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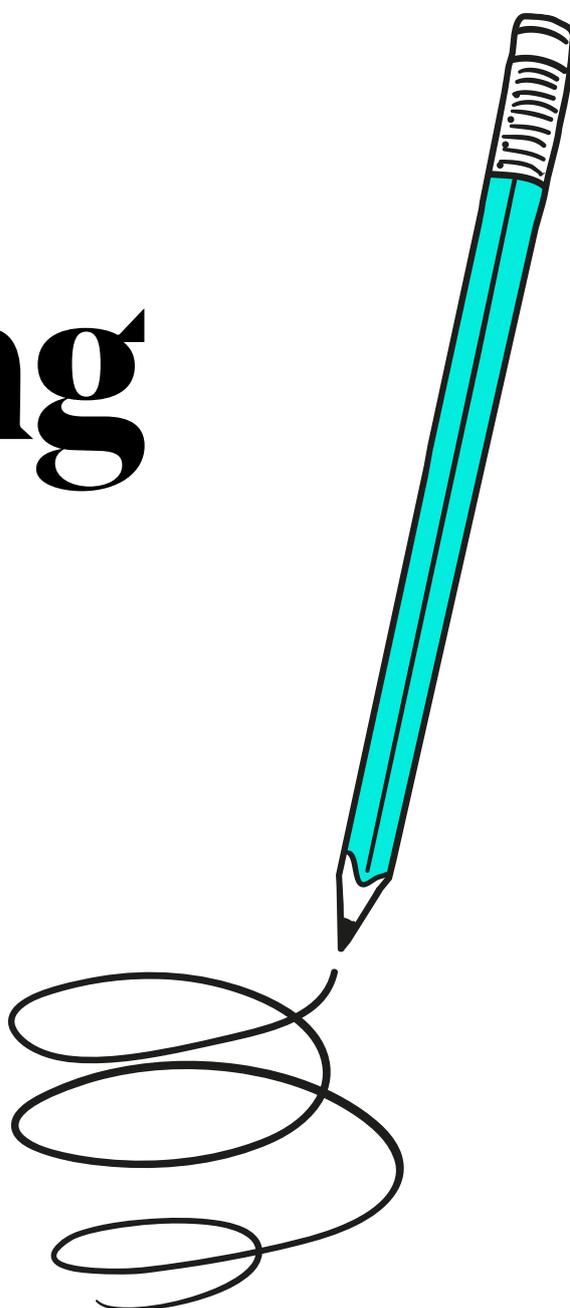
The Wolfson  
Foundation



# Final report

# Learning about culture

Mark Londesborough



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# REALISING



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**SUMMARY**

**EXECUTIVE**

# Executive Summary

**T**his report provides an overview of the RSA's (The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce) Learning About Culture project, that began in 2017. The project aimed to improve the evidence base for the impact of arts-based education on academic outcomes and improve the use of evidence and evaluation in the arts-based education sector.

The project was delivered with the support of DCMS, Arts Council England, seven Arts Council Bridge Organisations, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the Wolfson Foundation and Bank of America Merrill Lynch.

The project had three main components:

- Five, large-scale evaluations of arts-based learning activities in primary schools, designed to produce robust evidence of causal effects on academic achievement. The evaluators also studied how those activities were delivered and how participants engaged, in order to understand how any impact might have been produced. The evaluations were jointly overseen by the RSA and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and conducted by a team from the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) and UCL Institute of Education (IOE). The activities were developed and delivered by: [Tees Valley Music Service](#); [London Bubble](#); [Arvon](#), with the University of Exeter and The Open University; the [Centre for Literacy in Primary Education](#) (CLPE) and [Paradigm Arts](#).
- The Cultural Learning Evidence Champions Network: a programme of training and networking for professionals working in arts-based education, to support and advocate for better use of evidence and evaluation in that sector. [We also published a handbook](#) for practitioners with guidance on using evidence and evaluation to improve the quality of practice.
- [Arts-Rich Schools](#) – a report based on case studies of schools that prioritise the arts.

The main part of this paper focuses on the five Learning About Culture trials which, while they only look at a small sample of activities in a hugely diverse field, make a significant contribution to our understanding about arts-based education activity in school. This paper follows [the recent publication of individual evaluation reports on the five trials and an overarching report by the evaluators](#), which draws out lessons learnt from across all five trials. Those reports provide full detail about the methods, analysis and results of the trials, while this report briefly summarises those things, to support wider engagement with the findings of the research and their implications for practice.

In addition to some more detailed suggestions of what practitioners in the education and cultural sectors can learn from these evaluations, this paper makes three general recommendations for policymakers and practitioners, that respond to the results of the trials and insights gleaned from the wider Learning About Culture programme.

## Recommendations



### **Schools should maintain an arts-rich curriculum**

The results of the LAC evaluations indicate that teaching through the arts does not get in the way of children's progress in literacy. It supports learning. In addition, arts-based approaches provide children and teachers with many other benefits, only some of which are linked to attainment. School-wide commitment, championed at senior leadership level, is a critical factor in ensuring that arts-based learning can be of high-quality and delivered effectively.



### **Advocacy for the arts in education should build on moves in education policy that encourage breadth and balance, rather than focus on generalised claims of impact on attainment.**

Impact on pupil attainment isn't the main reason why schools and cultural sector practitioners provide arts-based learning. The results of the LAC trials leave us no more certain about a causal relationship between arts participation and improved attainment and suggest that making the case for the arts in schools based on impact on attainment can be confusing for schools. In the context of policy moves towards a broader scope for assessing the quality of school curricula and in the post-Covid context where interest in pupil wellbeing has come to the fore, the importance of demonstrating impact on attainment is waning.



### **Support stronger relationships between arts practitioners and the researchers and evaluation community.**

Arts-based learning is often expected by practitioners to facilitate, rather than be the direct cause of improvements in educational outcomes, but this process is not well-enough understood. More research is needed to understand how and when arts-based approaches create a supportive context for improved educational outcomes. Engagement between the practice and research communities can lead to mutual learning and better designed activities, but practitioners can feel intimidated in the unfamiliar milieu of research.

01

**BACKGROUND**

# Background

**M**any young people only take part in cultural activities such as music and theatre during school hours, but there has been a persistent decline in the number of specialist arts teachers and number of hours spent teaching the arts in England's state schools since 2010.<sup>1,2</sup> Surveys of teachers have shown that schools in disadvantaged areas offer fewer opportunities for music lessons or to be in a school play.<sup>3</sup> The Social Mobility Commission and the Sutton Trust have found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to take part in extra-curricular arts activities.<sup>4</sup>

We began this project with an interest in discovering if we could help improve access to the arts by demonstrating how they make a difference to academic attainment, in order that schools might have the option of spending pupil premium funds on arts activity. Attainment isn't always the primary outcome for arts-based learning, but it is nevertheless something that is claimed by some advocates for the arts in schools and many practitioners expect the arts to be supportive of academic achievement, even if it is not the specific intention of their activity.

When we talked to arts-based education practitioners across England in 2018 about the evidence on which this position was based, one of the most widely cited publications was the Cultural Learning Alliance's ImagineNation evidence summary. The summary claims that 'Learning through arts and culture can improve attainment in Maths and English' alongside a range of other outcomes.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Arts Council England's review of evidence also asserts that:

Taking part in drama and library activities improves attainment in literacy. Taking part in structured music activities improves attainment in maths, early language acquisition and early literacy.<sup>6</sup>

These claims are largely based on correlational studies that identify a relationship between arts participation and improved academic performance, but don't imply causality. That is, they observe that doing well in school and taking part in the arts often coincide; they do not provide evidence that participation in the arts was the cause. Despite the absence of causal evidence, these reports and others (for example the 2020 DCMS review of evidence of the impact of the arts on health and wellbeing) are often presented – or interpreted – to persuade policymakers and practitioners that the arts make the difference.<sup>7</sup> In the context of the threat to equitable access to arts education noted earlier, it's perhaps not entirely surprising that any favourable evidence becomes part of the advocate's arsenal.

