



Analysis of Unicorn Theatre's School Partnership Programme Evaluation

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Introduction

This report summarises the findings of Brunel University London's analysis of Unicorn Theatre's School Partnership Programme evaluation which was undertaken between September 2023 and January 2024. The Brunel project team worked in close collaboration with Unicorn to appraise its existing programme evaluation framework and tools to inform and develop its future evaluation processes.

Founded in 1947, the Unicorn Theatre is one of the UK's leading theatres for young audiences. Based in London Bridge it welcomes over 65,000 children each year and reaches thousands more through its work in schools and communities, and through its digital theatre strand Unicorn Online.

The School Partnership Programme is an in-depth, multi-year partnership between Unicorn and local schools. It is aimed at promoting and enriching children's engagement with the arts, their education and wellbeing, while also addressing the substantial disparity of access to arts and arts education across schools. Unicorn partners with neighbouring inner-city London schools from areas with high levels of socio-economic deprivation - significantly worsened by the pandemic - to nurture and support an impactful creative arts-rich curriculum, and equip children, teachers and senior school leadership with core skills to address the attainment gap (Unicorn, n.d.).

Aims

The main aim of this project was to provide an analysis of the evaluation framework and tools currently used in Unicorn Theatre's School Partnership Programme. In particular the project aimed to:

- Analyse existing partnership data and programme performance;
- Develop and refine Unicorn Theatre's existing evaluation tools.

These aims have been met through a two-stage project approach:

1. A systematic analysis of the current evaluation tools and their effectiveness in collecting relevant and impactful data. This analysis has enabled better understanding of the quality and scope of existing data and enabled gaps to be identified.
2. Refining and adapting the evaluation tools and developing an evaluation framework in relation to all stakeholder groups for use by the theatre.

Findings from this project will enable Unicorn to better understand the value and impact of the work it is carrying out in schools through its programme. This is especially important in the present context as arts organisations are being called upon to clearly express the significance of their work. While the economic contribution of the creative industries can be quantified, it is more challenging to assign a value to the experience of participating in the arts and explaining the worth of a multifaceted experience like attending a theatre performance (Bakshi, 2022). Although the benefits of learning beyond the classroom and through collaborations with arts and cultural institutions have been acknowledged and recorded in recent years (Goble et al, 2021), activities like attending a play are still often considered as 'supplementary' or 'additional' education. More recently, growing concerns

about the current cuts to arts funding in the public sector highlights the importance of collecting relevant, reliable and usable data. Such data can be used to demonstrate the intrinsic and extrinsic value of engagement with the arts, particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged children and their families.

Analysis approach

Unicorn currently collects a range of qualitative and quantitative data through its evaluation tools and from its various stakeholder groups which includes children, teachers and artists.

The key evaluation objectives of Unicorn's current framework are as follows:

- To have clear success indicators and an understanding of how well Unicorn meets its aims and intended outcomes;
- To highlight individual experiences of children, teachers and artists;
- To understand the collective impact for children, teachers and artists;
- To reflect on the range of activities provided and review the programme at the end of each year;
- To ensure impact drives the evolution of the programme, identifying gaps and reinforcing strengths;
- To capture the evidence and data required by project funders.

Unicorn uses two sets of surveys to meet these evaluation objectives:

1. Project Surveys: Teacher Impact Survey; Facilitator Impact Survey; Artist Impact Survey; Child Feedback Form; Engagement Team Project feedback.

2. School Partnership Surveys: Teacher Baseline Survey; SLT Baseline Survey; Teacher CPD survey; End of Year Survey; Teacher CPD survey.

The Brunel team analysed five individual surveys: Teacher Impact Survey; Child Feedback Form; Teacher Baseline Survey; End of Year Survey; and, Teacher CPD survey. In addition, we appraised the overall evaluation framework to ensure consistency in evaluation approach, identify gaps in knowledge, and suggest framework enhancements.

Findings

Current surveys collect a range of useful qualitative and quantitative data at different points in the school partnership journey and from differing stakeholder groups. This allows Unicorn to evaluate its school partnership programme, assess individual impact for schools and children, and provide evidence of impact to funders. However, our analysis found that there are some existing gaps and inconsistencies in the data collected and overall framework that require further consideration.

Surveys:

Analysis of the five surveys identified 10 key points relating to individual survey design and survey groupings:

1. The need for clear and consistent use of terminology, e.g. student or pupil; reference to 'creative approaches' in general or 'drama' specifically.
2. Logical ordering of questions and the avoidance of overlap and repetition within individual surveys.
3. Ensuring each question has a clear focus and purpose.
4. The use of precise question wording to avoid ambiguity in how to answer, and use of language appropriate for different stakeholder groups.
5. Clear and consistent question design to enable the collection of reliable data.
6. The avoidance of multiple questions rolled into one longer question.
7. Consistency in use and order of Likert scale response options.
8. Where 'other' is given as an option, ensure 'please specify' is used to ensure collection of useful data
9. Clear mapping of questions across surveys to enable change over time to be analysed, e.g. from baseline surveys to later surveys.
10. Ensuring question details are up-to-date e.g. in reference to curriculum areas.

The Brunel team edited and revised existing surveys in line with these points.

Evaluation framework:

The evaluation framework enables all stakeholder groups to feed into the evaluation of Unicorn's School Partnership Programme. Surveys are carefully tailored for specific stakeholder groups. For example, the Child Feedback Form makes good use of familiar emojis for children to easily respond to in a way that they can understand and relate to. Surveys have a clear timeframe for dissemination and response linked to the lifetime of each partnership.

