The efficacy of creative interventions with children and young people experiencing disadvantage: an evidence review

Contents

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Executive Summary

This review explores evidence on the efficacy of creative interventions with children and young people experiencing structural disadvantage and exclusion, including the key factors that can affect an intervention's success.

This review groups children and young people based on whether they have care experience or whether they are experiencing structural disadvantage and exclusion but do not have care experience, in order to explore any differences in outcomes for care experienced young people.

Creative interventions have been defined as structured, non-therapeutic programmes, delivered outside of day-to-day service provision (e.g. statutory school lessons), which aim to address developmental and psychosocial needs through creative engagement. This review identified and focuses on 21 studies relating to mixed-arts (6), music (6), theatre (4) and art (3) interventions and to the Arts Award (2).

Findings relating to care experienced young people and those facing structural disadvantage and exclusion, but not care experienced, were largely consistent. Most of the evidence related to 'soft outcomes.' Most commonly, children and young people were observed to have grown in **confidence, self-esteem, social skills** and **communications skills** and to have forged **strong relationships** with peers and programme facilitators. Other benefits relating to **self-awareness, identify, wellbeing, resilience** and **empathy** were also referenced.

In some cases, participants' **outward behaviour** was understood to have improved. Young people were understood as becoming less aggressive and disruptive.

There was less evidence about 'hard outcomes' relating to participants' longer-term trajectories such as **education** or **career attainment**, although young people's aspirations often developed. Despite some criticism of the accreditation, the Arts Award programme was found to support young people in their future career paths.

There is consensus that creating a **'safe space,'** allowing young people the opportunity to exercise agency, and having **the right facilitators** are critical components for success.

Mentorship programmes were shown to be highly effective, and the benefits of **enabling young people to showcase their work** were evidenced. **Providing support or 'after care'** following the close of a programme was found to be important.

There was less consensus about **group size and composition** (i.e. whether groups should involve participants with a range of experiences or be focused on a group with specific shared experiences).

Virtual programmes supported confidence and wellbeing, but they were less effective at supporting the development of social skills.

Most studies adopted qualitative methodologies. None utilised a control group and few used validated scales. It is not possible to conclude if any creative interventions are more effective than others in supporting children and young people facing structural disadvantage and exclusion, or about preferential programme designs.

Practice recommendations

- Dedicate time and effort to recruiting the right professionals with the appropriate qualities, skills and experience
- Create a 'safe space' - beyond a safe physical setting, build supportive and inclusive environments
- Foster agency of young people through co-design
- Tailor programmes to individuals
- Provide opportunities for young people to showcase their work
- Consider the individual needs of the target group of young people and consult them when deciding on group size and composition
- Design closing sessions and follow ups to prevent sudden endings

Policy recommendations

- Boost support for and investment in creative interventions, embedding creative interventions in education and children's social policy
- Focus policy on making arts accessible to young people experiencing disadvantages
- Provide comprehensive training for arts professionals to deliver effective interventions
- Foster partnerships between arts, community and educational institutions to increase opportunities for young people
- Include budget for further research on impact in arts funding

Research recommendations

- Future creative interventions should ensure funding is allocated to evaluation
- Develop research methods with and tailored to young people to increase engagement
- Allocate time and resources to developing research engagement strategies from the outset
- Consider a range of quantitative and qualitative methods, including participatory and creative approaches
- Further research is needed to explore:
  - Whether creative interventions benefit those most in need
  - Which types of creative interventions are most effective
  - 'Hard' quantitative outcomes using validated measures and a control group where feasible
  - Long-term impacts of creative interventions

1. Introduction

a. Background

Research has found numerous benefits associated with taking part in arts activities. The Cultural Learning Alliance (2017), using international evidence, found that participation in structured arts activities increased cognitive abilities, the development of skills and behaviour that helped children to perform better in school, and increased employability. Children and young people from low-income families who participated in arts activities at school were three times more likely to get a degree, twice as likely to volunteer, and 20% more likely to vote, and young people who had offended were 18% less likely to re-offend (The Cultural Learning Alliance, 2017).

Yet, public funding of the cultural sector in the UK is now one of the lowest levels of cultural funding in Europe with waning participation in arts activities in school (Campaign for the Arts & University of Warwick, 2024).

Coram's previous review (Peeran, 2016) identified nine studies; six were conducted in the UK and three were international. Despite the original objective of the review, only two studies involved care-experienced young people[1]. Therefore, the findings do not offer insight about the care population in isolation. Most (6) of the studies identified used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, two undertook a qualitative approach and one used a quantitative methodology. The review encompassed a range of creative interventions (three studies related to art, two to music, one to storytelling, one to film, one to drama as well as a mixed-arts approach), but scant detail was available within the studies about the specific nature of the interventions.

The review concluded that engagement with the arts could have a positive impact on various 'soft outcomes'[2]. Engagement with creative interventions has the potential to increase self-confidence, self-esteem and emotional resilience. It can also support children and young people's self-expression and this was found to be particularly valuable for those who struggle to express their feelings verbally. Participation supported the development of social networks; the development of friendships was a common theme. Children and young people benefitted from new experiences and felt proud of their attainment of new skills.

The review identified a lack of quantitative research exploring 'hard outcomes'[3] and was unable to find any studies that reported impacts on long term attainment relating to education, training or employment. However, it highlighted that communication skills, self-awareness, self-esteem and confidence 'are crucial for employment, training, re-entering education and improving educational outcomes' (p.9).

The review suggested that further research is necessary to explore gaps in the evidence base, including the potential longitudinal benefits associated with education and employment outcomes as well as the barriers to engagement.

[1] An additional study referred to those who 'were likely' to have experience of being in care (Coholic et al 2016)
[2] 'Soft outcomes' are those which are less tangible and typically harder to measure and quantify. Therefore, they are often explored using qualitative methodologies such as observation, focus groups and depth interviews. Soft outcomes often relate to the personal self with examples including communication skills, empathy and confidence.
[3] 'Hard outcomes' refer to outcomes that are more tangible and easier to measure through quantitative means. Examples include examination attainment and employment rates.

b. Purpose

This rapid evidence review supported by the Hadley Trust, builds upon an earlier body of work conducted by Coram (Peeran, 2016), which explored the impact of arts and cultural education on looked after children and young people, but focuses on the UK specifically.

This report summarises the findings from outcomes studies published in the UK since the previous review in 2016. It aims to answer two research questions:

1. **What evidence is there on the efficacy of creative interventions to support children and young people facing structural disadvantage and exclusion?**
2. **What factors can influence the outcomes for children and young people who participate in creative interventions?**

It explores the outcomes associated with participation in a range of creative interventions (Section 2) and presents factors that can impact their success (Section 3).

The review explores the evidence to support the use of creative interventions with children and young people:

1. With **care experience**
2. **Facing structural disadvantage and exclusion** (but not care experienced)

We define structural disadvantage and exclusion as inequalities resulting from how society operates (for example, power structures and the way resources are distributed) that impact peoples' ability to fully participate in society. This affects resources and opportunities and includes poverty, and discrimination related to characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, disability or sexuality.

We recognise that care experienced young people face structural disadvantage but for the purposes of this review, we are assessing the evidence for creative interventions with care experienced young people separately.

The review does not specifically address the issues for those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

c. Limitations

This evidence review does not claim to be systematic; it took the methodology of a rapid evidence assessment (REA)[4], and it is feasible that other studies meeting the inclusion criteria have been omitted and this review does not seek to assess the reliability or rigour of the identified studies in detail but rather to consider cross-cutting findings.

d. Scope and search terms

Only studies which discussed direct outcomes for children and young people were included. Publications which solely focused on wider societal benefits (for example, improving relations between the police and young people) or participation at arts venues and performances were excluded.

Studies were only permissible if they had been published since 2016 and were set in the UK.

Similarly, only programmes understood as a 'creative intervention,' outside of statutory school provision, was eligible for inclusion (see section 1f below). Studies exploring the impact of creative programmes as part of the standard school curricula or those delivered through regular day-to-day service provision were excluded. Interventions defined as 'therapy' were not within the scope of this review, nor hobbies, sports and general outdoor pursuits.

The key search terms were informed by the PICOS (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcomes and Study) framework outlined in Table 1. The search was conducted using Google Scholar.

[4] Rapid Evidence Assessment Toolkit index, [1] An additional study referred to those who 'were likely' to have experience of being in care (Coholic et al 2016)

Table 1: PICO Framework

Population: Children and young people (aged 0-21 years old) who have a) experienced any form of state care b) experienced structural disadvantage and exclusion but not state care. Structural disadvantage and exclusion refers to children and young people experiencing inequality as a result of how society functions, including poverty and discrimination.

Intervention: Any UK intervention or programme understood as 'creative' in nature, designed to improve developmental and/or psychosocial outcomes. An intervention is defined as a group of activities, with a beginning, middle and end that has a set process for its activities, and eligibility requirements. All settings were included. Programmes delivered as addendum to the standard school curriculum were included. Creative therapies were excluded.

Comparisons: Children and young people who have not experienced structural disadvantage and exclusion.

Outcomes: Any educational, social-emotional, cognitive, attitudinal, behavioural or knowledge outcomes.

e. Studies identified

Within Section 2, only studies that directly explored intervention outcomes and impacts were included (i.e. publications providing general commentary or theoretical frameworks were excluded). Twenty-one studies were identified that met the criteria:

- Five pertain to care experienced children and young people;
- Fourteen to children and young people facing structural disadvantage and exclusion;
- Two to the Arts Award, a UK-wide accreditation that can be accessed by all young people.

A summary of these studies can be found in Appendix A.

f. Approach

An overview of the findings from the 21 studies is outlined below, structured by the two overarching research questions.

The studies have not been categorised by mode of creativity because, firstly, many do not provide substantial detail about the intervention itself, and secondly, six used a 'mixed-arts' approach, incorporating a wide range of activities such as drama, music, art, poetry and photography.

Instead, they have been grouped by whether the interventions targeted care experienced young people or young people facing structural disadvantage but not care experienced, in order to explore any differences in outcomes between these groups.

The impact of creative interventions is explored in Sections 2a-c below. To assist navigation and interpretation, the studies have been structured by setting (e.g. school, community etc.).
Section 2d provides discussion on the Arts Award which is a government-backed accreditation accessible to all young people. It is relevant for inclusion owing to its uptake with, and promotion among, vulnerable groups.

g. What are creative interventions?

In this review, 'creative interventions' are understood as any structured, non-therapeutic programme, delivered outside of day-to-day service provision, which purposefully aims to address developmental and/or psychosocial needs through creative engagement. An intervention or programme is defined as a group of activities, with a beginning, middle and end, that has a set process for its activities, and eligibility requirements. Activities can incorporate anything from drama, music, creative writing, photography, film-making, art, crafts or story-telling.

Research undertaken on creative activities within day-to-day education of the statutory curriculum have been excluded from this review. Although interesting findings have been produced, for example, the Royal Shakespeare Company's (RSC) randomised controlled trial (RCT) of RSC teaching approaches found improved language development and confidence of young people (McCulloch and Collis, no date), such studies are beyond the scope of this report.

The terms 'creative interventions' and 'creative therapies' are sometimes used inter-changeably, or with the latter being understood as a sub-set of the former (as in the case of Malchiodi, 2008). However, creative therapies can be distinguished from creative interventions through their application of therapeutic frameworks and the facilitation of programmes by trained therapists (e.g. art therapists, music therapists).

Creative interventions meanwhile do not have to have a therapeutic framework, can be facilitated by professionals with no therapeutic background and do not necessarily need to be delivered by trained artists. All of the programmes referenced within this review are 'interventionist' in nature.

2. Evidence

Evidence on the efficacy of creative interventions for children and young people facing structural disadvantage and exclusion

a. Care experienced

This report builds on a review of the evidence by Coram in 2016, which found a scarcity of evidence for arts-based interventions with children and young people with care experience. This review identified four studies published in the UK since 2016 pertaining to children and young people with care experience, plus one unpublished interim evaluation of a Coram programme.

i. Community settings

Delivered within a community setting, Mannay et al. (2018) studied a weekly two-hour arts intervention, delivered as part of the Big Lottery Fund Confidence in Care' programme. Foster carers participated in some group activities and the positive significance of foster carer engagement and support for the intervention was noted.