- 1 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2019) Taking Part 2018/19: Annual Child Report. [pdf] Available at: [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201819-annual-child-release](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201819-annual-child-release)
- 2 Department for Education (2019) School Workforce in England: November 2018. [online] Available at: [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/school-workforce-in-england-november-2018](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/school-workforce-in-england-november-2018) [Accessed 18 December 2019]
- 3 Teacher Tapp (2019) Who gets a music education? [online] Available at: [www.teachertapp.co.uk/who-gets-a-music-education/](http://www.teachertapp.co.uk/who-gets-a-music-education/) [Accessed 18 December 2019].
- 4 Sutton Trust (2018) Parent Power. [online] Available at: [www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/parent-power-2018-schools/](http://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/parent-power-2018-schools/) [Accessed 18 December 2019]
- 5 Cultural Learning Alliance (2017), ImagineNation: The value of cultural learning. [pdf] Available at: <https://culturallearningalliance.org.uk/about-us/imagination-the-value-of-cultural-learning/>
- 6 Arts Council England (2014) The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society: An Evidence Review [pdf]. Available at: [https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/The\\_value\\_of\\_arts\\_and\\_culture\\_to\\_people\\_and\\_society\\_an\\_evidence\\_review.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/The_value_of_arts_and_culture_to_people_and_society_an_evidence_review.pdf)
- 7 Fancourt, D. et al (2020) Evidence Summary for Policy: The role of arts in improving health and wellbeing [pdf]. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/929773/DCMS\\_report\\_April\\_2020\\_finalx\\_\\_l\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/929773/DCMS_report_April_2020_finalx__l_.pdf)

**T**here is also a tradition of challenge to this way of dealing with evidence, almost as old as the interest in the social impacts of the arts. It starts with Belfiore's calling out of 'bullshit' in cultural policy and continues right up until Stephen Clift's call earlier this year for a 'robust critique' of the research evidence.<sup>8,9</sup> In this tradition, these scholars (who are also advocates for the arts) are clear that misuse of correlational (and other low-grade) evidence in this way does little to build trust in the arts. The five activities that were evaluated as part of Learning About Culture were delivered at a scale far larger than most arts organisations usually operate, in order to give us the best chance of getting a clear indication of impact – or otherwise.

However, the results of the trials show that while it is possible to evaluate the impact of arts-based learning activity on academic achievement, it is difficult to achieve certainty about a causal relationship, even when evaluating at scale.

**The LAC evaluations produced encouraging evidence of impact on outcomes that were 'secondary' in this study, but which are for many practitioners closer to their sense of purpose. Whether in social skills, self-efficacy or 'ideation' - the ability to express one's ideas, there is evidence for the potential of arts-based learning activities in Key Stage 2 to make a difference.**

However, despite evidence suggesting that many children and teachers benefitted in different ways, the trials did not produce statistically significant evidence that the activities evaluated raised attainment in English (the primary focus of the evaluation). This is a high bar to clear and not unusual for educational interventions of any sort (ie. not just arts-based interventions) evaluated in this way.

The lack of a statistically significant, positive result has nevertheless caused some of this project's advisors to worry that its findings may be interpreted as evidence for their lack of value and may pose a threat to their continuance in the curriculum. However, it's worth remembering that these results are in line with the findings of previous research (including the EEF's own systematic review of evidence) and in line with the expectations of practitioners, for whom impact on attainment is rarely a success criterion for arts-based learning and who expect the benefits of participation in the arts to mostly lie elsewhere. Nevertheless, despite our best efforts, it continues to be difficult to prove (or disprove) a causal link between participation in arts-based learning and attainment.

8 Belfiore, E. (2009) 'On bullshit in cultural policy practice and research: notes from the British case' *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 15:3 [online]. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10286630902806080>

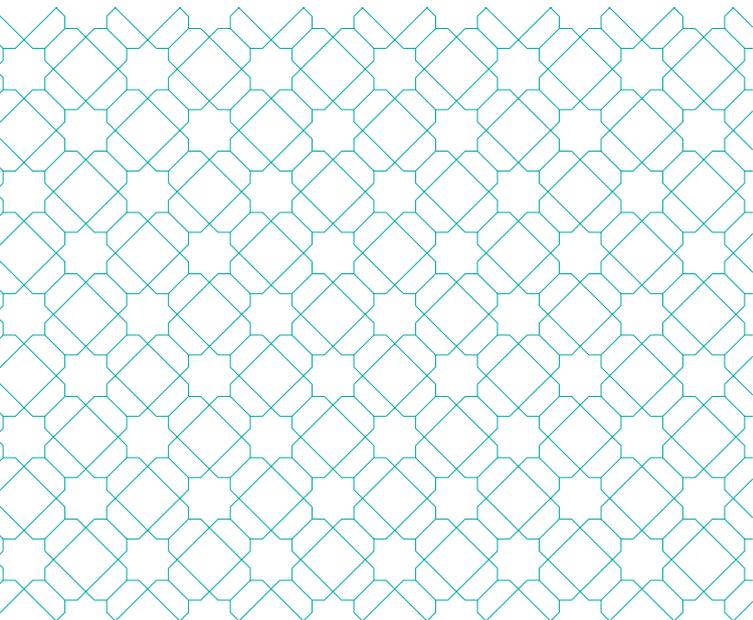
9 Clift, S. et al. (2021) 'The need for robust critique of research on social and health impacts of the arts' *Cultural Trends* [online]. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09548963.2021.1910492>

**I**n the context of a changed Ofsted framework for assessing schools in England, which prioritises curriculum depth and breadth, and in a post-Covid situation where attendance to pupils' wellbeing has come to the fore, perhaps the overriding lesson of these trials is that it's time to put to bed attempts to hold the arts accountable for impact on attainment, or to advocate for the arts based on claims of impact in that area. For the RSA, this can only be a positive step. The RSA's new Fair Education programme is based on a premise that the purposes of education are three-fold:

- 1 Capability:** Education should help children develop a wide range of knowledge and skills that endow them with cultural capital and prepare them for life and work.
- 2 Agency:** Education should develop the motivation and wherewithal to be in command of one's own life; to be deliberate and purposeful in participating in and driving social change.
- 3 Community:** Education should serve to strengthen communities, help them to overcome disadvantage and develop understanding of our shared and distinctive cultural heritage.

The findings of the Learning About Culture project reinforce our starting assumption that the arts have a role to play in all three areas of purpose. But they also reinforce the need to continue to deepen the evidence base on which arts-based learning activities are founded, so that they can be designed for impact and delivered effectively. And, as we improve our understanding of how these activities take effect, we may yet open new avenues for understanding how they are also implicated in academic attainment.

Richer dialogue between the arts sector, schools, policymakers and funders becomes possible when arts-based learning providers demonstrate concern for both pupil outcomes and equitable access to the arts but does not conflate the two. Acknowledging gaps in understanding of how the arts contribute to improved outcomes, but also accepting limitations on where it might contribute helps make the sector more credible. Otherwise, we end up in a situation where advocacy is based on arguments "by people who don't believe them, to people who don't believe them" and misses the opportunity to find convergence on outcomes of mutual interest.<sup>10</sup>



<sup>10</sup> The Conversation (2021) The limits of advocacy: arts sector told to stop worrying and be happy [online]. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/the-limits-of-advocacy-arts-sector-told-to-stop-worrying-and-be-happy-162860>

02

**THE LEARNING  
ABOUT CULTURE  
TRIALS**

# Evaluating the impact of arts-based learning activities

**From 92 submissions**, the RSA and the EEF selected 5 projects, with advice from Arts Council England. Most submissions were projects working with primary school pupils and expected to improve outcomes in in English/literacy. Very few of the projects submitted had robust evidence of their impact to date, so we looked to see if they incorporated approaches or techniques that are better supported by existing evidence.

**8,500 primary school children in 400 state schools** across England took part, with a considerable proportion of students eligible for pupil premium.

To achieve the least biased estimate of how outcomes improved for anyone taking part in these activities, the evaluators used an approach called a 'randomised control trial' (RCT). In an RCT, a sample – in our case, schools wanting to take part – is divided in two, with half the group allocated to participate and the other half allocated to a comparison group, which does not participate. At the end of the project, outcomes for the two groups – in this case attainment in literacy – are compared. With some of the activities, we compared outcomes between schools, with others we compared pupils within the same school who either did or did not participate.

We also wanted to understand how the activities were delivered and what made delivery easier or more difficult. Each trial incorporated an implementation and process evaluation (IPE), also carried out by BIT and UCL IOE, that asked:

- What helped to ensure that activities were delivered as intended?
- How responsive were schools to the activity?
- How did schools perceive the quality of the activity?
- How was the knowledge of the arts-based practitioners integrated with the knowledge of the teaching staff involved?

Evaluators conducted case studies of six schools per trial, selected in order to provide a diverse sample to capture the range of experiences, which included: interviews with teaching staff, senior leadership team (SLT) members and arts practitioners; discussions with participating pupils and observations of the activities – both in school and at teacher training events. Teachers in all participating schools were asked to complete a survey (response rates were 80 percent, on average across the trials).

