



MAGIC IN THE
COMMUNITY:
A MAGICAL JOURNEY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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COMMISSIONED BY THE DG MURRAY TRUST

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~ MAGIC IN THE COMMUNITY ~

INTRODUCTION

The College of Magic, established in 1980, provides education and training for aspirant magicians and entertainers from a cross-section of the South African population. Currently, at least 150 part-time students are involved in the extra-mural Performance Arts training. As a way of expanding the cultural diversity of participants and, more importantly, as a way of providing opportunity for those members from previously disadvantaged communities, a “Magic in the Community Project” [hereafter referred to as the Project] was formally established in 2000. This programme currently hosts fifty-nine learners. In 2001, this Project received financial support making it possible for it to become more firmly entrenched in the core functions of the College and facilitated a better level of sustainability.



The following are the goals of the Project:

- “To enthuse and inspire young people with an exciting and rewarding educational experience
- To build self esteem, improve co-ordination, develop valuable performance skills and potential job opportunities and to nurture excellent life-skills
- To offer access to information, performance and employment opportunities, services and computerised resources
- To empower young people, enabling them to gain the respect of their families and community and improve leadership potential
- To inspire students to be creative and productive through sharing skills, thereby contributing to wealth creation and career development”

Proposal, College of Magic (2002)

AIM OF THE EVALUATION

This evaluation sought to investigate and evaluate the extent to which the Project is meeting its proposed goals. More specifically, through the use of learner, parent and teacher interviews and observations, this evaluation sought to understand and describe the potential educational gains of the project.

RESULTS OF THE EVALUATION

Two main themes (common strands) emerged from the various sources of data. The first is a focus on the changing perceptions of magic in the communities from which these children are drawn. The second theme encapsulates the perceived educative benefits. Important to bear in mind is that these educative benefits are underpinned by an understanding that transcends limited conceptions of education as primarily demonstrable in academic performances. The educational benefits are understood as holistic and include psychosocial; academic (and by implication cognitive); emotional and familial benefits. Each theme is discussed below.

CHANGING PERCEPTION OF MAGIC IN THE COMMUNITY



Magic, in the communities from which these learners are drawn (comparable to commonly held and interrogated understandings in many other communities), is not perceived as a competency or a set of skills that can be acquired. Instead, it is essentially perceived as a negative, 'evil' thing that only 'bad' people do. Those who are said to indulge in such practices are often perceived as sorcerers who plan evil against people they dislike or despise. Another perception held is that those involved in magic have 'extra-ordinary powers' that allow them to 'change' things from their original form into something else. It is also perceived that magicians are endowed with powers that allow them to project evil against individuals or families.

During this evaluation, one of the most observable unintended outcomes of the Project was the extent to which parents, families and communities have revised and changed their commonly held perceptions of magic. This was evident in three ways. Firstly, it was confirmed in what the parents said in the interviews. Secondly and more importantly, it was evident in the manner in which they articulated this change. The parents demonstrated immense pride (and smiles) as they described their children's involvement and how this has certainly allowed the community the space to review their understandings of magic in a non-threatening manner. Thirdly, it was reflected in the level of support and encouragement these parents gave to their children.

In cases where parents were unsure or afraid of community responses, adequate information, from someone in whom they could trust and relate to, sufficed to help them examine and review their perceptions and thereafter make informed decisions concerning their children's participation. Without fail, all parents chose to allow their children to become involved once they understood the processes involved.

Evident is how parents themselves are becoming 'educators' concerning magic in their respective communities. Now that they understand magic as a skill/competence that can be taught and learnt, they are sharing this information with other family members, neighbours and friends. The upshot of this is that the magic wand has touched many more lives in the broader community than anticipated.

EDUCATIVE BENEFITS

It is difficult to place the perceived benefits below into well-defined categories especially since these are all interrelated and together function to create an interesting mosaic that, in my opinion, needs to be read as such. Notwithstanding, the perceived benefits are discussed under three sub-headings, namely psychosocial, academic, and organisational benefits.

PSYCHOSOCIAL BENEFITS

Teachers, parents and children reported that one of the immediate benefits of involvement in magic is the sense of well-being and the development of a positive self-image. Teachers described developing self-esteem (and by implication self-worth) as one of the intentional outcomes for the Project, but were uncertain of the extent to which this was being achieved. From the learner and parent perspectives, this was tangible. Both groups used a variety of descriptors to illustrate the point. Many children felt that they were 'somebody important' and that they felt 'great' about their participation. One parent described magic as something that his child could claim as 'his very own', a unique signifier of who he is; thus making his child feel unique and special.

