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Addressing loneliness in children and youth: lessons learnt from the activities of amateur artistic movements

Wychodząc naprzeciw samotności młodego człowieka – lekcje z działalności artystycznych ruchów amatorskich

Abstract:

Contemporary youth are increasingly experiencing loneliness as a consequence of socio-cultural transformations, the loosening of familial bonds, the digitalisation of everyday life, and a decline in meaningful interpersonal relationships. This phenomenon carries significant psychological and social implications, affecting the emotional and identity development of young people. The aim of the presented study was to explore the role played by amateur artistic groups in counteracting the loneliness of children and adolescents, and in fostering social connections. Based on the analysis of statements from instructors conducting artistic activities in cultural institutions and schools, the study identified symptoms of loneliness, compensatory mechanisms employed by young participants, and strategies for building community and relationships

within creative collectives. The findings indicate that such groups serve not only an educational function but also a quasi-therapeutic one, acting as spaces for managing social relationships. The presence of an engaged adult – an instructor who consciously cultivates an environment grounded in trust, cooperation, and acceptance – plays a pivotal role. On the one hand, this approach contributes to the creation of inclusive and safe spaces where young individuals can express emotions, build identity, and form social bonds; on the other, it facilitates personal transformation among participants. The conclusions suggest that amateur artistic groups represent a vital tool for managing the emotional social capital of young people, mitigating exclusion and supporting processes of social integration. The authors advocate for the recognition of these groups not merely as leisure activities, but as essential components of the mental health support system for children and adolescents. Furthermore, they call for critical reflection on funding models, training pathways, and cross-sectoral cooperation to enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of such initiatives.

Key words: loneliness, the multiple functions of amateur artistic movements, relationship management, social capital management

Streszczenie:

Współczesna młodzież coraz częściej doświadcza samotności będącej wynikiem przemian społeczno-kulturowych, rozluźnienia więzi rodzinnych, cyfryzacji życia czy deficytu relacji międzyludzkich. Zjawisko to niesie ze sobą poważne konsekwencje psychiczne i społeczne, wpływając na rozwój emocjonalny i tożsamościowy młodych osób. Celem zrealizowanego badania było podjęcie próby zrozumienia roli, jaką w przeciwdziałaniu osamotnieniu dzieci i młodzieży i budowaniu relacji społecznych pełnią amatorskie grupy artystyczne. Na podstawie analizy wypowiedzi instruktorów prowadzących zajęcia artystyczne w instytucjach kultury i szkołach, zidentyfikowano symptomy samotności, mechanizmy jej kompensacji oraz sposoby budowania wspólnoty i relacji w grupach twórczych. Wyniki badania pokazują, że grupy artystyczne pełnią funkcję nie tylko edukacyjną, ale także quasi-terapeutyczną i są miejscem zarządzania relacjami społecznymi. Kluczową rolę odgrywa tutaj obecność zaangażowanego dorosłego – instruktora, który świadomie kreuje środowisko oparte na zaufaniu, współpracy i akceptacji. Z jednej strony wpływa to na tworzenie inkluzywnych i bezpiecznych przestrzeni, w których dzieci

i młodzież mogą wyrażać emocje, budować tożsamość i relacje społeczne, z drugiej zaś na transformacje uczestników. Wnioski z badań prowadzą do konkluzji, iż amatorskie grupy artystyczne są istotnym narzędziem zarządzania społecznym kapitałem emocjonalnym młodych ludzi, przeciwdziałając ich wykluczeniu i wspierając procesy integracji społecznej. Autorzy podkreślają konieczność uznania amatorskich grup artystycznych za ważny element systemu wsparcia psychicznego dzieci i młodzieży, a nie jedynie za formę spędzania wolnego czasu. Jednocześnie apelują o refleksję nad formami finansowania, szkolenia i współpracy międzysektorowej, które mogłyby zwiększyć skuteczność i dostępność tego typu inicjatyw.

Słowa kluczowe: samotność, wielość funkcji amatorskich grup artystycznych, zarządzanie relacjami, zarządzanie kapitałem społecznym

1. Introduction

In today's world of fast-paced lifestyle, economic migration, family disintegration, and digital relations, many young people are feeling more and more isolated, misunderstood, and emotionally lonely. Although loneliness is a common experience in emerging adulthood, chronic alienation can have dire psychological, social, and developmental consequences. Children and teenagers who do not have a safe space where they can express themselves and build safe relationships are particularly vulnerable to anxiety disorders, depression, risky behaviours, and -in extreme cases - self-harm and suicide attempts.

In this context, artistic initiatives are particularly important. Although they do not operate as part of social welfare systems or psychotherapies, they create spaces with real potential to support the young in crisis and have a therapeutic effect. For many young people, participation in theatre groups, music bands, dance collectives, and visual arts workshops is the only available form of expressing emotions, building relationships, and regaining self-esteem. Practice shows that where school, family, or welfare institutions fail, a creative community can play a key role in breaking the silence, empowering children and youth, and getting their social life back on track.