11 Anders, J., Shure, N., Wyse, D., Bohling, K., Sutherland, A., Barnard, M., Frerichs, J. (2021). 'Learning about Culture Overarching Evaluators' Report', London: EEF [pdf] Available at: [https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Projects/learning\\_about\\_culture\\_overarching\\_evaluators\\_report.pdf](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Projects/learning_about_culture_overarching_evaluators_report.pdf).

## The five activities:

Developer	Name	Description	Pupils	Link to full evaluation report
<a href="#">Tees Valley Music Service and the British Kodaly Academy</a>	First Thing Music	Teachers are trained to use the Kodály method, where songs and games are used to teach music, providing a structured start to each school day.	KS1	<a href="#">First Thing Music   Projects   Education Endowment Foundation   EEF</a>
<a href="#">London Bubble.</a>	Speech Bubbles	Weekly drama lessons for children with mild-to-moderate speech and language delay, led by external specialists with TAs.	KS1	<a href="#">Speech Bubbles   Projects   Education Endowment Foundation   EEF</a>
<a href="#">Arvon, the University of Exeter and The Open University.</a>	The Craft of Writing	Teachers work with professional writers to develop their own writing and apply those skills to their teaching.	KS2	<a href="#">Craft of Writing   Projects   Education Endowment Foundation   EEF</a>
<a href="#">The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education.</a>	The Power of Pictures	Specialist training for primary teachers from author-illustrators and experts to develop their understanding of picture book creation; support to run a pupil project to create their own picture books.	KS2	<a href="#">Power of Pictures   Projects   Education Endowment Foundation   EEF</a>
<a href="#">Paradigm Arts.</a>	Young Journalist Academy	Classes set up a 'newsroom' where students apply for certain jobs and produce their own news articles and broadcasts. Journalists visit the school to support the process.	KS2	<a href="#">Young Journalist Academy   Projects   Education Endowment Foundation   EEF</a>

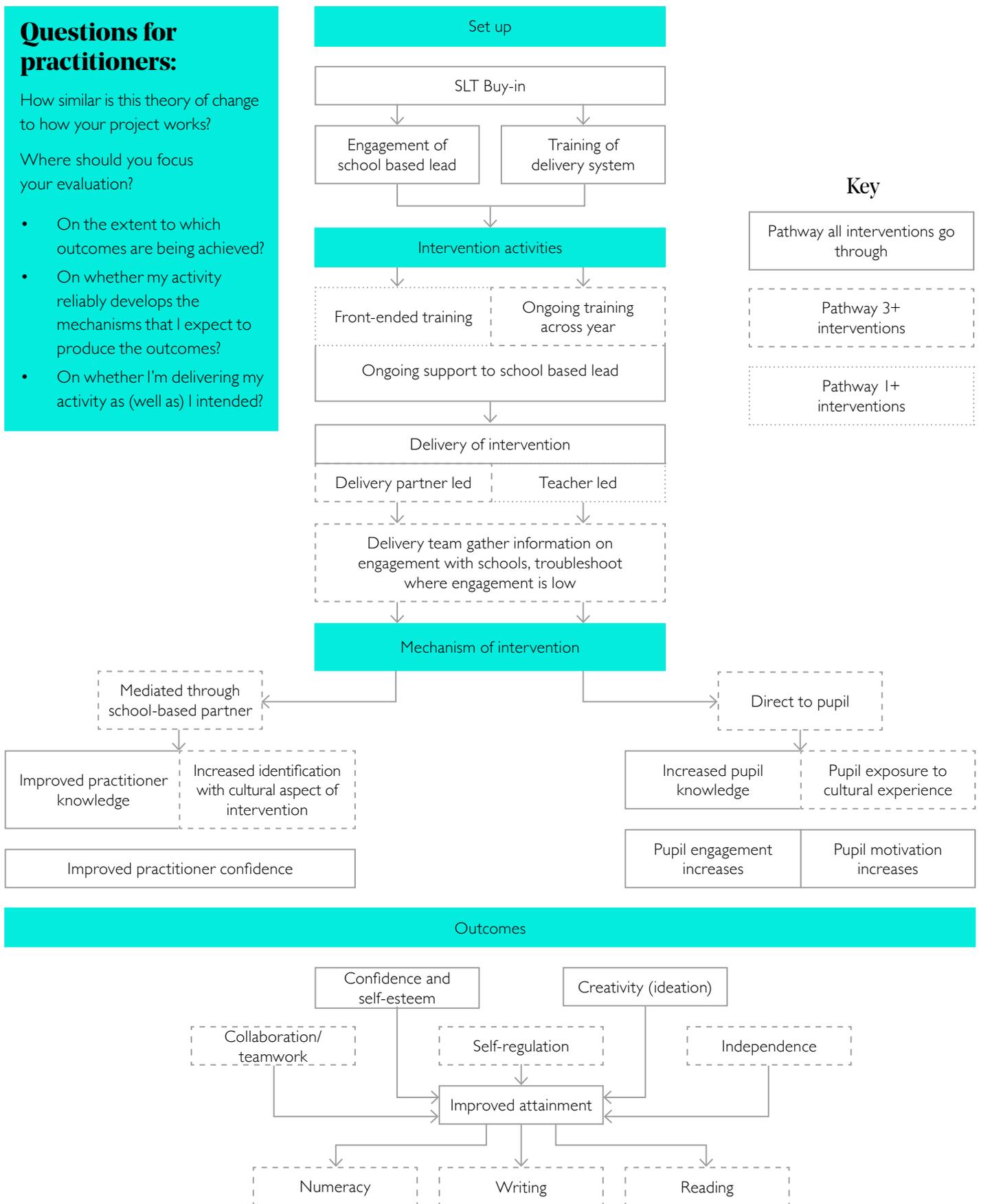
## How representative of wider practice are these projects?

As well as representing some – but by no means all – of the variety of practice in arts-based education, there are similarities in how the selected activities are delivered and what they hope to

achieve. This had the benefit of providing the evaluators with more scope for making overarching observations about the effectiveness of arts-based learning approaches. Figure 1 (taken from the evaluators' overarching report<sup>11</sup>) shows how the evaluators have brought together developers' different theories of how their activities are supposed to improve attainment (albeit simplified).

# Evaluating the impact of arts-based learning activities

**Figure 1:** Amalgamated logic model for the five Learning About Culture trials



## What outcomes were measured?

The five evaluations were primarily designed to measure the impact of these activities on reading and/or writing attainment. Evaluators also measured their impact on writing self-efficacy and creativity - defined here as pupils' perception of their own ability to generate ideas, or 'ideation'.

We wanted to evaluate each project accurately and so the design of each evaluation was worked through with each of the project developers. We also wanted to maximise the opportunity to compare and learn from the five trials, so the evaluators identified common research questions, measures and tests, where possible.

Children completed validated tests to assess those outcomes. Tests (see Fig 2) were selected for reliability, practicality, validity and resolution.

**Figure 2:** Primary and secondary outcomes and measures for the Learning About Culture trials

Outcome	Primary/Secondary Outcome	Trial	Measure
Reading attainment	Primary	FTM, Speech Bubbles	Progress in Reading Assessment (PIRA)
Oral communication (narrative recall skills)	Primary	Speech Bubbles	Renfrew Bus Story (RBS)
Social skills (e.g. self-regulation)	Secondary	FTM, Speech Bubbles	Social Skills subscale of the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS)
Creative self-efficacy	Secondary	FTM, Speech Bubbles	Adapted version of the ideation sub-measure of the writing self-efficacy measure (WSEM) referred to as WSEM3
Writing attainment	Primary	CoW, PoP, YJA	Writing Attainment Measure (WAM) Score (ideas scale double weighted)
Writing self-efficacy	Secondary	CoW, PoP, YJA	Writing Self-Efficacy Measure (WSEM) proposed by Bruning et al. (2013), adapted for primary school use
Ideation	Secondary	CoW, PoP, YJA	First five questions of WSEM

FTM – First Thing Music; CoW – Craft of Writing; PoP – Power of Pictures; YJA – Young Journalist Academy

## What did we find?

The results of the impact evaluation present a mixed picture. The full results and their explanation are available in the individual reports for each of the trials and an overarching report from the evaluators.<sup>12</sup>

### Primary outcomes: reading and writing

There are indications of both positive and negative effects for pupils participating in each project. The effects are small, ranging, on average, from minus two months' progress, to plus one month's progress. The security of these results ranges from two padlocks ('moderate to low security') to four padlocks ('high security'). All the projects are relatively low cost to deliver on a per pupil basis. All three elements – progress, security and cost – are important considerations when thinking about impact.

