

## **Traction Youth Theatre Ensemble: Performing Social Cohesion**

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# TRACTION



## **TRACTION YOUTH THEATRE ENSEMBLE: PERFORMING SOCIAL COHESION**

**DR SARAH WOODLAND, 2017**

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**QUEENSLAND THEATRE**



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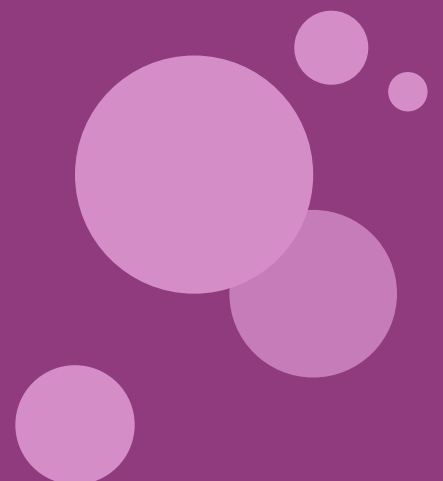
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## SUMMARY

This report details the outcomes of pilot research into Traction, Queensland Theatre's outreach youth ensemble based in Logan City. The goal of the research was to investigate the potential for Traction to promote social cohesion, and was undertaken in partnership between Queensland Theatre and Griffith University's Institute for Educational Research (GIER). Traction was established and has since been maintained with funding from the federal government's Department of Social Services, in response to a perceived need in the Logan community for programs and initiatives that would promote social cohesion. Queensland Theatre knew from anecdotal evidence that there were significant outcomes occurring in Traction, and sought to investigate and frame these within credible empirical research. Queensland Theatre also wished to explore how Traction might be facilitating career aspirations and pathways for young people into the arts. For GIER, the research represented an opportunity to investigate a unique example of theatre outreach as undertaken by a major performing arts company. Combining ideas about social cohesion and applied theatre, this report investigates the value of theatre and drama for young people in the Traction ensemble, and the potential ripple effects into the wider community of Logan and beyond. Although a small pilot study, the research found that Traction provides a culturally diverse cohort of 49 participants with a strong sense of identity, belonging, hope and aspiration; and the ensemble plays a key role in positioning them for success as artists and adults in the broader community.





# 1. BACKGROUND

## 1.1 LOGAN CITY

Logan is a vibrant and culturally diverse satellite city that is situated on what was traditionally Yugambah and Jaggera Aboriginal land, around 50 kilometres south of Brisbane and 60 kilometres north of the Gold Coast. It consists of 68 different suburbs and the most recent figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015) had the population at 308,681. According to Logan City Council (2013), around 50 percent of the population are aged 30 or under. There are 217 ethnicities represented, with 26.1 percent of residents having been born overseas, and 37.3 percent of those speaking a second language other than English at home. The most frequently spoken languages include Samoan, Mandarin, Hindi, Spanish, Vietnamese, Arabic, Cantonese and Tagalog. In the six years between 2006 and 2012, 2,538 people moved into Logan through humanitarian migration (Logan City Council 2016). In the 2011 census, two point eight percent of the population identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Logan City Council's 2013 snapshot identified significant social and economic disadvantages experienced by Logan communities in comparison to state and national averages in areas such as child development, unemployment, household income and health indicators. In addition, the number of volunteers in Logan City was lower than state and national averages by four percent, and in the 2013 election, there was lower voter turnout than neighbouring federal divisions (Logan City Council 2013). While it is not my intention to focus on Logan's deficits and disadvantages, these last two statistics may point towards a need for increased levels of social and civic participation, which along with the other indicators described above, is a key aspect of social cohesion and human development. Despite these disadvantages, however, Logan City appears to value its cultural diversity and youthful population, and has set out a number of goals in its latest draft Corporate Plan that position it as a "smart, dynamic city of the future" (Logan City Council 2016). A sense of pride and community esteem was also evident in our conversations with the young people of Traction as will be discussed below.

## 1.2 TRACTION

Queensland Theatre started Traction in January 2014 with a grant from the federal government's Department of Social Services (DSS) under the Diversity and Social Cohesion Program. The idea for the ensemble was initially prompted by outbreaks of interracial violence in Logan that were widely reported in the media in early 2013 (Brisbane Times 2013, Feeney 2013). Queensland Theatre's then Artistic Director Wesley Enoch, who grew up in the Logan suburb of

Woodridge, resolved to find ways to counteract the media's negative representations of Logan, through encouraging and amplifying the achievements and aspirations of a community he understood to be talented, generous, and proud of their multiculturalism. After extensive consultations with community organisations and stakeholders in 2013, it was established that Logan City was lacking in opportunities for young people to participate in theatre workshops, ensembles or performances and that young people would benefit from having access to the specialised training and professional pathways that Queensland Theatre could offer. Queensland Theatre applied to the DSS for funding in their 2013-2014 round, proposing that the project would bring together a diverse cohort of participants from across Logan who would work together towards an end of year performance project. The projected benefits of this were to give the young people a voice, legitimise their position in the community as cultural producers, and encourage participants and audience members to engage with the diversity of stories and experiences in their community. Another goal for the project was to provide pathways into the arts for the young ensemble members, thereby contributing to the cultural diversity of the broader arts industry in Queensland and Australia.

At the time of writing, Traction has run through three year-long iterations, seeing the ensemble grow from 35 participants in 2014 to 49 participants in 2016, and resulting in three public performances. In 2016 "Fraction" was formed, an offshoot program of Traction that was established to provide a smaller, more intensive artistic process for those members of Traction who felt they needed to be challenged further and to develop more specialised skills in performance making. Traction is held each Wednesday afternoon from three-thirty to six in the Logan Community Centre, which is situated in Logan's administrative heart, close to other public spaces such as the Logan Art Gallery, Library and Entertainment Centre. The young people who attend Traction range in age from twelve to twenty, with the majority being school-age participants who come from several different schools in the district including Kingston College, St Francis College, and Woodridge, Marsden, Springwood and Sunnybank State High Schools. The older participants are involved in university, vocational training and/or part time work, and many of these participants make up Fraction. The gender split in the group is fairly even, with the cultural diversity in the group directly reflecting that of the broader community of Logan City.