The intervention spanned ten weeks with eight female participants (aged 12-15). Sessions incorporated a range of activities including games, puppet-making, singing, acting and drawing. Impact was assessed using a range of qualitative techniques including diary analysis, observation and focus groups and interviews with the young women, foster carers and programme facilitators.

Young women reported **increased confidence**, a **sense of pride** at producing an artistic output and **new creative skills.** Some participants developed emotional and social competencies including 'transformative forms of self-development,' (p.70) evidenced through their increased engagement and inter-personal relationships.

There were indications that the impact of the arts intervention would extend beyond the intervention; foster carers reported that participation had enabled the children to develop their **cognitive skills, support their educational trajectories** and **build lasting friendships.**

However, in the context of the wider support offered within the programme, the study concluded that it was not clear what benefits the creative component of the intervention afforded. Foster carers tended not to focus on the artistic value of the intervention, but rather welcomed the opportunity for the children to engage with and enjoy something new and 'valued any activities that would engender positive experiences and developmental opportunities' (p.97)., The study recommended research be undertaken to explore the independent effects of creative practice, particularly with a control group.

Nunn et al. (2021) conducted a longitudinal study, collating qualitative and quantitative data from 120 participants across a two-year period to assess the impact of a creative mentorship programme run in Derby via the Virtual School. They used observations, interviews, focus groups, a questionnaire and repeated assessments. Children and young people aged 8-24 were referred by schools, carers, social workers or Education Support Officers.

The intervention was comprised of a series of discrete projects, varying in size and with different modes of delivery[5]. Creative activities included music, poetry, cookery, ceramics and crafts. Some participants were invited to take part in group activities, others were not. All participants were allocated an individual creative mentor.

The programme was underpinned by a 'social pedagogy' approach - promoting social skills and participation to support social integration. The person-centred ethos of the programme meant that mentors were required to support young people in a host of activities (such as going for walks, visiting shops or arcades) and assisting them in their development of life skills such as cooking and shopping for essentials.

As a core component of the programme, no overt functional goals were set. Mentors expressed that, unlike school, it was important that the programme did not focus on the assessment of particular skills or competencies so that they could 'introduce creativity and art in a less structured way' (p.43).

The fundamental focus of the programme was the mentor-participant relationship; the creative element was secondary. In this way, the 'primary role of creativity [was] in exploring ways to build that relationship and find share activities to support [it]' (p.22). These relationships were often deep and highly personal, spanning several years. As a result, it is not possible to unpick the impact of the creative work from the one-to-one support. The study concluded that creative mentorship (i.e. mentorship supported and facilitated by creative activities) was effective in supporting young people to **develop confidence, communication skills, overall wellbeing and emotional stability.** Over the two years, researchers observed that some children were more easily able to sustain **meaningful relationships with adults and their peers** and demonstrated **improved social skills**, which some young people directly attributed to their participation in the programme. Participants developed **cultural and artistic knowledge** and **creative skills.** The authors concluded that the development of these skills facilitated **resilience**; young people learned to persevere with tasks they found challenging and to confront and overcome problems. The study also tentatively showed that creative mentorship could **motivate** young people and **foster ambition.**

Although progress was described as 'bumpy' rather than linear, **those with the greatest initial need at the referral stage, were most likely to benefit the most from the programme**.

The programme's World of Work work stream facilitated access to a series of enterprise projects, typically running for several days. Activities included making objects for an exhibition or craft fair or gardening for a garden show. World of Work was designed to support those who were typically older at first engagement and closer to the labour market, or those who had undertaken a period of successful mentoring. Children and young people participating in the World of Work also received one-to-one mentoring. Young people reported developing **confidence, communication** and new skills. Carers believed that young people were more **employable** because of their participation and that they had an **enhanced understanding of their career options.**

Plus One was a mixed-arts programme (Dodsley et al., 2019), consisting of workshops, conducted over three to four days, typically during the school holidays, aimed at children and young people with care experience aged six to early 20s. Children and young people were either referred by the area's Virtual School or self-referred after seeing publicity for the programme.

Plus One offered multiple group activities including illustration, film-making, singing, dancing, story-writing and poetry with activities taking place in a range of venues. Older children, who had participated in Plus One previously, acted as 'Ambassadors,' supporting the development of themes explored within workshops. The programme aimed to facilitate skills development, confidence building, education attainment and career aspirations.

Impact was assessed using mixed methods (interviews, focus groups, artwork and document analysis, and observations) and data was gathered over a year. The short duration of the workshops meant that it was difficult to assess the impact of the intervention relative to other factors.

{5} All participants were allocated a Creative Mentor, but also had access to group activities either on a weekly basis, or as intensive programme during school holidays. Sometimes progression was required to move from one group to another. Some participants did not engage in group activity and only accessed one-to-one mentoring.

However, young people reported the attainment of skills - technical creative skills (e.g. in relation to singing, film-making or acting) but also 'softer' more generic skills such as increased confidence, resilience and the ability to negotiate and deal with conflict. Many young people highlighted that they had established strong relationships with adults and peers. These relationships were important in supporting young people in life transitions such as moving or leaving educational settings and entering work. Additionally, participation was beneficial for exploring self-identity[6].

Some of the older participants made causal links between their participation in the programme and positive life and skills development; their career ambitions had been influenced by the workshops. Two young women developed confidence to pursue further education.

ii. Online

We Belong was a week-long arts project designed to improve confidence, social skills and artistic abilities of children in care as well as promote agency and ambition. It was moved online due to Covid-19 (Parker, 2021).

Activities were predominantly art-focused (exploring texture and colour) but some sessions involved writing poetry. Young people used Padlet, an online sharing software, which facilitated the pooling of ideas and served as a means of creating a repository of artistic outputs. The small mixed-methods study used a survey, interviews and observations. Data showed young people developed **confidence** and **artistic capabilities**. The programme facilitated **agency** and **pride** for successful completion of tasks. Young people's feedback suggested improvements in **wellbeing**, particularly **positivity about the future.**

Post-intervention follow-up, captured via an online survey, demonstrated that young people had **sustained an interest in artistic activities** and had discovered ways to **express themselves through art.**

iii. Mixed online and community setting

Boiling (2025) carried out an evaluation of Coram's Voices through Time programme (2019-2024) which included a mixed-arts ambassador programme for care experienced young people. Ambassadors co-designed and participated in the programme's public campaign and creative projects delivered in partnership with literature and heritage organisations as well as theatres and museums. Creative activities included collages, textile dyeing, spoken word, theatre production and quilt-making. The public campaign included producing podcasts, poems and short films for social media. Thirty-seven 16 to 25-year-olds participated as ambassadors.

The evaluation used mixed-methods including surveys, interviews and output data. Six ambassadors took part in interviews and most reported **increased knowledge**, **confidence, creative and life skills.** They rated the project highly on how enjoyable, inspiring, relevant and engaging it and was a powerful and unique experience. They reported the highlight as being part of a **supportive network with shared experiences** that developed valuable relationship and communication skills. The skills and approach of the staff working on the project were highlighted as positive and influential. Ambassadors mentioned **agency and feeling in control** of what they wanted to do within the project. One interviewee powerfully described how the experience had helped them re-frame their own internalised negativity about being a care experienced young person into something more positive.

[6] A further finding from the study was that much of the art-work produced by the participants challenged the structures and institutions that pervaded their care experience. The notion of 'ethics of justice' is not discussed here, but this is explored in a publication by Benaton et al. (2020) who used the 'Plus One' programme as a platform to explore how ethics of justice and ethics of care can be balanced in programme delivery.

Discussion

It is promising that five additional UK-based studies have been identified since our review in 2016[7]. There was some consistency in results; most commonly, interventions increased participants' **confidence and self-esteem** and supported **strong peer and adult relationships.** Children and young people developed new **artistic, social and communication skills.** This includes 'We Belong' delivered online, suggesting that cost-effective online models, which can reach a wider group of participants, can be influential.

Without adopting more robust methodologies, it is difficult to assess 'hard' outcomes relating to education and employability. Three studies linked the competencies and skills developed through the programmes with future life trajectories. The World of Work component of the creative mentoring programme (Nunn et al., 2021) improved participants' **understanding of their career options** and approximately half of carers felt that the programme enhanced the young peoples' **employability.** Plus One (Dodsley et al., 2019) **equipped some young people with the confidence to take steps to further their career.** The Confidence in Care programme (Mannay et al, 2018) equipped young women with valuable **cognitive skills and knowledge.**

Each of the publications offered a range of 'mixed arts' activities and little detail was offered about the nature of their delivery or their balance of activities. Therefore, it is not possible to assess the impact of different modes of intervention.

It is positive that all five studies captured data from young people. Evidence was generally collated using qualitative methodologies and none of the studies used validated outcome measures.

The use of such tools could have strengthened their conclusions by offering quantitative data to compare pre and post intervention and with other datasets.

The Plus One study (Dodsley et al., 2019) had planned to collate quantitative data via a survey with young people, but based on young people's feedback, the researchers switched to qualitative interviews. More creative data capturing techniques such as a 'Big Brother' style diary room experience[8] were abandoned in line with young people's preferences. Programme funders disseminated questionnaires to young people, but the researchers did not have access to this data. Some of the questions were not age appropriate and young people struggled to complete the forms due to lower literacy levels. This highlights some of the challenges of conducting research with young cohorts, particularly those experiencing disadvantage; researchers need to be flexible and mindful of young people's preferences to encourage sustained engagement.

[7] A further study, which included children in care within the sample (Tawell, 2016) but does not discuss outcomes by type of vulnerability, is discussed in Section 2c.

[8] 'which involved young people working alone with an ipad and choosing the questions they wanted to answer from a narrated presentation which had frequent pauses and reminders that they could choose to stop the process' (Dodsley et al., 2019, p11)

b. Structural disadvantage and exclusion

Fourteen studies were identified that included children and young people experiencing structural disadvantage and exclusion, but without care experience (although we recognise that care experience can produce structural disadvantages). In the following studies, structural disadvantage and exclusion relate to a range of factors including economic deprivation, disability, school exclusion and offending.

i. Community settings

A mixed-methods study evaluated four music projects for young people (mean age of 15.59) from lower socio-economic backgrounds as well as children with special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities (Levstek & Banerjee, 2021). Two groups participated in Music spaces - weekly drop-in sessions, providing small group music activities, aimed at supporting children from deprived areas. Inclusive Ensembles was offered weekly to two groups of children with SEN and disabilities.

Observation data was recorded by staff members at the start of the intervention and on average, at week 10, which represented 'now.' Focus groups were conducted with young people, their parents and staff members. Observation and focus group data indicated improvements in children's **inter-personal** and **intra-personal development.**[9] Children became more socially open and **comfortable with adults.** Parents and carers reported that these inter-personal developments were sustained outside of sessions. Children and young people's self-esteem, confidence, emotional competence (children felt calm and less anxious) and **self-awareness** developed. Children and young people were able to explore their identity through music by exerting **agency** and control.

The study tentatively concluded that **developments were most positive for those most in need** as those who initially scored lower in this first session (on both inter- and intra-development measurements) tended to demonstrate greater progress at the following data capture. This was corroborated by qualitative feedback.

A qualitative study of three holiday clubs[10] in Northern Ireland to address food insecurity used focus groups to explore the impact of the creative components of the groups, including art, dance and craft (Shinwell et al., 2021). Children and young people **developed new skills** and **self-confidence**, particularly older children who acted as mentors to the younger children. Children could **socialise** and **build networks in a safe space.** The most prominent theme was the positive impact on **community**. This was perceived to be particularly pertinent in Northern Ireland, where young people from Catholic, Protestant and refugee backgrounds built strong friendships.