2. Sources and consequences of childhood and adolescent loneliness

Loneliness in children and adolescents is a phenomenon that is not only one's subjective experience but can also be a symptom or a consequence of complex interpersonal, family, environmental, and mental problems. Therefore, it should be looked at from various perspectives and their accompanying approaches. The most common factors contributing to loneliness in children and youth include:

1. Family factors. On the one hand, poor family relationships, low levels of family cohesion, and lack of strong emotional bonds with parents, but - on the other hand - neglectful parenting and overprotectiveness significantly increase the level of loneliness felt by children and adolescents[1]. Precarious family relationships boost the risk of emotional isolation, especially in children raised in unemployment-stricken or conflict-stricken households[2]. Adverse childhood experiences, such as child abuse and neglect, have been identified as significant predictors of loneliness in children and adolescents[3]. Such experiences can lead to long-term emotional and psychological challenges, making it difficult for young people to form and maintain healthy social relationships[4].
2. It is worth noting that, contrary to popular belief perpetuated by the media, the economic separation of parents does not always result in higher levels of child and youth loneliness, which undermines the stereotype of euro-orphans,[5] and children might experience loneliness

[1] Z. Dołęga, *The Family System and the Feeling of Loneliness of Young People*, "Family Upbringing" 2022, issue 2, pp. 37–50.

[2] L.Verity, K.-X.Yang, R. Nowland, A. Shankar, M. Turnbull, P., Qualter, *Loneliness From the Adolescent Perspective: A Qualitative Analysis of Conversations About Loneliness Between Adolescents and Childline Counselors*, "Journal of Adolescent Research" 2022, No. 39(5), pp. 1413–1443.

[3] S. Buecker, K. Petersen, A. Neuber, Y. Zheng, D. Hayes, P. Qualter, *A systematic review of longitudinal risk and protective factors for loneliness in youth*, "Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences" 2024, No. 1542, pp. 620–637.

[4] M. Hosozawa, N. Cable, S. Yamasaki, S. Ando, K. Endo, S. Usami., M. Nakanishi, J. Niimura, N. Nakajima, K. Baba, K. Oikawa, N. Stanyon, D. Suzuki, K. Miyashita, M. Iso, H. Hiraiwa-Hasegawa, M. Kasai, A. Nishida, *Predictors of chronic loneliness during adolescence: a population-based cohort study*, "Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health" 2022, No. 16(1).

[5] A. Iwanicka, *Loneliness as a potential consequence of the presence of children in the digital world*, "Interdyscyplinarne Konteksty Pedagogiki Specjalnej" 2020, issue 28, pp. 61–76.

even in families which are formally "complete"[6]. All of the above family factors lead to a chronic sense of misunderstanding and disconnectedness, as a result of which the child is unable to learn how to develop close relationships or how to cope with emotions[7].

3. Sociocultural and macro-social factors. There are also social and cultural determinants of child and youth loneliness. Due to the fact that loneliness is normalised in certain cultural contexts, it might become accepted and perpetuated[8]. In addition, there is a strong correlation between the feelings of alienation experienced by children and adolescents and the present era of virtual relationships and the fragmentation of social networks, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic[9]. The cultural pressure to be unique and to paint an alluring social media image can only exacerbate the feelings of isolation and disconnectedness[10].
4. Personal and psychological characteristics. Personality traits such as introversion, low self-esteem, social anxiety, difficulties in forming an identity, and negative affectivity are also crucial factors of loneliness[11]. Children and adolescents with a higher susceptibility to negative emotions are more likely to experience loneliness, especially if they are unable to successfully regulate their emotions or seek support. Youth loneliness can also stem from their inability to accept the physical changes of puberty and the associated disturbed body image[12].
5. Peer factors. Another vital set of factors include the school environment and peer relationships. Peer rejection, social exclusion, bullying, and lack of peer support are the main predictors of loneliness during school years[13]. Children and youth who are marginalised by peers experience social exclusion, which can persist in adulthood. They are more likely to experience depression, feel unmotivated in school, and

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[6] R. Caledron, M.T. Greenberg, *Social and Emotional Development of Deaf Children: Family, School, and Program Effects*, 2011, Oxford: Oxford Handbooks Online.

[7] See: A. Iwanicka, *Loneliness as…*; Z. Dołęga, *The Family.…*

[8] V.C. Cala, F. Ortega, *Understanding the Sociocultural Dynamics of Loneliness in Southern Spanish Youth*, "Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry" 2024, No. 48, pp. 547–568.

[9] L. Heu, *The Loneliness of the Odd One Out: How Deviations From Social Norms Can Help Explain Loneliness Across Cultures*, "Perspectives on Psychological Science" 2023, No. 20(2), pp. 199–218.

[10] L. Heu, *The Loneliness…*, pp. 199-218.

[11] L.Verity, K.-X.Yang, R. Nowland, A. Shankar, M. Turnbull, P., Qualter, *Loneliness From.…*

[12] S. Turner, A. Fulop, K. Woodcock, *Loneliness: Adolescents' Perspectives on What Causes it, and Ways Youth Services Can Prevent it*, "Children and Youth Services Review" 2024, Vol. 157.

[13] A. Gaweł-Mirocha, *Wirus w koronie – sytuacja społeczna dzieci odrzuconych rówieśniczo…*, "Kultura – Przemiany – Edukacja" 2024, issue 434, pp. 372–384.

withdraw from social life[14], while popular and well-integrated children display stronger emotional resilience[15]. What turns out to be of crucial importance is not the number of relationships but their quality. Trust, a sense of reciprocity, and the ability to share emotions with a peer are the fundamental factors preventing loneliness[16].

6. The impact of digital media. Overuse of social media correlates with higher levels of alienation and psychosocial disorders. On the other hand, lack of access to digital tools can also trigger social exclusion, especially among youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds[17]. Although the Internet can sometimes be a substitute for palpable, authentic social contacts, virtual relationships do not offer feedback or non-verbal contact and thus usually fail to fully meet people's emotional needs[18]. For some young people, however, digital media act as a compensatory mechanism, allowing them to maintain social relationships when physical contact is impossible, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic[19]. Furthermore, there is the phenomenon of digital exclusion—i.e. children without access to the Internet tend to be marginalised, particularly when contact with peers is only virtual[20].