An overview of how well the evaluation framework operates and how its component parts fit together forms the basis of the four following recommendations and suggestions for change:

1. Children's voice

Children are a key stakeholder group for Unicorn. However, the current evaluation framework limits their evaluation input to the Child Feedback Form. While the Teacher Impact Survey asks for teachers' perceived impact on the children they teach and the focus children used in the evaluation, evaluation engagement with children is limited. Research on children's voice in contemporary theatre suggests that this pattern of limited engagement is quite usual (Maguire, 2021). However, there are opportunities through this evaluation framework to ensure children have a greater stake and can have more of a say in their experiences of the Unicorn programme of activities.

Children need to be supported and facilitated to express their views (Archard, 2020). Child-centred or focused evaluation methods are aimed at ensuring children's voices are heard and children are given agency in the research/ evaluation process (Barker and Wells, 2003). Such

methods move beyond the traditional gathering of verbal and textual data gathering to include the non-verbal. Drawings are a particularly useful method to allow children to express themselves on their own terms and explore dimensions of experience that are not always captured through traditional forms of written and oral feedback. They also allow children to express what is important to them (Literat, 2013). Evaluation methods, such as drawing, therefore shift the usual power dynamics of the evaluation process, and enable individual experiences to be captured. Moreover, for children who are less confident in their written work, drawing allows them to be a part of the evaluation process on more equal terms with others. An element of child-centred evaluation could be enhanced in the current evaluation process used.

2. Family engagement

Family engagement is noted in the school partnership journey at year 2 and engaging parents/ carers is highlighted in the programme aims and outcomes. Family is identified in terms of access to creative activities and developing cultural capital within the home. However, there is currently no clear mechanism through which the evaluation taps into and records this engagement. Unicorn could consider possible mechanisms to create dialogue between parents and children through, for example, a discursive homework activity. Alternatively, as part of the information sessions for families, short feedback from parents/ carers could be requested via a survey. Parent/ carers have the potential to become a more prominent stakeholder group given their importance in sustaining the impact of Unicorn's work within the home.

3. Creative arts-based methods

Drawing is just one example of a more creative and arts-based evaluation method. As with child-centred methods, creative arts-based methods complement more traditional evaluation approaches, and can either focus on process or final outcome/ object. In an evaluation involving children, such methods can better demonstrate their active participation in the evaluation process. Moreover, creative arts-based methods fit well with evaluation of a programme which itself is creatively orientated.

A creative arts-based evaluation encourages different ways of knowing and understanding the value of a programme (Simons and McCormack, 2007), and places greater emphasis on participant experience rather than focusing on the programme itself. Furthermore, it aims to foster a more engaging and inclusive space through the process of creating, with participants taking a more active role (Hurlbut and Brouelle, 2023).

Creative arts-based methods can be quite simple, for example, as suggested above, encouraging children to make a drawing of their favourite or most memorable parts of the programme. Another example with children or teachers could be asking them to give three words to sum up their programme experiences to produce a word cloud. A further example could be to work with children as collaborators in the evaluation, asking them to design and then ask one another a set of questions to produce a series of voice notes. Such methods engage participants in new and different ways, enabling them to assert their own agency in the design of the evaluation.

Such methods also create a useful set of resources for dissemination. In writing evaluation reports and outcomes, text can be enriched with images, voices, and vignettes from those participating. Having a set of artistic or creative pieces to present the different voices and experiences of the participants in a creative but also concrete way, can also enable a sense of pride for those participating.

For these methods to succeed, there needs to be resourcing and planning, with clear information about the aims and purpose of the exercise. For the Unicorn programme, where these activities are not built into the programme time itself, close engagement and collaboration with schools and teachers would be needed to create a space where these can be undertaken.

4. Responsive evaluation

A responsive approach to evaluation is focused not only on an assessment of the effectiveness of a programme, but on engagement with stakeholders about the meaning of their practice. It focuses on dialogue and creating reciprocity between stakeholder groups to improve practice (Abma, 2006). For example, encouraging stakeholder groups to consider how best to evaluate a programme enables the evaluation relationship to become more open and shared. Greater reciprocity enables a responsive evaluation approach to emerge through partnership with stakeholders (Eluyefa, 2017).

Unicorn currently engages in good evaluation practices, with clear stakeholder groups and evaluation points. However, a more explicit recognition of this type of responsive approach would enable Unicorn and its stakeholder groups, especially children, to learn from one another, rather than the evaluation being one-way response-based. The current evaluation largely works as a one-size fits all approach for every programme and school. However, schools are differently located and have different student profiles. Therefore, opening up dialogical conversations with teachers and children during programme development could help shape the evaluation that ensues, allowing a more culturally responsive evaluation to emerge (Kushnier et al, 2023). Furthermore, this could encourage an evaluation process that is more responsive to changing circumstances, depending on school, context or activities engaged in.

Responsive evaluation also considers how findings can be fed back to participants. Linked to the discussions of child-centred and arts-based evaluation methods, participants, including performers and artists, can see the outcomes of the evaluation process. Dissemination of tangible outcomes can encourage and be used to prompt discussions on longer-term impacts beyond the three-year life of each programme.

Evidencing Impact

The need to demonstrate and evidence impact is part of the core business of the Unicorn School Partnership Programme to confirm the value of the programme to funders. The programme is monitored through its impact indicators, which have a clear functional purpose in terms of demonstrating programme impact to support future funding capture. Evidencing

the impact of engagement with Unicorn's work across children and teacher stakeholder groups is especially important in the current context of funding cuts across the arts. The recommendations made above will enable programme impacts to be evaluated in ways that are more meaningful for Unicorn, its stakeholders and funders. Changes to individual surveys will ensure the data collected is more consistent, comparable and robust, and change over time is more clearly tracked. A shift in emphasis to the evaluation framework to embrace greater creativity and re-position stakeholders, notably children, as active participants will give them a greater say in the evaluation process, enabling new ways of collecting and presenting impact which are more creative and dynamic.

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