

# The Arts Backpack NI Pilot

## Programme evaluation

Written by Brenda Kent and Janice Smith



# Arts Backpack NI

## Programme evaluation

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## Executive Summary

**By Mimi Doulton, Development Officer**

We are excited to share the findings from our Arts Backpack Northern Ireland pilot, which we ran in partnership with Young at Art from January to June 2022.

This is our second of four Backpack pilots and we are grateful to Arts Council Northern Ireland, the Worshipful Company of Haberdashers and the Gigglemug Charitable Trust for their support of the project.

The Arts Backpack NI came at an interesting time for society: in January 2022 we were emerging from another Covid-lockdown and in March 2022 we marked two years of the pandemic. For the pupils participating in this pilot, Covid-19 has been present for almost half of their time in formal education. We are proud that the Arts Backpack NI facilitated the first ever trip to a cultural venue for many of these children, and brought much-needed audiences back to Belfast's cultural venues.

The focus of the Arts Backpack NI was exploration and discovery rather than 'end product', enabling it to deliver both cultural capital and well-being outcomes. This evaluation finds that Arts Backpack NI has been particularly effective at engaging neurodiverse pupils, and may also have engaged children otherwise most at risk of missing out on cultural engagement. By covering the costs of tickets, transport and materials, every child and school was able to participate without financial barriers. It appears that the classes who had ongoing dialogue with their teachers between Backpack experiences may have benefitted most from the programme.

We are grateful to Young at Art for their role as project delivery partner, to Smith and Kent for their evaluation of the project, and to the schools, teachers, pupils and artists who so willingly participated.

## Introduction

In August 2018, Action for Children's Arts (ACA)<sup>1</sup> launched the Arts Backpack UK at the National Theatre, London. The project aimed to ensure that every primary school child in the UK can access at least five quality cultural experiences, including digital arts, heritage and library experiences, in the school year.

The idea for the Arts Backpack was driven by awareness of international education practices and a perceived lack of cultural education provision in the UK. It was modelled on similar programmes that were successfully rolled out in Germany, Norway and Denmark.

ACA worked with local delivery partners in each of the four UK regions. This included Young at Art in Northern Ireland to deliver the Arts Backpack NI pilot.

## About Action for Children's Arts

ACA's mission is to: campaign for arts for children between the ages of 0 and 12 years old across the UK, and to connect and celebrate practitioners and organisations making work for children.

## About Young at Art

Young at Art<sup>2</sup> is one of Northern Ireland's leading children's arts providers and home of Belfast Children's Festival,<sup>3</sup> which will celebrate its 25th anniversary in 2023.

Young at Art believes passionately that every child should have the right to access exciting and original creative experiences, regardless of who they are or where they come from. The company believes that arts provision should be for children and young people as well as by children and young people.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.childrensarts.org.uk](http://www.childrensarts.org.uk)

<sup>2</sup> [www.youngatart.co.uk](http://www.youngatart.co.uk)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.youngatart.co.uk/festival>

## About the Arts Backpack UK programme

In 2018 ACA commissioned a feasibility study,<sup>4</sup> supported by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) and Belfast City Council, which explored how an Arts Backpack scheme could work in UK schools.

The feasibility study points to evidence of the impact of cultural engagement on children's quality of life and life chances. However, it also recommends that the programme prioritises the intrinsic value of the arts so that "other extrinsic outcomes such as education, health and employability are part of the equation but foregrounded when needed".

Other recommendations include:

1. Arts Backpack focuses on primary school children across the UK. In relation to NI in particular, the feasibility study notes "There does not appear to be any over-arching, strategic approach to universal arts and culture access at a primary level outside of a general commitment to support cultural participation."
2. The programme should be co-designed locally, including with children, families and teachers, to ensure it is "locally specific".
3. It should be specifically targeted at children who do not currently access arts and culture as "a means of levelling an unequal cultural playing field".

### Fife pilot

Between October 2020 and March 2021, ACA carried out its first pilot with five schools in Fife, Scotland. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this was a digital Backpack.

The findings of the Fife pilot evaluation<sup>5</sup> included:

1. Arts Backpack can successfully foster arts and culture in areas where children may experience barriers to provision.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.childrensarts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Arts-BackPack-Feasibility-Study-FINAL-compressed-1-1.pdf](http://www.childrensarts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Arts-BackPack-Feasibility-Study-FINAL-compressed-1-1.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [www.childrensarts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Arts-Backpack-UK-Fife-Evaluation-Report-compressed.pdf](http://www.childrensarts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Arts-Backpack-UK-Fife-Evaluation-Report-compressed.pdf)

2. The Arts Backpack has clear value for the teacher and their professional development and confidence.
3. It can be presented in different ways to different audiences, for example, as being about particular art-forms, as a way of engaging with curriculum topics or as contributing to children's wellbeing.

