Arts-based Projects for Children and Young People

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Key Insights

The study has examined 18 examples of arts projects and arts-based practice in London. Across these, it has found a wide variety of different types of evidence and a range of outcomes from a sector developing its own approaches to evidence and evaluation.

What is the evidence?

The evidence ranges from elaborate evaluations combining multiple methodologies to anecdotal reflections from project participants and observers, and many of the projects would not reach above Standard 1 of Project Oracle’s Standards of Evidence. This variety in standards and types of evidence makes it difficult to draw general conclusions.

Moreover, there are also projects which have developed novel approaches to evaluation and are progressing to Standards 2 and 3. There is much for other sectors to learn from some of the arts projects on how to bring together soft and hard outcome data, give participants a voice in evaluation and develop innovative ways of explaining how and why change occurs during projects with young people.

What is the benefit of the arts?

The reports studied here have shown the arts to be beneficial to a range of issue areas, from criminal justice to education, employment and the community. They have shown positive hard outcomes in crime rates, literacy and entry into employment, education or training, as well as soft outcomes such as increased self-esteem, increased dialogue and raised aspirations.

The arts studies that we have found demonstrate a strong capacity to bring hard and soft outcomes together in project delivery. Some have also developed innovative approaches to evaluation which use art-based methods to capture the participant’s journey. These aspects are underpinned by three key factors:

1. **The arts are reflective**: The work involved often encourages participants to reflect upon their own behaviours and lives through their arts practice. This process may engender immediate internal and attitudinal changes which can subsequently contribute to harder outcomes.

2. **The arts are personal**: The outcomes of arts interventions often emerge as part of the creative process and can vary according to the individuals involved. Each individual’s perspective and creativity can open possibilities.

3. **The arts are performative**: The artistic product or craft (theatre, visual art, music or installation generated by participants) can be seen as giving the young people a voice and contributing to outcomes in their own right, from a sense of achievement and self-esteem to building a portfolio for young people to access employment or training within the sector.

We recommend building on the benefits of the arts by developing evaluations with methods and outcomes which can be compared and generalised across multiple projects. To help this, at Project Oracle we look forward to supporting an increasing range of arts-based initiatives to develop their evaluations and be validated on the Standards of Evidence.
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Glossary of key terms

**Arts** – a varied range of activities with a creative, emotional and reflective dimension. The arts can give young people a space for independence whilst promoting an affective experience linked to broader positive attitudes and behaviours beyond the artistic activity.

**Context** – the external factors which influence how individuals participate in or organise and carry out an intervention. The context affects the availability or resources and the opportunities for a project to be carried out. For example, the arrangement of key institutions for young people, such as schools, colleges, police, and young offender institutions, can facilitate the building of networks. Interventions and their participants are embedded in social contexts characterised by dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, material inequality, racial and ethnic diversity.

**Evidence** – the range of available robust and reliable information which demonstrates the impact of a policy, public service or programme. Evidence is knowledge which has been substantiated through empirical or theoretical research. Evidence is not the only type of knowledge, but it is often claimed to be more certain because of the rigour with which its claims have been tested.

**Indicator** – a measurable characteristic or process which reflects (indicates) that change has occurred.

**Intervention** – a planned action which aims to bring about positive change. This may aim to improve social inclusion, empowerment and equality, such as in social work. In this context, the term intervention refers to person-centred approaches which aim to change knowledge, understanding, attitudes and behaviour.

**Methodology** – the framework and assumptions, which enable the design of research, evaluation or secondary data analysis. This is different to a research or evaluation method, which is a tool for collecting and analysing data.

**Outcomes** – the end result of a process is its outcome. The outcomes of a policy, a project or an intervention are the changes that it has caused, or is aiming to cause. This is not the same as an output, which refers to the quantifiable, tangible products of a policy, programme or project such as the number of workshops delivered, the number of people trained, or website built. Outcomes are the changes, benefits, learning or other effects that happen as a result of a policy, a project or an intervention. These can be immediate, intermediate or long term.

**Participant** – an individual who engages with an intervention which is aimed at bringing about change for them, such as in their behaviour or attitudes.