## 2. APPROACH AND METHOD

### 2.1 SOCIAL COHESION

Although there is no one accepted definition of Social Cohesion, The OECD describes a cohesive society as one that “works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward social mobility” (OECD, 2016). Additional indicators of social cohesion and wellbeing include participation in community and political life, levels of trust between citizens, and a willingness to help others and cooperate (see Chan and Chan 2006, Jenson 2010, Larsen 2014, Stern and Seifert 2013). The “capabilities approach” to wellbeing (Sen and Nussbaum 1993, Nussbaum 2011) has also influenced the OECD’s studies into social cohesion and social justice. This conceives of human development and wellbeing in terms of having the freedom and capability to “be and to act” in the world (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016: 37). The central capabilities as proposed by Nussbaum (2011) that are particularly relevant to the Traction project include: the capability to engage “senses, imagination and thought” to produce cultural works; “affiliation”, or the ability to engage with other human beings with compassion empathy and inclusivity; and the rights and abilities to enable political participation. Where some conceptions of social cohesion focus on the problems within a community, the capabilities framing avoids speaking of communities in terms of deficit or disadvantage. For a community like Logan, this is an important element in community esteem and identity, as will be discussed in this report.

### 2.2 PARTICIPATORY THEATRE

Participatory arts practices offer diverse communities and groups equal access to and participation in arts and cultural expression. The work often involves collaborative practice between professional and non-professional artists, sometimes deliberately aiming towards positive social change (Matarasso 2016), reflecting the notions of social cohesion and capability as described above. With community theatre, political theatre and the rise of feminist and liberal political discourses as early touchstones, participatory theatre often focuses on the potential for theatre and drama to empower participants to tell stories from the margins. These practices have occurred for decades at grassroots level, but more recently major theatre companies in the UK and Australia have recognised the need to expand their scope, developing artists, stories and audiences that reflect the growing diversity of their communities. A key strategy in doing this has been to reach out into communities that do not traditionally engage with mainstream theatre, and offer access and opportunities, particularly to children and young people. Researchers in the academic field of Applied Theatre have contributed significantly to understanding how such participation can promote social justice, education and positive social change for traditionally marginalised groups and communities (Prendergast and Saxton 2009). Recent studies have focused closely on the capacity for theatre and drama to enhance social and civic participation (Neelands 2009, 2010); its ability to develop an individual or shared sense of identity (Hughes and Wilson 2004); and its potential as a “pedagogy of hope” (O’Connor 2008).





## 2.3 RESEARCH METHOD

The goal of this research was to investigate **the potential for Traction to promote social cohesion**. Being a relatively small pilot project meant that the research team focused on indicators of social cohesion that were evident within the ensemble, and then began to explore how this might ripple out into the wider community of Logan City and beyond. In exploring the potential for Traction to promote social cohesion within and beyond the ensemble, it was necessary to gain some understanding of the participants' perceptions of their community, and how Traction was viewed in this context alongside other social groups such as schools, sporting clubs and church groups. Part of the research goal was also to investigate **the potential for Traction to facilitate pathways into the arts**, which I have framed within in the context of social cohesion, capability and participation.

For the Traction study, I worked with a team of four student researchers from the undergraduate Contemporary and Applied Theatre degree at Griffith University. I believe that the presence of these students, three of whom had themselves grown up in Logan, enabled us to build rapport with the Traction participants in a short space of time. Our background in theatre also enabled us to easily participate in the warm up games, and work collaboratively with the Traction facilitator team to gather data, rather than be positioned as detached outsiders. The research team attended four Traction sessions in total, two of which were in the lead up to their end of year performance, by which point the ensemble was very much in rehearsal mode. The fourth and fifth sessions we attended were in the weeks immediately following the performance. We recorded our observations of the workshops and conducted three focus group interviews with a total of 22 out of the 49 participants. We also attended the performance *I Love You, I Love You* that was held at the Logan Entertainment Centre in December 2016, and administered a survey to audience members (75 out of a total of approximately 400 responded). Traction's lead facilitator Claire Christian assisted the research by working with us to elicit drama-based responses to the research questions. She framed these as performance provocations that she delivered during one of the Traction workshop sessions. Through this process, she invited the participants to create short dramatic scenes and tableaux about their perceptions of Traction in relation to social cohesion. I also conducted an interview with Claire at the end of the 2016 program about her approaches to the work and perceptions of the group.

The approach taken was to combine the concepts of social cohesion, participation and capability described above, and generate a set of terms that I felt would be accessible and meaningful to a young, culturally diverse cohort of participants. The key terms that were used in the interviews and surveys were: Co-operation, trust, belonging (also translated as feeling welcome), help and support, and success,

and questions focused on the ways that Traction might support or facilitate these. I was conscious that words like inclusion, cohesion, identity or aspiration might seem abstract or unreachable for young people, and for respondents whose first language was not English, so these terms were incorporated later during the analysis phase. I integrated all of these concepts into a basic thematic frame that is represented in the sections below, with the knowledge that these themes are interactive and at times interdependent: **Co-operation, Help and Support; Inclusion and Belonging; Identity, Agency and Voice; The Traction "Family"; Hope, Aspiration and Success; and Civic and Social Participation.**







### 3. FINDINGS

#### 3.1 PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF LOGAN

**"THE COMMUNITY AS A WHOLE IS COLOURFUL. YOU CAN JUST FEEL THAT THE AIR IS DIFFERENT."**

As stated earlier, the Traction program was given its initial impetus by negative reports in the media, unhelpfully depicting an isolated incident of inter-racial violence as "race riots" (see Calligeros 2013). At that time, Logan City Council (2013) reported that people residing outside of Logan were more likely to perceive Logan as having higher levels of crime than local residents were, and media coverage of several serious crimes and incidents since then has continued to damage Logan's reputation in the surrounding region. The young people participating in Traction were very conscious of this negative image of Logan, and appeared to be actively engaged in trying to counteract it. When we asked the question in focus groups, "What is it like to live in Logan?" there were some very positive responses from young people who appeared to value the sense of community and cultural diversity. One young woman said, "I know the people and they've always been like family. . . especially in my street, I know all the people on my street." A young African woman who had moved to Logan from interstate said that she had found Logan to be much more diverse and she was impressed that people still practiced their cultural customs and traditions. During a discussion about the difference between north of Brisbane and the south side (Logan), a young male participant said, "The community as a whole is colourful. You can just feel that the air is different." Participants were also keenly aware of the negative perceptions and stereotypes about