## About the Arts Backpack NI pilot

In 2021, ACA then secured funding from ACNI and the Worshipful Company of Haberdashers to deliver the Arts Backpack NI pilot, building on recommendations in the feasibility study.

Arts Backpack NI aimed to work with 120 primary school pupils and 5 teachers across 5 schools to:

1. encourage the involvement of children in high-quality arts and culture
2. articulate how the arts improve our lives, both intrinsically and through their wider impact on health, wellbeing and quality of life
3. help the recovery process arising from the trauma of COVID-19, prioritising resilience, expression, identity and mental health
4. remove barriers to accessing the arts for those from underrepresented groups
5. invest in workforce development
6. promote innovative, original work by Northern Ireland artists, facilitating the reconnection of venues and practitioners with children, schools and families, helping to revive Northern Ireland's cultural sector post-pandemic
7. demonstrate the importance of the arts in society, linking to research taking place in other Arts Backpack pilot areas across the UK.

## About the evaluation

In February 2022 Smith and Kent Consulting were commissioned to carry out a concise evaluation of the Arts Backpack NI pilot.

Smith and Kent worked with ACA and Young at Art to develop a theory of change to ensure that the evaluation adequately reflected the programme's intended outcomes. The theory of change was then used to structure the analysis of existing data and the collection of new data.

Smith and Kent subsequently reviewed and analysed a range of project documents including:

- the application to ACNI for funding
- the 2018 feasibility study
- the 2021 Fife pilot evaluation
- journals by artists reflecting on in-school activity

Smith and Kent also gathered and considered new evidence, including:

- short interviews or observation of 4 out of 5 artists
- observed 2 dance and 1 visual arts in-school workshops
- spoke to 2 teachers and 2 classroom assistants from 2 schools
- interviews with ACA and Young at Art together and separately

A template for teachers to complete, journaling and reflecting on their experience of the programme, was developed, but no teachers completed these.



1 PUPILS VISIT AN ART GALLERY AS PART OF ABP NI



## Overview of the Arts Backpack NI pilot

This section provides an overview of the Northern Ireland Arts Backpack, which ran between January and June 2022.

### The schools

Children from six classes in four primary schools across Belfast took part in the Arts Backpack pilot. They were aged between 9 and 11 in years 5 and 6 at primary school (key stage 2).

1. P5 and P6 from Ballysillan Primary School (north Belfast)
2. P5 from Cliftonville Primary School (north Belfast)
3. Two P6 classes from St Matthew's Primary School (east Belfast)
4. P6 from Nettlefield Primary School (east Belfast)

Blythfield Primary school (south Belfast) planned to take part but was unable to due to staff shortages arising out of the pressures of Covid. St Matthew's provided two classes instead.

### The programme

Each pilot was to be tailored to its regional context. In Northern Ireland, the pilot programme had two distinct elements:

1. Arts programme for children: to give children access to different artforms, artists and arts venues
2. Development programme for teachers: to develop primary school teachers' confidence to support children in their exploration of art.

ACA was responsible for financial management, including fundraising; shared learning across pilot areas; and evaluation. Young at Art was the point of contact for schools and was responsible for logistics and scheduling; engaging artists; and marketing.

Furnished with the project outline and lessons from the Fife pilot, ACA and Young at Art worked together to design the programme of activity.

The programme continued to adapt to shifting timelines and budgeting constraints arising out of Covid.

## Arts programme for children

Each of the four schools:

- went to the Lyric Theatre, Belfast, in early March 2022 to see Birdboy, a dance piece addressing mental health
- visited the MAC (Metropolitan Arts Centre), Belfast, to see the physical theatre performance No Man is an island, in March 2022
- toured the visual art galleries at the MAC and saw the Alfred Wallis and the Ronnie Hughes exhibitions in March 2022
- took part in in-school drama or dance workshops in April or May 2022
- took part in in-school visual arts workshops in April or May 2022

## Development programme for the teachers

The original plan was to offer each teacher two continued professional development (CPD) sessions during May into June. The teachers could choose from drama, visual art and storytelling.



2 PUPILS WATCH NO MAN IS AN ISLAND

## Arts programme for children

The Arts Backpack aimed to give children access to different artforms, artists and arts venues, totalling five quality cultural experiences a year.

The following section provides an overview of the arts programme that took place between March and April and considers what benefit this had for the children.