Walshe et al. (2023) sought to establish the impact of creative activity on children's wellbeing, through an 'arts-in-nature' intervention. Ninety-seven children (aged 7-10) were invited to spend eight days with artists across eight weeks, immersing themselves in nature to create artistic responses. This involved going outside with artists and engaging with the outdoor space in some way. Activities, included foliage-inspired collages, natural fabric printing, observational drawing, poetry and sculptures. Approximately 40% of the children were eligible for free school meals.

Children were asked to draw a picture of their 'happy place' pre- and post-intervention. The number of children incorporating elements of nature increased post-intervention. This was interpreted as children beginning to recognise the value of nature in relation to their own wellbeing.

However, the predominant focus of this study was the impact of immersion within nature, rather than the process of creating art. Furthermore, analysis of the artwork and feedback from children eligible for free-school meals was not distinguished within the study.

Atterby (2018) explored the impact of a Boalian Theatre[11] Project on notions of citizenship, delivered over 6 weeks, to ten 18-21-year-olds who described themselves as 'disaffected' from mainstream education. Qualitative interviews were conducted at the close of the programme and six months later. The programme assisted participants to re-imagine the terms 'respect' and 'self-discipline'. Participants' developed self-awareness through the 'mirroring' of playing theatrical characters the young people could relate to.

During the sessions, **disrespectful behaviours declined**, such as the use of profanities and aggression. The programme **improved confidence, communication skills, creativity** and **problem solving**. Participants' **resilience** improved, altering how they believed they would deal with conflict and authority in the future. In the longer-term, a number of participants reported **wanting to run similar workshops with young offenders**, others wanted to **volunteer in community programmes whiles seeking employment** and others **expressed a desire to return to full-time education.** Atterby argued that the success of the programme suggests that drama could be used more to deliver accessible citizenship education.

Arley (2019) explored the impact of an eighteen-month drama intervention (the V² method) on 72 11-18 years olds serving community sentences, who were referred to the programme by a Youth Offending Service.

Participants took part in one of three programmes devised using the V² method - through their engagement, participants should be able to explore similarities between the theatrical characters and their own lives[12]. Ex-offenders acted as positive role models to participants.

Qualitative feedback gathered from 10 participants indicated that they had become more empathetic through the theatrical exploration of the consequences of crime. All 10 respondents had grown in confidence and many had improved self-esteem. Others spoke about improved self-awareness and how the programme had prompted them to reflect on the life choices they had made. Participants referred to new opportunities that they could embrace including aspirations relating to employment and education and a determination not to re-offend.

Quantitative data was collated pre and post intervention and at three months following the close of the programme. There were significant positive changes from pre-intervention to 3-months-post intervention in all five measures of attitude to offending in the CRIME PICS II questionnaire. Although there were no significant differences between pre and post intervention on the Rosenberg's Self-Esteem scale, there were when comparing pre-intervention self-esteem scores and three month follow up.

A 2017 study (Hanrahan & Banerjee, 2017) conducted a longitudinal study over two years, assessing the impact of a voluntary theatre project on four young people (aged 15-21) who had experienced school exclusion.

[9] Inter-personal development refers to competencies and aptitudes relating to others such as social skills and the ability to forge relationships. Intra-personal development refers to 'inner' attributes such as emotional competence, wellbeing and confidence.
[10] In this context, the holiday club was established by community and faith groups to respond to the growing concern about child food poverty to enable children from low-income families to take part in activities and access food.

[11] Augusto Boal founded the Theatre of the Oppressed in the 1970s in Venezuela. Theatre of the Oppressed presents a system for creating theatre that seeks to examine forms of conflict, discrimination and oppression. It is frequently used with marginalised groups to explore notions of power and injustice. Unlike most forms of theatre where the audience is passive, everyone is considered a 'spect-actor' and invited to act as well as spectate.
[12] The V² method was deployed by the Recre8 programme in Birmingham and had been integrated into a number of its programmes. Within this study, Varley explored the impact of participation in three of these programmes; Segreg8 (designed to highlight the risk of gang involvement), Aggrav8 (focusing on anger management) and Imtimid8 (exploring issues related to knife crime).

The project distinguished itself from an 'intervention' and instead framed itself as a 'unique, sensitive and powerful way of developing a theatre production' (p.25). It was run by a charitable theatre group and aimed to create a theatre production on the life experiences of marginalised young people. The final production was run over three weeks at London theatre venues.

The researchers adopted a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews at three separate time points. Three themes were identified in young people's feedback: 'nurturing space', 'space for myself' and 'changing the story.' A key component of the supportive environment was the **strong relationships** that young people developed with the two theatre practitioners, who had experience working with young people encountering challenging circumstances. Young people felt trusted and valued throughout the programme, manifesting in increased **self-esteem, confidence** and a sense of belonging. 'Space for myself' encapsulated young people's ability to grow in self-awareness as they explored the **cathartic expression of emotion** within a secure environment. The programme enabled young people to **'explore their authentic selves** without restriction' (p.19). The 'changing the story' theme referred to young people being prompted to consider and **re-frame their life trajectories.** In expressing vulnerability and by exploring themselves through the performative element of the programme, young people expressed a distance between their past and current identities. One young woman expressed that she 'wouldn't ever go back that way' (p.20).

A qualitative investigation into arts-based approaches with young people who find it difficult to engage with school or society explored five programmes offered by two local arts-based organisations: Pegasus' and 'OYAP Trust' (Tawell et al., 2016).

Both provide alternatives and supplements to mainstream education and support young people to work toward an Arts Award qualification (see section 2d).

Pegasus is a community theatre based in Oxfordshire. Within their offering are three discrete drama programmes:

- Looking forward – weekly one-hour group sessions creating scripted theatre with 'vulnerable' young women of secondary school age and older (up to eight participants).
- Added Extra - weekly 1.5 hour group devising scripted theatre with three 12-18 year olds from both 'vulnerable and less vulnerable groups.' Supported by older, more experienced young people.
- School Plus[13] – 8-10 week drama intervention of 1.5 hour sessions with Year 7 children. Provides drama-based games and activities for
    - Group A: six young carers
    - Group B: eight young people in care[14] or who exhibited challenging behaviour

Through observation and qualitative data analysis, the authors found that participants on Pegasus's programmes valued **exploring different identities** and **distancing themselves from their everyday lives, and the negative 'labels'** that were often bestowed upon them. Across all three programmes, young people **increased in confidence** and **established strong relationships with peers and adults** facilitating the group.

The groups participating in Added Extra and Looking Forward **developed skills** such as public speaking and performance. The final performances instilled a sense of pride and gave young people an opportunity to experience success.

[13] Group B in this study initially met at a community theatre, before moving to a school setting.
[14] This study is included in this section although it includes young people in care, as the findings for these young people were not separated from the young people who did not have care experience.

In the case of School Plus, teachers reported **improved engagement and attendance at school** with **fewer behaviour sanctions issued.** All participants demonstrated higher levels of engagement with some developing increased awareness about the importance of appropriate behaviour and turn-taking. **Young people's empathy** was perceived to improve.

OYAP Trust (formally Oxfordshire Youth Arts Partnership) projects use mixed arts and are designed to promote community cohesion. Young people struggling with an array of disadvantages (e.g. school exclusion, poverty, SEN) are invited to participate. OYAP ran two projects subject to Tawell et al.'s research:

- Youth Action Team (YAT) project – 1.5 hour mixed art workshops every two weeks for 27 young people aged 11-20 'vulnerable to the challenges associated with disadvantage,' (p.24). Focused on creating events that celebrate where they live. Activities included song writing, photography, and singing.
- Kick Arts – 5-hour sessions for 12 weeks during school hours, but set in the community, for 18 young people (aged 11-16) who may be school refusing, disengaged or excluded, or home schooled.

Like the Pegasus projects, YAT enabled young people to **distance themselves** from the challenges of their everyday lives, through visiting different places and trying new things. Young people's **confidence** improved through the **development of new skills.**

For some, participation encouraged aspirations by highlighting opportunities and providing access to role models. Community projects, such as the Kindness Mission, supported the development of empathy and community bonds by forming a 'collective we' (p.25).

Kick Arts provision was bespoke, considering individuals' learning styles, interests and talent. Not all young people positively engaged. There was sometimes a disconnect between the needs of the young person and the provision on offer. A stricter referral process could ensure that the offering was suitable. Despite these difficulties, Tawell et al. (2016) reported that the programme enabled young people to engage in something new, increasing self-esteem, self-confidence and resilience. Some saw increased **engagement at school** and **improvements in their classroom behaviour.**

ii. School settings

In2 was a seven-week group-based music workshop conducted with year 6 pupils (from four separate primary schools) and a year 7 class (from a single secondary school) from economically-deprived areas of Darlington (Ward et al., 2023). Pupils (aged 10-12 years) were selected on the basis that they might struggle with the transition from primary to secondary school. Pupils worked with a professional brass band. They engaged in free play of music and learnt set pieces.

Observation data and qualitative feedback gathered from teachers, musicians and parents indicated that engagement in the intervention led to strong **inter-personal relationships.** Participants grew in **confidence, self-efficacy and their sense of connection to the school and local community.** Shy and anxious children became more responsive in lessons. Some young people commented on their ambitions to **continue studying and/or playing music.**

A group intervention involved singing every day for 20 minutes for two weeks for an entire class (27 8-9-year-olds), including five young people eligible for free school meals (Davies et al., 2023). The Student Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS) was completed pre and post intervention, revealing a statistically significant improvement in children's wellbeing. Focus groups with the children eligible for free school meals revealed that singing was a soothing, sociable and enjoyable experience.

A small-scale qualitative study (Parker et al., 2018) explored the impact of a ten-week music-making intervention with pupils (aged 13-16) in a primary school in England. Delivered by a mental health charity, young people were referred to the programme by their teacher on the basis of disruptive or aggressive behaviour; several had experience of the youth justice system or were involved with gangs. Within the school setting and part of the timetable during the school day, the programme aimed to teach young people how to write, produce and perform music, with the support of older mentors (aged 18-25), the majority of whom had experience of the criminal justice system.

Most participating pupils experienced improvements in **confidence** through the sharing of music and receiving praise. **Communication skills** improved which supported the development of more **positive teacher-pupil relationships**. Teachers noted **improvements in behaviour** with children appearing calmer and less angry and impulsive, and lyrics **became less violent and aggressive.** Some students indicated that their increased confidence and communication skills could support **future employability or work experience prospects**. Little attention was afforded to the impact of the intervention on mental health and wellbeing beyond observed 'enjoyment' of the sessions.

Efstathopoulou & Bungay (2021) explored Arts on Prescription (AOP), a form of 'social prescription' which refers and signposts patients to non-medical sources of support. An online search conducted by the authors failed to identify any AOP programmes specifically aimed at young people. However, it was not possible to discern what made this AOP model unique from other studies where children and young people were selected by professionals to participate in a creative intervention.

Children and young people (aged 13-16) were selected to participate by the school based on difficulties including poor school attendance and difficult family context.

Two-hour arts workshops were delivered over 10 weeks across 10 schools in England to 91 young people. Each week focused on a specific topic, such as the visual arts.

Sixty-five young people completed the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being scale and the True Resilience Scale at pre, post and three months after the intervention. There were statistically significant **improvements in wellbeing and resilience between pre and post intervention.** Fewer forms were submitted at the three-month follow up point and these changes were not sustained.

iii. Youth Offending Settings

Daykin et al. (2017) present the 'chaos' in delivering creative interventions in youth justice settings. Across eight settings (secure children's homes, juvenile secure units, youth offender institutions and community-based youth offending teams), involving 118 young people (aged 13-21 years, 81 males and 37 females) in contact with the criminal justice system, the authors examined fifteen participatory music programmes. Typically, two or three young musicians ran weekly sessions (90 minutes – 3 hours in duration) to 4-10 participants over 6 weeks.