None of the results shows statistically significant impact of participation on any of the attainment measures. That means it is not possible to be certain whether the differences in outcomes measured are the result of the activity, or due to chance. In order to achieve more certainty, the evaluators combined the results of the three KS2 trials (which all used the same outcome measure), although this approach did not change the overall estimate of impact. Pupils who participated in the activities did not, on average, have statistically significantly higher attainment at the end of the school year when compared to pupils in the control group, who carried on as usual.

Behind the headline findings, the evaluators note that the First Thing Music trial provides 'tentative evidence to support the hypothesis that music education can contribute to improvements in children's reading attainment'. This claim is made in light of the fact that in classrooms where the threshold for

teacher training (attending four out of six sessions) and delivery (at least 80 percent of possible sessions) was met, the average effect of the programme on reading attainment was twice as large as for the intervention group as a whole (although this difference was not statistically significant). This finding should be approached with caution, however, as it comes from a small, non-random sample of the most engaged classrooms.

12 For the overarching report, see Anders, J., Shure, N., Wyse, D., Bohling, K., Sutherland, A., Barnard, M., Frerichs, J. (2021). 'Learning about Culture Overarching Evaluators' Report', London: EEF [pdf] Available at: [https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Projects/learning\\_about\\_culture\\_overarching\\_evaluators\\_report.pdf](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Projects/learning_about_culture_overarching_evaluators_report.pdf).

For the individual reports, see Anders, J., Shure, N., Wyse, D., Bohling, K., Barnard, M., Frerichs, J. (2021). 'The Craft of Writing: Evaluation report', London: EEF [pdf]. Available at: [https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/craft-of-writing/?utm\\_source=site&utm\\_medium=search&utm\\_campaign=site\\_search&search\\_term=craft%20of%20writing](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/craft-of-writing/?utm_source=site&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=site_search&search_term=craft%20of%20writing)

Anders, J., Shure, N., Wyse, D., Barnard, M., Abdi, F., Frerichs, J. (2021). 'The Power of Pictures: Evaluation report', London: EEF [pdf]. Available at: [https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/power-of-pictures/?utm\\_source=site&utm\\_medium=search&utm\\_campaign=site\\_search&search\\_term=power%20of](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/power-of-pictures/?utm_source=site&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=site_search&search_term=power%20of)

Anders, J., Shure, N., Wyse, D., Bohling, K., Barnard, M., Frerichs, J., Evans, A. (2021). 'Young Journalist Academy: Evaluation report', London: EEF [pdf]. Available at: [https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/young-journalist-academy/?utm\\_source=site&utm\\_medium=search&utm\\_campaign=site\\_search&search\\_term=young%20journalist](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/young-journalist-academy/?utm_source=site&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=site_search&search_term=young%20journalist)

Bohling, K., Tankelevitch, L., Vinnitchok, A., Barnard, M., Anders, J., Shure, N., Wyse, D. (2021). 'Speech Bubbles: Evaluation report', London: EEF [pdf]. Available at: [https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/speech-bubbles/?utm\\_source=site&utm\\_medium=search&utm\\_campaign=site\\_search&search\\_term=speech](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/speech-bubbles/?utm_source=site&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=site_search&search_term=speech)

Bohling, K., Barnard, M., Crouch, L., Whitefield, A., Murphy, B., Gunzinger, F., Anders, J., Shure, S., Wyse, D. (2021). 'First Thing Music: Evaluation report', London: EEF [pdf]. Available at: [https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/first-thing-music/?utm\\_source=site&utm\\_medium=search&utm\\_campaign=site\\_search&search\\_term=first](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/first-thing-music/?utm_source=site&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=site_search&search_term=first)

13 Anders, J. et al. op cit..

## Evaluating the impact of arts-based learning activities

**Figure 3: Primary outcome results for the Learning About Culture trials**

Effect size = the difference in test scores between the active and control groups, with the upper and lower limits of the range in brackets. The scores are translated into an estimate of months' progress, to make them easier to read.

The Education Endowment Foundation use a system of padlocks to indicate how secure the results are. The security rating is based on several criteria, including how large the sample was, how many children dropped out (or didn't sit the test) and whether there could be other explanations for the result. This is different from statistical significance.

Trial	PIR <sup>a</sup> Score WAM <sup>b</sup> Score	Effect size (95% CI)	Estimated months' progress (95% CI)	EEF security rating	No of pupils	P Value	EEF cost rating
FTM	PIRA Score <sup>a</sup>	0.07 (-0.02, 0.19)	1 (0, 3)	2	2150	0.13	£
Speech Bubbles	PIRA Score <sup>a</sup>	-0.05 (-0.2, 0.1)	-1 (-3, 2)	4	821	0.93	££
Speech Bubbles	Renfrew Bus Story Score	-0.04 (-0.19, 0.11)	0 (-3, 2)	4	811	> 0.99	££
CoW	WAM <sup>b</sup> Score	-0.03 (-0.19, 0.12)	0 (-3, 2)	2	1697	0.68	£
PoP	WAM <sup>b</sup> Score	0.09 (-0.07; 0.24)	1 (-1, 3)	3	1945	0.27	£
YJA	WAM <sup>b</sup> Score	-0.13 (-0.32, 0.05)	-2 (-4, 1)	3	1613	0.16	£
Pooled KS2	WAM <sup>b</sup> Score	-0.04 (-0.14, 0.07)	0 (-2, 1)	N/A	5255	0.49	N/A

**Table note:**

<sup>a</sup>Progress in Reading Assessment;  
<sup>b</sup>WAM Score: Writing Assessment Measure  
(ideas scale double weighted)

Cost is an important factor for head teachers in deciding whether to implement activities. If something only makes a small difference, but it's low cost and may have a range of other benefits, it may still be appealing.

## Secondary outcomes: social skills, creativity and self-efficacy

The results for the secondary outcome measures are more encouraging. Most of the effect sizes (see Fig. 4) are positive, small and not statistically significant.<sup>13</sup> One exception is CLPE's Power of Pictures, in which pupils' confidence as writers increased, with suggestive evidence that it was as a result of participation in the project.

Just as they did with the primary outcomes, the evaluators combined the results for the three KS2 trials. Doing this revealed a positive and statistically significant impact on writing self-efficacy and a positive impact on ideation, which is not statistically significant. Together they provide evidence for the potential for arts-based education activities in KS2 to improve pupils' confidence and creativity as writers.

The evaluators looked at the impact on pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) but, consistent with the outcomes for all pupils, there were no statistically significant improvements in attainment or self-efficacy/creativity as a result of participating in these activities.

**Figure 4:** Summary of impact on secondary outcomes

<b>Trial</b>	<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Effect size (95 percent confidence interval)</b>	<b>No of pupils</b>	<b>P Value</b>
FTM	WSEM3 Score	-0.03 (-0.14, 0.07)	1931	0.51
Speech Bubbles	WSEM3 Score	0.05 (-0.09, 0.19)	770	0.47
FTM	SSIS Score	-0.09 (-0.24, 0.08)	852	0.27
Speech Bubbles	SSIS Score	0.03 (-0.12, 0.17)	746	0.71
CoW	WSEM Score	0.04 (-0.08, 0.15)	1674	0.55
PoP	WSEM Score	0.11 (-0.00, 0.22)	1907	0.06
YJA	WSEM Score	0.03 (-0.09, 0.16)	1571	0.61
Pooled KS2	WSEM Score	0.07 (-0.00, 0.14)	5152	0.06
CoW	Ideation	0.02 (-0.09, 0.14)	1674	0.69
PoP	Ideation	0.09 (-0.03, 0.21)	1907	0.14
YJA	Ideation	0.03 (-0.10, 0.16)	1571	0.68
Pooled KS2	Ideation	0.06 (-0.01, 0.13)	5152	0.12

### How do the results compare to participants' experience?

The results of the standardised tests are different from the opinions of teachers surveyed as part of the IPE. Figure 5 shows that teachers were more likely to perceive impact than was suggested by the test results.<sup>14</sup> Teachers also identified other benefits in areas not tested.

These observations aren't presented in order to challenge the test results, but to show that understanding impact is complex and that the outcomes that were the focus of

these evaluations are by no means the only ways in which these activities may benefit children. There are several possible reasons for some of the differences between teacher expectations and the test results. The evaluators note that the tests available are not perfect or complete measures of skills in literacy and that these projects may impact in ways that were not detectable by those tests. Teachers' perceptions of impact are also an absolute assessment of pupils' participation in the activities, rather than a comparative one. That is, teachers may not be taking into consideration whether these activities have been more effective than their usual practice. Teachers may also be biased towards the positive in data collection like this.