Many children described how they enjoyed being recognised as aspirant 'magicians' by community members and friends, an aspect that also supported and increased their self-worth and the development of a positive self-image. They took pleasure in a label like 'Mr Magic', a label many wore with pride.



A key benefit seemed to lay in how children's self-worth was coupled with being a part of the 'magic group'. Many learners described how important and gratifying it was to be recognised as part of the magic community. Parents also acknowledged this as important because, to them, such a community provided a safe environment, a place where creative energy was released, nurtured and channelled to enhance self-worth.



perspectives, this independence extended beyond what is described above, to include the possibility of being financially independent.

Indicative in parent and learner responses was a growing level of independence by participating children. This independence was demonstrated in their taking responsibility (for homework, clothes, daily chores, organising and successfully juggling extra-mural activities, etc.). Parents were ardently aware of how the need to be organised in magic, spilt over into routine activities children did in and around the home and how this was conducted independently of the parents. From the learners'

Many described how they would be able to make money once they felt 'ready' to do shows and stage performances for large audiences. For some learners, this was already a reality because they were already participating in shows, concerts and the like. What was interesting in the cases where this occurred was how children perceived and used this money. They did not perceive their activities as a quick 'money-making' tactic (for immediate gratification; e.g. buying clothes or things that would make them comfortable in the present) but instead to them it was a means to a larger end: that being of becoming 'somebody' one day.

Characteristic in almost all the learner interviews was a sense of purpose and a vision for the future, features closely allied to a sense of well-being and self-worth. Without exception, learners stated that magic had created an opportunity for them to have 'big dreams' and anticipate a better future for themselves and their families. They seemed to be keenly aware that their vision was not unreasonable, out of reach or unrealistic. To them their visions were possible because, already, for one or two of them, these had begun to unfold. In cases where this was happening, these children served as role models for the rest of the participating children.



Learners in this Project therefore seemed to understand that external circumstances are not the sole factors that determine one's future. Through magic, they could dare (have the courage) to create, shape, participate in and plan their own future... what a gift to give to any child!

Parents reported that children participating in the Project were role models for friends and others in the community in a variety of ways: in the way they were disciplined, focused, and organized, and in the level of respect they showed towards anybody; young or old. Learners attested to the sentiments of their respective parents. They were conscious of being admired, being 'in the eye' and of being role models within the magic community and especially among their school peers. This made them feel good about themselves and increased their self-worth and self-image.



Within the magic community, certain children stood out as role models from learner and parent points of view. Parents would say 'I want my child to be as good as so-and-so' and children would say 'I want to be as good as so-and-so'. Interestingly, the children who were perceived as role models did not view this negatively but accepted this role with ease and understood the importance of maintaining

their 'new status' through hard work and lots of practice!

Increased self-confidence made it easier for learners to say 'no' under circumstances where there was pressure to do wrong. They seemed to have developed the confidence not to succumb to peer pressure even under circumstances where some were singled out and called 'chicken' or 'pain' for refusal to take part in 'naughty' habits such as smoking. Children reported that even during those instances when the pressure was intense, they were able to be firm because they knew what they wanted to achieve.

Learners mentioned that they had learnt to laugh and enjoy themselves. The ability to laugh at oneself in the company of others is important for one's well-being and a healthy addition to one's sense of self!

Learners' perceptions of themselves in relation to other racial groups changed. Participating in the Project and mixing with children from other racial groups made them realise that they were the same in terms of ability and competencies, even if they did not necessarily look alike. There were instances when children in the Project performed better than those who were either more experienced or from racial groups that they thought would be 'better'. The upshot is that stereotypes have been shattered on both sides of the divide... a very positive benefit during this era of nation building.

Learners have talked about increased respect for themselves, evident as they say, in their appearance especially on a Saturday morning.

Finally, learners' self-confidence was enhanced by their participation for stage performances. Enhanced self confidence was closely linked with confidence in their ability and in understanding the interrelationship between preparation, practice and performance. Many learners understood that their ability to perform well was more a consequence of much practice rather than as a result of luck, an understanding that shaped the way they articulated their vision for the future.

ACADEMIC BENEFITS

Parents stated that it was difficult to attribute the level of their academic performance exclusively to their children's involvement in magic. Notwithstanding, they did acknowledge the following: increased curiosity; enhanced creativity; improved reading competency; increased ability to problem solve and to find things out for themselves; improved communicative skills and greater English proficiency and communication.