Logan that were represented in the broader community and the mainstream media. A young male participant said of these stereotypes, "They're not true when you actually get to come here and there's such a strong sense of community here." Yet there was acknowledgement from some participants that parts of Logan were unsafe – one participant said she would not be game to walk home from the train station alone at night and others agreed. But others suggested that this contributed to the unique sense of closeness and community that only people from Logan could understand: "People from Logan are stronger people just because we've gone through a lot of stuff, seen some scary stuff too" (female participant).

In one of the focus groups, conversation turned to the role that programs such as Traction might play in challenging these images of Logan to outsiders, and instilling a renewed sense of pride and positivity within the community. In 2015, the Queensland Music Festival had featured *Under This Sky*, a musical theatre event celebrating the energy and diversity of culture in Logan. A small group of Traction participants had performed in this show, and they spoke about how vital it had been for the community, in particular how it showed audiences (including locals) a different, more accurate image of Logan, and importantly a different image of the young people who live there as being much more than just "hoodlums", as one participant put it. These participants seemed conscious of the similar role that Traction had to play in changing the image of their community. Since starting in 2014, the program has received some very positive coverage in the media, including a report on the children's television series *Totally Wild* ('Everyday Superheroes' 2016). As one young man observed, "With Traction, it's kind of eye opening for the media in the way we've been portrayed over the past few years." This theme of challenging media and public stereotypes of Logan continued throughout the research, and signals a key success of the program, particularly through its annual public performances.

This not only has positive impacts on the city's self-image and how the broader public might perceive Logan, it also shows that the young people in Traction are developing the tools and the confidence to influence these aspects of identity and culture. This demonstrates an orientation towards social and civic participation that will be discussed in more detail below.

### 3.2 CO-OPERATION, HELP AND SUPPORT

By definition, the theatre ensemble is a microcosmic space driven by cooperative effort towards a shared performance goal. The participants readily referred to Traction as a place where co-operation, help and support occurred not only within the theatre devising and rehearsal process, but also in the surrounding social context of the program. For Claire, a vital element in the establishment of the ensemble is the weekly check-in, in which participants, seated in a circle, go around one-by-one and give a number out of ten that represents how they are feeling. Following this, they must each answer a question about themselves for example, "When you were a little kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?" Claire recognises the importance of this process in teaching the participants to read each other and develop empathy. In response to our question about how well do people help and support each other in Traction, one young woman mentioned the check-in: "If ever someone is a two, we just look after them that rehearsal. Sometimes we'll take them off to the side and make sure they're okay. . . we just kind of look after each other." Another male participant observed, "We're all thinking about everyone around us so it's not like, 'My day is great I don't care about anyone else,' it's, 'I want everyone else to be happy as well.'" I observed this check-in four times, and was always struck by the fact that despite it taking around half an hour to get through nearly 50 participants, everyone was quiet, focused and listening to each other intently. This ritual seemed to set the tone for the respectful interactions that followed. Another ritual activity in Traction was to offer someone "energy" if they were visibly feeling vulnerable or upset. Here, the whole group would raise their hands and wiggle their fingers towards the person needing their energy. We observed this happen many times during the highly emotional debrief after the Traction final performance *I Love You, I Love You*. One young woman referred to the Traction Facebook page, "Even after Traction, once it's over, I know I've messaged people, 'Hey! Are you still alright?' You know, sometimes people have their own things going on." As Claire pointed out, some of the Traction participants experience difficult home lives and mental health issues. If a participant has to leave the room due to distress or despair brought on by these issues, any one of their peers might follow to offer them support – not just their intimate friends. "It's whoever is [standing] the closest, or whoever is feeling the most emotionally buoyant will go and find that kid and make sure they're okay."

### "MUM COULD SEE HOW WELL WE WORKED TOGETHER – IT CREATED A GREAT ENERGY FOR THE AUDIENCE."

In small group tasks, the Traction participants always appeared ready and willing to work with each other, no matter who was in their group. When Claire would ask the large group to quickly split into smaller groups of five or six over five seconds, I noticed that there was never any hesitation or awkwardness, everyone moved quickly and seemed genuinely happy with the result, greeting each other enthusiastically. One participant explained how this benefited the performance making process:

"[Co-operation] is in getting into different groups, swapping, coming up with like a scene with other people you haven't worked with, and getting to know them better and then those scenes will work together to make one . . . performance, and that performance gets added to the show." (Male participant)

A show the size of *Love*, with nearly 50 performers, takes an enormous group effort to create, rehearse and present. During the rehearsals, I observed that quite a few participants were aware of others' roles and positions, helping them when they forgot, and taking responsibility for noting down others' stage directions while they were out of the room or absent that day. In developing the performance, participants were encouraged to feel important and valued no matter how small their contribution to the co-operative effort might be:

"We've always been taught since the beginning that no role is not important and even if you're a side character in the scene you're still a very crucial part of that scene because you're adding and contributing to the overall story." (Male participant)

This sense of co-operation was then visible to the audience members who came to the final performance. During one of the group debrief discussions a week following the show, one of the participants shared, "Mum could see how well we worked together – it created a great energy for the audience."

