

3.3 Creativity for Health and Wellbeing in the Education System

Key Points

As well as producing the creatives of the future, creativity as part of school life provides children with a broad range of transferrable life skills and improves their future outcomes. Creativity supports children's health and wellbeing - particularly relevant as we face a mental health crisis in young people. Schools can offer universal access to creative activity, reducing inequalities in both access to arts and culture and in health outcomes. Given the importance of early intervention in supporting mental health and reducing inequalities, schools are a vital component of the creative health ecosystem. However, opportunities to engage in creative activities at school are increasingly limited, as arts-related subjects are deprioritised and cuts

to creative subjects in higher education further disincentivise uptake of the arts in schools.

Creativity should be a key pillar of the education system, accessible to all and prioritised within the curriculum. This will have significant long term benefits for individuals. It will also lead to reduced pressures on the healthcare system, contribute to the levelling up agenda and feed the creative industries workforce. A coherent approach across all sectors will ensure the development of a creative health ecosystem which is self-sustaining in the long term. The Department for Education (DfE) therefore has an important role to play in the development of a cross-departmental strategy on creative health.

Background

We have seen in Section 3.1 that we are facing a crisis in children and young people's mental health. One in six children aged 5-16 have a diagnosable mental health disorder and up to 75% are unable to access support through the NHS²⁵³, with their mental health deteriorating whilst they wait²⁵⁴. The pandemic caused children to experience an increase in worry, low mood, grief and feelings of hopelessness, and rates of PTSD, depression and anxiety and self-harming also increased^{255,256}. There are inequalities in children and young people's mental health, with those from ethnic minority backgrounds, LGBTQ+ young people, young people with pre-existing health or educational needs and those from poorer backgrounds disproportionately affected²⁵⁷. The DfE State of the Nation report on children and young people's wellbeing recognises the central role for schools in COVID-19 recovery and notes the additional national and global pressures influencing children's mental health²⁵⁸.

The early years strongly influence children's development and health and wellbeing. We know that around half of mental health problems start by the age of 14 and have lasting impacts into adulthood. Early intervention and prevention

are therefore vital to improving future outcomes for young people. Providing every child with the best start in life is also integral to reducing health inequalities. Longitudinal studies have shown that there is a social gradient in children's engagement in arts and culture, but that this is only related to extra-curricular activities²⁵⁹. However, parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds are statistically less likely to pay for extracurricular activities such as music, dance and drama, or to take children to cultural institutions²⁶⁰. Schools can therefore ensure equal access to arts and cultural opportunities for young people, and are a vital component of the creative health ecosystem.



In a complex, changing world, and in the face of increasing mental health challenges, giving children the space and skills to express themselves, through all art forms, as a way to understand themselves, others and the world around them, is a key aspect of a child's right to a rich education"

Sally Bacon OBE, Co-Chair, Cultural Learning Alliance and co-author, The Arts in Schools: Foundations for the Future, Creativity for Health and Wellbeing in the Education System Roundtable

Creativity as part of school life provides children with a broad range of transferable life skills, supports mental health and wellbeing and improves their future outcomes. Despite this, there has been a decline in the provision of arts education in both primary and secondary schools in recent years, and fewer GCSE and A-level entries for arts-related subjects^{261,262,263}. This has been linked to an increased focus on core subjects on which performance measures are based²⁶⁴. Reductions in funding mean less money is available for specialist resources, and the number of trained arts teachers has also decreased²⁶⁵. A similar pattern has been observed in music education²⁶⁶. COVID-19 has significantly impacted arts education, and although the Durham Commission on Creativity and Education highlights the importance of using arts-based subjects as part of recovery to restore wellbeing and happiness to school life²⁶⁷, many schools have not been able to facilitate this.

