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Professional development through community arts projects: a study of the influence of Thesele Creative Society on the career paths of five people

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Abstract

This report examines the ways in which a community theatre project called Thesele Creative Society (TCS) active in Soweto, South Africa, influenced and broadened the career paths of five people who were directly marginalized by the Apartheid government's policies. I focus on the period from 1991-1995, which corresponds to the transition to democracy, signifying increased accessibility within the country to a variety of career options for black people synchronous with an entry into a differently challenging global economy. In many parts of the world, community arts projects are known to enhance the ability of their participants to successfully participate in the job market and learn skills that are useful in life more generally. South African community arts projects are understood to have played a significant role in, *inter alia*, the economic and skills development of its participants over the last 60 years. Although located in a remote periphery of the arts, culture and heritage sector, with its impact running a risk of being undercounted within the creative economy, TCS proved to be one of the community arts projects with socio-economic bearing. Selected through purposive sampling, the five main participants of this study present intrinsically interesting cases through which I identify the types of skills provided by TCS within the community theatre environment, as well as the methodology employed in transferring these skills. I also show that the background and practice of TCS provides lessons in terms of the application of self-reliance and self-determination principles, and sequentially argue that the application of these principles is necessary for the advancement of many disadvantaged communities in South Africa. I create links between the qualitative data I have collected in the form of interviews with wider issues of creative economies, complementing existing theoretical and ideological studies of community arts practice with a practically grounded approach. This research draws attention to, and demonstrates the importance of, the study of community arts projects, as opposed to community arts centres, which have been the virtually exclusive focus of prior research.