### 3.3 INCLUSION AND BELONGING

An atmosphere in which people co-operate, help and support each other contributes to feelings of inclusion and belonging, particularly as experienced within the context of a culturally diverse participant group. Cultural theorist François Matarasso encourages us to see culture and diversity in its broadest sense, to include ethnicity, but also gender, age, ability, health, sexuality. He argues that diversity is "a defining characteristic of the culture of communities" (2003: 5) rather than a way of classifying certain groups. The Traction cohort represent the

broader diversity of the Logan community, but are brought together by their love for theatre and drama. As such, they represent and explore their diversity through their art, learning and gaining the confidence to be innovative cultural producers. Several of the participants variously referred to their strong sense of connection as “drama kids” from the very unique community of Logan.

“I guess what makes Traction awesome is that we all love drama and we’re all from this little community, and I guess we’re the underdogs compared to everyone else that’s going to pursue drama. We want to have careers in drama, but we’re from a [place] that isn’t well known for drama.”  
(Female participant)

Many of the participants further highlighted the importance of Traction as a place where it was possible to interact with and learn from people from other backgrounds, and to explore the differences and commonalities between them in terms of language, religion, culture and customs.

“It’s also about meeting people from different cultures and finding that experience about other cultures. Like sometimes you’ll get to meet other people who have different experiences. Sometimes other people have different assumptions about other cultures and it’s better to see how different people are.” (Male participant)

This inclusivity is something that Claire works hard to foster within the group. In our interview, she pointed out that this had evolved over the course of the program, where in the beginning of the first year, young people were much more divided in groups based on the schools they attended. She made it an overt strategy to mix the groups up and speak openly about what it means to work as a cohesive ensemble. One young participant shared with us how she had felt isolated at first due to being the only African person in the ensemble. She said that she had brought her concerns to Claire, who immediately had spoken to the group and asked them to make this young woman feel more welcome. The group members responded whole-heartedly, apologising for having made her feel left out.

During one of the drama-based research activities, in which Claire introduced research questions framed as provocations, a group created a performance in response to the question, “If you could be who you are in Traction out there in the ‘real world’, what might be possible?” One group’s performance contained the following spoken statements that supported their scene:

“You could go up to people of different cultures and have random conversations with them and bring them into the family.”

“There would be more love and no more discrimination and hate.”

“There would be not as much nervousness and awkwardness meeting new people.”

This purposeful framing of the question invited participants to make links between the inclusivity occurring within Traction and a hopeful rendering of the world outside.

Rajendran (2016: 443) argues that youth theatre might provide young people with the opportunities to develop new models of inclusivity in rapidly changing socio-cultural contexts. She emphasizes the importance of “playful encounters with difference” and “multicultural play” as important processes in developing young people’s understanding and inclusivity. During our interview, Claire described one such playful encounter with difference in Traction. In a game where small teams had to create objects in ten seconds using their bodies, the teams were instructed to create a bowl of noodles.

“The two groups on opposite sides of each other put the Asian kid in the middle. . . . And then they see each other and go, ‘(Gasp) you were in the middle too! We did that as well!’ And then they look to [the third] group and notice that they’ve got the African kid in the middle, and go like, ‘How are you the noodles?’ And then they laugh about it and they think it’s hilarious, they think this is the funniest joke ever.” (Claire)

## **“WE WELCOME EVERYONE, PEOPLE FROM ALL DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS, RELIGIONS AND SEXUALITIES ARE ALL JUST COMING TOGETHER...”**

Claire pointed out that for outsiders looking in, this incident may appear inappropriate or even racist, but for this culturally diverse group, they had dictated their own ways of talking about culture and race. This was an example of humour and playfulness that was uncensored by political correctness, and respectfully negotiated by the group based on its strong foundation of inclusivity.

Beyond race and ethnicity, there was a strong sense that Traction participants felt a sense of belonging no matter their age, gender, background, life experiences, personalities and length of time in the program. In one of the focus groups, three participants discussed how, despite the distinct friendship groups that might exist outside Traction, in Traction everyone is a friend. “You can go to anyone and have a random conversation with them about anything – something you can’t do anywhere else” (male participant). Others agreed, suggesting that this was not something that would happen at school, because at school the group was not necessarily united by its love for drama.



"We welcome everyone, people from all different backgrounds, religions and sexualities are all just coming together and I guess because we're united under that common interest of the performing arts and all that acceptance just shows every single day." (Male participant)

As one young woman declared during a whole group discussion: "If you don't have friends, join Traction and you'll have 48 of them."

In focus groups, many recalled their first time in Traction, and how quickly they had gone from feeling shy and wary, to feeling welcome and comfortable; and this theme was also present in two of the performed research responses. "When I first started, I latched on to my best friend for the first week and then I went, 'Oh it's normal here, I belong!'" (female participant). Another male participant shared his experience:

"I think it was a week or two and . . . I started opening up to people and I thought that these guys were cool and I want to hang out with them. I want to share my ideas. I feel like I have some relevance in this conversation. That's a good feeling. In other groups I've been in, it's been months and months until I started feeling confident in those groups as opposed to just two weeks here. The first day a guy walked straight up to me and was like, 'Hey, how you going?'" (Male participant)

His statement not only shows a sense of welcoming and belonging that existed in the group, but also how this gave him the confidence to share his ideas and feel validated. The 2015 end-of-year performance referenced the *X-Men* and *Harry Potter* movies, framing Traction as a school for exceptional young people and describing Traction as, "A place where the things that make us special or different are recognised and celebrated." These feelings are vital in the development of identity, agency and voice as will be discussed below. The sense of inclusion and belonging in Traction was also recognised by parents who responded in the open comments section of the audience survey after the performance *Love*:

"Traction has given my son a sense of belonging and he has always felt welcomed in the group. It has given him self-confidence."

"It has brought my autistic son out of his shell and part of the community."