Children and adolescents apply various strategies in order to deal with loneliness. Some young people substitute real social relationships with frequent on-line presence or join new peer groups. Others withdraw socially, show aggressive behaviour, or develop maladaptive defence mechanisms[21]. Loneliness can also serve a defensive function against potential emotional hurt and help in the development of compensatory mechanisms, such as creating imaginary friendships, engaging in fictional worlds, or deepening relationships with adults (e.g. teachers,

[14] J. Wrótniak, *Sense of loneliness among young people in the era of social networks*, "Problemy Opiekuńczo-Wychowawcze" 2018, issue 9, pp. 3–13.

[15] E. Napora, W. Elmanowska, S. Misztela, A. Kaczmarek, N. Paździo, J. Piasecka, A. Sulińska, *Psychologiczne aspekty funkcjonowania dziecka w rodzinie w kontekście zmieniającej się rzeczywistości społecznej i edukacyjnej na podstawie badania testem rysunku rodziny*, "Kultura – Przemiany – Edukacja" 2024, issue 434, pp. 204–216.

[16] M. Farnicka, H. Liberska, *Uwarunkowania poczucia dobrostanu psychicznego u dzieci w środowisku szkolnym*, "Problemy Wczesnej Edukacji" 2015, Vol. 31 No. 4, pp.77–91.

[17] M. Wasylewicz, *Aktywność internetowa a poczucie alienacji młodzieży ery mediów*, "Interdyscyplinarne Konteksty Pedagogiki Specjalnej" 2018, issue 23, pp.161–176.

[18] A. Michalczyk, *Niesłyszący adolescenci wobec zjawiska samotności – wiodące determinanty ryzykownych zachowań w sieci,* "Studia Paedagogica Ignatiana" 2021, Vol. 24, No. 5, pp. 99–116.

[19] A. Gaweł-Mirocha, *Wirus w koronie.…*

[20] A. Gaweł-Mirocha, *Wirus w koronie.…*

[21] L.Verity, K-X.Yang, R. Nowland, A. Shankar, M. Turnbull, P., Qualter, *Loneliness From.…*

psychologists)[22]. Personality traits such as introversion, low self-esteem, social anxiety, difficulties in forming an identity, and negative affectivity are also a crucial set of loneliness risk factors. Children and adolescents with a higher susceptibility to negative emotions are more likely to experience loneliness, especially if they are unable to successfully regulate their emotions or seek support[23].

Loneliness in children and adolescents is a complex phenomenon, conditioned by numerous environmental, psychological, and cultural factors. It is cumulative in nature and can lead to lifelong developmental and health problems.

3. The impact of amateur artistic groups on child and adolescent loneliness

Amateur artistic groups constitute a vital yet often underestimated element of the socio-cultural landscape[24]. Non-professional creative endeavours, usually taking place in cultural centres, provide cultural transmission and open up opportunities to create new quality and new pieces of art and music. This is beneficial for the participants, the local community, and the culture of the entire country[25]. At the same time, amateur artistic groups are not limited only to creating and presenting art. They stem from the tradition of cultural management, promoting identity formation and community building, while counteracting social exclusion[26]. Such groups not only enable the development of one's artistic talents but, above all, constitute a form of inclusive cultural participation, providing a creative outlet to people from different backgrounds. As a rule, they do not exclude anyone, ensuring equal opportunities for people from so-called "normal" families as well as those coming from difficult environments, with different social status or education[27].

[22] S. Turner, A. Fulop. K. Woodcock*, Loneliness: Adolescents'…*.
[23] See: V.C. Cala, F. Ortega, *Understanding the…*; S. Buecker, K. Petersen, A. Neuber, Y. Zheng, D. Hayes, P. Qualter, *A systematic…*; J. Wrótniak, *Sense of…*.
[24] E. Orzechowski, *Teatry amatorskie*, [in:] M. Fik (ed.), *Teatr, widowisko*, Warsaw 2000 (series: *Encyklopedia Kultury Polskiej XX Wieku*).
[25] M. Białous, D. Dworakowski, *Badania amatorskiego ruchu artystycznego w województwie podlaskim*, "Podlaski Pomost Kultury", Białystok 2018, pp. 3–5.
[26] M. Skrzypek (ed.), *Animacja kultury*. *NieAntologia,* Lublin 2021.
[27] M. Skrzypek (ed.), *Animacja kultury…*.

Participation in art, especially as part of informal and inclusive theatre, music, or dance groups, turns out to be an effective way of supporting children and youth in overcoming their emotional challenges. A creative milieu makes it easier for them to build a sense of belonging, form identity, and hone their cultural and interpersonal skills. It is also a safe space for self-expression[28]. Working together on a project - whether it is a theatre performance, a concert, or an exhibition - requires communication, cooperation, responsibility, and mutual trust. Such activities are particularly beneficial for the socially excluded who have been marginalised or misunderstood in traditional systems such as school or family. As members of artistic groups, they can regain self-esteem, actively participate in social life, and experience a new quality of interpersonal relationships[29].