### Birdboy

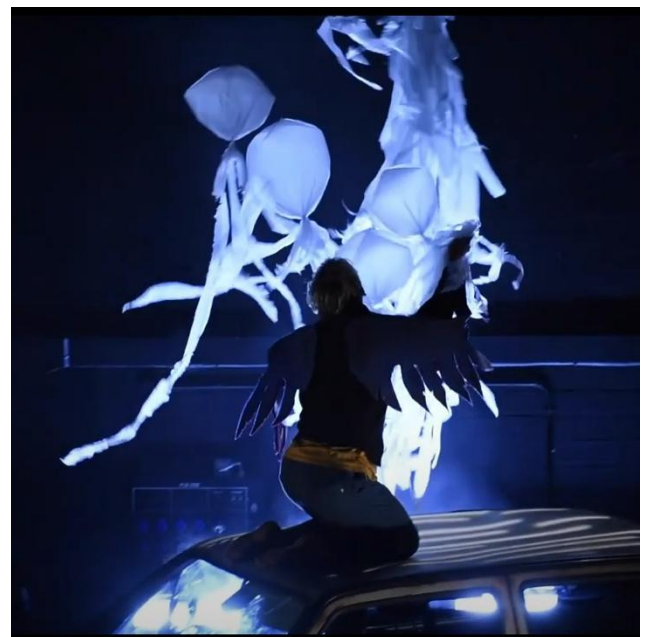
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"Once there was a boy who wished he was a bird. He wished he could just fly away and be free of all his worries.

Birdboy is a trip inside his head. In his whirring mind, thoughts, worries, fantasies all compete for space in a world where fitting in is hard to do.

Full of fun and sorrow, this kaleidoscopic show, performed by dancer Kévin Coquelard, celebrates the power of imagination and offers a vision of hope and connection."

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The schools went to see Birdboy at the Lyric, Belfast, in March 2022. It was choreographer Emma Martin's first-ever production for young people, suitable for everyone age 8 or over.

A dance piece that explores mental health, it was described by Young at Art as

*"a bit dark because the boy is followed about by his worries in the form of balloons, and a bit upbeat because it is full of movement with joyous moments."*

Young at Art observed that the pupils "stayed with it" and "seemed entirely engaged" during the performance. After the show, the children had the chance to ask the choreographer questions, where they reflected on and explored what they

had seen. The children responded extremely well during this session – nearly every child had their hand up to ask a question. One child to the choreographer, “That was a masterpiece”.

The conversation was then continued in in-school workshops, where the piece proved challenging and provoked much discussion.

Some children described it as “a bit boring” or “annoying”. They would have liked more action, more characters and “more sense”.

*“I don't want to be cheeky, but I thought it was silly – just an opinion.” (pupil)*

Others felt it was “too weird” or even scary.

*“It was terrifying – jumping all over the place like a wild man.”  
(pupil)*

*“Honestly – they did not like Birdboy – I got it as an adult, but they didn't. I got that it was his mind but halfway through they were lost, and then they lost interest.” (teacher)*

Others found it “funny” and recalled details easily, engaging with the main character, Boris, in particular.

*“I think that Boris was a child's voice. Was it?” (pupil)*

*“I liked that there was no voice” (pupil)*

One artist reflected:

*“I got no impression that the kids found it scary – they empathised with the boy – they got that he was struggling somehow.”*

Birdboy may have been particularly effective at engaging neurodiverse pupils. One teacher commented:

*"Getting to see Birdboy was brilliant. My class was amazed by it! We have quite a few kids with autism – their faces just lit up and they could not stop talking about it – I have never seen anything like that."*

Others found a middle ground – "kind of funny and kind of boring" – and there was debate about whether it was made for adults or children.

One teacher suggested that the children may have enjoyed and understood the production more if it had been explained beforehand. Young at Art had prepared a teachers' resource pack, which was sent to each school in advance to help them prepare for the visit. It included an overview of the piece; links to the curriculum (The World Around Us, Personal Development and Mutual Understanding, Language and Literacy, The Arts, Physical Development and Movement, Learning for Life and Work: Local and Global Citizenship and Personal Development); and pre- and post-show activities to "unpack the learning". Although it is not clear how many teachers used it, in some schools the artists felt that the teacher had obviously talked to the children about the visits in the interim.

*"It is as important to prime the kids as well as the canvas." (Artist)*

The Lyric theatre, where Birdboy took place, is a large, modern theatre in south Belfast. While some children reported that they had previously been to see Peter Pan (which was on at the Lyric in 2019), many had not previously visited the Lyric. The performance was in the main auditorium, and the children experienced sitting in a large theatre, the sensation of the house going dark and the stage lighting up, which had a significant impact on their experience of the performance.

*"It was dark. I fall asleep when it is dark." (pupil)*

*"Some of them found Birdboy quite scary – the theatre was very dark anyway and then all the lights went off and then they came on-stage and there were noises." (teacher)*

In this way, Arts Backpack may have helped break down psychological barriers, such as the fear of doing or experiencing something new or strange. Doing

something new once is the best predictor of doing it again and having experience of the arts as a child is one of the strongest predictors of life-long engagement.