The study illustrated the complex factors that can influence the success of musical interventions within a challenging environment, discussed in Section 3. Observation and qualitative data[15] demonstrated that some participants increased in **confidence, discovered new abilities and skills** and reported a sense of **pride** and **achievement.** Some **enjoyed** the activities which provided a sense of **agency** and **creativity** in an otherwise heavily-controlled environment. The intervention was perceived as **supporting young people in coping with their surroundings**, providing a safe outlet for securing attention and **recognition** from peers and staff. They were observed to become more amenable and engaged, offering support to one another, sometimes demonstrating positive changes in their body language.

In some cases, through participants' increased **confidence, skills and knowledge,** the intervention offered 'real hope for a differently imagined future where creativity has a part' (p.95).

However, there were instances where the intervention **stirred up difficult memories** and feelings. Group dynamics and facilitators' inability to effectively manage the young people meant that the intervention served to **reinforce social hierarchies,** providing the opportunity for some to **exert power over others.** The authors concluded that such interventions require careful negotiation of group and individual behaviours and handling of external factors, with significant onus placed on the skills of facilitators.

Caulfield et al. (2019) investigated the impact of art and music interventions with 30 young people (aged 13-18 years, 21 male and 9 female) at Sandwell Youth Offending Service (YOS). Projects encompassed media, music and art delivered in bespoke individual sessions or in groups, for example, young people were supported to produce a video on their experiences of county lines and received training in nail art. Additionally, a programme called Creative Careers was offered to introduce young people to alternative career paths (e.g. pottery, furniture up-cycling). The research aimed to evaluate a creative programme of work delivered across the whole YOS, rather than focusing a single, discrete arts project.

Caulfield et al. (2019) used mixed methods - in-depth interviews (with staff, young people and parents) and monitoring data (such as appointment attendance and written warnings). Qualitative data from young people showed improvements in their engagement, communication, confidence and wellbeing as well as supporting relationships with YOS staff and peers. Young people highlighted that the intervention positively influenced their future aspirations, by highlighting alternative career paths and lifestyle choices. The quantitative data was inconclusive owing to its limited size (17 young people).

There was an increase in the proportion of contact appointments attended by young people and a reduction in the number of breaches of order, although these changes were not statistically significant. Caulfield et al. (2019) intended to conduct a survey with parents and carers, but the completion rate was too low to meaningfully interpret the data.

iv. Mixed online and community

One study explored the impact of 13 virtual music groups[16] for children and young people aged between 8 and 20 years old during the Covid-19 pandemic (Levestek et al., 2021). Music groups were delivered via Music Spaces (focused on music production and aimed at those from lower socio-economic backgrounds), Inclusive Ensembles (for children and young people with SEN and/or disabilities), and Mainstream Ensembles (non-targeted virtual music group alternatives to in-person orchestras).

Using a mixed-methods approach, Levstek et al. (2021) collated:

- Qualitative and quantitative data recorded by tutors in their session reports since before the pandemic when sessions were delivered in-person.
- Qualitative and quantitative survey responses from tutors, young people and their parents.
- Observational data, collated in real time against a quantitative checklist, based on the Need-Relevant Instructor Behaviours Scale. Data was captured at 15-minute intervals.

Children and young people used music as a tool for **self-expression** and **emotional management**. The groups helped to restore **confidence**, preserve **social connections** and promote a **sense of belonging.**

[15] Quantitative data was also gathered at pre/post/follow up stages in an attempt to measure changes in health and wellbeing. However, low return rates meant that it was inconclusive.

[16] Four music projects from the original research project (Levstek & Banerjee, 2021) were included within the study as well as an additional nine music groups.

The study compared data from the in-person and online sessions. Virtual music making had a **greater impact on intra-personal outcomes** (e.g. relating to wellbeing and confidence) than inter-personal outcomes (e.g. social skills such as communication skills and attitude). Online delivery deterred 'accidental chats,' the 'usual flashes of personality' (p.10) and the sense of cohesion and togetherness in in-person group music-making was not fully supported by the technology. However, the virtual music groups still had an overall positive impact on inter-personal outcomes, particularly in relation to virtual communication.

Being able to control the camera and the 'mute' function gave young people a sense of **'virtual autonomy,'** ownership over their learning and control over their environment. For some, confidence was felt to be supported by virtue of participating from their home environment.

There was no notable difference in either inter or intra-personal outcomes for young people experiencing economic disadvantage compared to young people with SEN.

The number of survey responses from parents and young people engaged with the Music Spaces programme (supporting those facing economic challenges) was very low. A much higher number of survey responses were received from participants in the other programmes. This alludes to the challenges associated with gathering self-completion data from families facing economic difficulties.

Discussion

Six of the fourteen studies focused on music interventions, three on theatre, two on art, and two on mixed arts. One study focused on five interventions – three theatre and two mixed arts. All of the studies found positive outcomes. Findings from these studies with young people who face structural disadvantage and exclusion, but not care experience, are largely consistent with the studies with care experienced young people.

Nearly all of these studies referenced **increased confidence,** the majority reported **positive findings about relationships** and several observed **developed skills.**

In four studies, outward **behaviour was perceived to have improved** (Kick Arts and School Plus Tawell et al., 2016; Atterby 2018, Parker et al., 2018; Daykin et al. 2017). There were some improvements related to school in engagement and attendance (Tawell et al., 2016), relationships with teachers (Parker, 2018) and connections to school (Ward, 2023). Community connections also developed (Ward, 2023; Shinwell et al, 2021 and Varley, 2019) and resilience increased (Atterby, 2018; Tawell, 2016; Efstathopoulou & Bungay, 2021).

Creative interventions provided young people space and freedom to **express themselves and explore their identities.** The three studies exploring only theatre interventions explicitly tasked young people with exploring their own life experiences (Hanrahan & Banerjee, 2017; Atterby; 2018; Varley, 2019) or interrogating notions of oppression and conflict (Atterby, 2018). The theatrical exploration of relatable experiences and characters can offer a platform for self-discovery (Atterby, 2018). Both Hanrahan & Banerjee (2017) and Atterby (2018) discussed drama as a means to challenge the structures that have influenced young people's lives and to give voice to participants. Music was also used as a way to explore identity in the intervention studied by Levstek & Banerjee (2021).

Four of the studies used at least one validated outcome measure (Varley, 2019; Davies et al., 2023; Efstathopoulous & Bungay, 2021; Levestek et al. 2021) and tended to find pre- to post-intervention improvements, although these improvements were not always sustained at follow-up points. Findings from the In2 intervention (Davies et al., 2023) are interesting as they indicate that short, daily sessions of singing can have a statistically significant positive impact on wellbeing. Delivery is not contingent on specialist equipment or trained professionals; singing can be readily incorporated into in-school and out-of-school activities.

Although the studies did not tend to focus on long-term impacts, several studies referenced raising aspirations and reframing life trajectories. There were some attempts to draw causal links; the In2 programme study reported that **social capital** is connected to "lower crime rates, better health, higher educational achievement and improved economic development" (Wright, 2012, cited in Ward et al., 2023, p.45). In another study, students indicated that their increased confidence and skills could support future employment prospects (Parker, 2018).

There were some difficulties in delivering creative interventions to young people experiencing disadvantage and exclusion. Daykin et al. (2017) warned of the dangers of delivering creative interventions in challenging environments where negative behaviours could be normalised and perpetuated. Tawell et al. (2016) reported that not all young people positively engaged in the interventions they studied.

Young people experiencing structural disadvantage and exclusion is a broad group; what works for some young people, may not work for others. The interventions studied by Tawell et al. (2016) included young people labelled 'vulnerable' without explanation of the disadvantages they were facing, creating ambiguity. Several studies were not focused solely on disadvantaged young people but mixed groups of those with an identified disadvantage as well as those without, making it difficult to establish the impact on young people experiencing disadvantage specifically. For example, Walshe et al.'s (2023) study did not distinguish the impact of the intervention on students eligible for free school meals from the rest of the group.

Levstek & Banerjee (2021) studied young people from socially-deprived backgrounds and those with SEN and disabilities, but did not offer any insight into any differential impacts. However, they tentatively concluded that those most in need were most likely to benefit from the intervention.

In contrast, in the online music intervention (Levestek et al., 2021), the experiences of young people from the socially disadvantaged group did not differ from their peers. This highlights the need for further investigation.

In some studies, it was not possible to separate the impact of the creative element of the programme from the wider offering, for example, the art-making from the experience of being in nature in the intervention studied by Walshe et al. (2023). Further, there was not sufficient detail about the activities undertaken to discern which, if any, creative activities offer the most positive impacts for young people facing disadvantage and exclusion.

c. Arts Awards

Established in 2005, the Arts Award is a government-funded initiative open to young people aged 25 and under. Facilitated by Trinity College London, it is flexible in its delivery model; programmes can be offered in any setting providing access to a range of arts and crafts activities including emerging art forms and technologies, dance, and poetry. There is no set time frame to complete the award. Two core principles are to 'reach young people of all backgrounds, interests and abilities' and to put young people at the centre of the process (Arts Award, n.d.-a). Young people can work towards five different levels of attainment (Discover, Explore, Bronze, Silver and Gold). Four of the five levels are on the Regulated Qualifications Framework, meaning that participants gain a recognised arts qualification, with UCAS points associated with the Gold award. Several interventions within this review offered participants the opportunity to work toward an Arts Award (OYAP and Pegasus in Tawell et al., 2016) and others were contemplating its introduction (Caulfield et al. 2019; Mannay et al. 2018).

Hollingworth et al. (2016) followed 68 young people who had achieved an award, for up to two years following its attainment. Survey data revealed that three in five young people said they **better understood their options for a career or further study in the arts** after completing the Award and half (50%) were able to **attain qualifications or employment.** Participation provided young people with **life** and **entrepreneurial skills** that would benefit them in their future careers (Arts Award, n.d.-b).

Hollingworth et al. (2016) found that working towards an Arts Award had benefits in relation to **communication** and **organisational skills**. Children and young people developed **leadership skills** and **independent learning**, through ownership of their art projects. They developed confidence, 'social capital,' self-worth, validation and ownership and entitlement of creative spaces.

However, younger people in areas with **high unemployment were less likely to be able to secure paid work.** Young people who engaged in the programme in an arts setting (as opposed to a school, for example) were more likely to **capitalise on the connections** they had made.

Hollingworth et al. (2016) concluded that the Arts Award **provides a 'lifeline'** for children and young people who had lost hope that they could be successful; sometimes it provided their **only qualification.** The value of the accreditation and the **practical experience** provided dual value in enabling young people to **enhance their CVs and develop skills associated with promising future trajectories.** The higher levels of Arts Award (Gold and Silver) had the greatest impact, including on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Frances Howard has published several papers (Howard, 2022; Howard, 2020; Howard 2017) exploring the pitfalls of the accreditation, particularly among participants facing structural disadvantage and exclusion. The most recent of these studies (Howard, 2022) adopted an ethnographic approach and followed the experiences of 46 young people (aged 11-25) who were participating in the programme at five sites of alternative education and youth provision. Children were experiencing - school exclusion, behavioural issues, disabilities or 'risk factors' within social or family life (e.g. a parent in prison, young carers or living in care).

In this iteration of the Arts Award programme, children and young people participated in lyric writing, music production, film making and digital art/design. Children and young people in the **most disadvantaged groups often received the weakest interpretations of the programme.** This was largely the result of programme facilitators' assumptions about young people identified as 'at risk'[17], particularly their ability. As a result, they were tasked with 'really low level' challenges (p.109) and activities and/or were 'spoon-fed' (p.110).

More challenging tasks were often not introduced or lacked critical engagement from the facilitators in how to support the young people in tackling them. A draconian approach often adopted by the facilitators meant that young people's creativity was curbed. In other examples, facilitators deferred to stereotypes, encouraging young people to undertake a task involving graffiti art, even though none of them had expressed any prior interest in this form of art. In another instance, young people were asked to create a film about knife crime.