What is more, through amateur art, one can symbolically process their life hardships. By taking on stage roles, creating narratives, and expressing themselves through art or music, participants can communicate the emotions and traumas that often remain unexpressed in everyday life. For many young people, participation in art is a form of soul-searching and a way to make up for their loneliness and connect with others. In the age of virtual communication, responsible for the increasing superficiality of interhuman relationships, artistic groups bring back the importance of direct, interpersonal contact and community action. The creative process becomes an opportunity to hone one's artistic skills but is also a community-building experience with great therapeutic and educational potential. The process of skill-building is a by-product of creative endeavours, collective emotional experiences, and collaboration. Participants learn how to talk with one another, listen, resolve conflicts, and play different roles responsibly—not only on stage but also in social situations[30]. Amateur artistic initiatives can serve a quasi-therapeutic function—the performative act of creation makes it possible for children and youth to integrate their experiences, regulate emotions, achieve a sense of agency, and feel like they belong[31]. A given artistic form can be their

[28] A. Clarke, A.J. Bartoli, D. Omigie, *Supplemental Material for Exploring Barriers to and Drivers of Participatory Arts Engagement in Early Adolescence*. "Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts" 2023.
[29] J. Wrótniak, *Sense of*….
[30] K. Borzucka-Sitkiewicz, K. Kowalczewska-Grabowska, *Wspieranie potencjału psychospołecznego młodzieży na przykładzie projektu me_HeLi-D*, „Kultura – Przemiany – Edukacja" 2024, issue 434, pp. 365–371.
[31] A. Clarke, A. J., Bartoli, D. Omigie, *Supplemental Material*….

accessible and acceptable channel of self-expression that supports their emotional and social growth[32].

The activities of amateur artistic groups also play a vital role in shaping cultural capital, since the participants learn how to be responsible for the community, have an impact on their surroundings, and co-create public space[33]. For children and adolescents from socially disadvantaged families, participating in creative initiatives is often an opportunity to overcome social barriers, enter new roles, and experience values that were previously beyond their reach. Furthermore, artistic activities can also motivate youth to enrol in higher education, try civic engagement activities, or even plan their future career. It is also worth noting that the vital role of artistic groups became particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when social distancing and the shut-down of cultural institutions deprived many people of the opportunity to create art together. Studies conducted in youth education centres have confirmed that the lack of peer contacts combined with fewer opportunities for artistic expression led to a deteriorated mental health in children and adolescents. In places which were able to continue their artistic work - even if remotely, it was possible to maintain the community and provide emotional support[34].

4. Research methodology

The methodology of this research was designed to capture the complexity and multidimensionality of the relationships formed within artistic groups, which are not only a space for self-expression but also a place where children and adolescents can be a part of community and overcome loneliness.

[32] M. Skrzypek (ed.), *Animacja kultury*….
[33] M. Skrzypek (ed.), *Animacja kultury*….
[34] J. Siemionow, B. Atroszko, *Funkcjonowanie psychospołeczne podopiecznych młodzieżowych ośrodków wychowawczych w okresie pandemii COVID-19*, „Przegląd Badań Edukacyjnych" 2021, Vol. 33 No. 2, pp. 227–245.

4.1. Research gap

The existing studies on amateur theatre groups and other cultural activities aimed at children and youth have generally focused on the emotional and social benefits drawn by participants. They have not sufficiently covered the issue of how such groups function, and especially what youngsters bring in to such groups and what drives their different behaviour. The desk research on the subject has revealed that such issues are more often addressed in the case of therapeutic work, with groups operating within the framework of rehabilitation processes, while leaving behind thousands of so-called ordinary groups operating at numerous cultural centres, schools, and other gathering spots frequented by children and youth.

4.2. Objectives

The main research objective was to identify the challenges faced by instructors and leaders of amateur children's and youth artistic groups in the context of how modern children and teenagers live and behave, and particularly what causes their behaviour and what consequences their behaviour has for themselves and the work of the entire group. The preparation of the research was preceded by a series of informal interviews and consultations with the milieu of instructors, culture managers, and cultural educators who acknowledged the significance of the issue.

As a result, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What symptoms of loneliness do instructors observe in children and adolescents under their care?
2. How do instructors cope with the problems that have been diagnosed?
3. What are the factors that help or hinder relationship and community building in an artistic group?

4.3. Research object and subject

The object of the research involved the experiences and opinions of the instructors of children's and youth workshops run as part of amateur artistic groups, mainly theatre but also music and interdisciplinary formations, operating outside the formal education system.

The research subject included a group of 19 instructors—practitioners conducting regular workshops with children and youth aged 7 to 18. They were both experienced educators with over 25 years of experience as well as novices (2–5 years of experience). They run their workshops mainly in cultural centres but also in other cultural institutions as part of educational activities, in schools, and non-governmental institutions. They represent a wide spectrum of professions, incl. culture managers, theatre educators, artists, and teachers, and a multitude of skills and competences, e.g. one of the interviewees described himself as "a musician, singer, performer, visual artist, and dancer in one." Owing to such extraordinary assortment of people, their voices can be readily considered as representative of instructors working with youth in the informal culture sector.

4.4. Research process

Data collection lasted from March to May 2025. The process entailed the following:

1. Recruitment of participants through direct invitations and a network of community contacts. Data collection:
   - Written interviews: providing answers to pre-made research questions (structured form). The respondents were able to reflect upon their answers without haste, which proved particularly useful when discussing sensitive and personal topics.
   - Semi-structured on-line interviews (video calls). Selected issues could be explored in depth. It was possible to capture emotional nuances in the respondents' answers.
2. Coding and data analysis: in accordance with the principles of qualitative analysis. In the course of the work, a number of key analytical categories were distinguished: symptoms of loneliness, the leader-participant relationship, role of the group, support strategies, challenges in working with youth, and emotional needs of child and teen participants.
3. Data analysis. Data was analysed based on the thematic analysis procedure. Stages of the analysis were the following:
   - Reading the input and grouping it according to the call words.
   - Drawing up a detailed grid of thematic codes based on the initial assumptions and supplemented with those that emerged from the data.