Creativity is not limited to arts-based subjects. PISA, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) programme for international student assessment, introduced creative thinking assessment measures in 2022, recognising that such skills will help students adapt to a rapidly changing world, and contribute to the development of society²⁶⁸. The Durham Commission on Creativity in Education, which published its first report in 2019, defined creativity as 'the capacity to imagine, conceive, express, or make something that was not there before.' This can be incorporated across all subjects, but the commission notes that arts make an 'invaluable' contribution to the development of creativity in young people, and that the link between creativity and wellbeing is most strongly associated with arts-based activities²⁶⁹.

A reduction in arts and creativity in the curriculum, compounded by a reduction in funding for arts-based courses in higher education, will deny children the opportunity to progress into careers in creative industries, despite an ambitious Creative Industries Sector Vision which commits to supporting 1m more jobs in the creative industries by 2030²⁷⁰. It has also been argued that a focus on performance measures

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I've noticed that the skills that our pupils gain from being part of this programme are things like resilience, determination, confidence and self-esteem....these are skills that perhaps as adults we take for granted, but that our children just do not possess and they have to be taught this, and they have to be taught in a school setting, and one of the best ways to do that is through enabling them to be creative”

Sarah Williams, Head Teacher, Faith Primary Academy, Creativity for Health and Wellbeing in the Education System Roundtable

linked to core academic subjects will mean that pupils with lower attainment levels (often linked to social deprivation) will be discouraged from taking arts-related subjects, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities in creative engagement in young people from poorer backgrounds²⁷¹.

Given the benefits to young people and wider society of creative and cultural engagement, it is counterintuitive to reduce the opportunities for children and young people to access creativity as part of their school day. Here we will outline what can be achieved by incorporating schools into local creative health ecosystems and instilling a whole school approach to creativity.

The role of creative health

Creative health can be applied in school settings to improve health and wellbeing outcomes as part of whole school approaches or targeted interventions to address needs in individual pupils. This can take place in partnership with local creative practitioners and cultural organisations, which can address inequalities in access to culture and creativity and its associated benefits. There is also good evidence that creative engagement can aid educational development, and equip children with a range of transferrable skills which are attractive to employers and will improve their future life outcomes.

The mechanisms through which creative health influences mental health were explored fully in Section 3.1. Studies with a specific focus on young people have found that participating in creative



activities including listening to or playing music, drawing, painting, making and reading, can have positive effects on behaviour, self-confidence, emotional regulation, relationship building, and a sense of belonging, contributing to resilience and mental wellbeing^{272,273,274}. A review by the Centre for Cultural Value found that engaging with the arts helped young people cope with their feelings and distracted from negative thoughts. Creative activities offered a safe space, allowed the opportunity to showcase work, could raise aspiration and facilitated the formation of friendships²⁷⁵.

The WHO scoping review *‘What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing?’* collates studies which have shown associations between arts activities and educational attainment and behaviour. It finds that the arts can improve social skills, reduce bullying, support engagement with learning and enhance emotional competence. Studies have found the arts to have benefits for children experiencing social or behavioural difficulties, children with learning disabilities, dyslexia and physical or developmental disabilities²⁷⁶.

Data gathered from 6000 young people and teachers about the perceived benefits of cultural engagement in educational settings reported that the arts helped children to develop critical thinking and the ability to assess the world around them, to develop a sense of their own identity and place in a community, to build self-belief, confidence, empathy and appreciation and diversity, and encouraged them to express ideas, opinions and stories in complex and nuanced ways. They also felt that arts engagement was a way to release pressure and relieve stress, improving overall health, wellbeing and happiness²⁷⁷.

Addressing inequalities

Given the recognised social gradient and inequalities in access to cultural engagement, schools can be vital in ensuring these educational and wellbeing outcomes are available to all. Programmes which target areas where children may be less likely to access culture outside of school can help to tackle inequalities.