### 3.4 IDENTITY, AGENCY AND VOICE

The notion of inclusion and belonging is strongly linked to the sense of identity that individuals, groups or communities might shape and perform through their cultural practices. In a youth theatre ensemble, the space can be seen as a place for nurturing participants' voices, and their capacity for agency as artists and as people. It is a space where one can experiment with different

roles and ways of being in performance, while also having the freedom to "be yourself" without judgement. Participants mentioned numerous times throughout the research how much they valued this in Traction. One male participant described how important drama was as a way of expressing himself, adding, "I can't express myself the way that I want to everywhere that I go. So, coming to Traction is like my way of showing who I really am." Others also connected Traction to their sense of identity. One young woman said, "It's . . . a process of discovering ourselves," and another, "It's about who you are as a person." A third young woman also pointed out how important it was not to be judged for some of the difficult life circumstances she was experiencing:

"That's one of the amazing things that I've found about this group, it's just so amazing how people are just, you know, willing to listen to you and not judge you for the things you're going through which is just so amazing." (Female participant)

### **"IT HELPS TO PUSH YOURSELF AND TAKE RISKS TO BETTER FURTHER YOURSELF AS A PERSON AND AS A PERFORMER."**

The sense of freedom to be yourself without judgement creates the feelings of safety and trust that are necessary to take risks in performance. Relatively small acts such as making or responding to a performance offer or sharing an idea during a workshop, can feel like a very risky business. Claire explained that for some Traction participants, even the act of speaking a sentence in front of 40-50 peers was a terrifying prospect. For her, the check-in described earlier is an important moment for some participants for whom it may be significant risk to "take up space" on their own, or to "have a voice". For those participants, Claire suggested, the check-in may be "the only time that they will ever feel comfortable to speak in front of 50 people." Claire and some of the young people referred to the idea of taking risks as an important Traction "rule".

"I talk to kids about risks as the feeling in your stomach, or the critic in your head that is like, 'This is a bad idea.' Or, 'I'm going to look like an idiot.' Or, 'This is what's going to happen if I do this.' And it's deeply personal, and no-one can tell you what a risk is for you. But it's about you being able to measure that and push through that. And so we have a language about that as well, where kids will go, 'Take a risk.' Or, 'This is a risk for me, but here it is.'" (Claire)

One young man recognised the value of this in both performance and life: "It helps to push yourself and take risks to better further yourself as a person and as a performer."

Another Traction rule connected with taking a risk that participants shared was "don't justify" - in other words,



to make an offer with conviction and not apologise for it. Overcoming fears and making offers with conviction requires a sense of safety and trust within the group, and once this culture is established, the theatre ensemble not only encourages people to accept all artistic offers, but also all offers of “self” and expressions of vulnerability. McCammon et al.’s (2012) longitudinal study of 234 adults who had done drama as children found that most felt a strong sense of these early experiences shaping their identity and sense of self in adulthood. Participants in Traction appeared to be developing the confidence to “own” their identity, and move forward with focus, energy and agency, not only in the workshop space, but also elsewhere in their lives. Claire and I discussed the idea that for these young people, being a fearless, authentic artist is inextricably linked to becoming a fearless and authentic human being.

**“TRACTION HAS HELPED ME CHANGE AND BECOME A BETTER PERSON – MORE CONFIDENT AND JUST TO BE MYSELF IN THE REAL WORLD.”**

Hughes and Wilson’s (2004) study of youth theatre in the United Kingdom found that the theatre ensemble provides some young people with more freedom to experiment with personal identity than can be found in other peer groups, with their constraining rules and expectations. This idea was clearly illustrated in one of the small group performances that were created in response to the research provocation, “If you could be who you are in Traction out there in the ‘real world’, what might be possible?” In this scene, a young man approaches a group of his peers at school who are acting over-the-top cool, aloof (a little bit “gangsta”). He greets them and they are somewhat welcoming, but he is visibly uncomfortable and put off by their behaviour. He then approaches a group of his peers at Traction (the same actors as the cool gang), and these young men all embrace him, full of enthusiasm, leaping around together. He says, “I really love you guys, you really help me to be me.” He then turns to the audience to speak:

“Sometimes in the real world it’s kind of hard to be yourself, you know? At Traction, you kind of feel like it’s a huge family, there’s no barriers, everyone can just be themselves. And that’s just the reason why I love Traction so much, because Traction has helped me change and become a better person – more confident and just to be myself in the real world.”

After this speech, he returns to the first group of “cool” boys and is met with the same response as previously. He then breaks into some highly energetic hip-hop dance moves in front of them. He punches fists with them, and appears visibly more comfortable in his own skin. The inference here is not that Traction made this young man cooler and therefore more

acceptable to his peers outside of Traction, but rather that he felt less pressure to be like them, and more confident to be accepted on his own terms.

As Traction has grown in size over the three years of its life, so has the young people’s sense of confidence and ownership over the performance making process leading towards the end of year shows. Claire described how in the first year, she wrote the majority of the performance herself, drawing on themes and ideas that the young people were interested in and writing scenes that were performed mostly in smaller groups. This show was essentially about the community of Logan, and reflected its diversity through a range of different stories. In the second year, the participants had stronger views about what they wanted to do, asking to work together as a larger ensemble. More young people came forward to co-write the show, which explored the experience of adolescence, and the themes of acceptance and belonging through the frame of superheroes and super villains. For the 2016 show *I Love You, I Love You* Claire wrote only two out of the 48 scenes, with the remainder being the young people’s own work. The show reflected a mixture of small group scenes, individual poems and monologues, dance sequences, videos, and whole group performances woven together and reflecting the diversity of talents and voices in the group. The work depicted young people grappling with the notion of love, the different ways it manifests, and where it fits within their worldview and their sense of identity. The progression of these performances demonstrates not only a developing sense of ownership and agency for the participants in making the work, but also their voices as artists. The common thread that brought them together initially, being from Logan, served as a jumping off point for explorations of identity and culture in the first year. From there, they have progressively developed the confidence to explore more complex ideas and themes drawing from their own experiences and evolving sense of self. The performance *Love* reflected, not only the themes of the play itself, but also the collective energy, vitality and identity of the Traction ensemble, and the diverse individuals within it.