**Programme** – an on-going series of activities to affect an issue or problem. Whereas a project has a defined beginning and end, a programme may be more open-ended: an overarching programme can be composed of various projects.
Introduction

There is a wide variety of arts-based activities for children and young people across London, and yet it is often difficult to express their specific benefits and impact. Reviewing the evidence can help to shine light on how the arts help to improve outcomes for the capital's young people.

Why the arts?

Art as the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination is seen as critical to the on-going development of human cultures. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche claimed art to be ‘the proper task of life’, the writer Oscar Wilde stated that ‘life imitates art far more than art imitates life’, and Napoleon Bonaparte is thought to have noted how ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’.

There has been a wide range of initiatives for disadvantaged young people to improve their lives through arts-based activities across the UK and these have often made efforts to communicate their value. For example, the Youth Justice Board and Arts Council England have funded Summer Arts Colleges to ‘help young people tap into their creative side and boost their CVs’, and through The Arts Alliance 370 artists and criminal justice organisations work with prisoners and ex-offenders to ‘transform their lives’.

There are also projects large and small to be found in London, from the Southbank Centre and Lambeth Council’s ‘Nucleo’ to help children with limited opportunities and resources to access world class music in 2013, to the transformative work of Dance United, PAN Intercultural Arts and many more.

However, the challenge of communicating the benefit of the arts is particularly acute in our current political and social environment, which is characterised by restricted budgets and increased pressure to show concrete project outcomes and impact. In 2014, the reduction of the Arts Council budget by the government was a clear signal that the arts are not exempt from this context.

In this study we review the evidence of arts-based projects in London. In doing so, we explore the link between arts activities, the outcomes that they achieve and the lessons to be learned from their approaches to evaluation and evidence-based practice. Our aim is to have a better understanding of how arts-based interventions and activities are beneficial, in which contexts and why.
Background: What are the Arts?

The word art describes many different practices including: painting, drawing, performance, installation, sculpture, photography, film and new media technologies. Some are more recognised branches of arts practice than others, but all included in this study encompass a variety of programmes and projects using forms of art to engender social change and improve participants’ lives.

A definition

According to Gerard Lemos, ‘art can summon up profound emotions, insight and identification with the artist and the reflection into the receiver’s current condition’ (2011: 12).

However, for Bilby (et al.) this goes further, as the artistic experience can also be linked to attitudes and behaviours beyond emotions and identity ‘the affective experience, which can include a sense of community cohesion, that time is passing at a different pace, or an improved feeling of self-satisfaction and achievement, can be linked to desistance from crime’ (2011: 7).

Finally, the arts have also been associated with identity and community and the opportunity to give a voice to the vulnerable, the excluded and the disadvantaged through participation (Hewison 1995).

As a result, for this study we have defined the arts as a varied range of activities with a creative, emotional and reflective dimension. The arts can give young people a space for independence whilst promoting an affective experience linked to broader positive attitudes and behaviours beyond the artistic activity.

Across arts initiatives and projects there is often a shared vocabulary referring to the benefit and impact of the arts, couched in terms such as inspiration, expression, identity, self-esteem, creativity, aspiration, and confidence. There are also varied arts practices which they utilise and groups and communities that they engage with. Arts-based interventions might also be known as Applied Arts, Participatory Arts, Theatre in Education, Art Therapy or Community Arts.

Due to this complexity, it is considered that there is an innate difficulty in demonstrating their impact. Recent attempts have been made to communicate the benefits through case studies (Lemos 2011, Bilby et al. 2011) and economic analysis (Johnson et al. 2011). However, the arts pose a methodological challenge, due to the complex and long-term processes of change that project evaluators often need to measure.

As a result, it is often difficult to express art’s value and importance in the terms of hard measurable outcomes often desired by policy makers. Their propensity to facilitate a broader range of beneficial outcomes is often overlooked and these will be explored in more detail in this study.
Project Oracle Synthesis Studies: Aims and Approach

The Project Oracle synthesis studies aim to create a better understanding of what works in youth policy and provision. They each bring together, assess and analyse the available evidence on a particular issue. Together the studies build a library of synthesised evidence to aid providers and funders in designing and commissioning projects that have a greater likelihood of succeeding.