**Figure 5: Teaching staff who perceived positive impact**

	<b>First Thing Music</b>	<b>Speech Bubbles</b>	<b>Craft of Writing</b>	<b>The Power of Pictures</b>	<b>Young Journalist Academy</b>
Reading	41% + (56% not sure or neither positive nor negative)	38% + (62% not sure or neither positive nor negative)	-	86%	57% (43% limited impact)
Speech and Language	77%	81% +	-	-	-
Writing skills	-	-	92% +	84% +	69% +
Communication	83%	86%	-	81%	74%
Social skills	93% ++	95% ++	-	59% (41% no impact or don't know)	74%
Ideation	-	-	97% ++	95% ++	63% ++
Creativity	85%	86%	97% (specifically writing)	97%	69%
Engagement	88%	86%	98% (specifically writing)	98%	74% (specifically, with culture & the wider world)
Confidence	-	91%	97% (specifically writing)	95%	77%

+ primary outcome measure in impact evaluation; ++ secondary outcome measure; - not asked.

## Were there other benefits of participating in these arts-based learning activities?

Behind the headline results, the evaluation reports indicate the possibility that the activities produced a range of other positive outcomes, many of which were outside the scope of the evaluation. The following comments are drawn from the individual evaluation reports.

### **Confidence, creativity and self-efficacy**

- Craft of Writing led to a positive impact on FSM-eligible pupils' ideation – with an effect size equivalent to three months' additional progress in academic outcomes. This provides some indication that the approach may be beneficial for increasing the creativity of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, although this should be approached with some caution as the sample size of this subgroup was small.

**“My class has developed a culture of freedom with their writing. So, you might have seen today that they are quite comfortable with just sitting there and just writing what comes into their head. They don't worry about it, and they view themselves as authors in that way.”**

Craft of Writing Teacher

- The Power of Pictures had a statistically significant impact on writing self-efficacy - with an effect size equivalent to two months' additional progress in an academic outcome.

- The combined results for the KS2 trials provide suggestive evidence for arts-based literacy interventions to produce positive effects on pupils' confidence and creativity as writers.
- In the Speech Bubbles case study schools, school leaders, teaching assistants and the visiting drama practitioners reported noticing positive changes in pupils' self-efficacy and self-regulation.

**“[The Young Journalist Academy] has engaged some of the lower [attaining] children and because it has been hands-on and working with materials, it's helped them to see that writing does have a purpose. If I don't write this script or these interviewer questions, then I can't go on and produce a radio or TV programme. So, there has to be some writing and there has to be some planning.”**

Participating teacher,  
Young Journalist Academy

### **Cultural capital and skills in art forms**

74 percent of teachers thought that the Young Journalist Academy had a positive impact on pupils' engagement with culture and the wider world (37 percent said this impact was 'very positive').

94 percent of teachers thought that First Thing Music improved pupils' music skills, learning musical content (such as notation) that teachers felt older pupils, who had not taken part, would struggle with. They reported that “pupils sought out musical instruments to play with at playtime and had described singing the First Thing Music songs to their parents (and even their pets) outside of school.”<sup>15</sup>

15 Bohling, K. et al. (2021) 'First Thing Music: Evaluation Report'

## Critical thinking

Teachers reported that the Young Journalist Academy helped pupils to differentiate between facts and opinions. "Observation data and discussion with pupils also indicated that children had developed skills for researching factual information online and understood the importance of ensuring that the information they reported was accurate."<sup>16</sup>

## Self-regulation

**“Our PE teacher has said, they are an easier class to teach than the other one, and they get more PE done because they’ll sit and listen. They’ll follow the instructions, which means that over the course of a lesson they will end up achieving more because they are not having to waste time on bringing everyone back together and saying this is what we need to do.**

SLT member, reporting  
on First Thing Music

## Teacher confidence and enjoyment

94 percent of surveyed teachers participating in Arvon/University of Exeter’s The Craft of Writing project, said that it improved their confidence as a writer and 67 percent said that it had a ‘very positive’ impact.

Participating teachers perceived First Thing Music to have been “worthwhile in terms of continued professional development and enjoyed improving musically alongside their pupils.”<sup>17</sup>

The impact on teachers chimes with the information RSA gathered speaking to leaders of the schools featured in our ‘Arts Rich Schools’ report:

**“What I do quite like about the results was the... improvement in teachers confidence, and I think that’s probably key, especially at this time, when teachers probably aren’t feeling so confident or feeling quite dejected... that actually working with artists does enhance their practice and makes them want to, you know, be back teaching again, it just adds a little bit of life and to us to our school anyway.**

Arts Rich Schools headteacher –  
not participant in the trials

<sup>16</sup> Anders, J. et al. (2021) ‘Young Journalist Academy: Evaluation Report’

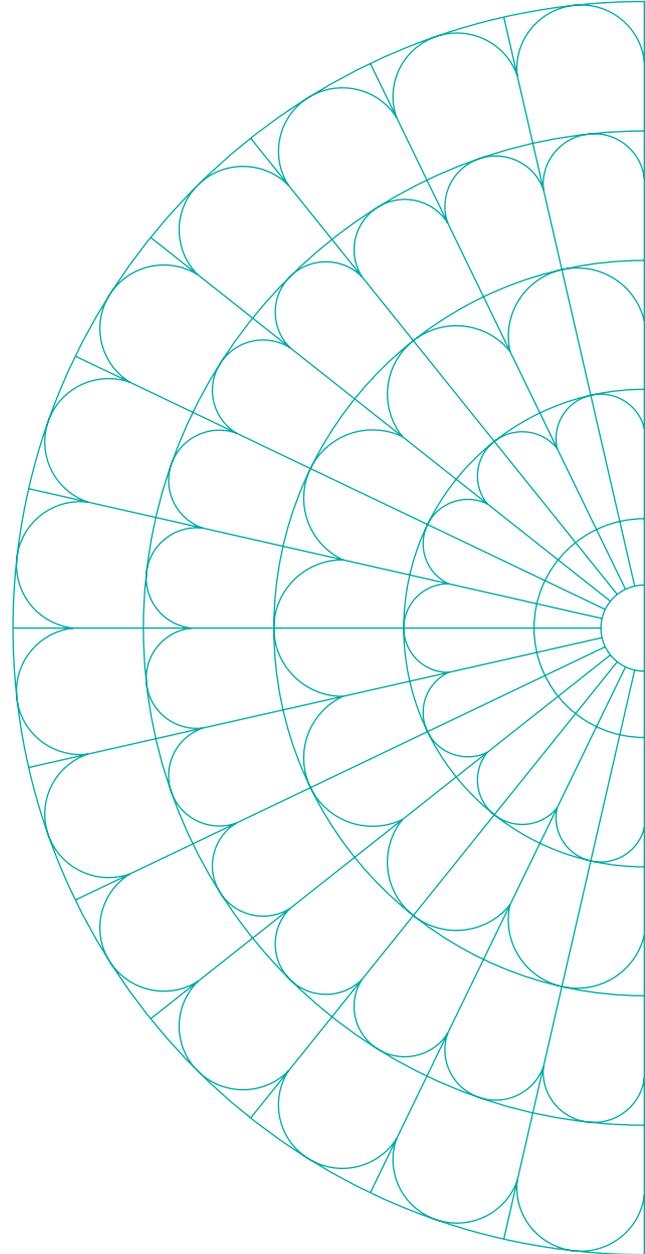
<sup>17</sup> Bohling, K. et al. op cit.

## What did we learn about how the arts-based learning activities were delivered?

The IPE asked four principal questions:

- What helped to ensure that activities were delivered as intended?
- How responsive were schools to the activity?
- How did schools perceive the quality of the activity?
- How was the knowledge of the arts-based practitioners integrated with the knowledge of the teaching staff involved?

While the findings are primarily based on data from the 30 case study schools<sup>18</sup>, there are recurrent themes common to all five activities, despite their distinctive approaches. Together they provide a useful checklist for schools considering arts-based learning interventions and/or for arts organisations when designing their activities to fit with the competing priorities for schools and when explaining to schools the conditions that will best support their work to be effective.



<sup>18</sup> The IPE also used survey data and administrative data which they attempted to get from all participating schools and teachers.