- Grouping the codes into broader thematic areas (including support mechanisms, adult presence, strategies for counteracting exclusion).
- Identifying recurring patterns, metaphors, exceptions, and counterexamples.

4. Developing the research results. During the analysis, an attempt was made to strike a balance between generalisation and respect for the individual voice of each respondent. The quotations were selected in such a way as to illustrate the diversity of approaches and experiences.

4.5. Research ethics

The research was carried out in compliance with all the relevant ethical principles. All participants were informed about the research objective. Particular attention was paid to:

1. voluntary participation;
2. the right to withdraw from the study at any stage;
3. anonymisation of personal data and contexts enabling the identification of third parties;
4. content that could carry a heavy emotional load for the respondents.

The respondents were informed that their answers would be used solely for scientific purposes and would be presented in a collective manner.

4.6. Limitations of the study

Like any qualitative study, this one also has its limitations, including:

1. Purposeful sampling means that the results cannot be generally applied to the entire instructor milieu.
2. The subjective and personal nature of the data (stories, reflections) may affect the selectivity of the presented themes.
3. It was impossible to directly observe the workshops, which limited insight into the real course of group interactions.

Despite this, it was considered that the collected data could be representative, which should be verified during further research.

5. Research results

5.1. When the world is shaking at its core: the behaviour of children and youth from the instructor perspective

Child and teen loneliness is an increasingly alarming phenomenon. Young people are struggling with alienation and isolation in many different forms. Nowadays, young people attend cultural centres and art workshops not only to sing, play an instrument, or perform. More and more often, they come with the stories of loneliness, misunderstanding, and emotional chaos. In the opinion of people working with youth, loneliness is not always clear-cut, and behaviours such as timidness, withdrawal, noisiness, and unpredictability, are often manifestations of deep-running issues. There is a common theme prevailing through the stories collected during the research: young people join artistic groups with a wealth of experiences that are often too much for their age to handle. Loneliness, feeling misunderstood, peer violence, lack of family support—such is usually the background for their difficult, destructive behaviour.

This is the everyday reality that educators and cultural instructors have to deal with. The responses of people working with youth indicate a number of signals and behaviours that may stem from loneliness. The most frequently observed ones are listed below.

5.1.1. Difficulties in social relations and communication

One of the most obvious signs of loneliness is social isolation and difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships. The respondents emphasised that young people "avoid social contact", are "withdrawn" and unwilling to interact with others. "Isolation from the group, withdrawing into oneself, and reluctance to start conversations" are also typical symptoms. Such children and youth "are afraid to speak their mind," "lack self-confidence," and "have low self-esteem," which causes them to "withdraw to the role of mere observers in the group." Sometimes, they speak very little or, conversely, tend to "over-talk" and "draw attention to themselves through various behaviours during workshops."

5.1.2. Conspicuous compensatory behaviours

Some children and adolescents try to cope with loneliness through behaviours that can be misinterpreted as hyperactivity or rudeness. As one of the respondents put it, "[their loneliness] can manifest itself as conspicuous, attention-seeking behaviour and, at the same time, an inability to bond and connect with other participants." It can be a desperate attempt to be noticed and accepted, not just a desire to be the centre of attention.

5.1.3. Mood swings and difficulty concentrating

Many interviewees indicated emotional instability as an indicator of loneliness. The relevant responses included: "Mood swings, from sadness to irritability, often stem from a lack of support and a sense of being misunderstood." On the other hand, "young people have huge problems with concentration," and their "behaviour is often devoid of empathy," which may be because they have not experienced empathy at home or in their immediate environment.

5.1.4. Lack of peer acceptance; peer and adult rejection. Exclusion and stigmatisation: the first chapter of many stories

Another clear indicator of loneliness is the experience of rejection by peers and adults, including teachers. Artistically-oriented children and youth often feel misunderstood, have a sense of "being 'the odd one out' at school due to their interests in art or drama," and " feel like their teachers and classmates do not understand or support their artistic passions." Teachers are often unable to support such passions, which results in youngsters feeling lonely and neglected. Peer rejection is also associated with negative labels: "Negative peer judgement (e.g. calling someone a "freak" or an "alien")" is a form of stigmatisation that only aggravates isolation.

5.1.5. Invisible children. Family issues and lack of support

Family issues, including unsupportive and unavailable parents, divorce, domestic violence, are some of the main sources of child and teen loneliness. The respondents often reported that they were the confidants with whom children "talk about their family problems," which can be interpreted as an attempt to bond and find a safe emotional space. As

one respondent reported, "once I had a situation where a girl with strong father absence chose me as her 'daddy."

5.1.6. Specific nature of migration and cultural trauma

Children of migrants are a particularly difficult case. Their loneliness is intensified by a change of environment, language barriers, and cultural differences. As one of the interviewees noted, "the child refuses to go to school or leave their room at all, with our workshops being the only exception." Furthermore, it is noticeable that "modern children are more afraid of quite ordinary things than children in the past (in a different reality)." For instance, sometimes "fear of incorrect pronunciation or making a linguistic mistake" "blocks the child's speech, even if they know the right answer."

5.1.7. The need for adult presence and boundaries

Loneliness may also result from a noticeable lack of role models and adults who give young people a sense of security. Such youngsters often have no one to support them emotionally. As one of the instructors reported: "sometimes I feel like I'm the only person who listens to them, but I also want to set some boundaries," which shows that many young people suffer from a lack of adult presence or a lack of boundaries at home or school.