Evaluation of Big Noise (Sistema Scotland), an immersive music education programme providing

orchestral activities for children from low-income backgrounds has explored the impact of school-based arts interventions²⁷⁸. Qualitative evaluation found that the programme positively affects children across seven main areas²⁷⁹;

- Educational (concentration, listening, coordination, language development, school attendance, school outcomes)
- Life Skills (problem-solving, decision-making, creativity, determination, self-discipline, leadership)
- Emotional (happiness, security, pride, self-esteem, emotional intelligence, an emotional outlet, resilience)
- Social (social mixing, social skills, cultural awareness, diverse friendships, strong friendships, support networks)
- Musical (instrument skills, reading music, performance skills, music career options, access to other music organisations)
- Physical (healthy snacks, opportunities for games/exercise, creating healthy habits for adulthood)
- Protection (someone to confide in, calm environment, safe environment, reduced stress).

The evaluation continues to look at health and social outcomes as participants reach school-leaving age, in comparison to children from similar backgrounds who did not take part in the programme. Quantitative analysis of educational outcomes shows that participants in Big Noise were more likely to achieve a positive post-school destination, including employment, and indicated benefits in educational attainment²⁸⁰.

A systematic review of arts-based interventions for children and young people delivered in nature found that in addition to improvements in wellbeing (including mood, empathy, inner calm, emotional expression and regulation, happiness, resilience, stress, anxiety and interactions with others) activities fostered a sense of connection to nature, which led to an interest in environmental issues²⁸². Further work in this area has investigated the mechanisms through which these activities can be made available to all children, including those in the most deprived areas²⁸³.

Creativity and mental health support in schools

Schools are an important setting through which children can develop social and emotional skills, where positive health and wellbeing can be promoted, and where early signs of mental ill health can be identified and addressed²⁸⁴. Schools have a duty to provide mental health education, and DfE recommends a whole school approach with a focus on early intervention and prevention. School-based mental health leads, and mental health support teams which link young people experiencing mental health problems to NHS services can provide additional targeted support. Creativity can be used as part of a whole school approach, to equip pupils with a tool for mental self-care they will be able to draw on as required, and into adulthood.

Arts and music therapies can be used with children facing emotional or social difficulties to improve communication and behaviour²⁸⁵, and improve quality of life, anxiety, attitudes towards school, and emotional and behavioural difficulties²⁸⁶. In school settings, a systematic review has found improvements in self-esteem, self-confidence, self-expression, mood, communication, understanding, resilience, learning, and aggressive behaviour, and small changes in the outcomes of depression, anxiety, attention problems, and withdrawn behaviours as a result of arts therapies²⁸⁷. A randomised controlled study with children with emotional and behavioural difficulties found that story-making and story-telling, drawing, puppetry, song-writing and empowerment activities in schools had the greatest impact on children's wellbeing, through the facilitation of emotional expression, group bonding, empowerment and

optimism²⁸⁸. In Northern Ireland, Verbal have worked with the Education Authority and Public Health Agency to design and deliver shared reading and storytelling projects in primary schools across the country, improving mental health and wellbeing, helping children to manage emotions and develop resilience and supporting cross-community dialogue in areas of community-conflict, deprivation and marginalisation²⁸⁹.

In Harmony- Creative Health and the Curriculum

Since 2009, the **Royal Liverpool Philharmonic's In Harmony** programme has provided music education in schools serving some of the most disadvantaged areas in North Liverpool, enhancing life chances through orchestral music making. In Harmony targets children with the greatest need and fewest resources, with over 40% of the children taking part classed as living in poverty. The programme is embedded into the curriculum across four primary schools, and provides free music education for 1750 children and young people every week. Every child in participating schools learns to play an instrument and is given the opportunity to take part in orchestral rehearsals and performances, with a repertoire across musical genres.

In Harmony has demonstrated improvements in a range of outcomes for individual pupils including confidence, resilience and teamwork²⁸¹. Evaluation also finds benefits for the school, and that when children take part in the programme, their families are subsequently more likely to participate in cultural activities, indicating a wider social benefit and the potential to break cycles of lower participation in the arts and culture. The programme principles align with approaches to address the social determinants of health and tackle health inequalities, and through long term commitment at neighbourhood level, In Harmony Liverpool has helped to build stronger communities, generating civic pride, hope and aspiration.