For one school, the Lyric visit was also their first trip out in two years because of the Covid-19 pandemic, providing the children with time and space away from home or school. Even on the journey to the theatre, the children enjoyed new experiences and seeing parts of Belfast they had not been to before.

## No man is an island




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“This dance duet by choreographer Erik Kaiel pushes the limits of physical possibility. It explores balance as one body climbs and shifts atop another without ever touching the ground. No man is an island brings connection, cooperation, communication and creativity together.”

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No man is an island is a physical dance. The performers move about constantly but never walk on the floor – they walk on each other.

At least two classes had previously been to the MAC, although did not remember what they saw (“there was a weird dance by two men”). The performance took place in the upper gallery at the MAC – a public space where people can wander and chat as they take in the visual artwork on display (at that time, an [exhibition of work by Ronnie Hughes](#)). This non-formal setting was likely to have been novel to children who had not experienced art in such spaces before.

At the after-show question-and-answer session with the performers, the children gathered round, and each child asked a question in turn. They were so full of curiosity that there had to be a second round of questions until all questions were answered.



*"The kids were totally drawn in by it and asked millions of questions – they just kept coming!" (artist)*

The physicality of the performance was important.

*"it had a great bit of risk which they love at that age" (teacher)*

## Gallery tour of Alfred Wallis and Ronnie Hughes exhibitions



Five fishing boats anchored by pier and lighthouse, © Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge

Alfred Wallis (1855–1942) was a mariner and scrap merchant born in Devonport, Plymouth, who spent most of his life in Cornwall. He started painting around the age of seventy, with no formal training and little income. Part of what makes Wallis' work so distinctive is his use of unconventional materials such as household paint and cardboard.

Ronnie Hughes was born in Belfast in 1965 and received an MA in Fine Art from the University of Ulster. He is one of Ireland's most dynamic abstract painters. His work is complex and multidimensional. The painted surface is constructed through a layering of strata revealing a range of associative and representational qualities simultaneously.



The trip to see the Alfred Wallis exhibition in the MAC was postponed from January to March 2022 as Covid-19 impacted on teacher availability.

As a result, the visit to the exhibition was integrated with the visit to see the performance of No man is an island. This meant that the children "happened across" the No man is an island performance when they came out of the gallery

exhibiting Alfred Wallis. No man is an island took place in the upper gallery, where there was an exhibition of artwork by Ronnie Hughes, which the children also got to experience. This format was considered to have worked very well.

*"The tour worked really well [...] the performance in between [the exhibitions] stopped it being too info heavy which two exhibitions may have been. It was almost like a reset for attention span." (artist)*

The visual artists that had been engaged to deliver the in-school workshops and teacher CPD, joined the children and teachers on this trip. This provided the artists with a chance to meet the class and talk about what art they had and had not done.

However, there was some confusion about the tour start time, and one of the schools turned up early. Some of the children had already seen the art exhibitions, possibly as part of the MAC's own schools access programme, and it was "hard to tell them anything new". However, they were able to enjoy another exhibition, Touch, in the community gallery. As one of the artists reflected,

*"It is great to feed curiosity through touch. That breaks barriers."*

## In-school drama, dance and visual arts workshops

The idea of going out to experience art, then bringing it back into the school learning environment is at the core of Arts Backpack. This "package" was considered particularly impactful.

*"I think it is the package – a visit and then a follow up. It lodges better. And a link between the workshop and the exhibition meant they absorbed more." (artist)*

*"The workshops drew them deeper. And gave different children different ways to engage." (artist)*

The in-school drama, dance and visual arts workshops took place in April and May when some stability had returned to the schools after the worst of Covid and following the Easter break.



Overall, there were 12 workshops in four schools benefiting six classes, 163 pupils and 17 teachers and teaching assistants.

School	Number of classes	Number of pupils	Number of teaching staff
Ballysillan	2	59	6
Cliftonville	1	28	3
Nettlefield	1	28	2
St Matthew's	2	48	6

Each class received a visual art and a dance or drama workshop delivered by art-form specialists experienced in working with children.

The drama and dance artists were Stephen Beggs and Alice Malseed. Visual artists were Hazel Boland, Lauren Cudden and Lina Morgan.

The artists asked teachers in advance what they would like to focus on in the in-school workshops. Some choose a particular medium, such as clay, because they would not normally have the budget or skills for this. Others wanted to draw on the Wallis or Hughes exhibitions specifically or more generally on what had inspired the children during their visits to the MAC and Lyric.

The workshops typically started with the artists asking the children what they remembered, and the visits had clearly made an impression. While some pupils needed prompting, the artists and teaching staff were generally impressed with the children's recall – from the names of the artists to dance moves and colours used to portray the emotions they felt. In one class, the teacher “had clearly done a lot of follow up work with the class – their recall was amazing”.