Synthesis study aims

1. To identify which projects work, for whom and under what conditions by
   - Focusing on evaluations of previous interventions to draw broad conclusions regarding how intervention mechanisms influence outcomes in different contexts.

2. To assess the type and quality of evaluation data currently available by
   - Analysing the evaluations being conducted in terms of their underlying theory, methodological approach and data collection strategies.
   - Outlining indicators of positive and negative outcomes.
   - Identifying gaps and shortcomings in the evidence base for future work.

We approach the examination of ‘what works’ from the perspective of realist evaluation (Pawson and Tilly 1997). This means that we accept that projects are found in complex social realities, and that they proceed within a context (Pawson 2006; Pawson and Tilley 2009). A realist synthesis of evidence therefore involves investigating how social programmes work in certain times and places, looking at the mechanisms that underpin interventions and the way that these evolve in specific contexts.

Our realist approach to synthesis sets out to:

1. Identify an underlying theory of change
   Do the interventions aim to achieve change through an approach which is theoretically grounded?

2. Examine interventions in their context
   Do interventions have the same impact on all participant groups in all places? Which institutional and social contexts facilitate positive outcomes?

3. And is aware of interventions and contexts being open and changeable
   Do intervention providers borrow from or compete with each other? Do positive or negative outcomes create or restrict opportunities for future programmes? Can synthesis studies facilitate knowledge exchange among intervention providers and commissioners?
The Study: Arts-based Initiatives in London

The principal aim of this synthesis study is to outline what is known about the effectiveness of arts-based initiatives aimed at bringing about positive change in the lives of young people in London.

Keeping the outline of a realist approach in mind, to achieve this aim requires addressing the following:

1) Assessment of the type and quality of evaluation evidence that is available.

2) Map and categorisation of the interventions which have been focused on arts-based activities in London.
   - Intervention participants
   - Contexts of implementation
   - Art types employed

3) Identification and assessment of the evidence of outcomes in the evaluation literature.
   - What is the standard of evidence available?
   - What gaps and shortcomings are there in the available evidence?

4) Exploration of linkages between intervention types and outcomes.
   - What are the outcomes specific to the arts?
   - Which processes and mechanisms contribute to positive outcomes?

5) Recommendation of good practice guidance for evaluating the range of policies, programmes and projects targeted at improving youth outcomes.
The Available Evidence

A synthesis study is a meta-analysis of the available evidence. It evaluates and summarises previous evaluations, rather than examining the detail of specific projects. The framework outlined for this study has been open to diverse forms of evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, that have been drawn together to help understand what influences intervention outcomes.

Eligibility criteria

We drew upon a wide range of potential sources, not limited to academic research papers and focusing in particular on the ‘grey’, unpublished evaluation literature. These were accessed through bibliographic searches, internet searches through Google and by consulting experts. We also searched through the Arts Alliance online repository of arts programmes in criminal justice, including studies that referred to youth programmes in London.

We have included evaluations that used the arts in order to bring about positive change in the lives of children and young people in London. The definition of arts was broad, including drama, dance, painting, drawing, performance, sculpture, photography, film and new media technologies. The evaluations had to include evidence of programme outcomes.

The selected material

We have included a variety of documents from end of funding reports, in-house evaluation and publicity material to commissioned research from external evaluators. This search brought forward 18 reports on 14 youth arts projects and the practice of two organisations (Magic Me and Paddington Arts) in London. These projects ran across 11 inner and four outer London boroughs. In total they reached over 25,000 young people as either participants or audience members.

A range of funding bodies reflect the diversity and scope of this work from locals councils, charitable trusts and foundations to the Arts Council, the Economic and Social Research Council, National Lottery, Open University and the NHS. In spite of the variety of projects, the basic aim remains the same: to find artistic ways of engaging young people towards transformative, positive outcomes.

