remain a need to tread the "fine line between presenting children's accounts of the world and the claim to be able to see the world from the child's perspective as a new kind of 'truth'" (James, 2007, p. 263), and it is also necessary to ask whether it serves children best to present them as having a distinct perspective:

> Or does it serve children better to show that their perspectives are not fundamentally different from adults' or even that differences between them are regarded as significant? (Alldred & Burman, 2005, p. 193)

St Pierre (2012) advocates a more "risky" and "provocative" (p. 473) social science inquiry. She is weary of the lines drawn around the practice by those with power. Yet even if we overstep those lines, there remains a need to be "vigilant in analysing the consequences of human invention" (p. 473). In evaluation research, which involves making judgments of

quality and worth, some interests are always going to be advanced over others (Greene, 2013). There are definite consequences for those programmes or practices being measured, but also consequences for choosing to measure or focus on particular ideas. For instance my preoccupation with what the children had learned from the EOC project, which feeds into the idea that it should have provided them with experience and knowledge that they would later be able to draw on.

Memories of the Future

A number of the adults who took part in one-to-one interviews in the evaluation discussed the EOC's project in relation to children's futures. Time passing is a central tenet in majority world understandings of childhood, and its focus is "inextricably linked" to time future (James & Prout, 2015, p. 209). Some participants spoke about the importance of creating happy memories for children to look back on, drawing on that ubiquitous narrative of childhood as "'in the past' as something to be remembered, as a time to look back upon during later life" (James & Prout, 2015, p. 209). It is the older generations, James and Prout (2015) point out, who like to tell the younger that "school days are the best of your life" (p. 209). Others talked about the EOC's project having the potential to influence children's future lives. For instance, the Senior School Improvement Officer said that questions that interested him were: "Is that actually going to sow the seed with some of our children that one day they'll go into technical design, working in a theatre, or they'll go into film, movie production? Or will they become a dancer? Or will they become a singer?"

"Investment" in children's futures is a pervasive contemporary global discourse. Emphasis is placed on children as our "future citizens and workers" and it follows that the content of their education is becoming increasingly rigid and academic, from early childhood care onwards (Kjørholt, 2013, p. 247). Futurity, is also a common theme in the call for children's greater access to arts and culture. There is a lack of consistency in the delivery of arts education in the UK which is resulting in a growing divide between the cultural experiences of rich children and poor children. There appears to be much concern that this lack of equal opportunity will impact the *future* capacity of young people to benefit from—and indeed contribute to—the arts. A number of recent reports have drawn attention to this state of affairs (e.g., Cultural Learning Alliance, 2017; Warwick Commission Report, 2015; and, with a specific focus on music, Henley, 2011).

The following excerpt from one of the focus groups again focuses on my determined but perhaps misguided question of what children learned through taking part in the EOC's project. It opens with the class teacher shushing and apologising for the talking that is happening in the group. The class is growing restless.

Teacher: Shush. Sorry.

Researcher: It's okay. Yes?

Child 1:   Like, how to do a lot of art.

Researcher: You've learned a lot about art. Can you think of anything in particular, that you've learned to do in art?

Child 1:   Mmm.

Teacher: Come on boys and girls, what have you learnt from the project?

Child 1:   Oh.

Teacher: What have you learned?

Child 2:   That art's fun.

Researcher: That you like art. Who wants to be an artist?

Child 3:   Me.

Child 2:   Me.

Researcher: Oh wow.

Child 5:   I'm an artist already.

Whilst Qvortrup (2009) is adamant that we need to "rescue children from being reduced to a futuristic project and to reclaim them as here-and-now beings vis-à-vis reifying investment discourses," he acknowledges that there is also a "legitimate interest in exploring children's becoming" (p. 631). In fact, he continues, "even children themselves often look with curiosity and some resolve towards their own futurity" (p. 634). That was the case for some of the children in the focus groups, but I find the idea that they are *already* artists (or actors or musicians or stage managers) pertinent. It would have been interesting to explore this further with the children, especially as it challenges so many of the assumptions made when considering the benefits of arts programmes for children.

There were also flaws in the evaluation *if* the intended aims were to improve the lives of the children involved long-term. One of the tensions in measuring success is the time frames that are applied or assumed. Campbell, Cox, and O'Brien (2017) make some pertinent remarks on this in relation to cultural-led regeneration. Evaluations of cultural events tend to be a short-term necessity in order to demonstrate impact to stakeholders, including funders. So, whilst the aims of such projects are to create long-term social change, the data that would support this is not (generally) being collected: "If evidence gathering is repeatedly linked only to time-limited interventions, evidence of long-term impact will, by definition, not be found" (p. 52).

A post-qualitative approach however would introduce a more complex, layered understanding of time. For instance, Myers' (2014) post-qualitative research involved a long-term project with kindergarten children exploring material-discursive entanglements within their classroom in ways that might hold some useful lessons, not least to do with conceptions of time. Myers (2014) discusses how she and the children subverted participant observation in favour of something the children would come to call "being with me/you/us" (p. 37). A planned session of taking photographs changes when one of the children, Paige, instead wants Myers to join her in playing with a plastic horse that is missing a tail (which was allegedly chewed by long-ago children, according to Myers' participants). They film the tail-less horse which leads to a conversation about a three-legged dog that Myers had once known, and she draws it for the children. This reminds children of a one-legged grasshopper, Old One Hopster, they had encountered a few months ago, and they each hop around on one leg. Myers describes these encounters in relation to Deleuze's theory of time:

> Paige's engagement with the horses in these present times took up the plastic figure's past as an embattled plastic body and its present as a tailless agent, folded into our past times with legless dogs and grasshoppers, and our knowing and wondering about animal limbs. This enfolding is what Deleuze (1987) would call a *synthesis* of times; it transformed our futures, as what we would become – a movie subject, a camera operator, a horse mother, a grasshopper (hunter), a particular kind of research(ing) participant – was taken up as dimensions of our multiple presents (Myers, 2014, p. 42).