**Figure 6: Summary of IPE findings and checklist for schools and arts-based learning practitioners**

<b>Intervention characteristics</b> <b>The design of the activity.</b>	<b>Individual factors</b> <b>Pupil and teacher characteristics.</b>	<b>Structural factors</b> <b>School characteristics.</b>
<p><b>Resource intensity</b></p> <p>What level of resource is needed to deliver an activity faithfully to design and to a high standard?</p>	<p><b>Staff/SLT background and prior experience</b></p> <p>Are staff familiar with this way of working?</p> <p>What might staff need to know in order to implement the activity as intended?</p>	<p><b>Resource availability</b></p> <p>Some of the activity developers reported that even basic materials for drawing were missing from classrooms, making activities difficult to deliver.</p> <p>Are the school and the arts partner jointly able to provide sufficient resource?</p>
<p><b>Divergence from the (perceived) requirements of the curriculum (see page 23)</b></p> <p>How well aligned with the national curriculum or the school's own curriculum is the activity?</p> <p>To what extent does it challenge existing approaches to teaching and learning?</p>	<p><b>Teachers' belief that the activity could make a difference supports effective implementation.</b></p> <p>How are SLT encouraging class teachers?</p> <p>How is the activity explained by the provider to teachers? What evidence of how it works and its effects are available?</p>	<p><b>Timetabling</b></p> <p>How will the activity fit into an already crowded curriculum?</p> <p>What other lessons/ activities will participating children miss?</p>
<p><b>Timetabling stipulations (eg to do music 'first thing') and intensity of focus on the activity (e.g. YJA's full days of writing).</b></p> <p>Does the activity require changes to the shape of the school day? This kind of activity will be more challenging to implement and sustain.</p>	<p><b>Teachers' ability to teach in a different way to usual needs careful consideration.</b></p> <p>How will visiting practitioners work with teachers in the classroom? How will teachers be supported to work differently – via training or otherwise?</p>	<p><b>SLT buy-in and encouragement</b></p> <p>To what extent is the school leadership supportive?</p> <p>How can they help overcome teacher-level barriers to engagement?</p>
<p><b>Adaptability to individual contexts</b></p> <p>More-prescriptive activities are more likely to be delivered according to plan, but that can make them less responsive to individual schools' needs and more difficult to scale.</p> <p>Less-prescriptive activities might be more adaptable but are more dependent on teachers' own efforts. They might look quite different in different schools, making quality assurance and assessment of impact difficult.</p> <p>How prescriptive is the activity in respect of these different elements?</p> <p>(i) Training, (ii) Involvement of external specialists, (iii) Practical hands-on teaching, and (iv) Fit with existing school approach</p>	<p><b>Pupil background characteristics are key determinants of engagement.</b></p> <p>Teachers reported challenges for:</p> <p>Pupils with English as an additional language and pupils with low prior attainment/ special educational needs [terms were used interchangeably by trial teachers].</p> <p>There was also an indication that these activities were effective at engaging typically disengaged pupils.</p> <p>Who is the activity targeted at?</p> <p>Is it suitable for all pupils, or only some? How do you know?</p> <p>How is it differentiated for pupils with different needs?</p>	

# OR3

**IMPROVING THE  
USE OF EVIDENCE  
AND EVALUATION  
IN PRACTICE**

**T**he five evaluations were by far the largest part of the Learning About Culture programme, but in pursuit of the programme's second aim, to improve use of evidence and evaluation in arts-based learning, we undertook two major projects, a snapshot of which are provided here.

### The Evidence Champions' Network

Starting in summer 2018, the RSA worked with seven Arts Council Bridge Organisations to establish the Cultural Learning Evidence Champions Network (ECN). The ECN champions the role of evidence and evaluation in improving the quality and impact of arts-based education, connecting artists and educators, funders and evaluators, venues and universities. Through the ECN, we worked with 90 Champions to develop and spread knowledge and skills in use of evidence and evaluation, convening online and in regional hubs, to support practitioners across England.

To support their activity and wider embedding of evidence-rich practice in arts-based education, the RSA published the [Cultural Learning Evidence Champions' Handbook](#) in 2019. We also convened a series of in-person and online seminars, the latter of which are available to watch [here](#).

We used participant surveys to get an indication of how Champions' attitudes and behaviour in relation to evidence-rich practice had changed after a year of participating. Feedback from participants suggests that the ECN may have had some success at increasing Champions' confidence in designing and co-designing evaluation, in managing relationships between evaluators, arts organisations and schools and in reporting on evaluation. Champions also reported increases in confidence to make decisions about the evaluation tools they use, and a shift from

using evaluation for advocacy to thinking about learning through evaluation. The number of Champions using a theory of change to understand and explain their impact also increased.

While Champions talked about sharing practice and knowledge across organisations and with colleagues, the project does not appear to have driven engagement further afield. Champions also reported they were sharing their evaluation results with a smaller range of stakeholders at the end of the year than the beginning. However, the greatest drop was in their sharing evaluation 'as a news story'. Given the network focus has been on creating a shift to more emphasis on learning and less on advocacy, this could be seen as a success.

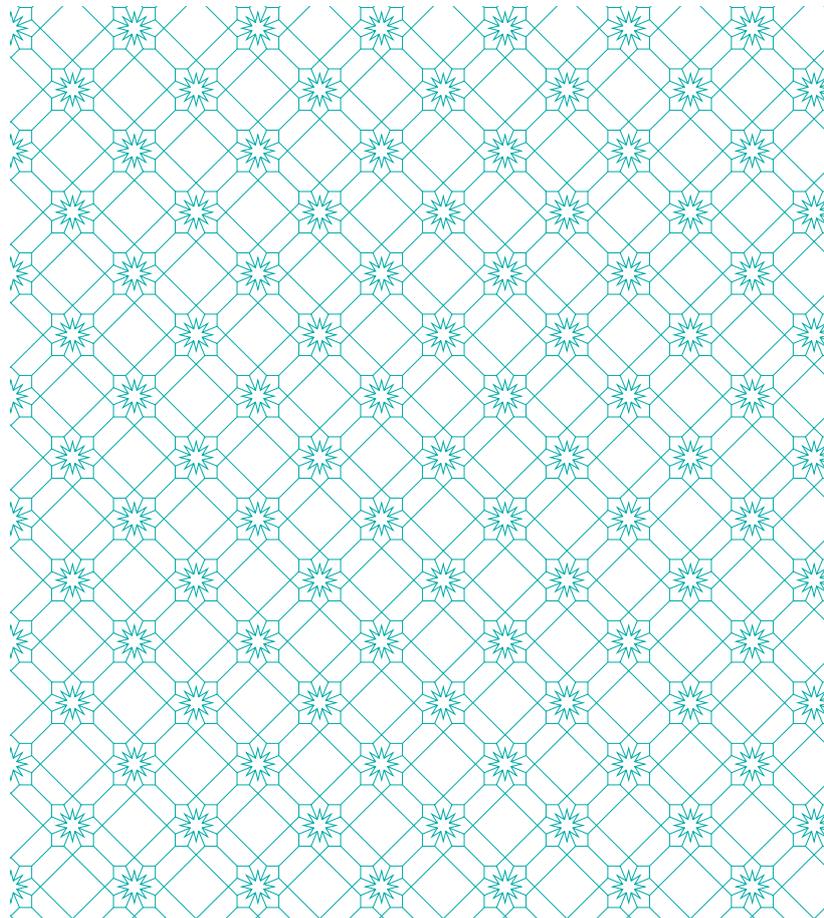
The RSA will continue to work with the Bridge Organisations and the Champions to support engagement with the results of the Learning About Culture trials.

## Learning from existing practice in arts-rich schools

The RSA visited 'arts-rich' schools across England to improve our understanding of what enables and motivates some schools to put the arts at the heart of learning and published a report [Arts-Rich Schools](#) with case studies of eight schools that maintain a commitment to a strong arts offer.

The report includes information for other school leaders on the strategies used by these schools, many of which align with the findings of the trials that relate to successful implementation of arts-based learning (see Fig. 6), namely:

- Giving the arts high status within the school
  - Considering arts subjects to be a 'core' part of the curriculum
  - Senior leadership team representation
- Prioritising dedicated arts spaces
- Developing a range of partnerships to facilitate curricular and extra-curricular offer
  - Making the most of staff, governor and parent networks to identify partners, work-related learning opportunities and spaces to exhibit student work
  - Hosting networks for arts professionals
  - Adapting timetable to create dedicated time for external practitioners
- Maintaining curriculum breadth at secondary school
- Prioritising specialist staff at primary school
  - Recruiting specialist-trained secondary teachers
  - Building 'arts teams' to share responsibility for delivery of the arts curriculum
- Timetabling to put the arts at the centre of school life
  - Dedicating regular, extended sessions for the arts
  - Identifying times when arts teachers from different disciplines can come together to plan curriculum across art forms.



