

## THE ART OF HEALING – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Art of Healing* was an AHRC-funded research project that investigated the potential for **arts activities and art-based therapies to support the mental health and wellbeing of children affected by conflict.**

To conduct this work, we partnered with the Dolphin International School and 30 students (ages 11 to 15) in the town of Pulwama (located in the Kashmir Valley) in a programme called ‘*Kalakar Qasbah*’ (artists’ collective). Students participated in drama, visual arts, puppetry, drawing and many other creative activities. Working with a team of experts, they produced videos, photography, songs, performances, murals, puppet shows and remade their school as a place for artistic and emotional exploration and healing.



### Timeline of Activities

Phase 1 (July and August 2020): project initiation and establishment of evaluation plan. Through this phase we: i) established our baseline expectations regarding how we believed art therapies might benefit children at the school; ii) agreed the evaluation strategy and iii) organised risk management, safeguarding, and ethics.

Phase 2 (August 2020 to March 2021): centred on delivering art activities to children in Kashmir and evaluating the impact. These were delivered online as well as in-person.

Phase 3 (April 2021 to October 2021): further activities, exhibitions and engagement work, analysis, refinement of outputs, dissemination, and outreach.

### Evaluation

The impact on children: To understand the impact and effectiveness of our work we conducted a series of individual and group evaluations. These included wellbeing measurements of the children’s behaviour in the classroom as well as art sessions, their cognitive development, levels of emotional development, coping mechanisms, expression and communication skills, bodily comfort, and ability to work in groups, among other elements. The approach taken was non-invasive, avoiding asking children directly about their wellbeing, which may have increased distress, especially when some experiences may have been difficult to articulate verbally.

Collectively, our evaluation measures suggested that the intervention supported **children on a trajectory towards increased wellbeing, but that continued support was required.** Over the course of the art intervention, children exhibited significantly fewer signs of affective disturbance. Ratings conducted by school staff as showing significantly fewer behaviours indicative of aggression and rule-breaking, but higher scores for anxiety and depression. Ratings by artist facilitators described children as being better able to focus mindfully on art activities, and increased ability to use the arts to communicate cognitive information, and as expressive and communicative tools.

Developing theories of change: A central part of our work was to develop a theory of change, to enable us to better understand how such interventions can make a difference. This helps us to understand the key features of the intervention with the potential to benefit children in other

similar settings. Below are some initial statements of change and learning that have come from the project.

- Arts based interventions can improve **children's sense of belonging** through the collaborative development and sharing of their artistic creations with each other.
- Arts based interventions can **improve children's confidence** by sharing their artistic creations with others in a supportive setting. Further, children may develop leadership skills through supporting younger children with art activities in a setting that facilitates mixed aged participation.
- Children are more able **to explore their feelings** when given choice, time, resources, and space to experiment.
- Children may **develop their expressive abilities** through opportunities to engage in arts activities that are not dependent on talking in an environment with trusted adults.
- Children (and particularly boys) are more likely to engage in arts-based interventions when the activity is delivered in a setting that **values artistic achievements** equally to academic achievements and is supported by parents. Moreover, support organisations such as schools and other protective environments should see personal wellbeing and mental health as a critical part of the student experience.
- There is an important role for institutions and their staff – with support and training, **teachers can be champions for art-led activities and child wellbeing**. Moreover, children are more likely to engage in arts-based activities where the teacher or art therapist is adaptable and able to provide a consistent input.
- Art activities for wellbeing benefit from student ownership and their **partnership with teachers and staff**. Further, children can also develop artistic or expressive skills that are perceived to have a value beyond the school setting, providing them with greater **optimism for the future**.
- **A variety of spaces are needed to facilitate involvement, belonging and ownership**. Digital spaces are important. However, a physical space to display artwork and conduct performances can illustrate to parents the value of arts-based activities, making them more likely to agree to their child's participation.

#### Project contacts:

Academic lead: **Dr Michael Buser**, Associate Professor, University of the West of England, Bristol. ([Michael.Buser@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Michael.Buser@uwe.ac.uk))

Arts leads: **Anurupa Roy**, Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust ([royanurupa@gmail.com](mailto:royanurupa@gmail.com)) and **Vikramjeet Sinha**, BOAT: Building on Art Therapy ([sinha.vikramjeet@gmail.com](mailto:sinha.vikramjeet@gmail.com)).

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