Generating 'evidence' for their portfolios proved troublesome with the process heavily dependent on completing forms. Howard noted that this process could overshadow the creative elements of the programme and commented on the coercion of young people to undertake the award as a means of measurable outcome, even though there was not always appetite to do so. Tawell et al. (2016) found that in striving to attain the Arts Award, participants potentially lose other benefits such as the freedom from fear of failure (p.19). Howard writes;

> 'Some arts programmes aimed at at-risk youth can be seen as an attempt to make young people fit social norms by credentialing them, developing 'transferable skills' and monitoring and controlling behaviour. This research has demonstrated that often the most disadvantaged young people receive these kinds of programmes.' (p.102)

Howard has attempted to discredit the notion that the Arts Award is a 'highly respected' accreditation (Hollingworth et al., 2016), arguing that the attainment of the award is 'low on the educational hierarchy' (Howard, 2020).

Discussion

Hollingworth et al. (2016) and Howard (2022, 2020) offer different perspectives on the merits of the Arts Awards, however they are not in direct contention. It is probable that both positions are valid; that the Arts Award can benefit young people in a host of ways, whiles underserving the most disadvantaged participants. However, Howard's (2022) research raises the issue of balance; how should projects be structured and delivered to ensure that activities are stimulating and engaging but that the challenges associated with supporting disadvantaged groups are sensitively catered for?

Programme commissioners and practitioners should take note of Howard's findings and reflect on how Arts Awards projects can be delivered in suitable and appropriate ways that mitigate the challenges discussed. It is not acceptable that young people from disadvantaged groups can receive a 'weaker' version of the programme, but Howard reported some positive outcomes for these young people, even in its current guise[18]. Consideration needs to be paid to how projects are delivered, particularly creating a 'safe space' and the role of facilitators (discussed in Section 3).

One point of disagreement between Hollingworth et al. (2016) and Howard (2020) was around the value of the award. Hollingworth et al. (2016) described the attainment of the 'highly respected' accreditation as a 'lifeline' for some. Howard claimed the award was not held in high regard. This begs several questions that cannot currently be answered; would the 50% of participants who achieved a job or (re)engaged with education after participating in an Arts Award programme have secured employment or qualifications otherwise? Is a 50% 'success' rate something to be celebrated? What is most important to employers and educators: the perceived value of the accreditation, or the skills and competencies that young people acquire as a result of participating in an Arts Award project?

Without a control group it is impossible to discern the impact of the Arts Award programme. In the absence of a Randomised Control Trial (RTC), more work could be undertaken to benchmark the trajectories of young people who had participated in the Arts Award programme with their non-participating peers with similar characteristics and experiences.

[17] Howard further explores the notion of participation in the Arts Award under 'deficit labelling' in 2020 publication; 'Howard, F. (2020), Pedagogies for the 'Dis-engaged': Diverse Experiences of the Young People's Arts Award Programme. Int J Art Des Educ, 39: 672-685.'

[18] Young people were provided with the opportunity to access art, activities with less defined outcomes could support creative collaboration and involvement in discussions about the delivery of the programme could be empowering (p.110).

3. Influencing factors

What factors influence the outcomes for children and young people who participate in creative programmes?

This chapter provides an overview of key factors that can influence the success of a programme. The studies in this review agreed about the importance of creating a 'safe space,' of having skilled facilitators and practitioners running the sessions and providing children and young people with agency. There was debate about other elements of creative programmes, such as group size and composition.

An additional study conducted by Benaton et al. (2020) is referenced in this section. They provided additional commentary on the Plus One intervention with care-experienced young people, originally reviewed by Dodsley et al. (2019).

i. Setting and 'safe space'

Almost all of the studies within this review discussed the importance of **setting.** There was some consensus that programmes were most effective when based outside of children's typical environments, whether that be school, residential or youth justice settings. A change to their routine, offered a sense of escapism (Ward et al. 2023) where they could distance themselves from their everyday lives (Hanrahan, F. & Banerjee, R, 2017; Parker, 2018) and remove themselves from negative spaces (Tawell, 2016). Caulfield (2019) highlighted the importance of the venue not resembling a police interview room or classroom, supporting young people to engage in more open and informal dialogue. This was also facilitated by the selection of music practitioners from the local area who looked and dressed like participants.

There were benefits to running creative interventions within high profile, community settings. In Mannay et al.'s (2018) study, using an important building within the locality helped to foster a sense of professionalism within the group. Regular engagement there helped young people to establish familiarity and a feeling of ownership of the venue. Similarly, an intervention set in a university (Nsonwu et al. 2015, cited in Mannay et al. 2018) was perceived to be beneficial in facilitating aspirations.

Many studies referenced a **'safe space',** referring to physical setting, emotional support and inclusivity. It was critical that children and young people felt accepted (Shinwell, 2021; Atterby, 2018), comfortable and supported (Benaton, 2020). A positive environment promoted a willingness to undertake new tasks and challenges (Mannay et al, 2018) as well as facilitating social bonding and bridging (Levstek and Banerjee, 2021). An open and inclusive environment could serve to mitigate any potential 'labelling' or 'stigmatisation' associated with working with a targeted group (Shinwell, 2021). This was reflected in Varley's (2019) study of the V² programme where one participant commented:

> 'we could talk openly about it no one was judging you and I knew that what we said would wouldn't go any further than that so we could just be ourselves.' (p.179)

ii. The role of practitioners and intervention facilitators

The **role of practitioners** cannot be underestimated in the manifestation of positive outcomes. Practitioners were critical in establishing a 'safe space.' They were observed to nurture (Hanrahan, F. & Banerjee, R, 2017) and exhibit patience and compassion, 'remaining sensitive to the unknown pressures that could be influencing behaviour' (Ward et al, 2023, p.42).

Many studies highlighted the strong bonds that were forged between participants and facilitators (Mannay et al. 2018; Dodsley et al., 2019; Caulfield et al. 2019; Tawell et al, 2016) and consistency of staff was understood to be key in fostering these relationships and developing **trust.** In one study (Mannay et al, 2018), the unintended absence of a key member of the programme delivery team had a notable impact on the dynamics of the group.

Practitioners have a critical role to play in terms of establishing and maintaining engagement by pitching activities at the right level of challenge (Levstek and Banerjee, 2021; Mannay et al., 2018), offering praise and encouragement (Tawell et al. 2016) or one-to-one support when required (Ward et al, 2023).

Practitioners need to adopt a carefully balanced approach to create a **dynamic but structured environment.** In some of the most positive examples, practitioners were able to maintain their authority and control over the group, while simultaneously fostering fun and discovery (Tawell et al, 2016; Ward et al. 2023). Participants distinguished them from their teachers, sometimes commenting that their approach meant that they 'hadn't realised' that they were learning (Varley, 2019).

Attaining this balance was particularly difficult when participants were disengaged and displayed disruptive behaviours. In their study of a music intervention delivered with young offenders, Daykin et al. (2017) outlined the challenging roles the musicians needed to navigate:

> 'Programme delivery was strongly mediated by the qualities, attitudes, skills and reflexive awareness of the musicians leading the sessions. They needed to negotiate a social divide between themselves and the young people, which revealed itself through different musical experiences, skills and sometimes entrenched preferences. They needed to gain participants' trust and encourage them to try unfamiliar activities, encouraging vulnerable participants and building rapport by finding points of connection while avoiding a collusion with proscribed behaviour and language.' (p.950)

The studies highlighted the need for facilitators to **navigate multiple roles**, often balancing their positions as teachers, mentors and when required, authoritative. There was some consensus that practitioners should not only be well-accustomed to dealing with children facing disadvantage (Mannay et al, 2018; Hanrahan, F. & Banerjee, R, 2017), but also skilled and trained professionals (Benaton, 2020).

iii. Agency and control

Including children and young people in **design and delivery** and **encouraging agency and control** was important. Autonomy is critical to self-development (Levstek and Banerjee; 2021) and particularly important as disadvantaged young people often experience a lack of control over their lives (Benaton et al, 2020).

In some cases, children **selected their activities** (Caulfield et al., 2019; OYAP Tawell et al., 2016) or **had ownership** over a theatre script (Added Extra, Tawell et al., 2016). Tawell et al. (2016) observed that one of the strengths of the OYAP programme was that it offered a diverse range of activities that enabled participants to find a match for their interests. In other cases, young people were given the opportunity to undertake 'adult' roles such as interviewing staff members (Pegasus programme, Tawell et al., 2016) or reviewing the content of the research report (Benaton et al., 2020). Caulfield (2019) spoke of the value of allowing young people to make their own choices and 'treating them like adults' (p.23), trusting those who wanted to to access expensive equipment.

In some instances, **co-design** was a key component supporting positive engagement. Age-appropriate co-production was a 'core ethos' of the Plus One programme and a significant contributing factor to young people's sustained engagement (Dodsley et al., 2019). Caulfield et al. (2019) noted that 'when young people can take ownership of a programme and set their own ground rules,' engagement likely improves (p.38). Voices Through Time Ambassadors reported feeling in control of what they wanted to do and not being told what to do 'for once' (Boiling, 2025).

Programme models should adopt a careful **balance between agency and structure**. Several studies (Hanrahan and Banerjee, 2017; Levstek and Banerjee, 2021; Mannay et al. 2018) highlighted the importance of young people being able to exercise choice within a structured framework. The consistent structure of sessions, at a consistent time and place, provided participants with the sense of being 'held' (p.13). In their assessment of the YATS intervention in Oxfordshire, Tawell et al. (2016) concluded that projects were most effective when there was structure and flexibility.

iv. Participation and engagement

Children and young people's **level of participation** in a programme is critical to achieving the best outcomes (Peeran, 2016). Exploring the impact of creative mentoring, Nunn et al. (2021) concluded that 'the longer and more intensively people participate...the more they gain.' Similarly, Hollingworth et. al (2016) reported that achieving the higher levels of the Art Award had the greatest impact on outcomes.

However, the link between participation and positive outcomes was not necessarily linear. Nunn et al. (2021) found that there was a marked acceleration in progression around the 14-month point of a two-year creative mentoring programme involving care experienced young people. While mentors played a critical role in supporting young people to access the programme and cope with group participation, it was sustained group participation that helped them to advance at an accelerated rate.

Programme facilitators **deployed strategies** to encourage children and young people's participation. Pegasus boosted attendance by offering young women female-driven taxis to and from the workshops as well as telephone reminders about the sessions (Tawell et al., 2016). The mixed-arts programme in Cardiff supported young people and their carers with the financial costs of attendance (Mannay et al. 2018).

Engagement and participation should be distinguished. In their study of a music intervention, Levstek and Banerjee (2021) found that **active engagement** was correlated with the development of inter-personal and intra-personal outcomes, whilst the number of sessions young people attended was not.

Engagement was higher when children and young people either had a **pre-existing interest** in the arts (Parker, 2021) (Winter and McAlpine, cited in Mannay 2018) and/or had actively chosen to participate in the programme (Levstek and Banerjee, 2021).

The **subject matter** within a creative intervention should, where possible, relate to young people's everyday interests (Gibson and Edwards 2015; 2016, cited in Mannay, 2018) and be **accessible** to young people (Caulfield, 2019). The subject of women's rights within an all-girl theatre intervention resonated with the girls and reflected the aims of the project to increase self-awareness and confidence (Tawell et al., 2016). Consideration should be given to preferences within groups. Daykin et al. (2017) reported that young males identified more with rap and hip-hop than young women who tended to prefer singing. Tawell et al. (2016) highlighted the significance of speaking to young people to understand their preferences and making personalised provision. Within the study of the V^2 drama programme (Varley, 2019), participants were able to connect with the protagonist, 'they were able to understand and relate to his behaviour, actions and consequences and therefore were invested in the content [of the programme]' (p.185).

Howard (2022) warns of the **dangers of making assumptions** about young people's interests citing the example in one Arts Award programme where young people were encouraged to undertake a graffiti project, despite having expressed no interest in it. This reinforced the notion of 'other.' Researchers should also be alert to the pressures to conform within a group; one young man in Daykin et al.'s study (2017) revealed privately that he did not enjoy the rap music celebrated by his peers.