Manning (2016) employs Deleuzian theory of time to explore alternative ways of understanding the making of art. She proposes that we engage with the way that we practice rather than the end result: art is "a quality, a difference in kind, an operative process that maps the way toward a certain attunement of world and expression" (p. 47). Art is the *way*:

> …the intuitive potential to activate the future in the specious present, to make the middling of experience felt where futurity and presentness coincide, to evoke the memory not of what was, but of what will be. Art, the memory of the future. (p. 47)

Manning's (2016) description of art is not dissimilar to Myers' (2014) creative—and patient—research process. There is an openness to this process which allows for new ways of becoming. In contrast, the hurried classroom focus groups in my evaluation left little opportunity to find new pathways. Rather, any interesting openings were quickly shut down. Of course, there was not much time to play with in carrying out the evaluation, and it is telling that one of Myers' (2016) academic colleagues describes her research as being "terribly inefficient!" Yet there are possibilities for thinking differently and prioritizing a "being with" approach to evaluation that is not rushing to look for easy answers. As Myers herself acknowledges, this will not necessarily make research relationships "more ethical, equitable, or egalitarian" (p. 43):

> However, undoing our expectations of what time will give (or take) from us *can* situate researchers and children within a temporal freedom of becoming, thus opening possibilities to affirm our many entanglements as we research together. (p. 43)

Conclusion

This article has revisited my evaluation of the EOC's week-long project at a Liverpool primary school and considered how approaching it differently—drawing from development in childhood studies and its turn to post-qualitative research—might have enabled a more imaginative exploration of the children's thoughts and experiences. In doing so it might challenge the outcomes that we expect arts programmes to provide. This questioning was by no means intended to devalue the project itself, which was undoubtedly engaging, enjoyable and educational (albeit in ways that are hard to pin down). Moreover, it brought opera to children who might otherwise never experience it, and this is a social justice issue. In her foreword to the Warwick Commission Report (2015), Vikki Heywood rightly draws attention to the barriers and inequalities in the UK that prevent "a rich cultural education and the opportunity to live a creative life" (p. 8) from being a universal human right. Behind the questions that the article poses remains the desire that children's lives should be (immeasurably) enriched by art and culture and educational experiences. Yet there is also a frustration that children are not able to enjoy these experiences without having to pay for them in some way, such as through Maths and English testing. And a fear that without the evaluation results that tell funders what they want to hear, already meagre sources of funding will dry up further.

As researchers, "We change the world by changing the way we make it visible" (Denzin, 2008, p. 100 as cited in Spyrou, 2017, p. 207), although Spyrou qualifies this with a reminder that it is "not all up to us" given that we are entangled in the research process ourselves. In arts evaluation, which involves commenting on the success or otherwise of projects and

programmes, we can directly change the future of them. The arts in particular suffer from the need to prove their worth. Tusa (2007) has grappled with this issue for many years, feeling the "existential doubt" that surrounds it (p. 7). He found himself, after a confrontation with a local authority politician, justifying the existence of the arts in what he later reflected was too instrumentalist a fashion:

> The arts do stimulate the growth of a creative sector in the economy. They do play a part in the vigour of the ideas economy. They do give children a chance to express themselves, to be confident in their emotional intelligence, in a way that much of the curriculum-heavy teaching in schools does not permit or stimulate. It is good that investment in the arts has these economic and social effects. Yet true as all this may be, it still seems to miss the essential point. The value of the arts is not to be defined as if they were just another economic lever to be pulled, or a particular investment vehicle of choice. To behave as if they were, places them on a level of activity where measurement of results, predictability of outcome, and direction of activity are rated as conditions of success and therefore as grounds for investment in the first place. We are back in the bind of instrumentality: that something is worth paying for only if it provides a measurable result. (pp. 10-11)

If we could move away from this need for measurable results, post-qualitative research practice could hold some exciting, less predictable new ways to explore children's engagement with the arts. This would take into account the fact that children are part of a complex web of interdependencies and that their material surroundings (human and non-human) play a role in who they are. It might also play with notions of time and provide opportunities for creative, free-ranging exploration that offer some potential for making connections between the worlds of adults and children. As Harker (2005) suggests, rather than knowing children's worlds, "we can instead know something about this betweenness that we both share. What occurs between adults and children is inevitably inflected by unequal relations of power, but it is, irreducibly, a shared space" (p. 60)

Perhaps there is something to be learnt from the *Cunning Little Vixen*. The opera moves away from a linear view of time in its preoccupation with the eternal circle of life. Despite the Vixen's sad end (which is dealt with quickly and efficiently with no sentimentality or mourning), the presence of the Vixen cub and the little Frog in the final scene suggest the continuation of life and reaffirm the essential, life-affirming quality of the opera (Pines, 1995). Our constant plans and predictions for a future that will happen anyway, in its own time, are futile and relinquishing some of our attempts to control it might enable more enjoyment in the present, or at least more value ascribed to enjoyment. These are lessons for evaluation, too. The humour of the opera and its levity (despite its serious themes) might act

as reminders that evaluation research would do well to take a more creative and less rational approach to knowledge production, one that embraces mystery and is not afraid to admit to not having all the answers.

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A recent research arts-based research project, CULTIVATE, took place at a local community farm and explored people's interactions with the natural world through creative writing, mindful movement, photography and natural sculpture. Victoria is currently working on a participatory research project looking at community wealth building and the benefits - to people and the environment - of supporting a generative economy.