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<th>Projects and provider organisation</th>
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<td><strong>7</strong> Ten Years of Intergenerational Arts Practice at The Women’s Library, Magic Me in collaboration with Mulberry School for Girls and local, older women</td>
<td>Wild Wild Women, Sue Mayo and Dr Caoimhe McAvinchey <a href="http://issuu.com/magicmeuk/docs/wild_wild_women_research_report_ma/1?e=0/5845755">http://issuu.com/magicmeuk/docs/wild_wild_women_research_report_ma/1?e=0/5845755</a></td>
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<td><strong>8</strong> Music and Change, MAC-UK</td>
<td>Grime not Crime, Psychological Impact of a Community-Based Music Project for Marginalised Young People, Sally Zlotowitz <a href="http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/854736/">http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/854736/</a></td>
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<td><strong>9</strong> Paddington Arts</td>
<td>A report into Performing Arts and Media as a platform to develop and strengthen the lives of children and young people, Diane O’Connor <a href="http://www.paddingtonarts.org.uk/">http://www.paddingtonarts.org.uk/</a></td>
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<td><strong>10</strong> Young Londoners Fund Programme, Paddington Arts, Film and Video Workshop, space, WAC Performing Arts and Media College, Vital Regeneration</td>
<td>Executive Summary of the Findings of the LDA Young Londoners Fund Programme March 2010, Diane O’Connor <a href="http://www.paddingtonarts.org.uk/">http://www.paddingtonarts.org.uk/</a></td>
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1 The Dance United project The Academy is run in various locations in the UK, including London. However, the evaluation took place in the North of England
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<th>Projects and provider organisation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Talking to Byron, National Youth Theatre</td>
<td>Talking To Byron, Richard Ings <a href="http://artsevidence.org.uk/evaluations/talking-byron/">http://artsevidence.org.uk/evaluations/talking-byron/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>LearnPhysical Interactive, The Place</td>
<td>LearnPhysical Interactive evaluation: Autumn and Spring term 2009/10, Alison Twiner, Caroline Coffin, Karen Littleton, Denise Whitlock <a href="http://www.theplace.org.uk/learnphysical">http://www.theplace.org.uk/learnphysical</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Heart n Soul</td>
<td>Heart n Soul Annual Report 2010-11 <a href="http://www.heartnsoul.co.uk/category/about/details/reports">http://www.heartnsoul.co.uk/category/about/details/reports</a></td>
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Categorising Interventions

This section presents an overview of the art forms and aims of the interventions as well as the participants that they have been targeted at.

Project participants

The total age range of participants in the evaluated projects was five to 24 years but most interventions (11 out of 18) fell into the 12-18 year old (teenage) category. The majority of the projects (11 out of 18) had both male and female participants whilst almost a third (five out of 18) worked uniquely with young women.

Contexts of the projects

The settings and contexts varied hugely from schools, prisons and pupil referral units to community centres and mainstream arts venues. This influenced the resources available and the way that the arts were used.

In particular, an important distinction to be made is between projects delivered in the community and those delivered as part of the school curriculum. This difference had real significance because the majority of arts-based projects in the community were run by volunteers, whereas those in schools were mandatory and more often had dedicated staff assigned to them.

In these different contexts, the projects needed to be adapted to accommodate different vulnerable, cultural or ethnic groups of participants. Using arts-based activities, and in particular drama, made this possible because they involved using a range of skills and capabilities to give participants a voice (see Case Study 1, p.12).

Engagement of participants was also considered to be increased by the artistic and performative content of the projects. For example, in the Old Vic New Vic project Health Wealth, leading artistic directors and professional artists were able to work with a nutritionist and education expert to ensure that their performance communicated accurate information in an accessible and engaging way.
Case Study 1: Miss Spent, Clean Break

**Project:** Miss Spent was facilitated by Clean Break between 12th and 23rd April 2010, at the Josephine Butler Unit for young women, HMP Downview in Surrey. A team of Clean Break facilitators worked with nine young female offenders aged between 17 and 18 for 10 days, to explore personal skills and work towards a public event to which Clean Break and prison staff and other guests were invited.