### 3.5 THE TRACTION “FAMILY”

The previous sections have hopefully built a clear picture of the culture of Traction, which fosters and promotes the qualities of the ensemble and elements of social cohesion that have framed this study. Throughout the focus groups, discussions and performances (including the 2015 end-of-year show), participants consistently referred to Traction as a “family” and emphasised the important place that this family held in their lives. A group of young men in one focus group had a lively conversation about how much they missed Traction during the school holidays. Another participant described how important it was for her during the most stressful times of university. Another rather poignantly declared, “Traction is like one of my voices because I literally can’t talk to my parents” (female participant).



Traction's unique culture is something in which the whole group is invested. Claire told me that there had never been any serious conflicts in the group, but when small conflicts occurred, the group were very good at self-policing. She added that there was a "core" or "nucleus" of Traction who have been with the group from the beginning and who "assert the rules and the tone and the culture." The Traction family welcomes new members with open arms: "When the new people come in . . . we give them love and trust . . . make sure they fit in and join our group – ensemble" (male participant). And the family readily welcomes back older members as well:

"When I finished high school, it was like yeah I'll do Traction again. I've been invited back I'm doing it. And I didn't know that I could do it again two years out of high school and I got invited back and I said yes!" (Male participant)

Several participants mentioned the Traction Facebook group as being an important aspect of the group's functioning, with participants using it to offer support to each other as described previously, to show videos of scenes that had been created to people who were absent that day, and for older members able to stay in touch and get feedback and support for their current arts projects.

The idea of Traction as a family therefore did not come across as flippant or platitudinous. There was a sense that these young people were committed to each other, and to the health of the group in a unique way. Although some of the young people referred to school, sporting clubs and church groups as places where they might experience co-operation, trust and support, there was a strong sense that Traction was special and different. This was most evident to us when we were privileged enough to be part of the group debrief workshop a week after the performance of *Love*. Claire had invited the participants to write down something they would like to say to the group that they had not said already. The participants sat and wrote independently (or sometimes in pairs) and then came together in a large circle. Each of the participants then delivered heartfelt thanks to either the whole group or specific people. A more recent member of the group said, "Everyone in this circle has made me feel welcome" (and this was echoed by a few others who joined during this year). Others talked about how Traction has pulled them through serious problems at home and described it as the thing they look forward to most each week. There were many tears, and when people paused or could not speak, the rest of the group gave them "energy" in the way that I have described earlier. Claire later said that it was the newer participants who had been the first to get up during this process. She said, "They often feel like they've found something special." At another point, Claire described Traction as a "cherished" space where participants "revere" each other. Claire declared that in over eleven years of working with young people, she had never encountered a space like Traction:

"It's the very fact that there are kids aged twelve to twenty, from varying different schools, cultural backgrounds, socio-economic experiences, all in one space, who have found a way to be with each other that is compassionate and creative and loving and no judgement." (Claire)

### 3.6 HOPE, ASPIRATION AND SUCCESS

Traction's unique and cherished space, with its culture of acceptance and inclusion, becomes a place where participants are able to take risks, imagine, and begin to enact success as artists and adults. A large body of research in applied theatre and drama education focuses on the idea that drama engages children and young people in the imagining of possible selves, possible worlds and possible futures. It provides a safe testing ground for ideas and different ways of being in the world, becoming in some ways a rehearsal for life. Some scholars have linked these ideas with the work of radical educational theorist Paulo Freire in conceiving drama as a "pedagogy of hope" (Anderson and Dunn 2013, O'Connor 2008). Anderson (2014: 115) suggests, "Perhaps applied theatre and drama could make a contribution to the rebuilding of hope and the social imagination in these confused, contradictory and chaotic times." In Traction, this manifested most obviously in the various pathways that participants had taken from Traction into a range of other arts training and education opportunities. But also evident was a wider constellation of aspirations and successes that appeared to be driven by growing confidence and agency. Success is conceived here not only in the career sense, but also in the small successes that can be achieved in the context of daily life. One of the drama-based research provocations was the question, "Since joining Traction, what has become possible?" One group showed a series of "Before Traction" and "After Traction" scenes. One of these scenes depicted a young female protagonist giving a presentation in her English class. In the first scene, she was slumped down in her chair, muttering quietly in gibberish, occasionally throwing in the words "English" and "poetry." In the second "after Traction" scene, she stood and recited a poem clearly and emotively. Another male participant recognised the same benefit, describing how he was normally shy, but that Traction had given him the confidence to "smash" his presentations at school. The drama-based research responses depicting "what is possible" were a clear indication of hope, aspiration and success in Traction, and as detailed elsewhere in this report, many of the scenes focused on confidence in social situations, career success (particularly in the arts) and the freedom to "be yourself" despite pressure from peers. Claire observed that some participants were now considering university as a real possibility, and suggested that being part of Traction was making them feel "empowered to make choices about their lives."



**"I'VE WATCHED THE SAME KIDS FOR THREE YEARS BUILD THEIR CONFIDENCE AS YOUNG ADULTS. THIS THING IS BECOMING AN INTEGRAL EVENT TO COMMUNITY. IT IS SO, SO IMPORTANT."**

The end-of-year performance *Love* itself appeared to be an important showcase for the success and talent of the participants. In one of the drama-based research provocations, Claire invited small groups to create a documentary about Traction. One group's scene focused on how each of the different participants' talents was able to come to the fore in *Love*. In the post-show survey, 96 percent of audience members agreed or strongly agreed that Traction gave young people important life skills for success in adulthood. In the open comments section of the survey, respondents wrote:

"Great show. Can see the enthusiasm and purpose in life coming through the performers."

"I've watched the same kids for three years build their confidence as young adults. This thing is becoming an integral event to community. It is so, so important."

These kinds of outcomes are clearly important to all young people, but for some of the young people in Traction, there is an urgent need for developing resilience in the face of experiences such as stress, trauma, poverty, family violence, homelessness, mental ill health and juvenile incarceration. As Claire observed,

"In this space, because of the culture or the communities that they come from, or the family environments or the trauma that they've had to navigate, it's heightened. What the artistry means on a bigger, grander, personal development level is bigger."

The idea that Traction can bring stability and hope to participants with experiences like these connects directly to notions of wellbeing and agency that feature strongly in the concepts of social cohesion and human development that have informed this study.