A visual art workshop explored the concept of abstract, “a type of art with layers” like Hughes's work. The artist observed that

*“Most of the pupils seemed to like this choice. They seemed really excited when shown an example of what they would make and again when they were handed their canvases.”*

They used rolls of different coloured sticky tape to make patterns on a board, then applied masking tape and painted over it, before removing masking tape to reveal the final piece.

Another visual artist used the same materials that Wallis had used, including old cardboard and charcoal.

During a drama workshop around Birdboy, the class explored communication, starting from thinking about why a young person (Birdboy) might not speak, through movement and radio broadcast.

All or the majority of pupils in all classes were engaged, either from the outset or with support from the artists and teaching staff.

*“All but two were really engaged from the start – one was concerned they could not do art and the other that they had no ideas.” (artist)*

The in-school workshops may have proved particularly engaging for neurodiverse pupils. A few pupils, however, did not engage, and the teaching staff created safe space for them to “sit out”.

*“Some kids will be very shy and will sit out of workshops – they just don’t flourish in drama or in the spotlight.” (teacher)*

Generally, the teachers and teaching assistants taking part in the in-school workshops “moved about and helped with a light touch”, handing out materials, checking the children had all they needed, taking them to the toilet and so on. As the focus of the programme was not “learning to do art” but about discovering art, they did not correct the pupils’ work, rather supported the children to enjoy the process.

*“The painting allowed each to work away on their own and not feel watched. And there was no pressure at all as the artist made really sure they knew there was no right or wrong – she set it up and*

*checked so there was no competition with each other – they got the message and all worked away.” (teacher)*

Some children did struggle with the less didactic approach.

*“Because of the open nature of the workshop perhaps some found it overwhelming to not have as much instruction or structure as they are normally used to.” (teacher)*

However, again, the artists could draw on their skills and experience.

*“The drama man was brilliant – that P6 is a challenging class – he read the room and could see when kids lost interest and called them back into it or changed tack. A lot of the time teachers have to step in to a workshop – in this one I did not ever feel the need to.”  
(teacher)*



### 3 A WORKSHOP IN THE CLASSROOM

## The development programme for teachers

The original plan was to offer each teacher two continued professional CPD sessions during May and June. The teachers could choose from drama, visual arts and storytelling.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic seriously impacted on the capacity of schools to support CPD. Teachers and children were ill or isolating. Class work and in-person interactions were closely regulated. Supply teachers were in high demand and short supply. When some stability returned to schools, there was an emphasis on catching up on the core curriculum, and the Department for Education (DfE) lifted the mandatory requirement for teachers to undertake CPD.

With the funding deadline and end of the academic year approaching, ACA and Young at Art were keen to ensure the pilot left a legacy for teachers. So, instead, Young at Art created a digital resource using drama-based techniques for the classroom from their "All About Plays/ing" CPD training. A filmmaker worked with drama facilitators, who are trained to deliver this CPD course, to create the digital resource, which is accompanied by resource booklet. All P5, P6 and P7 teachers in participating schools will also get a box of arts materials for use with their class. The teachers at Ballysillan Primary School have agreed to review the video and packs and provide feedback.

## Programme outcomes

This section considers the impact the Arts Backpack NI pilot had on the pupils who took part, their teachers and schools and for the arts in general. It also considers the long-term impact and sustainability of an Arts Backpack programme in NI.

### Outcomes for children

#### Access to arts

Overall, there were 16 cultural experiences benefiting six classes, 163 pupils and 17 teachers across 4 schools.

The experiences (2 performances, 2 exhibitions and 12 workshops) comprised high-quality productions in leading cultural venues and in-school workshops led by facilitators experienced in arts, community arts and child-led practice.

#### Removing barriers

Arts Backpack may have been particularly effective at engaging children otherwise most at risk of missing out on cultural engagement.

While some children had been to the Lyric and MAC previously, according to their teachers:

*"[Arts] is not something most do at home unless they happen to have a parent into it."*

*"This school serves a mainly working-class community and arts tends not to be a priority in their lives at home."*

Of the four schools, Cliftonville is located in the second most deprived area of Northern Ireland.<sup>6</sup> The other three schools are located in the top 40 per cent most deprived areas, bordering and with a catchment area encompassing top 20 per cent most deprived areas.

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<sup>6</sup> Based on 2017 Multiple Deprivation Measures

Arts Backpack covered the cost of visits and materials so that they were free for the children to take part in, and no child (or school) faced a financial barrier. This enabled schools to access more expensive materials that they could not afford out of their standard teaching budget.