**Evaluation:** Miss Spent convincingly demonstrated the value of drama exercises, creative education and the use of role play in teaching personal skills, increasing confidence and self-esteem, and enabling young women to consider their role in society, including looking at their offending behaviour as well as determining their own strengths and weaknesses.

The evaluation noted that the project was well-adapted to the prison setting and participants. The use of drama games and exercises as metaphors for real life situations was suitable for bodily-kinaesthetic learners and so could be particularly effective with groups that are likely to have low literacy levels.

This in turn enabled the project to motivate young women who may not have responded so positively to other types of activity, with one commenting:

“When Miss Spent first came in I was rude, always stropping and moaning. Over the last couple of days I’ve done more than the first week and a half. Thanks for showing me what I could do. Without that I wouldn’t have gained the confidence to do it.”

**Art types employed**

The range of art forms in the identified studies was substantial, reflecting the bespoke nature of some of these projects and the specialisms of the organisations in the field. The assumption in each has been that the creative ownership lies with the participants and that the facilitator acts as an expert guide. As the chart below shows, the activities for each art form can involve elements of learning, such as in workshops, as well as performances.

Over half (10 out of 18) of the interventions are interdisciplinary employing two or more art forms, with drama being the most popular. It is also evident that there is a considerable variety of styles, pedagogy and methods used in this work. Many projects that adopted the same art form deployed them in very different ways with different groups of people. For example, drama projects ranged from small classroom-based, one-off workshops to large-scale community productions that involved hundreds of people of different ages and social backgrounds.
### Art project reports: art forms used

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<th>Art form</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>Workshops, Touring performances, Forum theatre, Debates, Play scenarios, Physical theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Workshops in digital technologies, Broadcasting, Animation, Editing and post production</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dance</td>
<td>Workshops, Residential events, Performances to peers of hip-hop, street, contemporary dance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Workshops in digital technologies, Vocal and instrumental lessons, Recording, Releasing EPs, Live public performances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual art</td>
<td>Photography, Drawing and painting, Mind-mapping to start debates, Workshops, Public exhibitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoken word</td>
<td>Workshops, Residential events, Performances to peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive media</td>
<td>Workshops in digital technologies, Broadcasting</td>
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</table>
Assessing the Evidence

The reports contain a broad range of types of evidence, gathered through varying methodologies. The benefit is a variety of innovative approaches to demonstrating the impact of the arts, although this does not always give comparable data which can enable us to draw general conclusions.

Arts practice has often been seen to have a weak evidence-base. According to Hacking et al (2006), this is often the result of a lack of resources and appropriate training to be able to complete evaluations which can show long-term change. The authors argue that, although eager and innovative in evaluation approaches, arts projects were often unable to produce evidence that impressed funders. This left many trapped by their own evidential limitations, both in terms of how the evidence they can collect is undervalued and their inability to demonstrate outcomes which are more desirable to funders.

Many of the reports included in this study brought together different types of evidence, in particular including anecdotal comments and references, as well as case studies of individuals, which supported the evaluation data gathered through other methodologies. Interestingly, one of the distinguishing factors of arts-based interventions has been the way that arts-based evaluation methodologies, involving researcher participation and visual media have been developed to measure their impact. One example is the evaluation of the Speech Bubbles project by London Bubble Theatre (see Case Study 2, p.16).

It is important to note that seven of the reports set out an explicit theory of change underpinning their project and the way that the arts were beneficial to their participants. This reflects a clear understanding of how and why their projects contribute to positive outcomes for young people. A theory of change is a vital requirement to reach Standard One on Project Oracle’s Standards of Evidence.

![Evidence Type Bar Chart]

- **Anecdotal**: 8 projects
- **Theory of change**: 7 projects
- **Case Studies**: 6 projects
- **Longitudinal**: 7 projects
- **Control or comparison group**: 0 projects
Almost a third of the reports also presented evidence of change over time in their participants, through longitudinal measurements. Moreover, two of these used validated measurement tools and scales, and two others employed recognised data sources such as ASSET scores on offending and reoffending behaviour. This use of validated tools and external data sources can facilitate comparison of outcomes from one project to another. A measure of change over time in a project cohort is typical of the validations at Standard Two of Project Oracle’s Standards of Evidence.