5.2. Between community building and 'therapy'

In working with children and youth in artistic groups, there is a much more complex process taking place than just education or following one's passion. The seemingly simple question of how children and adolescents end up in amateur artistic groups opens up a wide range of topics: from child and youth mental health, through home environment, to the strength of communities built by cultural centres. The conversations with practitioners indicate several main channels and mechanisms through which children start attending the workshops in question. They are presented below.

5.2.1. Parents as the first link

The most common way to find art classes is through parents. These are both parents who target specific workshops and parents seeking help.

"Children and youth who receive parental support usually come to us thanks to them," said one of the instructors. There are parents (and sometimes grandparents) who are simply looking for an extracurricular activity and also those who believe their (grand)child is artistically inclined. Others are looking for a place where their child can take a break from their challenging reality: "A parent has a problem with their child and wants them to have support or a place to relax." Parents often act on their gut instincts after noticing that their child "refuses to leave their room," "experiences anxiety", or "avoids school." For some, art workshops are a form of subtle intervention before they call a psychologist or psychiatrist, and they often turn out to be very effective. Parental help is invaluable both in terms of logistics and emotional support.

5.2.2. Peer recommendations: the power of the group

Peer recommendations and invitations are an extremely vital factor. "They actually end up here thanks to their friends," as reported by one of the instructors. Sometimes, young people start attending said classes, because "they heard someone talking about it" or "they found out that there is no judgement there, that it's cool, that they will feel accepted." This grass roots communication and trust between young people often proves more effective than any kind of advertising.

Peer relationships are equally important—young people recommend places where "there is no judgement" and "it's okay to make mistakes." One of the instructors said that, to her knowledge, "friends tell one another about this place…" and that "they simply feel fantastic." Sometimes, it is the group that is the only space where a child or a teen feels accepted. "Very often, after the first workshop taken with caution and reserve, youngsters come back to continue and invite their friends, which helps create a larger group of participants." The interviewees' answers also included the following: "When we deal with children and adolescents who live in some kind of care and educational facilities, the situation is different there, because someone comes there and works with them; whereas here, they need to have some kind of impulse to start coming here. So either they have heard someone talking about it and have decided to try it out, or maybe they have some peer relationships that make them feel like they fit in here in some way."

5.2.3. Coincidence, curiosity, own initiative

Some children are simply walk-ins. They see a poster about something happening in their community centre, so they ask if they can join. "They are simply interested in drama. And that is probably the main reason why they come. They want to play theatre. This is the majority of group members." As of the respondents recalled: "There is one girl in my class who saw that something was happening in the community centre and came by herself. She was brave enough to come and ask if she could join too." However, such cases are rare. The respondents admitted that by approaching the instructor and asking to be enrolled, some of the children showed great courage and determination in overcoming their own barriers and limitations.

5.2.4. Difficult life experiences as an impulse

Experiencing a crisis is often a strong motivator for children and youth to join artistic groups. The examples found in the respondents' answers are truly heart-breaking. This is how one of the instructors described one of the girl members: "She came from a dysfunctional family (an alcoholic father, a bipolar mother). She started as a withdrawn girl with communication problems and suicide attempts and stayed with us for five years. She was looking primarily for support, connection, a chance to escape her home environment." Another story was about four sisters who joined the group after their father died. The interviewee emphasised the strong emotional bonds between the girls, mutual support and help. The younger sisters would always be there during the older ones' rehearsals and vice versa, carefully observing how their siblings were coping.

There is one special group – children of parents who have migrated due to economic, political, or war-related factors. Migrant children often "experience stress and trauma after everything has changed." This is particularly true for the teenagers who had to abandon "their entire lives" and could not understand why. Children whose parents have fled the threat of imprisonment in a regime-ruled country have it extremely difficult, because they see their situation as something entirely abstract. In such cases too, parents and peers can motivate youngsters to start attending places "where they can speak their drama language, e.g. a mixture of Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian," where they can meet others with similar emotional baggage, personal issues, and often puberty-related challenges.

5.2.5. The instructor's network of social contacts

Many children come to artistic workshops because they feel like they do not fit in at school. As one of the cultural instructors said, "high-school teens who make music or paint [...] have their wings automatically clipped or are even mocked." Young people who are called "freaks" at school feel like they belong only in an artistic group where they do not have to justify their sensitivity.

Youngsters often enrol because they know the instructor or have heard of him or her. "Parents enrolled their children because they knew me from school," said one of the instructors. The instructor's network of contacts or his/her presence in the local community boost trust and drum up participation. Many parents sign up their children because "they have previous experience with classes at school," they know the instructor and trust him/her. Information about workshops can also be advertised in local community centres or schools. For example, pupils are sometimes encouraged by teachers or posters—"someone from the community centre has left a brochure at school about drama workshops." Children return to places "where they are listened to, where there is no judgement, where they feel important," and the advantages of non-formal, out-of-school classes are "a safe space for self-expression and an authentic, charismatic, and empathetic instructor with high emotional intelligence," as described by one of the respondents.

Unfortunately, sometimes children "don't come by themselves." As one of the respondents stated, "I'm afraid that I don't have such children. I conduct contemporary art workshops, and the children who come to my classes are well-cared-for, loved, and brought by educationally-aware parents." These words contain an important warning: children in the direst circumstances - withdrawn, lonely, and from dysfunctional families - often do not show up at all. They require a special invitation, open doors, and additional community support.