### **3.6.1 PATHWAYS INTO THE ARTS**

Beyond the more generalised sense of hope, aspiration and success described above, a clear goal of the project for Queensland Theatre has been to create pathways into the arts for young people in Logan. Traction exposes participants to high quality arts experiences by organising group excursions to major theatre performances in Brisbane, and inviting professional artists and practitioners into the workshops for specialist training in areas such as voice, physical theatre, dance and stage combat. As one participant described it,

"Amazing mentors and teachers who help us become who we want to be." For some participants, this exposure, alongside the safe and nurturing culture of Traction, has given them the confidence to see the arts as a viable career pathway. Claire observed that some participants had already been actively engaged in the arts through activities such as traditional cultural dance, choir and freestyle rapping, but had neither realised that these were connected to creativity or "the arts", nor had they the language to articulate it. Claire was pleased to see that since joining Traction, these young people spoke more confidently about their creativity and did not shy away from calling themselves young artists. What is more, Traction participants did not appear to feel "boxed in" to any particular art form or aspect of theatre making:

"It exposes everyone to a whole bunch of different kinds of experiences based on what they want and what they're interested in. I guess through the workshops we do every week and through the excursions we get to see and all the different productions that we actually get to be an audience member of. We don't just see acting we also see directing, production acting and design. We see all the different components that make up a performance and through our time in Traction we get to dabble in each of those." (Male participant)

Participants are encouraged to experiment with a number of different languages and skill sets within the arts, and this enables them to explore their strengths, hone their interests and develop their articulatory as well-rounded cultural producers.

Traction participants have gone on to participate in a range of different arts opportunities, including university study. One participant recognised the important role that Traction could play in creating a bridge between high school drama and university: "It's really nice to work with professionals that come in. It's opened up the transition from secondary to tertiary. You can train whatever but you can take a leap here with Traction it has a larger than life sense to it." I have already mentioned above the Queensland Music Festival and the opportunity that this presented for Traction members to be involved in a large community-wide project. Also important is the relationship between Traction and Fraction. Claire describes Fraction as a space where young people with arts career aspirations are pushed harder, given "a further professional language" and an opportunity to make work outside of the end of year Traction show. But members of Fraction must agree to remain in the larger Traction group as well, which enables the Fraction group members to infuse the larger ensemble with their developing skills and articulatory. At the time of writing, three Traction participants were studying drama at university, with one of these engaged in part-time administrative work for Queensland Theatre; another participant was taking part in a young playwrights' mentoring program; one participant had auditioned for and been accepted into the Brisbane Queensland Theatre

Youth Ensemble; and four of the long-standing young male participants were auditioning for the forthcoming intake of the acting program at Queensland University of Technology.

### 3.7 SOCIAL AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

The themes I have described above can be visualised as working together within the Traction ensemble space, and then rippling outwards, influencing how participants go on to be and act in the world. It seems that a collective Traction identity characterised by energy, cultural diversity and talent was visible and recognizable to family, friends and community members who came to their 2016 performance *Love*. During the performance debrief, one participant even noted that he had been in the local barber shop when he overheard two people talking about the show. Teachers recommend Traction to their students, and young people who are in the same families and friendship groups as Traction members often join. The Facebook group, has the potential to operate as an extension of the values of the Traction family, to encourage other young people in its 84 members' networks to not only engage with Traction itself, but also with its ethos of support, respect and inclusivity. Neelands (2009: 2) suggests, "[The] ensemble approach to drama provides young people with a model of democratic living and a means of continually re-imagining and questioning the idea of how best to live as interdependent human beings." This notion of the ensemble resonates throughout the Traction research, serving to ground the idea of social cohesion within the artistic process, rather than positioning it as a by-product. Young people from Traction might therefore be empowered by the process to participate in and contribute to wider social networks, communities, and political or cultural institutions.

Matarasso (2003: 5) suggests that cultural diversity can be seen as "a measure of the variety of cultural expression within a given society, and particularly the degree of legitimacy given to different voices and values by the state itself." The development of Traction participants' cultural literacy, and their pathways into further training as future artists and cultural producers, has the potential to enable them to be more involved in mainstream arts and culture. Claire discussed this potential during a conversation about one participant who had been away studying theatre at a regional university for the past year and returned to Traction on his semester break. He told her that he was the only young African man in his university course, and that he never realised until leaving Traction and Logan that he was in a minority, not only in this country, but also in the performing arts industry. For him, this realisation had been "heartbreaking", and Claire said she had to encourage him to "let that fuel a fire in you to be the person that has these conversations and drives change." Claire also talked about the four young men mentioned previously who had just recently auditioned for the acting course at Queensland

University of Technology. She said that the audition was like "four unicorns walked into the room," because that course has traditionally attracted mostly Anglo-Australian students. The potential for these young people to participate in the mainstream arts landscape emerged as significant in the Queensland Music Festival performance, but also in Fraction, where they now feel compelled to create work for a wider audience. Claire observed that at the beginning of Fraction,

"The kids were sick of Logan, they didn't want to talk about Logan, they just wanted to explore being young people. Now the Fraction group want to create their own company that is Logan and bring local work to a wider audience."

This shows an interesting progression in terms of how the young people might have wished to explore their identity as apart from the negative stereotypes and assumptions about Logan, but then re-engage with the idea of having a unique collective voice that can enter the wider cultural conversation.

In the ensemble model of democratic living suggested by Neelands (2009), some will emerge as natural leaders. Traction and Fraction appear provide the space for this to occur in respectful, democratic and organic ways. One male participant described how he used his position of leadership in the ensemble to bring out the confidence in new members, remembering how he had felt when he first began. Claire suggested that those who were taking on a leadership role in Traction were then more confident do so in other contexts as well:

"These boys are all in their Samoan dance groups. They're all leaders at school. They are performers. They are involved in leading the arts programs. They are doing every kind of arts program at school. [Participant name] just choreographed their House of Champions hip-hop dance crew dance. [Participant name] has curated the whole Woodridge [State High School] performance night." (Claire)

One young participant saw the potential to use his skills and leadership abilities as a way of reaching out to other young people like himself: "One day I want to be able to perform for younger people. Hopefully give them ideas that Traction gave to me, [how it] helped me find what I wanted to do." Claire also related to me that a small group from Traction had been asked to give a presentation to Logan City Council members and staff about Traction. Initially nervous about speaking in front of a group of "official" adults, Claire said that the young people spoke honestly and passionately about the outcomes of Traction.