With support from the artists, Arts Backpack may also have helped remove psychological and intellectual barriers, creating a sense of cultural democracy. While some children were initially slow to engage in the workshops, fearing they had no skill or nothing to offer, one artist told them repeatedly, "If you are having fun, you are doing art". Another reported,

*"The children [...] really tuned in and asked me questions like "Who owns the gallery?" So, I said everyone does. You do."*

The programme may have been particularly effective engaging neurodiverse children. For example, according to one teacher:

*"The kids with additional needs loved the art – they settled in and enjoyed the drawing from memory bit. The freedom to wander in the MAC – not all at the same time suited and helped them too."*

As all classes were mixed, it also effectively engaged boys. Boys are more likely than girls to state that they are just "not interested" in arts, and young men are generally slightly less likely to attend cultural activity and much less likely to participate in activities such as going to drama class than young women.

### Experience of different art and art forms

As well as working closely with the artist-facilitators in in-school workshops, the pupils met Birdbox's choreographer and the No Man is an Island performers at post-show discussions.

As well as experiencing visual art, dance and drama in cultural venues, they then experimented with these art forms in school. The children do not generally have drama classes at school (although some do school plays).

*“One child asked, ‘What is drama?’ The artist explained it was telling a story by moving and acting.” (as observed by evaluator)*

They used different mediums, such as clay and charcoal, and they learned about different concepts, such as abstract art.

*“They had not used charcoal before – they seemed to like doing their own thing, not being too neat and drawing from their chosen memory in their head, not copying something they were looking at.” (artist)*

*“It reinforced art in different forms – like two dudes walking on top of each other is art. And it was in an art gallery so that may reinforce that too.” (artist)*

Their technical skills developed to the extent that one girl felt she could produce better abstract art than that exhibited, and one boy felt he could replicate some of the dance moves in No man is an island. Teaching staff and artists frequently remarked on the children's accomplishment, that their pieces were “wonderful” or “amazing”.

### Confidence to engage

With a focus on exploration and discovery rather than “on the end product and what it looked like”, the artists and teaching staff supported the creative process, and the children tested and reflected on what they liked, or didn't like, and why.

*“There was definitely a creative joy and confidence in what they were making.” (artist)*

As each workshop progressed, they became bolder in their choices and movements, more engaged and creative. For example:

*“They chatted and talked to each other – looked at the pictures in the MAC – had opinions” (artist)*



*"The way the artist explained to them – they got them to think of a memory just in their head first and then to draw it – that got all the children involved, and it made them think outside of they are 'useless' at art and 'this is what you have to do to do art' – it gave them a new way to see art." (teacher)*

*"I used messy charcoal as Wallis did. One girl loved it, did a wonderful picture. And her hand went up when I asked who liked the charcoal best when all the others had said they liked the clay better – she did not yield to peer pressure. She'd found something she loved." (artist)*

*"They grew in confidence and some in being willing to try again – for example when first crossing the dance circle, the early volunteers showed off, but then the rest just walked, some clearly felt exposed. [The artist] stopped them and discussed what was not great – how could they do it better. She acknowledged their fear – said she knew it could be hard being watched – like the dance Birdboy did on stage, you needed to be committed. This seemed to give insight into dance and movement, and they did all try again and put more movement into it." (as observed by evaluator)*

This was more difficult to achieve in some classes than others. For example, one artist reflected that in one class

*"The kids seemed more 'competitive', more focused on the output and if what they made would be good and so they engaged a bit less with the process of it."*

In another class,

*"Many more declined to show their artwork to the group and tell the piece's title when offered at the end, and significantly more kids were displeased with their final piece [...] They still enjoyed it [...] But*



*I definitely had to work harder at trying to instil the value of the process of making art, instead of them focusing on the end product and what it looked like."*

Artists considered the variance could be down to pre-existing dynamics in the class, such as peer pressure or a particular teaching style.

### **Intrinsic value**

While the twin approach of intra- and extra-school activities helped cement learning, the design of the programme also placed an emphasis on discovery and enjoyment, which was reported by both teachers and artists.

*"It was nice to take the kids to a show, talk about it, get their opinions on the show and then just one active drama session having fun – not a whole long programme examining the 'art'. A short fun session loosely tied to the show." (artist)*

*"The kids had fun – not too serious – they enjoyed a themed workshop and got to think about art – but it was not school-work thinking" (artist)*

Their ability to recall details of the performances and exhibitions indicates a level of captivation. The in-school workshops in particular explored their emotional reactions and encouraged them to express themselves and in new ways.

### **Wellbeing**

While the feasibility study recommends that the intrinsic value of arts is prioritised, the Covid-19 pandemic significantly changed the context in which the programme operated, "foregrounding" the importance of wellbeing for children. As ACA's development officer reflected:

*"As we come out the other side of Covid-19, the mental health of our nation's children is a huge concern. We believe that the opportunity to play and be creative must take a central role in children's recovery and wellbeing."*

## Being active

The in-school workshops, in particular, were physical and involved being active.

Activity included:

- Touching something of a particular colour
- Moving like walking through water or clouds
- Moving like a storm
- Forming a large circle and moving across it in an expressive way
- Making a statue of something in Belfast from their bodies

## Connecting with others

The in-school workshops involved the children working by themselves and in small and larger groups.