None of the reports included in the study had a control group against which to judge the project’s impact.

The concerns noted by Hacking et al. (2006), regarding innovative evaluations of arts projects which were nonetheless limited in their utility, to a certain degree rings true in London. We have found that London’s arts sector has strong ambitions to gather evidence of its impact when working with young people. However, this is done in ways that are not always consistent or repeated from one project to another, making it difficult to compare outcomes and draw general conclusions.

Case Study 2: Speech Bubbles, London Bubble Theatre

Project: The project was a series of drama workshops which involved participatory physical games, sound, vocal and gestural work for children of five to seven years old, referred from schools due to having communication and literacy difficulties.

Evaluation: Varied methods of data collection were employed, with these being largely qualitative and interpretative, falling within the field of participant action research. They included observation, self–report by participants, visual imagery based methods and semi-structured interviews, all built on a very strong theory of change.

In particular, a researcher participated in every Speech Bubble session and videoed and analysed the progress of 12 children. This analysis was carried out using a grid based on the five statements of Laevers’ well-being scales (Laevers, 1994), enabling them to conclude that the children demonstrated outcomes such as improved self-confidence, emotional engagement and empathy.

This was supported by assessments from teachers in the schools showing that 78% of referred pupils showed improvement in learning, speaking and listening, 36% demonstrated what teachers called a ‘clear improvement’ and 9% a ‘striking improvement’.

The result is insightful, robust academic research illustrating how the project promotes change and recognition from the schools of the value in children’s educational outcomes.

Speech Bubbles has been validated at Standard Two of Project Oracle’s Standards of Evidence.
Analysing interventions

The reports included in this study showed that the impact of the arts is not limited to only ‘soft’ outcomes related to emotions and creativity. Rather, they have also been shown to bring about positive change in ‘hard’ outcomes such as offending behaviour, educational attainment and employment.

Hard or soft outcomes?

Outcomes of social interventions are often separated into hard and soft outcomes. Hard outcomes are usually those that involve a clear and observable change in a service user’s life, or the lives of a community. Soft outcomes more often describe internal or attitudinal changes that are considered (but are not always) less easy to observe and often require an understanding of their significance in context.

One of the differences between hard and soft outcomes is how they are measured. Hard outcomes are often associated with quantitative measures, such as numbers of people gaining a qualification, entering employment, or committing crimes. Soft outcomes are often (but not always) associated with qualitative measures, such as reports in interviews, observations or focus groups.

The range of hard and soft outcomes in the reports examined here therefore explains the variety of evaluation methodologies illustrated on the previous pages.

There are multifarious aims and outcomes of London’s arts projects. This illustrates how the arts can provide intervention methodologies for a range of issue areas, from employment and education to criminal justice. The most common are shown in the diagram on the following page.

As can be seen, arts activities are not limited to achieving soft outcomes, but also work towards a range of hard ones too. These often happen in tandem in delivery and the evaluations give them equal importance. Soft outcomes included raising aspirations, improving emotional and social skills and building greater community cohesion. Hard outcomes included reducing offending and reoffending behaviour, reducing the number of young people not in education, employment and training, and raising literacy, as a contribution to young people’s attainment in schools.

The artistic aims of the projects were not often mentioned in the documentation. However, most of these organisations have a strong track record of employing high-quality artists who use creative, innovative and engaging methodologies in their work with young people.
Soft outcomes

- Increased self-confidence and self-esteem
- Changed perceptions of disability
- Raised aspirations
- Better psychological wellbeing
- Increased dialogue on specific issues
- Improved conflict management
- Improved life skills: team building, problem-solving, communication
- Greater social inclusion and community cohesion

Hard outcomes

- Desistance from crime, reoffending and gang related activity
- Improved literacy and educational attainment
- Reduction in number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)

Hard outcomes of arts projects in the studied reports

- Desistance from crime, reoffending and gang related activity: 7
- Improved literacy: 2
- Reduction not in employment, education or training: 6
As can be seen in the charts above, there has been a broader range of soft than hard outcomes recorded in the reports. This reflects the most common as well as explicitly measured outcomes. However, the two should not be seen as separate. Soft and hard outcomes are often inter-related, and the presence of a clear theory of change is an important way of ensuring that this relationship is logical and well communicated.