5.3. Amateur artistic groups as a community: what really supports young people in artistic groups? Loneliness has a face and a voice: how artistic groups save children and youth

There are some urgent questions to be addressed when working with children and youth in the areas of culture, art, and education. What really works? What makes young people open up, recover emotionally,

and regain agency? Various personal stories of children and teenagers distinctly indicate that the following are of key importance: safe space, presence of an engaged adult, tools for self-expression, sense of community, and trust. A clear picture emerges from the accounts of people running and leading artistic groups: artistic activities not only support the growth of children and adolescents but also save them from isolation, frustration, and destructive behaviours.

5.3.1. A safe and inclusive space. An adult who sees and listens

A sense of security and acceptance is the most crucial factor fostering a healthy development of children and youth. Young people come to artistic groups with different experiences. There are children from "completely normal families," children who, despite loving homes, have difficulties at school or in peer relationships, and children from broken families or with various traumas. As one of the instructors noted, "I try to build relationships from the very start - I ask them to call me by my name, which is a simple yet powerful signal. This is the first step to gaining their trust. Then, I notice this sparkle in their eyes - wow, I don't have to call this lady "Mrs." They start to open up. The next step is to show that I am not an omniscient teacher but a person who creates together with them. I tell them clearly: there are no grades here, this is not a school, all ideas are yours and they will be taken into account."

Parental involvement is of vital importance, because it often makes children more willing to participate in cultural activities, especially when they were enrolled by a parent. "My kid comes home happy, smiling. Their behaviour is totally different. What are you doing over there?" – said one of the instructors when citing the feedback she heard from one of the mothers. "I don't know what I'm doing there... maybe we're just creating a space for children to pursue their interests," she answered herself. Another person reported that "there are children whose parents support their passions, come to all their performances, record them, and hug them afterwards, telling them they're proud." On the other hand, instructors have also noticed that some children receive support only when their parents sign them up for classes. "There are parents who have never been to a performance and say they're not interested," which is why such young people lack the impulse to take part in such initiatives at all.

The respondents pointed out that children who come from dysfunctional families often need additional support, and merely inviting them

to join a group where they are seen for who they are can be the beginning of a revolutionary change. A strong, personal bond with the instructor is another vital element. "I get the impression that they have no one to turn to, so they come to us," many female instructors said. Instructors become confidantes and emotional caregivers. Young people often bring problems with them, and sometimes they open up, as in the following account: "One of the girls sent her intimate photos to someone. When they went viral, she had no one to talk to about it. She came to me […] It was a very difficult situation, but we worked it out. And I know that she trusted me, knowing that she could come to me," said the instructor.

Not every difficult child behaviour stems from dysfunctional home background. "Nice and proper" families are not a guarantee either. One of the instructors wrote about a girl from a well-educated household where "everything was great"—and yet the girl did not understand boundaries, social norms, or the fact that verbal aggression has its consequences. She was surprised that someone enforces the rules and expects respect. Sometimes, young people come from homes where there is no communication, no support, and no clear boundaries. One of the interviewees noted that "Sometimes, I am the only one who sets boundaries, who says: you're not allowed to talk like this. And children are stunned." Another respondent said: "A child from a good home didn't understand why they couldn't 'call their friends names. They were surprised that I said stop."

In many homes, there is simply no adult presence: "We have children from families where one parent is raising them, and the second parent is rarely home... A lot of children who are starved for attention." An instructor who observes and reacts without judgement becomes a safe beacon. Migrant children from Ukraine and Belarus often "refuse to leave their room," "are afraid to speak up," or "are afraid to misspeak in Polish." For many of them, a drama group or a community centre is the only safe space.

However, it was noted that "such children have no support whatsoever, and yet they attend places where they can develop in some way."

5.3.2. Transformation through drama and the experience of community

Initial performances and plays are some of the most frequently described turning points. Artistic workshops, especially drama and arts, allow children to express what they often cannot put into words. One of the instructors said: "We staged a play about the challenges of childhood

and adolescence. They were the ones who wrote the scenes about hate, loneliness, and parental divorce." The responding instructors point out that artistic workshops break stereotypes and allow young people to regain their self-confidence. Many of them come from places where their passions like acting, music, or dance were ridiculed by teachers or peers. "It's wing-clipping." In artistic groups, children and youth can build new identities. "After a few months in the group, an initially withdrawn girl plays the lead. Parents in shock—'we didn't know she could do that'."

For many children, joining the group is their first experience of community. In one of the respondent accounts, a family of four sisters started to take care of their younger siblings on their own after their father died. The older sisters brought the younger ones to drama classes so that they "wouldn't sit at home alone." One of the twins had aphasia, including difficulty speaking, but the group found a role for her that did not require words. "It was a huge breakthrough for her (…) such children can shine even without speaking," the instructor said. In another account, an ADHD boy, rejected by everyone, landed the lead part in a play about Peter Pan. "He was phenomenal. To this day, he recalls it as one of his best life experiences."

Once young people start to feel like they belong, "they don't want to miss classes, sometimes they just come to sit and watch. It their hangout." As one of the respondents stated, "Here, for the first time, someone listens to them. No judgement. Their mere presence is enough." These groups "teach responsibility, cooperation, and empathy. Children learn to work in a team, make decisions, share tasks. It's not just art - it's a school of life."