There were a range of explanations for programmes struggling with active engagement. Tawell et al. (2016) proposed that running School Plus sessions on a Monday morning was unwise as challenging events at the weekend could impact young people's receptiveness. Engagement was particularly challenging in youth offending settings and many young people did not actively participate in the music programme outlined in Daykin et al.'s study (2017). Staff commented that it was a 'significant achievement' that young people had turned up (p.94), despite the programme being a mandatory requirement. In part, this was reflective of the chaotic, transient setting where the intervention took place, but external events, unconnected to the programme, also influenced young people's propensity to engage.

To combat these challenges, within Daykin et al.'s (2017) study, musicians adopted a person-centred approach, encouraging young people to handle instruments at the earliest opportunity and keeping their performances and instructions brief. They attempted to develop rapport and 'banter' with the groups (sometimes in a manner that conformed to gender-stereotypes and flirted with the boundaries of political correctness).The role of facilitators was critical in establishing and sustaining participant engagement. Ward et al. (2023) described how musicians would engage shy and less confident pupils through eye contact, smiles and applause (p.42).

Engagement is most beneficial when a project is structured in its provision of 'programme and content' i.e. there is direction and purpose to the programme, rather than being open and undirected (Bishop, 2012, cited in Mannay, 2018).

Winter and McAlpine (2011, cited in Mannay, 2018) have argued that it is imperative for engagement that young people understand the nature and purpose of the project, highlighting the need for a clear introduction. The notion of 'working towards something' can be a motivating factor (Hollingsworth, 2016), although others argue that this can dilute or impair the benefits of the creative process (Howard, 2022; Nunn et al, 2021).

v. Group composition

Several studies cited the benefits of having a **'homogenous' group** of participants who shared similar life experiences, particularly care experience. In our previous review (Peeran, 2016), we found that similarities in their histories allowed children and young people to openly share without fear of judgement, establishing close relationships. Mannay et al. (2018) reported that foster carers believed that young people's engagement in an arts programme was supported by being in a group with others with care experience.

Benaton et al. (2020) highlighted that the sampling of 'targeted' groups with shared experiences enables the notion of 'justice' to be explored. In Dodsley et al.'s (2019) study of the Plus One programme, care-experienced young people felt free to share their own histories and the programme incorporated a 'frequent emphasis on experiences of the care system in the artwork' (p.342). In their reinterpretation of the study, through the dual lens of 'Ethics of Justice' and 'Ethics of Care,' Benaton et al. (2020) argued that Plus One was largely successful in reconciling the two concepts.

Through an artistic exploration of their shared experiences, young people were able to contest and challenge harmful social structures that underpinned their histories while developing social and emotional competencies that could develop their resilience. Voices Through Time care-experienced ambassadors reported that being part of a supportive network of people with similar experiences was one of the best aspects of the programme. Friendships and support within the group were cited as reasons for positive outcomes of the programme. However, some ambassadors did experience some frustrations with other young people (Boiling, 2025).

Other researchers conclude that having a **'mix' of participants** within a group can facilitate children to extend their network outside of the care system (Salmon & Rickaby, 2014, cited in Mannay, 2018).

The success of Added Extra (Tawell et al., 2016) was in part attributed to the group split between those from 'vulnerable' backgrounds and those without identified vulnerabilities whose role was to support their peers.

A goal of the programme was to value all participants and to treat them equally, as professionals. The small size of the group and ongoing collaboration allowed for trusting relationships between the young people to be established; those in the vulnerable cohort reported feeling comfortable within the setting and able to voice their opinions, without having to 'talk about [their] whole life'.

Howard (2020) highlights that purposefully targeting young people with shared vulnerabilities, can lead them to be unhelpfully 'labelled'. A teacher involved in the In2 music programme explained:

> 'Sometimes you will get told the stuff [about pupils with behavioural issues]. When we first go to a group, I like to not know anything, because you start treating them different' (p.42, Ward et al., 2023)

There is also a danger of 'false normalisation' in bringing young people facing similar problems together reinforcing 'problematic norms,' which may not just result in disappointing outcomes, but can also be damaging (Selleman, 2015). Daykin et al.'s study (2017) highlighted these dangers where 'normative behaviour, forms of expression and identities were conveyed through lyric and song choices as well as behaviour' (p.955) where 'gangster rapping' conferred social legitimacy.

vi. Group size

Most of the studies primarily focused on **whole-group activities.** A few (Parker, 2021; Nunn et al., 2021; Walshe et al., 2023; YAT and Kick Arts programmes cited in Tawell et al., 2016) incorporated individual activities and one-to-one sessions. It is likely that the dominance of group interventions stemmed from practical reasons (availability of practitioners, resources), but particularly in the case of theatre and music, creative activities can be understood as social.

Engaging in music within a group is associated with stronger positive experiences. In their observation of the In2 music programme, Ward et al. (2023) found music within a group created a sense of 'fellowship' of caring for and being cared for by others. Previous research (Langston and Barrett, 2008, cited in Ward et al., 2023) has shown that for some choir members, fellowship is as important as the music. Ward et al. (2023) observed pupils within the group supporting musicians by 'gently admonishing 'naughty' classmates' and encouraging shy or reluctant pupils to join in (p.42).

Other studies noted the **benefits of smaller groups**; Tawell et al. (2016) concluded that within the Kick Arts intervention, the optimum group size was around eight participants as this provided participants with sufficient access to the professionals. Similarly, Benaton et al. (2020) argued that in the Plus One intervention with care-experienced young people, the small size of the cohort enabled strong bonds of trust with the professionals.

Mullen (2017) presented six key elements that influence community music delivery within Pupil Referral Units and observed that 'one to one sessions were much more obviously productive than group work' (p.142). Within one-to-one sessions young people engaged more readily and it was easier to build rapport with the musicians. Behavioural challenges dictated that it would not be possible for a single adult to manage a whole class independently.

Parker (2021) promoted the benefits of a combined approach, arguing that group work can promote trust and familiarity, but one-to-one work provides opportunity for more bespoke activities and the opportunity for young people to refine their work (p.13).

vii. Digital vs. in-person

With the right facilitators and delivery models, **online programmes** can be effective at supporting young people. Parker (2021) highlighted the benefits of a digital arts programme for care experienced young people, when the intervention was forced to move online due the Covid-19 outbreak. The online format offered participating children with a greater sense of agency in being able to turn their cameras on and off as they pleased. This was understood to help foster 'a relaxed and egalitarian feel to the sessions which seemed to drive creative output' (p.10).

Levstek et al. (2021) agreed that online formats could provide a sense of autonomy and agency. However, they found that compared to in-person delivery, the virtual model was less effective at supporting inter-personal relationships. Feedback indicated that virtual teaching 'can't replace actual teaching and having the experience with someone' (p.11). Nonetheless, the sessions supported young people to cope during lockdown and promoted intra-personal outcomes such as emotional competence and confidence. Additionally, digital provision can enable young people who are non-verbal to communicate through chat functions and can reach participants living in remote areas who might otherwise struggle to access provision.

A covid-19-related move to hybrid delivery of the Voices Through Time programme allowed young people to join online from outside of London, but there was a lack of budget for them to travel to in-person activities (Boiling, 2025).

viii. Support staff

Supporting staff also impacted the success of a programme. In the case of Daykin et al. (2017) a number of other adults (key workers, security staff, education staff, welfare staff) were present during the music groups. Staff generally expressed support for the music programme and some of the most vulnerable participants benefited from the presence of their key workers. Staff would support the running of the sessions and could help to manage disorder.

However, other staff were dismissive of the programme. There were several instances where they seemed to disrupt sessions on purpose. On one occasion, a staff member entered the room and instructed all participants to leave to play a game of football. These instances created problems for the musicians who 'needed to develop sophisticated diplomacy skills in order to negotiate these scenarios' (p.947).

As well as the importance of obtaining 'buy in,' Tamwell et al. (2016) illustrated the importance of a clear **definition of roles**. In one iteration of the School Plus programme, disruptive behaviour presented an ongoing challenge. There was frustration among the drama leaders from Pegasus that the school representative did not support the management of behaviour; he was reluctant because his role within the school did not include behaviour management (p.19).

ix. Mentoring

Several studies (Parker et al, 2018; Tawell, 2016; Shinwell, 2021; Nunn et al. 2021) incorporated **mentors** and they were universally perceived as supporting positive outcomes. In some studies (Shinwell, 2021; Tawell 2016), older and/or more experienced young people acted as mentors to younger or less experienced people on the programme. In the Added Extra programme (Tawell et al., 2016) support from more experienced participants boosted the confidence and engagement of those less experienced. Shinwell et al. (2021) described older people at a holiday club developing greater confidence as a result of mentoring younger people.

In Parker et al.'s study (2018), with the support of tutors, older people with experience of the criminal justice system delivered music sessions with the younger participants. Young people welcomed their friendly communication style and appreciated that they did not administer judgement or punishment.

They were often compared favourably to teachers. During one-to-one work with mentors, young people completed tasks more readily.

In the V² programme (Varley, 2019), ex-offenders acted as peer mentors and positive role models. Through their lived experience, the mentors offered alternative viewpoints to the facilitators and held credibility within the groups, enabling them to establish strong relationships with participants. Through their relatability, mentors demonstrated that 'change is possible' (p.194).

The concept of 'mentorship' was interpreted differently in the Creative Mentorship Programme where mentorship was primarily focused on the creative element of the programme (Nunn et al., 2021). The programme was flexible with activities led by participants including supporting life skills such as cooking and shopping for essentials. That participating young people developed social, emotional and practical capabilities, demonstrates effective mentorship more than the impact of creative interventions.

Programme commissioners should consider the inclusion of mentors within delivery models, ensuring that: mentors possess greater 'wisdom' than mentees; provide guidance to facilitate personal growth of mentees; and foster relationships of trust (Dubois & Kracher; 2005, cited in Parker et al., 2018).

x. Showcasing outputs and validation

Young people felt a sense of accomplishment in achieving an Arts Award accreditation (Hollingworth et al., 2016; Tawell et al., 2016) and sharing their work resulted in a sense of pride (Parker, 2021), personal achievement and validation through 'new achievement experiences' (Hanrahan, F. & Banerjee, R, 2017). Within the We Belong programme, 'showcasing work was not an afterthought' but a critical way of enabling children to chart their development and progress (Parker, 2021).

Voices Through Time ambassadors spoke of a sense of achievement from developing their own creative projects, such as a cooking project for care leavers (Boiling, 2025). 'Working towards something' was a motivating factor. Daykin et al. (2017) reported that participants were 'strongly focused' on producing a professionally recorded CD.

In the case of Plus One, following the completion of the programme, children exhibited their work to 120 people from the arts and care system at a major symposium at the Derby Theatre. Several professionals indicated that they would change their professional approach based on the artistic outputs highlighting that artistic outputs can act as a catalyst for change (Benaton et al., 2020).

xi. Longer term involvement

Studies observed that children and young people experienced sadness (Mannay et al., 2018; Parker, 2021) and emptiness, with a 'loss of drive' following the close of a programme (Hanrahan, F. & Banerjee, R, 2017). In the mixed-arts programme in Cardiff (Mannay et al., 2018) facilitators ran a session to celebrate the young people's achievements.

It was suggested that in future years the programme could incorporate a 'graduation' celebration into the model and invite them to return to speak and engage with future participants (p.79). Parker (2021) argued for follow-up opportunities following the conclusion of programmes.

Limitations of this review

Qualitative vs. quantitative data

Researchers have noted the tension in attempting to 'instrumentalise' or measure creative processes, which are intended to embody flexibility, exploration, and responsiveness (Howard, 2020). There is debate about the appropriateness of measuring the impact of creative processes in an instrumentalised way which may challenge 'the inherent value of the arts' (Dodsley et al., 2019 p.47, see also Howard, 2020). There are limitations of quantitative methodologies in capturing complex and nuanced impacts on participants. Qualitative methodologies may be more suitable for capturing the collective efforts of participants and facilitators in 'challeng(ing) social closure and structures of inequality' (Dodsley et al., 2019, p.23), particularly when supporting children and young people experiencing disadvantage.

As a result, many studies within this review adopted qualitative approaches, with less focus on capturing 'hard' measures. Some researchers reflected on the potential limitations of a purely qualitative approach and attempted to bridge the gap by collating qualitative feedback from a range of sources.