## 100 PERCENT OF AUDIENCE MEMBERS AGREED OR STRONGLY AGREED THAT THE PERFORMANCE MADE THEM FEEL WELCOME OR PART OF THE LOGAN COMMUNITY

The Traction performances themselves bring the values and culture of the Traction family to a public audience, not only through the energy and commitment of the performers, but through the themes and content of the shows. Kellman (2015) suggests that community performances such as these invite groups to attend performance and engage in cultural reception who do not represent the demographic of mainstream theatre attendance. The performance event becomes a positive and affirming moment for the community where connections between people are magnified and celebrated. Audience survey responses after the performance *Love* were (perhaps unsurprisingly) uniformly positive. *100 percent of audience members agreed or strongly agreed that the performance made them feel welcome or part of the Logan community*, and 96 percent agreed or strongly agreed that Traction gave young people the confidence to be active members of the community. *Love* was a thoughtful and celebratory exploration of many different kinds of love between people, and as such, the performance modelled to the audience the sense of inclusion that was felt within Traction. A young Indigenous man opened the Traction 2016 performance *Love* with a Welcome to Country in his traditional language. He delivered this with conviction and pride and then introduced himself in English. He spoke to Claire later, concerned that some of the audience members had laughed during his address, but Claire helped him to recognise that the energy had changed and become more respectful as soon as he introduced himself in English and they realised what was happening. In another part of the show, the young Pacific Islander men in the group performed the traditional Haka. When Claire later asked the group during the debrief workshop to create performances from the audience responses they had heard or seen, one group showed an audience member nodding in gradual realisation: "Oh I get it, the Haka is showing a love for culture." These examples demonstrate how the young members of Traction were beginning to be empowered as cultural producers who can work to fight exclusion in the community. As Claire put it,

"[The Traction participants] will go into the real world and, because of the authenticity about themselves, and because of how empowered they feel to be themselves, that they will acknowledge that social cohesion isn't a thing that happens outside of this space, but they feel empowered to be the change makers." (Claire)

Studies have now begun to link young people's participation in arts and drama with broader political literacy and engagement (see Flinders and Cunningham 2014). A longitudinal study

undertaken by the National Endowment for the Arts in the USA found clear correlations between arts activity and volunteering, voting and school politics (Caterall 2012). Even within the small scope of this study, it is possible to see the potential for such civic and political engagement from the Traction participants as they move into young adulthood.

## 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Having been in dozens of different drama and youth theatre spaces over the past twenty years, for me Traction felt like a singularly hopeful space, where anything was possible, and where I came away feeling optimistic about these vibrant young people and the part that they might play in transforming our increasingly fractured society. This was a small study on a particularly remarkable case. Participatory arts evaluations are often criticised for over-claiming outcomes and exaggerating the transformative potential of the arts. Yet in this early stage, Traction has emerged as a unique example of how a youth theatre ensemble can promote social cohesion. Some of this can be attributed to the more generic qualities of youth theatre, for example building ensemble, developing drama skills and cooperatively working towards a performance outcome will occur in most youth theatres. However, Traction appears to possess some distinctive characteristics and critical success factors that have pushed these outcomes beyond usual expectations. The participants appear to be particularly attuned to how Traction works for them, and how they contribute to its culture of inclusivity and empowerment. They recognise that the space offers them a chance to be themselves and take the risks necessary to bravely experiment with ideas and interpret the world around them. The workshop space, and the end-of-year performances reflect social cohesion in action, and this has the potential to reach out into the wider community and beyond. Based on these early findings, it is possible to make recommendations for more extensive research into Traction, which would deepen our understanding of how and why it works so well, and develop a more complex and nuanced picture of how it might impact the young people as they develop their agency as cultural producers.

**1. Critical success factors:** It is impossible to pinpoint why Traction is so successful without further research, but it is possible to speculate that some of the critical success factors might include the timing of its establishment at a crucial moment in Logan's story; the holistic ways in which the program not only teaches performance skills, but also provides exposure to other high quality arts experiences; Claire Christian's unique form of leadership and the particular cohort that make up the Traction "family". All of these must surely contribute to the program's success, but a more comprehensive investigation would help to ensure its long-



term sustainability in a funding a policy environment that is often precarious and unpredictable.

**2. Wellbeing:** Some of the findings in this report point towards the idea that Traction enhances wellbeing on both an individual and community level. Some of the Traction participants described above have endured significant hardship based on their particular life circumstances, including mental ill health, learning disabilities and trauma from family violence and forced migration. For them, Traction has clearly provided an essential safe and supportive space to express themselves without judgement. Similarly, viewing the notion of wellbeing in a holistic sense, Traction has, along with initiatives like the Queensland Music Festival event *Under This Sky*, made an affirming and positive contribution to the wellbeing of the Logan community. Using the Capabilities framing described earlier in a more focused way could uncover the ways in which Traction works within the cultural ecology of Logan to enhance wellbeing.

**3. Arts Pathways:** It is clear that Traction is providing its participants with a range of skills and opportunities to pursue future career pathways into the arts and creative industries. A more detailed investigation of this could explore how the pathways are navigated, how this operates in relation to factors such as parental and cultural expectations, and how this is framed within a wider analysis of diversity within the Queensland arts scene. This could include a more longitudinal approach that tracks participants from school, interviewing parents, caregivers and teachers, and investigating how Traction connects to other arts activities such as the QMF project (which seemed an important part of the story for to some Traction participants), school arts programs and cultural events to contribute to these pathways. An important extension to this would be a closer examination of how Traction works to develop an individual and collective sense of identity, and how this might ripple out into mainstream forms of cultural production.

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