Creative health, if it is really integrated into the school's existing support systems, can be a tool to spot mental ill health, and for a whole school approach to flourish"

Cara Verkerk, Place2Be, Creativity for Health and Wellbeing in the Education System Roundtable



A number of studies have demonstrated the value of using creative approaches with children who may not be able to access mainstream education, or who have additional needs²⁹⁰. For example, music has been used in youth justice settings and with refugees, where it has been found to foster wellbeing, a sense of belonging, and enhanced engagement with learning^{291,292,293}. Breathe Arts Health Research have delivered their Breathe Magic for Mental Health programme in a Pupil Referral Unit for young people (aged 6-11) excluded from school, showing trends for improvement in eye-contact, confidence and communication skills²⁹⁴.

Maximising the potential of creative health

The arts and creativity are essential in providing a child with the best start in life. In order that these benefits can be felt by all, creativity should be embedded into the school day as part of an approach to education that focuses on the whole child, prioritising personal development and life skills, and supports mental health and wellbeing. Creative approaches are effective tools to support pupils with additional mental health needs, or who have been excluded from mainstream education,

and can be employed by specialist facilitators and mental health care leads.

Challenges to implementation arise due to assessment pressures, which focus on core academic subjects, and a lack of resourcing to support the wider curriculum. It has been suggested that a fundamental rethink of the curriculum to reassesses the purpose of education is necessary in order that the value of the arts and creativity are fully recognised²⁹⁵. A template for this could be provided by Wales, which undertook a curriculum redesign in 2022. It identifies the Expressive Arts as integral to achieving key skills including creativity, innovation, critical thinking and problem-solving:

“Experiencing the expressive arts can engage learners physically, socially and emotionally, nurturing their wellbeing, self-esteem and resilience. This can help them become healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.” – Curriculum for Wales²⁹⁶

With the number of arts and music teachers in decline, training in providing a creative education,

Place2Be – Creativity to support mental health in schools

Place2Be is a children’s mental health charity which works with young people, families, teachers, and schools using a range of approaches to support mental health and wellbeing. Their **Art Room** programme uses arts and creativity as a tool to help children thrive. The Art Room delivers creative wellbeing workshops, training, and activity resources aligned to national educational wellbeing curricula for school staff to use as part of a whole school approach. Creative Wellbeing Projects empower school staff to use creative activities to support children’s mental health in classrooms.

One example is The Forest Project: Growing Through Change. The creative activity involves each child creating a tree, where they reflect on how they have grown through times of change in the past and what they need to boost their resilience. The class can then exhibit their trees

to create a class or school forest and think about how they can grow together as a community.

Headteachers and school staff have welcomed the approach, recognising the importance of creativity for self-expression, particularly where pupils may struggle to do so in written form. One teacher who implemented this project with primary-age children said it was important to involve the whole school to normalise self-reflection and give all pupils the opportunity to express their feelings – “to stop and think and be in the present”. Pupils appreciated the opportunity to share their feelings and have their voices heard. In this school, discussions of mental health improved relationships in the classroom, where children found commonalities in their thoughts and feelings despite any cultural and physical differences, and this has led to a reduction in bullying.

and in the benefits of creativity for health should also be part of teacher training and workforce development.

In addition to ensuring creativity is a pillar of the curriculum, partnerships with local cultural organisations or creative practitioners have been shown to have positive impacts, for pupils, schools and wider communities. They can have particular impacts in the poorest areas where children may have less access to creative and cultural opportunities outside of school. Such initiatives could be scaled up in order to tackle health inequalities.

The long term benefits of a creative education are wide-ranging and cross-sectoral. A systems approach could help to bring together stakeholders to develop more impactful programmes, designed to meet local priorities. Schools should be considered an integral part of the creative health ecosystem and the Department for Education will therefore be a key partner in a cross-departmental strategy on creative health.