Whiles in some cases qualitative methodologies best support the investigation of 'softer' outcomes or nuanced effects, there is value in the collection of statistical data that can be interrogated and used for comparisons. The direct comparison of two statistical data sets, representing in-person and online delivery, contribute to our understanding of the pros and cons of virtual delivery models in a way that would be precluded by a solely qualitative approach (Levestek et al., 2021; Levstek & Banerjee, 2021).

Evidence gaps

This review presented evidence from a range of 'creative' programmes. There is huge variation among the studies identified both in terms of delivery model (e.g. group composition, length of programme and sessions, settings) and the modes of intervention.

Some programmes focused on either art, music or theatre, while several interventions used 'mixed arts activities' including anything from poetry to puppet-making.

The evidence base is therefore **'broad' rather than 'deep.'** Collectively these studies have shown that young people experiencing structural disadvantage and exclusion can benefit from a range of different intervention approaches. However, the diverse nature of the interventions means that it is difficult to draw conclusions about which individual components of an intervention have the greatest impact and how they should be best delivered.

It is not possible to conclude that a particular mode of creative intervention is likely to result in specific outcomes or that they are particularly beneficial for certain groups of young people. There is some evidence to suggest that drama is particularly effective for exploring notions of self-discovery (Hanrahan & Banerjee, 2017). Previous research has indicated that drama and theatre offer the strongest forms of intervention compared to other creative programmes (Daykin et al. 2008, cited in Mannay et al. 2018 p.92).Nonetheless, young people experiencing structural disadvantage and exclusion is a broad category that encompasses young people experiencing very different challenges. What works for some children, may not work for others.

The evidence presented in this review has shown **mixed success** in supporting specific outcomes, particularly **wellbeing.** Despite demonstrating a positive increase in participants' wellbeing at the close of the programme, Efstathopoulou. & Bungay (2021) were unable to conclude any long-term impacts in their follow-up assessment. Moreover, the dual modality of the 'Arts in Nature' intervention (Walshe et al., 2018) prevents conclusions being drawn about the value of creative activity in isolation from engagement with nature.

Daykin et al. (2019) attempted to collate pre and post data using two validated measures for assessing wellbeing but the poor completion rate meant that meaningful analysis could not be conducted. Only Davies et al. (2023) was able to demonstrate that singing in the classroom for 20 minutes each day could positively influence participants' views on life satisfaction.

Additionally, outcomes are interpreted in different ways, for instance **resilience.** Within the creative mentorship programme (Nunn et al., 2021) young people learned to persevere with tasks they found challenging, whereas the Plus One programme (Dodsley et. 2019) was felt to support emotional resilience through sharing experiences and establishing a supportive network. In their study of the 'Arts on Prescription' programme, Efstathopoulou. & Bungay (2021) interpreted resilience as the ability 'to cope with the normal adversities of life' (p.196).

There is a lack of evidence on whether the impact of an **intervention is sustained.** Beyond Hollingworth et al.'s (2016) investigation of the Arts Award, two other studies (Efstathopoulou & Bungay, 2021; Varley, 2019) attempted to show that positive impacts of participation extended beyond the close of the programme. However, the results were inconclusive. That said, some qualitative feedback suggests that positive outcomes were sustained following the close of a programme (Levstek & Banerjee 2021; Parker 2021).

Two studies within this review tentatively showed that those in the greatest need were most likely to benefit from the programme. However, more research is needed to offer clarity given Levstek et al. (2021) found that the experiences of young people from the socially disadvantaged group did not differ from their peers.

Programme commissioners within the UK should aim to integrate data gathering mechanisms within the intervention design in a way that honours and respects creative processes and in consultation with young people.

In understanding more about what works (and what does not), programmes are more likely to be successful, gain traction and ultimately improve outcomes for young people experiencing disadvantage. As concluded by the Centre for Cultural Value, better data is needed to inform decision-making, increase effectiveness and to make a stronger case for support and funding for creative programmes (Walmsley et al., 2022).

4. Conclusion

This literature review has identified that creative interventions with young people experiencing structural disadvantage and exclusion often positively impact a range of different outcomes. Although the scope of this review was targeted, we have identified a growing number of UK studies that evidence the value of creative programmes. This review included 21 studies exploring mixed-arts (6), music (6), theatre (4) and art (3) interventions, and the Arts Award (2).

Reflecting the findings from Peeran's (2016) original review, most commonly, these 21 studies referenced 'soft outcomes' and findings were largely consistent across the care experienced and structurally disadvantaged and excluded, but not care experienced, groups. Young people were observed to grow in **confidence**, a benefit referenced in nearly all of the studies; to a slightly lesser extent, studies evidenced benefits to participants' **self-esteem.** There was also evidence of **social skills** and **communication skills** developing and the majority of studies referenced **strong relationships** between fellow participants and programme facilitators.

Additionally, creative interventions can support **self-awareness and self-identity;** in some cases, programmes allowed participants to explore negative feelings and experiences within a safe environment. Drama interventions may be particularly beneficial in supporting these types of outcomes by offering:

> 'a space outside of other school or home environments where the self is nurtured such that new insight and self-awareness can grow and new roles, identities, and ways of behaving can be actively explored.' (Hanrahan & Banerjee, 2017, p.22)

There was mixed evidence on other outcomes, such as wellbeing. There was some evidence to suggest that creative interventions could support resilience, but authors interpreted **resilience** in slightly different ways. A smaller number of studies concluded that participation in creative activities could support the development of **empathy**, for example, demonstrated by improved behaviour and turn-taking (Tawell et al., 2016) and connection with theatrical characters (Atterby, 2018). Studies also noted improvements to **emotional regulation.** This could result in changed outward behaviours including **improved attention** (Daykin et al. 2017; Tawell et al., 2016) and a reduction in **anger, aggression and disruptive tendencies** (Parker et al., 2018; Atterby, 2018).

Generally, this review has identified a paucity of studies focused on 'hard outcomes.' Hollingworth et al. (2016) represented the only study which sought to investigate the impact of an arts programme on longer-term impacts. The dearth of evidence is likely to be, at least in part, linked to the costs and practicalities of engaging in longer-term research to explore education and career outcomes. Some studies gathered qualitative data that indicated that participation in creative programmes had positively influenced career ambitions (Dodsley et al.2019; Caulfield et al, 2019) or equipped young people with skills to support their future careers (Nunn et al. 2021; Parker et al. 2018). The majority of studies referenced the acquisition of creative knowledge and skills, even though their link to future employment or education trajectories was not always made.

Practice recommendations

Dedicate time and effort to recruiting the right professionals with the appropriate qualities, skills and experience

- Facilitators should be trained in their craft and have experience of working with young people facing disadvantage
- Consider the use of relatable mentors with lived experience
- Include members of the target group of young people in recruitment decisions
- Where support staff are present, clarify roles and responsibilities and prioritise buy-in from the outset.

Create a 'safe space'

- Beyond a safe physical setting, build supportive and inclusive environments
- Consider settings outside of young people's typical environments to avoid negative associations with everyday settings such as classrooms. Consider 'high profile' locations to give programmes gravitas and young people opportunities to use buildings in their communities.

Foster agency of young people

- Co-design the programme and any evaluations with the target group of young people
- Trust young people with responsibilities
- Give participants space and encouragement to articulate their needs and preferences in both the design and delivery phase.

Tailor programmes to individuals

- Adopt person-centred approaches and enable flexibility within structured frameworks
- Set activities at the right level of challenge for participants
- Align activities with young people's interests based on their input, avoiding assumptions.

Provide opportunities for young people to showcase their work

- This can motivate them, give them something to work towards and encourage them to feel pride.

Consider the individual needs of the target group of young people when deciding group size and composition

- Consult young people, particularly in relation to heterogeneity of experiences.

Design closing sessions and follow ups

- This can prevent a sudden ending which can be upsetting for young people.

Policy recommendations

- Decision-makers should boost support for and investment in creative interventions, embedding creative interventions in education and children's social policy
- Focus policy on making arts accessible to young people experiencing disadvantages
- Provide comprehensive training for arts professionals to deliver effective interventions
- Foster partnerships between arts, community and educational institutions to increase collaborative working and opportunities for young people
- Include budget for further research on impact in arts funding.

Research recommendations

- Future creative interventions should ensure funding is allocated to evaluation
- Further research is needed to explore:
  - Whether creative interventions benefit those most in need
  - Which types of creative interventions are most effective
  - 'Hard' quantitative outcomes using validated measures and a control group where feasible
  - Long-term impacts of creative interventions.
- Develop research methods with and tailored to young people to increase engagement
- Allocate time and resources to developing research engagement strategies from the outset
- Consider a range of quantitative and qualitative methods, including participatory and creative approaches.

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Appendix A

Summary of outcomes studies

Category	Study	Methodology	Setting	Sample of young people	Intervention	Programme length and duration	Outcomes
Care experienced	Mannay et al.(2021)	**Qualitative** Focus groups with foster carers, programme facilitators. Interviews with foster carers and young people. Diary analysis of young people. Observation	Community	7 care experienced young women aged 12-15 1 additional participant did not have care experience and was the biological daughter of one of the foster carers	Delivered as part of the 'Confidence in Care' programme Mixed arts programme (e.g. games, puppet-making, singing, acting, drawing, diary-writing). Predominantly group activities	2 hour weekly programme, over 10 weeks	Confidence, pride, creative skills, self-confidence, emotional and social competencies, relationship-building, communication
Care experienced	Nunn et al (2021)	**Mixed Observation** Interviews with mentors and programme managers. Focus groups and interviews with young people. Interviews with carers. Questionnaire for young people. Assessment analysis	Community	120 children and young people with care experience aged 8-24	Creative mentorship programme. Allocation of individual mentor to each child and young person Range of individual and group activity projects including music, poetry, cookery, ceramics and crafts but also support with life skills such as budgeting	Varied structure Two year programme	Confidence, self-esteem, communication skills, wellbeing, emotional stability, social skills, creative skills and knowledge, motivation, life skills, relationship-building, employability, resilience
Care experienced	Parker (2021)	**Mixed** Online survey, depth interviews, observation	Online	30 young people with care experience Age of children not specified but virtual school supports children from early years – Year 11	'We Belong' programme Multi-session arts project delivered online. Activities included art and poetry Group and individual activities	1 week programme (sessions ran from 10am-4pm)	Confidence, creative skills, wellbeing, self-expression, pride, sense of agency
Care experienced	Boiling (20250 (unpublished)	**Mixed** Interviews, surveys, output data	Online and community	31 care-experienced young people (aged 16-25) took part as ambassadors, six of these took part in interviews	Care-experienced ambassador programme with ambassadors involved in a public campaign and creative projects	Frequency of activities unclear but likely varied by ambassador engagement	Knowledge, confidence, creative skills