Learners were in agreement with their parents' points of view. However, they were more articulate in explaining the academic benefits. Learners recognised that mathematics and science concepts are fundamental in understanding magic. Thus, many magic tricks that were learnt depended on understanding the underlying mathematics or science concepts. They enjoyed learning these concepts in a fun way, through magic. More importantly though, these learners could transfer this knowledge to the classroom and make the connections between school knowledge and magic competency and vice versa.



The ability to problem solve and think things through in magic was another competency learners stated they could transfer to other learning areas like mathematics and science. These competencies, it would seem, are enabling learners to become independent, creative thinkers -

critical outcomes within the new curriculum framework and essential competencies needed to compete within a global environment.

Finally, learners were benefiting by developing competencies in the areas of stage performance and public speaking, and in verbal and non-verbal communication. Enhanced communication has had the added benefit of enabling learners to articulate feelings and provide alternative ways of resolving conflict amongst peers. Children reported, for example, that when friends got into arguments, they would always tell them not to fight, but talk instead. As a result, some children were looked upon as peacemakers. Others intimated that increased communication skills allowed them to recognise differences in people and enabled them to respect and be more tolerant of differences.

ORGANISATIONAL BENEFITS

Organisationally, learners benefited from their involvement in magic. Parents were also conscious of how involvement in magic changed the way in which their children organised their daily activities and how much more focused they had become. This sharper focus on managing time was associated to and integrally linked with making time to practice magic. Many children stated that they had to manage their time more effectively so as to ensure that they could have playtime, schoolwork time, soccer time, chore time and magic time! This many managed without coercion from parents.

As already stated, learners made the association between practice and success in performance, an understanding that they related to other aspects of their lives (such as practicing soccer, science experiments, mathematics, speaking English, etc.).

FAMILIAL BENEFITS

For many parents and children alike, involvement in the Project meant a detractor from life in the street. Parents knew where their children were on a Saturday morning and children understood what it meant to be away from the township on a Saturday morning. Literally, parents were happy that their children were being kept off the streets. Figuratively however, it meant giving them a chance in life; a reason for being and a vision for possibilities beyond the township! The children, young and older, understood and articulated this sentiment.

Magic also served as a catalyst in relationship building within certain families. Some children stated that magic provided them with something to talk about; something to make the family laugh together and something that made them become close. Parents who normally found it difficult to relate to their children, experienced this involvement as a vehicle to establishing, building or mending relationships between parent and child.

CONCLUSION

This evaluation sought to investigate and evaluate the extent to which the Project is meeting its proposed goals. More specifically, through the use of a variety of data collection instruments, this evaluation sought to understand and describe the potential educational gains of the Project.

It is not difficult to see that the Project has met its proposed goals. Significantly though, the evidence from the data suggests that, in meeting its proposed goals, this Project has embraced a holistic approach to education. This broad conception of education is proposed within the current educational reform. No finer expression of the spirit of the new curriculum is found than in what is evident in the classrooms and lived experiences of the children in the Project!

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Project is funded on an annual basis, an aspect that can potentially put a strain and undue anxiety on the service provider and teachers involved. Longer-term funding should therefore be solicited to sustain and expand the services provided.
- Learning English is a significant benefit for Xhosa-speaking learners. This environment provides a natural space where English speaking learners can learn to speak Xhosa, an aspect that should be more consciously integrated into the planning and teaching at the College.
- Parents were very eloquent in explaining the potential benefits of magic. They also clearly stressed their changed perspectives of magic. It would seem therefore that parents are becoming an excellent resource in the community. Ways of using parents in talks, information sessions, show introductions, etc. should be explored.
- There is evidence that children have gained much confidence in public speaking and stage etiquette. More and more, children should become more involved in the planning, preparation and presentation of performances and not solely as performers. In addition, like their parents, they could be involved in talks, shows and performances in the community, involvement that goes beyond 'the performance'.
- Many children were very conscious of the short and long-term benefits and goals of magic in their lives. Ways should be explored in which these children, for whom magic is clearly working, may be used to encourage and motivate other children in and outside the Project.
- It is clear that children in the Project are more focused, prepared (in and out of Project activities) and vision oriented. Tracking children, in a more systematic way through a longitudinal study, (to ascertain the benefits in and out of school) may be valuable for the life and sustainability of the Project.
- Very few girls seem to be attracted to participate in the Project. Reasons why should be sought and an effort should be made to correct the balance especially since, generally, it is the girl-child who seems more vulnerable.
- The evaluation focused only on the learners in the Project. It may be useful to do a comparison between the various groups of learners within the College as a way of ascertaining the perceived benefits from a more representative cohort/sample.