Sometimes there was obvious discomfort when the children were separated in to groups that they wouldn't normally mix with. However, once the groups understood their shared task, they collaborated and worked together well.

Sometimes, some shyer children opted to wait before taking part. Groups then opened gently to let children who had been sitting out join in.

At the end of the workshops, children were sometimes asked to share their artwork with the class, and most children did, coming up with clever names for or careful explanations of their work.

Another girl did not show the class what she had created, but she did show the teacher. She had drawn a picture of going to the shops with her dad. Her dad had died a year ago, and the artist reflected

*"That was her memory and her desire to capture her dad – perhaps an opportunity to express what she felt or work through it. Maybe it helped her wellbeing."*

Empathising and connecting with others were also addressed directly in the conversations about No man is an island and, in particular, Birdboy – the children, teachers and artists discussed what might be troubling him, why he did not speak and so on.

## Peer support and collaboration

One artist reflected on how

*"I plan the workshop so the children work on their own, in a large group and in small groups to allow them to connect with each other in comfort – to move from alone to together to cooperating."*

Cooperation was evident in all workshops. For example, during a visual arts workshop, they were observed sharing materials and advice.

*"Anyone any baby blue left?" "*

*"Yes – there is one here"*

*"Would anyone like this yellow now?"*

*"Lie the tape down first and then cut – it is neater."*

*(as observed by the evaluator)*

During a drama workshop, the children recreated their favourite moment from Birdboy in small groups. This involved standing on chairs as if they were on a car roof, cooperating to support each other physically.

## Outcomes for teachers

### Confidence to enable children to explore arts

In most in-school workshops, teaching staff engaged and showed interest. As with the pupils, it sometimes took the staff time to "settle into it", and they starting by observing, perhaps gaining confidence and trust in the artist, before offering encouragement and support.

A few staff engaged only to help control the children if they became unruly. It is likely that the more engaged staff benefitted most from the programme.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The evaluators were unable to engage with all staff at all schools.

No teaching staff were reported as assessing or correcting the children's artwork. There was a shared understanding that the programme was about the process, rather than the end product.

## CPD

Teacher development was largely to be achieved by the dedicated CPD strand of Arts Backpack. However, this did not happen as planned due to the Covid-19 pandemic. To ensure this element was not missed from the project, Young at Art created a digital CPD resource for the "All About Plays/ing" drama training course.

Nevertheless, the teachers did learn from the programme – from first-hand experience of the performances and exhibitions to the discovery of new mediums and art forms to exposure to the expertise of the artists themselves.

*"We try to get the children involved in something different and new as much as possible, and I like to get people in who have more expertise than I have too." (teacher)*

The teachers also understood the importance of the creative process, rather than the end product, and at least one teacher has already put that learning in to practice.

*"The way the artist explained to them [...] that got all the children involved, and it made them think outside of they are 'useless' at art and 'this is what you have to do to do art' – it gave them a new way to see art. I have picked up on it myself. It's a very good way to think. And all got included too." (teacher)*

## Outcomes for the arts

Arts Backpack sought to "To promote innovative, original work by Northern Ireland artists, facilitating the reconnection of venues and practitioners with children, schools and families, helping to revive Northern Ireland's cultural sector post-pandemic."

For many children, this was a first trip to a cultural venue. For most children and teachers, it was a first trip since lockdown, bringing much-needed audiences to a sector that has been described as first to close and last to open. Filling cultural institutions with young audiences can also be energising for those institutions, encouraging them to think about who their audience is or can be.

Being engaged in arts as a child is the main predictor of lifelong arts engagement. The programme is likely to have helped sustain future audiences, participants, practitioners and champions by:

- Creating familiarity with arts venues, different arts forms and the way they are presented
- Supporting children to explore their own interests and tastes and learn that it is okay to like or not like different arts
- Helping build teachers' confidence to deliver a variety of enjoyable arts activities

*"There is this elitist thing with galleries where parents don't want to go in. But if the kids have been in and know they can and that it belongs to everybody they might get a parent to go in." (artist)*

## Outcomes for Arts Backpack NI

The artists and teachers involved in Arts Backpack spoke of its impact and value and were keen to continue the programme.

Young at Art as the local delivery partner was instrumental in the success of the project. They brought the experienced artist-facilitators, and the four participating schools were all schools that Young at Art had a previous a relationship with over varying periods of time.

*"I know that Young at Art have very high standard and trust them to deliver." (teacher)*

Arts Backpack allowed Young at Art to consolidate these relationships or engage with different classes. At St Matthew's, for example, they had only previously worked

with the nursery class. It is likely that the Arts Backpack model is scalable to more or other classes within the schools.

