

Dartington Report - Observation - Active Horizons

Introduction

The observational visit is an opportunity for grantees to showcase their work and gain tailored insights from a Learning Partner around their activities and wider organisational work to support young people’s mental health and wellbeing. This document aims to present some of the insights from the Dartington Service Design Lab (Dartington) observation of one of Active Horizons’ activities offered to young people from Black, migrant and refugee communities living in and around the London Borough of Bexley.

Dartington’s observational visit consists of three stages. First, there is a 30-minute pre-meeting in which the grantees’ activities are discussed, aims are explored, and any questions are clarified. Second, an in-person observation of an activity/event takes place, during which conversation can be had with both the grantees offering the activity and the young people benefitting from it. Finally, there is a 45-minute debrief session to discuss key findings and potential recommendations.

The grantee

Active Horizons is a youth organisation in Bexley that aims to amplify the voices of Black, migrant, and refugee communities between the ages of 8-25. Active Horizons works with over 300 young people each year to provide the training, tools and confidence required to enable them to raise their voices and challenge the injustices that affect them in their day-to-day lives (schools, health services, employment).

The Activity

Grantee	Active Horizons
Activity observed	Hair Braiding: Active Horizons brought in an external facilitator to carry out a hair braiding activity.
Date and Duration	Wednesday 31 st of January 2024 The activity ran from 15:30-18:00
Facilitator	Bukola Joel (Facilitator/also Project Manager at Centric Community Research)
Attendees	A group of 15 young people from different age groups (U16s) Ediane de Lima (Dartington) George Davis (Dartington) Michelle Borerwe (Active Horizons) Active Horizons Team member

Activity Aims

One of the key aims of the activity was to teach young people a new braiding technique: the use of extensions. However, there were other aims which were achieved through group check-in questions, peer interactions and interactions with the facilitator.

Exploration of career opportunities

The activity began with an icebreaker that encouraged young people to consider and explore potential careers. The facilitator prompted young people to think about two jobs/careers they had heard about before. After that, a process was facilitated in which young people would ask each other which careers they would

prefer based on the careers peers had come up with. Each young person had an opportunity to ask and answer the question. The facilitator encouraged young people to explain the careers the group was less familiar with and provided further clarifications when necessary.

During the pre-observation meeting, Active Horizons' team members mentioned one of the key challenges for young people coming from the communities they work with is around careers and aspirations. Parents are often focused on ensuring young people from these communities have access to and explore careers which they perceive to be safe and secure, i.e., careers which members of their community have been able to access and support their families with (e.g., nursing and social care). The check-in used by the braiding activity facilitator provided an opportunity for young people to hear and learn about various jobs and careers, and also to start voicing interests and aspirations.

Activation of key behaviours

Young people were very engaged throughout the activity, regulating their own use of mobile phones and socialising with others in the group. They also displayed various behaviours such as discipline, perseverance, patience, and active listening. Furthermore, they engaged and received feedback from the facilitators and peers.

Safe environment

Young people were comfortable in the environment, they engaged with each other and members of the Active Horizons team prior to the facilitator arriving and were engaged with the facilitator when they arrived. Despite the ages of the young people varying from tweens to teens, the girls were sociable with each other and engaged in the facilitator's activities.

Connection to young people's culture and identity

Many of the young people engaging in this activity were already wearing braids and mentioned ways in which they were using or might use the skills acquired in the course in the future. The facilitator ensured the head mannequins used in the activity had different hair types, including but not restricted to those of the young people present in the activity, who were mostly black girls. Additionally, various researchers have discussed the cultural importance and benefits of hair braiding, specifically for black women, girls and immigrant black women. See some papers discussing this below:

1. Thompson, Cheryl (2008-2009). Black Women and Identity: What's Hair Got to Do With It? *Politics and Performativity*. vol. 22, no. 1. [Here](#)
2. Jenkins, N. D. (2019). Contested Identities: African Diaspora and Identity Making in a Hair Braiding Salon. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 48(6), 806-835. [Here](#)

Key learning/findings

The main purpose of the observational research was to gain insights into the approaches, and potential effectiveness of the activities offered by the grantee. Insights are presented below, in relation to key aspects and questions being explored by UK Youth through the Thriving Minds Programme:

Active Ingredients

Our observation suggests Active Horizons is currently mobilising several Active Ingredients, i.e., "aspects most likely to make a difference in preventing, treating or managing mental health difficulties", through the activities they offer young people from various minoritised communities in London. The braiding activity included various facilitation techniques and exercises that might contribute to the following Active Ingredients, as suggested by our observations and Active Horizons' team members:

- **Human Connection:** Social Relationships, Social Inclusion, Loneliness reductions
- **Behaviours and Activities:** Behavioural Activation, Engagement with the Arts.

This suggests that there is a likelihood that these activities may be effective in improving outcomes for young people. However, evidence of outcomes and mechanisms of change must be further explored through appropriate data collection and investigation. (See more in Active Horizons Active Ingredients Summary)

Equity and Social Justice

Dartington's engagements and observations suggest Active Horizons provides a crucial range of activities and services to young people who often lack appropriate support. These young people belong to Black, immigrant and refugee communities and benefit from supports that are tailored to their backgrounds and culture. Active Horizons is also supporting some of these young people, and their families, in navigating difficult circumstances related to intergenerational cultural dissonance, experiences of racism, and related mental health and wellbeing challenges. The organisation is creating spaces for young people to strengthen and build their sense of community in all its complexity within multicultural families.

Low-cost and Effective Delivery

Braiding is an inexpensive activity that can be taught to young people. It does not require expensive equipment or an army of facilitators and support staff. It is popular amongst young black girls, as evidenced in Active Horizons' attendance and retention numbers; a skill that they can learn and share with others in their family and community. It can also be managed without constant supervision (peers can support each other), making it relatively simple for staff to deliver. This suggests that low-cost activities such as this can produce desirable outcomes, providing that organisations are deliberate in the purpose and aims of the activity and ensure that it involves various aspects relevant to young people, i.e., their culture and identity, conversation, and exploration of subjects that matter to them.

Youth Practitioners

The young people participating in the activity demonstrated a good connection with the youth practitioners. The youth practitioners were attentive and considerate towards the young people, who also showed a trusting attitude towards them. Some young people arrived before the scheduled braiding session, and the facilitator was slightly late due to family commitments. Youth practitioners were quick to improvise with a different activity (i.e., colouring) which the young people happily engaged in regardless of their age. Youth practitioners were also present during the braiding session to support young people as needed. This was required when some young people had to leave early, and one of them was feeling unwell.

Limitations/Gaps identified

Active Horizons can benefit from measuring and monitoring the activities they offer to young people. This can support them in assessing and reflecting on the effectiveness of their offerings and provide a basis for improvements. Additionally, it can help make a stronger case to funders for why these activities are important to support.

The observations have suggested potential areas where Active Ingredients may be present, but further investigation is required to confirm this. Active Horizons could benefit from using more systematic data collection methods to gather evidence of Active Ingredients or changes in young people's wellbeing, behaviour, or knowledge.