Category	Study	Methodology	Setting	Sample of young people	Intervention	Programme length and duration	Outcomes
Structural disadvantage and exclusion but not care experienced	Ward et al. (2023)	**Qualitative** Interviews with teachers, musicians and parents. Observation of workshops and performances. No data collected from children	School	Year 6 pupils from 4 primary schools (103) and year 7 pupils from secondary school (90) in economically deprived areas. Selected to participate on basis that they may struggle with transition from primary to secondary school 10-12 year olds	'In2' programme 7 week group-based music workshop, working with professional brass band Combination of free-play and learning set pieces	7 week programme Workshops ranged from 45 minutes – 2 hours	Social capital, confidence, self-efficacy, sense of connection to school and community, increased responsiveness in lessons, relationship-building
Structural disadvantage and exclusion but not care experienced	Davies et al. (2023)	**Mixed – pre and post measures collected** Pre and post tests of the Student Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS) completed by all children. Focus groups with economically-disadvantaged children only	School	27 children in year 4 (aged 8-9) 5 eligible for free school meals	Singing in the classroom	Singing in the classroom, every day for 20 minutes over the course of two weeks	Improved wellbeing
Structural disadvantage and exclusion but not care experienced	Levstek, M. & Banerjee, R. (2021)	**Mixed – pre and post measures collected** Focus groups, surveys, analysis of session reports. Staff completed retrospective survey of young people's developments, comparing intra and inter-personal functioning at start of intervention and at an average of 10 sessions	Community	99 young people (children with SEN/disabilities also included within sample) Age range not given. Mean age of 15.59 years old	'Music Spaces' and 'Inclusive Ensembles' 2 music programmes each run with 2 groups of children. One programme aimed at supporting children from deprived backgrounds 'Music Spaces' and one aimed at supporting children with disabilities/SEN 'Inclusive Ensembles'	Weekly drop-in sessions Ongoing drop-in model with no 'end date' Session reports completed after each session (data collected from Jan 2019-March 2020) and retrospective surveys, focus groups, interviews taking place over 8 months (June 2019-Jan 2020)	Intra-personal development: self-esteem, confidence, emotional competence, self-awareness, self-identity Inter-personal development: social skills, relationship-building, communications skills
Structural disadvantage and exclusion but not care experienced	Shinwell et al. (2021)	**Qualitative** Focus groups with participants	Holiday club	34 primary school children (aged 4-11) and 31 secondary school children (aged 12-17) attending three holiday clubs in Northern Ireland	Primary aim of intervention was to address food securing issues, but also offered creative activities including arts, crafts and dance	Three holiday clubs ranging in provision length (3-5 weeks) offering sessions between 2 and 5.5 hours in per day	New skills, confidence, relationship building, sense of community

Category	Study	Methodology	Setting	Sample of young people	Intervention	Programme length and duration	Outcomes
Structural disadvantage and exclusion but not care experienced	Walshe et al. (2023)	**Qualitative** Analysis of art-work (pre and post), 'walk and talk' focus groups with children, observation and interviews and focus groups with artists and teachers	Community	97 children from years 3-5 Aged 7-10 years old 40% of participants were in receipt of free-school meals	'Arts in nature' programme. Children invited to spend 8 days with artists over 8 consecutive weeks Children immersed themselves in nature and were invited to create an artistic response (e.g. collages, printing, drawing, poetry, sculpture)	8 full days spread across 8 consecutive weeks	Wellbeing
Structural disadvantage and exclusion but not care experienced	Levstek et al (2021)	**Mixed - pre and post measures collected** Qualitative and quantitative staff session reports, collated before and after pandemic. Surveys distributed to tutors, young people and their parents during first and second national lockdowns Observations recorded at set time intervals against a quantitative framework (The Need-Relevant Instructor Behaviours Scale)	Online	Aged 8-20 years old Observed 12 staff members in online groups, attended by on average 5.04 young people Number of participating young people within sample not clarified – some children attended multiple sessions	13 music groups delivered via three mainstream musical hubs. One music hub, 'Music Spaces', responsible for delivering 3 music groups, was focused on children from lower-socio economic backgrounds	1 hour length Programme duration not specific – 16 sessions were observed within the study	Self-expression, emotional management, confidence, relationship building, sense of belonging , self-esteem, social skills, communication skills
Structural disadvantage and exclusion but not care experienced	Daykin et al. (2017)	**Qualitative[19]** Observation and qualitative data **APPROVED MEASURES**	8 Youth Offending Sites	118 young people in contact with criminal justice system, across 8 settings Aged 13-21 years 81 male, 37 female	15 participatory music programmes. Variation in delivery, but typically 2-3 young musicians ran weekly sessions	Some variation in delivery but generally, weekly sessions (90 mins – 3 hours in duration) to 4-10 participants over a 6 week period	Confidence, **skills acquisition,** pride, resilience, relationship building
Structural disadvantage and exclusion but not care experienced	Caulfield et al. (2019)	**Mixed** Qualitative data gathered from young people. Survey. Monitoring data (e.g. appointment attendance, final warnings)	Youth Offending Site	30 young people aged between 13-18years old (mean age of 14.97 years) 21 were male, nine female	Range of art and music interventions and creative career programme. Activities including nail art, pottery, furniture up-cycling	Mix of length and duration: (No specific detail provided)	Engagement, communication, confidence, wellbeing, relationship building, inspiring future ambition

[19] Attempts were made to capture quantitative data, but owing to insufficient returns, it was not possible to interpret results.

Category	Study	Methodology	Setting	Sample of young people	Intervention	Programme length and duration	Outcomes
Structural disadvantage and exclusion but not care experienced	Parker et al. (2018)	**Qualitative** Interviews with pupils, observation, documentary analysis	School	32 pupils aged 13-16 Referred by teacher on basis of exhibiting challenging behaviour A number of pupils had previous involvement with the criminal justice system or were believed to be affiliated with gangs	Combination of group music-making and mentorship Programme aimed to teach young people how to write, produce and perform music. Older mentors (aged 18-25, many with experience of criminal justice system) supported young people Delivered during school day. 2 hour session delivered over 10 weeks	2 hour music sessions, delivered once a week over a 10 week programme to groups of roughly 15 pupils	Confidence, self-esteem, communication skills, social skills, improvements in behaviour. Future employability prospects
Structural disadvantage and exclusion but not care experienced	Efstathopoulou. & Bungay (2021)	**Quant - pre and post measures collected[20]** Changes in mental well-being and resilience were assessed using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) and the True Resilience Scale. Applied pre and post intervention, with follow up at 3 months [1] Qualitative feedback was also collated but only the results of the quantitative data were presented in the study	School	Young people aged 13-16, at risk of emotional or behavioural problems 91 participated and 65 completed pre and post intervention measures Children selected by school to participate. Inclusion criteria included lack of self-esteem, being vulnerable, self-harm or poor attendance	'Arts on Prescription' workshops facilitated by an artist and used visual arts, focusing on a different theme each week (e.g. 'journeys') Programme delivered across 10 schools	10 weekly 2 hour 'Art on Prescription' workshops delivered during school day	Pre and post measure indicated a significant positive change in wellbeing and resilience, but no long-term impact can be concluded
Structural disadvantage and exclusion but not care experienced	Atterby, K. (2018)	**Qualitative** Interviews were conducted at close of the programme and six months later participants	Community	Ten 18-21 year olds, described themselves as 'disaffected'	Boalian Theatre project	Delivered over 6 weeks	Improved behaviour, confidence, communication skills, creativity and problem solving. Inspiring ambition, social skills, relationship building, resilience

[20] Qualitative feedback was also collated but only the results of the quantitative data were presented in the study

Category	Study	Methodology	Setting	Sample of young people	Intervention	Programme length and duration	Outcomes
Structural disadvantage and exclusion but not care experienced	Varley (2019)	**Mixed methodology – pre, post and follow-up data collected** Data was collated on Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale pre and post intervention and at three month follow up Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 10 participants at the three month follow-up stage Also use of CRIME PICS II scale, used to gauge propensity to re-offend	Community	72 young male offenders aged 11-18 serving community sentences Mix of those defined as 'high', 'medium' and 'low' risk	Drama intervention using the V² method. Use of peer mentors The study explored the impact of three programmes which incorporated the V2 method; Segreg8 (designed to highlight the risk of gang involvement), Aggrav8 (focusing on anger management) and Imtimid8 (exploring issues related to knife crime)	Programmes lasted between 12-16 hours (delivery time) which could be implemented over a block of 4 consecutive days or split over a period of weeks depending on the Youth Offending Services Length of programme not referenced explicitly. Participants were referred over a period of 18 months	Quant: increased self-esteem Qual: empathy, confidence, self-esteem, self-awareness, aspirations relating to employability and education, social skills, relationship-building
Structural disadvantage and exclusion but not care experienced	Hanrahan& Banerjee (2017)	**Qualitative** Longitudinal study. Semi-structured interviews conducted over two year period at three different time points	Community	4 young people (3 male, 1 female), aged 15-21, who had experienced school exclusion	Aim of theatre project was to create a theatre production based on the life experiences of marginalised young people, with parts acted by participants	Initially ran over 6 months of weekly or bi-weekly workshops. Following this was sporadic engagement before 12 weeks of intense rehearing in preparation for the production. The final performance ran over 3 weeks at different London theatre venues	Relationship building, self-esteem, confidence, self-awareness, self-discovery, re-framing of life trajectories

Category	Study	Methodology	Setting	Sample of young people	Intervention	Programme length and duration	Outcomes
Structural disadvantage and exclusion but not care experienced	Tawell et al. (2016)	**Qualitative and observation**	Community	Young women at secondary school and older (aged 11 +)	**Pegasus**: 'Looking Forward' – to create a piece of scripted theatre	Weekly group of one hour sessions. Ongoing Study focused on 15 sessions between October 2014-Februrary 2015	Pride, attainment of skills, exploration of new identifies, confidence, relationship building
			Community	12-18 year olds from both vulnerable and non-vulnerable backgrounds	**Pegasus**: 'Added Extra' - to devise a piece of scripted theatre to present to family and friends, using stimulus such as Macbeth Vulnerable group supported by older, more experienced young people Target group size of 12 young people but attendance was often lower and only 6 young people were regular attendees	Weekly 1.5 hour group run during term-time Ongoing Study focused on 14 sessions between Nov 2014-March 2015	Pride, attainment of skills, exploration of new identifies, confidence, relationship building, self-esteem
			Community Group B initially met at Pegasus, before moving to school setting	Year 7 children (aged 11-12) split into two cohorts: Group A: those suffering from shyness and lack of integration (four participants) Group B: those in care, who exhibited challenging behaviour or at risk of becoming disengaged (8 participants)	**Pegasus:** 'School Plus' - programme begins with drama-based games and activities, and works towards participants completing the Bronze Arts Award	8-10 week drama intervention of 1.5 hour sessions Ongoing Dates of study not provided	Improved engagement, behaviour and attendance at school, confidence, empathy
			Community	Young people aged 11-20 27 young people n YAT register who opt to get involved in activities that interest them	**OYAP**: Youth Action Team (YAT) –. Mixed-arts activities – focused on celebrating area where they live. Activities included songwriting, photography, singing	Workshops held every 2 weeks for 1.5 hours Ongoing Dates of study not provided	Exploration of new identities, skills acquisition, inspiring future ambition, empathy, strong community bonds, confidence
			Community	Young people aged 11-16 referred due to school refusing and/or high levels of exclusion and disengagement	**OYAP**: 'Kick Arts' – arts activities including photography. Bespoke element to delivery – children directed toward specific activities	Sessions last for 5 hours, during school term. 10-14 sessions. Study focused on sessions delivered between January 2015 to May 2015	Self-esteem, self confidence, resilience, increased engagement and improved behaviour at school

Category	Study	Methodology	Setting	Sample of young people	Intervention	Programme length and duration	Outcomes
Arts Award	Hollingworth et al. (2016)	Longitudinal qualitative approach Observation and semi-structured interviews Participants followed up to two years after completing an arts-award	Mixed	68 young people - who were either undertaking or had recently completed an AA qualification - in AA settings across the UK Settings were purposively selected based on their location and their delivery of AA. Young people were identified from 14 different case study venues	Three year study into the impact of the Arts Award	3 year study into ongoing programme	Life skills, arts choices, accreditation, creative pathways, entrepreneurial skills 3 out 5 said they better understood the options for a career or for further study in the arts after completing Arts Award. This was especially true at Gold level 50% achieved hard outcomes such as grades or employment
Arts Award	Howard (2020)	12 month ethnographic study Observation, interviews, analysis of art work at five difference youth projects	Mixed - spanning informal education and alternative provision contexts	Not referenced	12 month ethnographic study into the Arts Award	12 month study into ongoing programme	Adverse effect of labelling cohorts of students Too much focus on worksheets and evidence, rather than a portfolio approach Lack of agency among those taking part in shorter programmes Teaching and access depended on perceived abilities and behaviours of young people Too much focus on product, rather than process Young people taking up Art Award under deficit groupings such as NEET, their experience was of lower-quality and lower level engagement Deficit groups assigned a passive learning role with little scope for interaction, learn in a controlled environment where behaviour is monitored. Taught differently to others

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