Their transformation is remarkable. The following pattern could be discerned in the respondents' answers: "A child who is at first withdrawn and scared suddenly, after a few months, starts talking and telling stories, willing to take part in a play." Another person reported that "when working with young people, I often observe a similar pattern, regardless of whether the child is extremely withdrawn or more open. The beginning is almost identical: it is primarily shyness and withdrawal, because they are testing the waters. They don't want to make a fool of themselves, they don't know how much of their true self they can reveal, how much they can trust others." She added, "what works great is a space where young people can feel they have some agency, their voice matters, where they can make mistakes without being mocked or punished, and they won't

make a fool of themselves. This is the moment when the real work begins - when they stop being afraid, their body relaxes, they start to come up with "stupid ideas" and they know that they will be taken seriously." Their body is a barometer of change, where "at first, you can see their gestures are somehow... awkwardly theirs, or their body is just so tense." But with each rehearsal, conversation, and exercise, their body begins to open up. The tension disappears. They start to feel freedom. And only then do we see what a long way they have come. You can see in their acting that they have gone through a process that has released their creative energy." The respondents unanimously pointed out that "this process is not only about art - it is about a young person being able to feel that they can be themselves," and "the biggest visible change is their body and their movements, in which you can see a certain freedom and self-confidence."

Participation in artistic groups is much more than a hobby. This is a real educational and therapeutic intervention. This is a space where a child can not only grow but can be "saved." As one of the cultural instructors said, "I don't know if I saved anyone's life. What I *do* know, however, is that thanks to these workshops they started to laugh again."

6. Conclusions

The analysis of the answers provided by the instructors and culture managers who run and lead children's and youth artistic groups clearly shows that the role and benefits of such workshops go far beyond education or entertainment. For many children and adolescents, they become a space of their personal breakthrough - a place of emotional safety, belonging, and personal growth.

First of all, such artistic groups turn out to be a solution to loneliness and exclusion. Child and youth participants have often experienced isolation, lack of understanding, domestic conflicts, or stigmatisation in the school environment. Their difficult behaviours, from excessive talkativeness to withdrawal, stem from their unmet need to be noticed and accepted. As one of the instructors says: "young people are struggling with loneliness," the symptoms of which vary but are always associated with deep emotional tension and the need for relationships.

Second of all, artistic workshops in amateur groups are deeply communal in nature. Young people often join them due to peer recommendations, which proves the power of social attraction. Rather than official enrolment, it is positive peer feedback that drives youth participation. In said groups, young people are not judged. On the contrary, they can freely express themselves. The opportunities of artistic creation, whether through drama, dance, music, or visual arts, is a language they can use to talk about difficult and personal issues. As of the instructors reported, her teen participants wrote theatre play scenes about hate, divorce, and violence themselves.

Third of all, the instructor plays a fundamental role in the support process. Instructors, who often deliberately avoid formal teacher-student relationships, promote an atmosphere of openness and camaraderie. To young people, the mere fact that instructors and participants are often on a first-name basis is a signal of mutual trust. "This is the first step to gaining their trust," says one of the instructors. It is a judgement-free relation based on partnership and acceptance. Each child is given appropriate time and space to open up.

The fourth conclusion concerns the transformative nature of such workshops. Participation in an artistic group transforms not only emotions but also the body – the language of movement, tension, and gestures becomes a barometer of change. After a few months, a child who at first "sits all tensed up and shy" starts to "suggest stupid ideas" without fear of being judged. This shift - from withdrawal to expression - is the essence of what happens in these groups.

The fifth but no less important element is the mechanisms of inclusion. Children join said groups in various ways - through their parents, peers, out of own curiosity, or in response to a crisis. The cases of migrant children facing cultural and linguistic isolation are particularly important. An artistic group is where they can speak "the language of theatre" regardless of how much words they know. For a child who is "afraid to speak Polish," drama is a tool for self-expression and identity building.

The last conclusion concerns the role of adults. In numerous cases, instructors and culture managers are the only stable and emotionally available people in the child's life. They are their confidants, but they also set boundaries and expect respect. In this way, an artistic group is not only a creative outlet but also an educational and therapeutic space.

7. Discussion

The research results and the analysis of the responses provided by the instructors of artistic groups show that participation in such initiatives is educationally, therapeutically, and socially beneficial. The issue is not new; however, as indicated in the research gap part, it is rarely investigated in the context of amateur artistic groups. The research results suggest that this gap also encompasses the entire realm of education and culture management in general.

The role of an artistic group as a space for emotional and identity support calls for broader research and discussion. On the one hand, they are amateur groups formally operating in community centres and NGOs, and on the other, they are actual "therapeutic micro-communities" that give young people a sense of belonging and understanding and opportunities to express themselves. The pressure of hovering between amateurism and therapy calls for the system to reflect upon the fact of who trains and supports the instructors. Are they prepared to work with children in crisis? What resources do they have? Who can they cooperate with (e.g. Psychologists)?

Another aspect that is worth exploring is the role of art as a tool for emotional communication. Many respondents mentioned the "body as a barometer of change" - a closed, tense, expressionless body that begins to open up over time. This is both a physical and mental transformation. For many children and teens unable to talk about their feelings, art becomes the only channel of expression. They can talk about emotions through drama, arts and crafts, music, and dance without using actual words. It is therefore worth asking the question of how the system can support instructors. After all, instructors work with the effects of tensions rather than causes.

The issue of support from an instructor is also associated with defining their role as an adult (not a parent) who is ready to listen, avoids judgement, and sets clear boundaries. As shown, children have increasing problems with understanding social norms; they do not know that you cannot call someone names, that you have to show respect. In this respect, cultural managers are not only artists but also teachers, and their role is often crucial in forging and offering relationships that young people do not have either at home or at school.

Finally, it is worth noting that an artistic group is not therapy, although it often performs similar functions. As some of the youth participants reported, “I can be myself here,” “people don’t judge me here,” “I can say anything here.” This safe space of freedom and creativity should be reinforced, well-funded, and supported - not as after-school hobby but as a fundamental part of supporting children and youth in Poland.

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