# 04

## RECOMMENDATIONS

# Schools should maintain an arts rich curriculum

## Teaching through the arts can support children's academic progress

The results of the Learning About Culture trials suggest that while on average, arts-based education approaches don't lead to faster progress in English/literacy, they also don't impede progress. At a time when the pressure on headteachers to maintain good levels of progress in English, maths and science has been cited as a cause for limiting curriculum provision in the arts, this is an important finding.<sup>19</sup>

Making substantial improvements to pupil progress, over and above that which would have been made anyway, is difficult. It's not uncommon for interventions evaluated in EEF trials to produce a null result, like those observed in these trials. The fact that with the measures of attainment we used, we were unable to get statistically significant evidence of impact, is not the last word in whether or not these activities are effective. It is much less an indication that arts-based education does not deserve a place in the school curriculum.

The evaluators of the trials note that the few available options for measuring attainment, combined with the desire for a consistent approach across the five trials limited their ability to look closely at where the activities may be having an impact. It isn't that the results we have are invalid, but that they don't tell us the whole story of where these activities may be contributing to good outcomes for children. This is a limitation of evaluation in general, not something unique to these trials. In order to deliver the rigour it

promises, the focus of the evaluation must be tightly defined.

Some of those other outcomes might be linked to attainment, but some of them might be important for children's flourishing in other ways. For example, participants in the trials indicated that these arts-based learning activities support disengaged learners to engage in the classroom. In the post-Covid context, this may be particularly pertinent to plans for a recovery curriculum.

## School-wide commitment, led by SLT, is a critical factor in ensuring that arts-based learning is delivered effectively

The Learning About Culture trials indicate that effective implementation of arts-based learning is influenced by the endorsement of the headteacher and their encouragement of teachers to see its potential contribution. In the case of First Thing Music, the impact of strong commitment was measurable: the project's impact on reading attainment was higher, on average, in classrooms where the minimum threshold for engaging in training and delivery was met. Conversely, in delivering the Power of Pictures, the project developer (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education) raised concerns about a shortage of even basic art supplies – paper, coloured pencils - and critical to high quality delivery.

<sup>19</sup> Fabian Society (2019) Primary Colours: The decline of arts education in primary schools and how it can be reversed [pdf]. Available at: <https://fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FS-Primary-Colours-Report-WEB-FINAL.pdf>; The University of Warwick (2015) The Warwick Commission: Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth [pdf]. Available at: [https://warwick.ac.uk/research/warwickcommission/futureculture/finalreport/warwick\\_commission\\_final\\_report.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/research/warwickcommission/futureculture/finalreport/warwick_commission_final_report.pdf)

# **2 Advocacy for the arts in education should build on recent policy and social changes that encourage breadth and balance, rather than focus on generalised claims of impact on attainment.**

## The game has changed since we began this research

We began the Learning About Culture project at a time when impact on attainment was believed by many to be key to advocacy for the arts in schools. The focus of education agencies including Ofsted and the EEF was on attainment in English, maths and science and how schools were narrowing the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. Since the programme began in 2017, several events have served to broaden the scope of interest in what schools do and what outcomes they help children to achieve.

The results of the Learning About Culture trials should be understood within this changing context. The focus of our evaluations was on attainment in English/literacy. Although our original call for proposals was agnostic about the subject

in which attainment might be measured, it was on that subject area that submissions were overwhelmingly focused.

## **School inspections**

Ofsted's shift to focus on how schools provide a broad and balanced curriculum has very much altered the focus of efforts to understand what works in education. The current inspection framework (introduced in 2019, two years after Learning About Culture was initiated) requires schools to demonstrate how they are developing pupils' cultural capital. This seems impossible to achieve without the arts and makes the case for the arts based on transfer effects on English, maths and science seem less critical. While the Learning About Culture trials were primarily interested in measuring the impact of arts-based learning on academic attainment, the secondary outcomes included in the study – self-efficacy, creativity and social skills – bring us closer to a combined measure of the benefits of a more rounded education.

## **Covid-19**

For both schools and cultural organisations, new priorities are emerging from the pandemic. Lockdown reinforced underlying socioeconomic inequalities in access to extra-curricular cultural activities and there are questions and opportunities for teaching and learning in the arts following the rapid acceleration of digital and remote learning.<sup>20</sup> Certainly, among the schools the RSA focused on in the Arts-Rich Schools report, the use of technology in arts has been a gamechanger for most participants.

20 Education Endowment Foundation (2012) Challenges in Home Learning: Emerging findings from the Big Lockdown Learning Parent Survey [online]. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/eef-publishes-emerging-findings-from-big-lockdown-learning-parent-survey/>; Arts Council England & Durham University (2019), Durham Commission on Creativity in Education – Second report 2021 [pdf]: Available at: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/creativitycommission/DurhamCommissionsecondreport-21April.pdf> and OECD (2020) Culture shock: COVID-19 and the cultural and creative sectors [online]. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/culture-shock-covid-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors-08da9e0e/>

Whereas previously most did not consider integrating digital teaching and learning components, the pandemic has forced them to do so and in some cases, it has allowed for more equitable access to the arts (eg pupils being able to practice music at home using technology).

Perhaps most critically in relation to the focus of questions of the value and transfer impact of the arts, the pandemic's effect on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people appears to be carving out a role for the arts and culture in a 'recovery curriculum'. Based on testimonies from school leaders and young people, in their second report published this year, The Durham Commission on Creativity in Education argue for a 'recovery curriculum' centred on the restorative value of creativity and cultural learning, in order to address the effects of the pandemic on children's wellbeing and mental health.<sup>21</sup>

Both our Arts Rich Schools leaders and members of the Evidence Champions Network have observed how this is changing the nature of their provision:

**...the government's focus on wellbeing has led to artists/arts-based practitioners coming to the school with arts projects related to wellbeing. And this has resulted in an extended offer for the arts.**

**“** (Arts-Rich School headteacher)

But practitioners are not always certain about how to go about this:

**“The wellbeing agenda in schools has made it easier to deliver some work without the need to justify with what schools deem 'evidence'.”**

(ECN member)

**“I think there's been more panic, and a rush to get content out to audiences. But I'm not convinced there's always been thought about what people want or need - it sometimes feels like it's been more to satisfy practitioners' needs to create than an audience need... On the other hand - it's been clear that we need to prove our worth more than ever... I'm just not convinced we're sure how to do that.**

(ECN member)

Arts Council England has also been spearheading renewed interest in the role of creativity in education and the role that arts-based learning might play in its development. Indeed, reflecting on the significantly changed landscape in education since their first report in October 2019, the Arts Council sponsored Durham Commission sees the rapid adoption of digital platforms by schools (and cultural organisations) as an opportunity to increase the understanding and practice of teaching for creativity in schools.<sup>22</sup>

21 Arts Council England & Durham University op cit.

22 Ibid.

### Impact on attainment isn't the main reason why schools and arts organisations offer arts-based learning and its outcomes are broader than those studied in this research.

The primary outcome measured in the LAC evaluations was impact on academic achievement, because we wanted to see if demonstrating it might improve equitable access to arts in school, through use of the pupil premium. However, and perhaps unusually for evaluations conducted with the Education Endowment Foundation, it is rarely the main success criterion that project developers or schools use when developing arts-based learning activities.