However, even with a strong local partner, ACA is not in a position to lead long-term on Arts Backpack across the UK. Depending on the success of other regional pilots,<sup>8</sup> Arts Backpack would need an alternative national lead to fund and oversee the programme, supported by local partners. It could also be delivered as standalone projects in each nation, although this may lose opportunities for shared learning.



4 PUPILS ON A GALLERY VISIT

<sup>8</sup> The first pilot was completed in Fife in 2021. This was digital due to Covid restrictions. ACA has secured funding from Fife Council for a second, in-room phase from September to December 2022, pending funding from Creative Scotland. It will also be delivering a small pilot in partnership with Attenborough Arts in Leicester from September to December 2022, supported by the Aviva Community Fund.



## Lessons and recommendations

### Co-design

The feasibility study recommended each pilot should be co-designed locally. ACA successfully partnered with Young at Art, one of NI's leading children's arts organisations, who had local knowledge and the trust of local schools.

On a school-by-school basis, artists also worked with teachers to shape the in-school workshops. However, further opportunities for co-design with children, families and teachers were limited by public health restrictions and associated pressures (such as home-schooling, working from home, cuts to CPD and so on) at that time.

Through the work of organisations such as Young at Art and prioritisation of the extrinsic impact of the arts at policy level, NI is also rich in artists with a wealth of experience in working with children, teachers and schools.

**Any future programme should be locally led and co-designed with artists as well as teachers and children.**

### Targeting

The feasibility study also recommended that the programme should be targeted at children who do not currently access arts and culture as “a means of levelling an unequal cultural playing field”.

The programme benefitted schools in areas of deprivation and may have had a particular impact on groups of pupils who are less likely to benefit from arts, such as boys.

In a Northern Ireland context, targeting could also include pupils from broadly Unionist backgrounds; schools in rural areas; newcomer pupils;<sup>9</sup> schools with a high proportion of children on free school meals; schools in areas with lowest per capita spending on the arts; or lower-performing schools (which can seek to redress

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<sup>9</sup> A newcomer pupil is a pupil whose home language is not English or Irish and who may require support in school for this reason ([www.eani.org.uk](http://www.eani.org.uk))

educational inequalities by focusing on literacy and numeracy over cultural engagement).

**The programme should further consider opportunities to target and benefit those most at risk of missing out of cultural experiences.**

### Arts programme

The mix of dance, drama and visual arts appears to have been very effective, engaging pupils individually and in groups, as participants and audience, in a variety of experiences which offered something new for both children and their teachers.

There was some consideration that the children preferred the more informal setting of the MAC or that between the content, setting and venue, Birdboy at the Lyric was too alien. Children who have an enjoyable experience are more likely to want to repeat the experience, becoming long-term arts attendees. However, art can also challenge, and Birdboy provoked more debate than No man is an island.

Regardless of art form or venue, the programme brought a particular emphasis on process, rather than end result, which helped break down psychological barriers for the pupils and may have the most sustained impact on teachers' approach to the arts.

**The programme should continue to offer a variety of art forms and a range of emotional experiences – from enjoyment to captivation to challenge – in different in-school and extra-school settings.**

### Priming the children

The visits to cultural venues were an effective way of priming the children for the in-school workshops. However, children who were primed throughout the process by their teachers may have benefitted most from the programme.

**The programme should explore with artists and teachers how children can be supported throughout the programme, in particular before visits and between visits and workshops.**



## CPD

The appetite for CPD was strongly evidenced in the evaluation of the Fife pilot. However, with ongoing Covid restrictions and DfE's withdrawal of mandatory CPD, the NI pilot became predominantly child centred, with artists delivering, supported by teachers.

Changing the way teachers think about and approach the arts is essential to sustaining the programme within participating schools.

**Further programmes should complement artist-led delivery with support for teachers' practice.**

## Intrinsic and extrinsic impacts

In the fall-out of Covid 19, there is grave concern about the mental health of children who have experienced a substantial proportion of their childhood in isolation.

Simultaneously, primary school children have missed out of a substantial proportion of their education.

**The Arts Backpack can deliver on these twin priorities, and future programmes should focus on both wellbeing impacts and the links with the curriculum.**

## Shared practice

As the first in-room local pilot, Arts Backpack NI has lots to share itself but could not benefit from learning from other areas. This is one of the main advantages a national programme has over local projects.

**While ACA is not in the position to act as the national lead going forward, it should ensure that learning from the pilots is shared widely. Any future national lead should embed opportunities for shared learning in the programme.**

## Celebration

Teachers and artists were delighted with the artwork produced through the programme.

**Future Backpacks should create space for an all-schools end-of-programme celebration event, which would also help get parents and families in to cultural venues.**

## Evaluation

Teachers are very busy, in particular emerging out of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, active participation in the programme evaluation should be a condition of the offer to schools taking part.

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