Furthermore, the value of the arts projects was not considered to benefit only the individuals who took part in them. Almost all of the reports mentioned the broader contribution of the arts to society, but only a few included this as a specific outcome (see Case Study 3, p.21). One challenge facing the arts is how to measure and evidence this outcome.
Case Study 3: Intergenerational Arts Practice, Magic Me

Project: The Magic Me projects wanted to bring together teenage girls with older women who lived locally, and the demographic of the area of East London meant that young Bangladeshi women from the Mulberry School came together with a varied, mixed-race group of local 50-60 year old women.

Evaluation: All of the projects worked towards four aims: building relationships, exploring specific themes, developing skills such as writing, performing or photography and sharing work with a wider audience.

Challenges with working with these groups included avoiding the period of Ramadan in the autumn and the school exam period of May and June. The benefits were felt to outweigh the challenges though, as mentioned by the school head teacher:

“The creative energy that comes from the project existing amongst ten students within a year group has a life that is difficult to quantify but it’s critical really. The learning those young women bring back is distributed across the school.”

The impact of arts interventions are often multiple, making the fixation on one particular kind of outcome inappropriate to reflect the projects aims. However, from the studies we can see that some of the principal benefits of arts-based projects include the following.

The benefits of the arts

1. Reflective: The work involved often encourages participants to reflect upon their own behaviours and lives through their arts practice. This process may engender immediate internal and attitudinal changes which can subsequently contribute to harder outcomes.

2. Personal: The outcomes of arts interventions often emerge as part of the creative process and can vary according to the individuals involved. Each individual’s perspective and creativity can open possibilities.

3. Performative: The artistic product or craft (theatre, visual art, music or installation generated by participants) can be seen as giving the young people a voice and contributing to outcomes in their own right, from a sense of achievement and self-esteem to building a portfolio for young people to access employment or training within the sector.
Conclusions

This study has found several arts projects which are well-placed to support positive change in young people’s lives and to evidence their impact. Yet the challenge may be to overcome the specificity of individual projects and evaluations and express its commonalities.

What is the evidence?

The study has found a range of different approaches to evidence-based practice and evaluation in London’s arts projects. These range from elaborate evaluations combining multiple methodologies to anecdotal reflections from project participants and observers. There have also been positive efforts to expand evaluative approaches within the arts sector.

Project directors and facilitators are not always trained in evaluation. This can pose challenges and offer opportunities to explore arts-based evaluation involving participation with performance, photography, video and other media.

What is the benefit of the arts?

The reports studied here have shown the arts to be beneficial to a number of areas, from criminal justice to education, employment and the community. They have shown positive hard outcomes in crime rates, literacy and entry into employment, education or training, as well as soft outcomes such as increased self-esteem, increased dialogue and raised aspirations.

The arts, in the studies we found, often demonstrate a capacity to bring these hard and soft outcomes together in project delivery and to develop innovative approaches to evaluation which use the arts to capture the participant’s journey. Both project content and evaluation methodology have in this way been influenced by the reflective, personal and performative nature of the arts. This is of particular benefit when working with young people who are vulnerable or have complex backgrounds.

What challenges remain?

Although the projects seen here have often employed novel approaches to evaluation, many would not reach above Standard One of Project Oracle’s Standards of Evidence. Greater support would be needed to be able to develop evaluations with comparable outcomes and conclusions.

Some projects showed that the arts need not be separate from the tools, data types and approaches to impact measurement more commonly used in education, criminal justice or employment. Use of these approaches may enable them to speak the language of commissioners, funders and providers who are looking to compare and generalise across multiple projects.

There is also much for other sectors to learn from some of the arts projects here on how to bring together soft and hard outcomes, give participants a voice in evaluation and develop innovative ways of explaining how and why change occurs during projects with young people. This could provide an opportunity for arts-based evaluation training to capture participant’s experiences and moments of transformation during non-artistic interventions and projects.
References