**It's important to say that the goal of these projects is not, ultimately to improve literacy. The goal of the evaluation might be to test that, but those things are not the same.**

Developer, First Thing Music

**It's not really academic arguments that are convincing schools because you cannot see that straightaway. Rather the well-being elements: when you start doing the arts within a couple of weeks, you see miles happier children. And that sort of thing tends to appeal to the head teachers much more than a kind of vague promise that it's going to improve the maths and English results.**

JR - Arts Rich Schools Headteacher

**We participated in the 'Step into dance' project. And our main aim was to get more boys dancing, and to create a culture where it's okay for boys to dance. And that's our main driver is about getting more students from different backgrounds, of different genders involved in different aspects of the arts and break down those barriers. And that's my key driver for that really, not on academic outcomes. And if the project has outcomes on other things, then that's an added bonus.**

TW - Arts Rich Schools Headteacher

The Learning About Culture trials were not a full evaluation of everything these projects were good at. Indeed, delivering the promised rigour of an RCT depends on a tight focus. However, the evaluators observe that by narrowly defining the outcomes of interest we may miss where impact was accruing elsewhere. There may be effects outside of the pre-defined areas of investigation and there may also be effects on the outcomes, just not in a way that might be picked up in the tests. For example, with First Thing Music, the evaluators write:

**Phonological awareness is a hypothesised attribute that sits much closer to music training and also appears in the First Thing Music logic model as a hypothesised mechanism that leads to improved reading attainment. Other discrete skills that contribute to reading attainment and were assessed by the PIRA, such as making inferences, do not appear in the FTM logic model. As such, a more targeted assessment of an individual reading skill rather than overall reading attainment might be a better outcome to examine for this programme.**<sup>23</sup>

This aligns with other research in this area:

**Arts in education has been shown to contribute in important ways to the factors that underpin learning, such as cognitive abilities, confidence, motivation, problem solving**

**and communication skills. These are more compelling than claims to significant improvement in attainment on standard tests where the evidence is much less convincing. It also questions the hierarchy of subjects that means we're interested in whether studying music improves ability in maths, but not whether studying maths improves ability in music."**<sup>24</sup>

The evaluators also note that, in general, pupils really enjoyed these activities and seemed particularly adept at engaging disengaged learners: "music might be a way to help otherwise disengaged learners attend school through enjoying and looking forward to school."<sup>25</sup> As others have reported recently: "A school's absence rate is the strongest predictive factor of the progress made by its pupil premium students, but in most schools, it is only a minor focus of pupil premium policy."<sup>26</sup> If the outcomes of these projects support disengaged children to re-engage, then perhaps that will lead in turn to other things, like academic progress. We might not be able to get evidence to demonstrate how the arts cause progress directly, but we might be able to get better evidence of how they create the conducive contexts in which children can make progress.

23 Anders, J. et al. (2021) 'Learning about Culture Overarching Evaluators' Report'

24 Crossick, G. & Kaszynska, P. (2016) Understanding the value of arts & culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project [pdf]. Available at: <https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/publications/cultural-value-project-final-report/>

25 Anders, J. et al. (2021) 'Learning about Culture Overarching Evaluators' Report'

26 Social Mobility Commission (2021) Against The Odds: Achieving greater progress for secondary students facing socio-economic disadvantage [pdf]. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/997897/Against\\_the\\_odds\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/997897/Against_the_odds_report.pdf)

## Recommendations

We have not studied the impact of the arts on young people's wellbeing and we make no claims or counterclaims in this regard. However, in common with the existing evidence for arts' impact on educational achievement, the evidence for impact on wellbeing suggests a cautious and sceptical approach to any claims of a causal relationship.<sup>27</sup>

### Claiming impact on academic outcomes, when arts-based learning approaches diverge from the national curriculum can be confusing for schools and undervalues the arts' role in supporting creativity.

The evaluators observed tensions between how some projects were designed and teachers' interpretation of the requirements of the national curriculum. Some teachers found it difficult to reconcile the two and to see how approaches not specified in the curriculum could support attainment, when assessment is so aligned to the national curriculum. But some developers of arts-based learning activities see it as their function to stretch the scope of the national curriculum and to introduce more creativity and agency:

**“What the arts do is complicate and augment the limited scope of the national curriculum, but it needs support from the leadership to remind teachers that they should care about the joy of the written word. The national curriculum should be the departure point, not the prescription.”<sup>28</sup>**

Developer,  
Young Journalist Academy

**“One bit of useful information [in the evaluation reports] is that the teachers said that they couldn't find room in the national curriculum. The fact that the curriculum restrains teachers legitimates our way of working. The evaluation shows that [The Craft of Writing] can support literacy and other outcomes, but the national curriculum restricts the ability to engage in this way. Schools need autonomy to think and grow.”<sup>29</sup>**

Developer, The Craft of Writing

Many teachers participating in the Craft of Writing project perceived benefits in terms of their own creativity and their pupils', but also that adjusting to a new balance between curriculum demands and more creative approaches requires adjustment time for both teachers and pupils.

<sup>27</sup> Clift, S. et al., op cit.

<sup>28</sup> Telephone interview with author, May 2021

<sup>29</sup> Telephone interview with author, May 2021

## **Support stronger relationships between arts practitioners and the researchers and evaluation community**

We need better understanding about how arts-based learning activities work before we make claims about impact on academic achievement.

We measured the impact of arts activities on attainment in one area – literacy. This outcome is not expected to be a direct effect of participation, but one that flowed from several other preliminary outcomes. The evaluators suggest that without more evidence of how the activities affect these preliminary outcomes, we are left in a position of not knowing whether lack of impact on literacy stems from not having produced the expected preliminary outcomes, or that those preliminary outcomes don't affect literacy as expected. In other words, the activities might be working as expected, but the outcomes they do produce don't in fact have a knock-on effect on literacy.

**Building evidence for any educational intervention requires an accumulation of evidence first about how interventions affect their most direct intermediate outcomes, before moving to evaluate more distant outcomes (such as pupil attainment). This project shows the limitations of attempting to skip any of the steps that are implied in such an accumulation, including new and innovative thinking as to how to capture such intermediate outcomes at fairly substantial scale (allowing for their use in impact [evaluations], not just IPEs) in the highly time-pressured context of a busy school.”<sup>30</sup>**

The absence of this foundational evidence was a factor in the frustration expressed by some of the activity developers about how the reality of the evaluations contrasted with their expectations. Despite entering the project knowing that the evaluation was focused on attainment and being involved in the development of the evaluation protocols, the evaluations didn't tell them more about other outcomes. The projects selected for trial had, as mentioned earlier, limited pre-existing evidence for impact, so the impact evaluation results open up just as many questions as they answer.

30 Anders, J. et al. (2021) 'Learning about Culture Overarching Evaluators' Report'

### **Stronger relationships can lead to mutual learning, more targeted interventions and help practitioners move forward if evaluations don't identify impact**

Some of the delivery organisations felt overwhelmed by the unfamiliar and technical language of evaluation something and were keen to find better ways of building mutual understanding:

**I think there's a stage [with the evaluators] that maybe we skipped... It's a collaborative space, a coming together of different practices and principles to find out how to evaluate the arts.**

**Project developer,  
Speech Bubbles**

Effective relationships between researchers and practitioners are also important in order to embed evidence into practice. Here, interaction has been found to support more relevant and contextualised research for practitioners and increase the chances that they will use it, with direct involvement in the research process also tending to increase evidence use.<sup>31</sup>

Membership of networks and partnerships has also been reported to develop a sense of ownership and positive outlook towards the research outputs, increasing their use in practice.<sup>32</sup> The EEF have also found that the development of evidence-based guidance is most credible and useful when it is co-created by researchers and practitioners.<sup>33</sup>

Formal partnerships between schools and universities have also been found to increase the use of evidence in practice. Over time, such partnerships have developed from informal contact in applying individuals' research to organised support for schools and school networks in systematically attempting to bring about improved teaching and learning.<sup>34</sup>

Charities have also benefited from research collaborations with universities. As the latter face increasing pressure to demonstrate the impact of their work while the former face budget restraints, mutually beneficial partnerships provide robust and independent expertise for professions and practitioners while universities are able to engage otherwise inaccessible groups and individuals for their research.<sup>35</sup>

The Evidence Champions Network members have been explicit about how their own priorities for evaluation are changing. They note simultaneously that efforts to collect data have been disrupted and that for freelance practitioners, made increasingly precarious by the pandemic, evidence-rich practice could be well down their list of priorities. However, for a minority, rather than putting a stop to it, Covid-19 has often opened up more space for reflection on purpose and deeper conversations with partners about impact and evaluation.

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- 32 Gu et al. (2014) Teaching Schools Evaluation: Emerging Issues from the Early Development of Case Study Teaching School Alliances Research report. [pdf]. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/505517/RR332\\_-\\_Teaching\\_schools\\_Evaluation.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/505517/RR332_-_Teaching_schools_Evaluation.pdf)
- 33 Education Endowment Foundation. Supporting schools with evidence – EEF timeline [webpage]. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/eeef-support-for-schools/supporting-schools-with-evidence-eeef-timeline/>
- 34 Coldwell, M. et al. (2017) Evidence-informed teaching: an evaluation of progress in England. Appendices. July 2017 Department for Education [pdf]. Available at: <https://dro.dur.ac.uk/22311/1/22311.pdf?DDD29+vrfd57+d700tmt>
- 35 Breckon, J. et al (2019) Bodies of Evidence: How professional organisations in health, education and policing champion the use of research. Alliance for Useful Evidence. [pdf]. Available at: [https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/2019/09/Bodies-of-Evidence-report\\_Sept-2019-1.pdf](https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/2019/09/Bodies-of-Evidence-report_Sept-2019-1.pdf)

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