There are exceptional things happening, but we are nowhere near making those exceptional things available to every child and every young person in our country today”

Baroness Estelle Morris of Yardley, Creativity for Health and Wellbeing in the Education System Roundtable

Kazzum Arts – Trauma-informed approaches with children excluded from mainstream education

Kazzum Arts is a trauma-informed arts charity based in Bethnal Green, with a mission to use creativity to enable marginalised children and young people who have been impacted by trauma to feel seen, heard and valued. They work with young people who have experienced high levels of Adverse Childhood Experiences which have resulted in social, emotional and mental health issues, communication needs, disabilities, exclusion and displacement.

Kazzum Arts works in a range of settings including hospitals, communities and schools. Their work in pupil referral units with children who have been excluded from mainstream education, and who have often experienced trauma, uses creativity to support children to build connections with their peers, to develop a sense of self-expression, to feel safe and to

engage in learning. Weekly sessions are held with artists over the course of an academic year, to provide consistency. Sessions consist of a range of artistic forms, and children are encouraged to choose which art forms they want to engage with. As sessions progress, children form relationships with the artist, which leads to further relationships with teachers and staff.



We see creativity inside Pupil Referral Units and Alternative Provision as a vital protective factor to support a child or young person through adverse experiences”

Alex Evans, Artistic Director and CEO, Kazzum Arts

South Tees Art Initiative (STAR) - Cross-sectoral approaches to tackling inequalities



The **STAR Programme** is an excellent example of collaborative working across health, culture and education sectors to improve the health and wellbeing of children in some of the lowest-income areas of the North East. The programme is run by the **North East and North Cumbria Child Health and Wellbeing Network**, an ICS-wide initiative which places an emphasis on creative health, with a dedicated Arts and Creativity Lead. The Network was established to respond collaboratively to system priorities, in particular mental health and poverty, and builds on learning from previous creative health work in the region. With some of the highest rates of child poverty in the country, a cross-sectoral approach was developed to address the need:

“We literally got into the room with public health, the creative arts, the CCG commissioners, Northern Ballet and our research partners and said ‘what can we do?’” – Heather Corlett, Arts and Creativity Lead, NENC Child Health and Wellbeing Network

Based on evidence that dance can improve the health and wellbeing of children through facilitating self-expression, building self-awareness and identity and improving social and emotional learning skills, the programme consisted of facilitated weekly dance sessions for primary-age pupils in years 1-5. Dance facilitators from local dance organisation TIN Arts worked with the Northern Ballet to align with the themes of local performances, and families were also offered theatre experiences as part of the programme – in many cases the first time children had visited a theatre. Schools were identified using public health data, prioritising underserved areas. Family link workers were incorporated into the programme to ensure that benefits from the programme were taken out of schools and into homes.

The programme was fully evaluated with academic partners, and was found to have benefits for pupils, schools and families.

- Children noted: contributed to our emotional and physical wellbeing: ‘Feeling more confident’, ‘More fit and well’ and ‘Full of energy’. After participating in the programme children felt creative (74%), fit (73%), well (67%), happier (66%), confidence (64%).
- Teachers noted: children more engaged in class, better listening, less disruptive behaviour, improved creativity, social & literacy skills
- Parents noted: proud to celebrate the achievement of their children
- Artists noted: activity contributes to children’s creative, social, cognitive and physical skills, as well as increasing their confidence
- Link worker noted: support enabled improved behaviour in the home, increased social networks for families and families were better able to meet the children’s emotional needs.

Although only 30% of the children had taken part in dance before the programme, upon completion 60% felt they would like to continue. In Phase 2 of the programme, the network are developing a more replicable and scalable approach, incorporating digital technologies and shorter dance blocks, to reach more schools, and linking more extensively with existing community assets to ensure that the benefits are sustainable over the long term.



“With dance you get a break from reality, and you get to relax, and just let yourself be yourself”

STAR Participant