



Analysis of Initial Focus Group Reports

20th May 2021

Tom Dobson

Background

Focus group meetings with relevant stakeholders were undertaken in each partner country (England, Italy, Iceland, Greece, Germany and Austria) between February and April 2021. These meetings were part of a participatory design model employed by arted to ensure the value, effectiveness and sustainability of their Intellectual Outputs (IOs) across Europe. The focus group meetings explored the five questions outlined in TABLE 1 (page 8), with specific questions used as prompts.

For the purpose of this report, a thematic pattern analysis was undertaken in line with these initial questions in order to highlight the key points and ideas which will help arted shape their IOs. This analysis also included looking for ideas that were contrasting, both within and across focus groups, in order to emphasise some of the tensions surrounding creative practices which arted will need to think through.

The key points and ideas discussed are presented below under the following subheadings:

- artists' practices in schools;
- creative arts learning in schools;
- benefits of artists working in schools;
- barriers to artists working in schools;
- ideas for guides for teachers;
- ideas for guide for parents and carers.

The report concludes by outlining the key implications of the focus group analysis for arted in developing their IOs.

The Focus Groups

The focus groups were undertaken by each partner with up to 17 members and included key IO stakeholders. A breakdown of the make-up of the focus groups is represented in Table 2 below. Because over half of the group members were also parents, this is not listed as a separate category. Where group members had more than one role, the main role only is listed.

Partner Country	University-based Practitioner	Artist in Education	Trainee Teacher	Primary/Secondary School Teacher	Primary School Teacher	Secondary School Teacher	Member of a cultural body	Policy Maker
England (Leeds Beckett University and Interplay Theatre Company)	4	4			2	1	3	
Italy (CESIE)		6			2	3	6	
Iceland (University of Iceland)	1	2	5	3	1			1
Austria (World University Service)	2	2			4	1	1	
Greece (Stimuli for Social Change)		3				3	2	2
Germany (Young Arts)	1	6			2	1		

Focus Group Key Findings

Artists' practices in schools

All focus groups discussed effective projects involving artists in schools, drawing upon a range of creative arts expertise, as often reflected in the make-up of the focus groups. The projects were diverse in nature and included: drama; visual arts; textiles; photography; creative writing; the theatre of the oppressed; a Circus School; science and the arts; music; storytelling for history; media; festivals; outdoor games. For all partner countries, with the exception of Iceland, the projects linked to the arts were not part of government policy and were not therefore compulsory. This meant that the projects did not reach all young people and were not always effective. In Austria, access to state funding can be bureaucratic and "time-consuming"; in England, lack of time to develop arts projects is an issue; in Germany, arts projects involving artists in education are often "thin and out of reality".

In Iceland, however, the government's Art for All policy means that all children, regardless of economic background, benefit from a range of arts based experiences throughout their ten years of schooling. This is underpinned by the aims of providing "culture for children" and "culture with children" and often, therefore, involves mobilising local community links. In Italy, this kind of practice took place in one specific school – a Circus School - where the artists' circus practices were integrated across the curriculum.

In England, where artists' practices in schools are more sporadic and less embedded, the importance of a two-way relationship between the teacher and the artist was emphasised so that the artist was able to view their work in schools "as part of their artistic practice". This collaboration was noted as being rare in Austria where "usually the artist prepares everything" but where the "personal commitment of teachers" is seen as best practice by some parents. In Iceland, collaboration between artists and teachers was noted as a key aspect of creative arts learning.

Creative arts learning in schools

The discussion of what creative arts learning looked like in schools mainly centred around the development of soft skills for young people. These included: collaboration; social confidence; empathy; emotional literacy; critical thinking; self-expression. Developing these skills through creative learning was also thought to improve "motivation" and the "enjoyment" of young people through a lived "experience", which "improves learning as the body can store the feelings". In England, the combination of these factors meant that creative arts learning could "transform" young people's "identities".

One key distinction that was brought to the surface by Iceland and Germany was the difference between integrating the creative arts across the curriculum as a pedagogical tool and the creative arts as subjects in their own right. Interestingly, in Iceland, the group was keen to stress "the importance of teaching the foundation of the arts, not just combining it with other subjects"; on the other hand, the group in Germany was concerned that the arts were seen as "more of a subject here" and that their potential as a "tool that is integrated into everyday learning experiences" was underutilised.

Benefits of artists working in schools

In the majority of the focus groups, the discussion of the benefits of artists working in schools centred around the positive wellbeing of young people. This included: having the opportunity for self-expression; developing respect for yourself; expressing emotions; preventing psychological problems; healing through embodied experiences; developing empathy; improving confidence and self-esteem; being more engaged at school; countering disaffection; feeling experiences are valid. However, one group member in England did question the evidence-base for some of the claims currently being made about creativity improving young people's wellbeing. It was felt that more of an evidence-base on creativity for positive wellbeing was needed.

Other benefits for young people were more instrumental, focussing on the artist as a role model, who could demonstrate to young people that there were different ways of making a living. Added to this, the development of soft skills such as communication and teamwork was once again mentioned.

For teachers, the focus was on learning "innovative ways to teach and learn" (Germany) from working alongside artists in the classroom. In three of the focus groups, this was about the teachers having "fun" and, through taking on a different role, developing an "emotional connection" with young people. Teaching in this way was seen to promote inclusion within the classroom through: promoting diversity in regions where there was none (Iceland); offering activities where all young people could "develop their own skills" (Italy); and allowing teachers to see children differently and appreciate "different creativities" (England).

Barriers to artists working in schools

All focus groups (including Iceland) identified wider structural issues as creating barriers to artists working effectively in schools. This included: national strategy and policy marginalising the arts; national curricula focussing on other subjects and not promoting an interdisciplinary approach; lack of funding for schools to work with artists; in England, a lack of time for artists to work with trainee teachers; and in Germany policy which makes establishing extra-curricular clubs difficult. Where artists did work in schools, it was felt that, within these wider structural constraints, evidencing "impact" became a major challenge for schools and artists alike and brought into question "what is valued" (England).

At school level, the issue of a lack of a “physical space” for arts-based teaching was highlighted in four of the focus groups. Also in four of the focus groups, there was an identification of the different priorities, discourses and practices held by teachers and artists creating barriers for artists to work effectively in schools. Teachers and leaders were seen as: not always being interested or willing (Italy); not having the time to collaborate (Greece); viewing a young person’s participation in the arts as a “reward for good behaviour” (Germany); wanting to avoid the “chaos” that artist practices would bring (Austria). In Greece, all of this combined to make children’s experiences with the arts “fragmented” in school and at home.

Ideas for guides for teachers

One key aspect for the guides was the relationship between the activities in the guides and the curricula being delivered in the different countries. All of the groups mentioned an interdisciplinary approach where arts activities could be linked to “overall learning goals” or “domains” across the curriculum. In three of these groups, it was felt that it would be easier to do this for the primary rather than the secondary curricula. In England and Austria, it was suggested that a broad thematic approach where a theme like Homes was adopted would make the guide applicable to all young people in all countries. There was also the idea that the arts covered within the guides should be multidisciplinary (Italy). Finally, there was the idea that the guides should be linked to the broader aspects of cultural development (England) as well as soft skills (Greece).

In terms of aiming these guides at teachers, it was felt in Iceland that the guides should target all teachers and “not just the few”, with “the effectiveness of creativity in everyday school life” explained to and illustrated for teachers. In four of the groups, it was stressed that teachers would need to have an immersive experience of artistic practice and the use of visuals and youtube to facilitate this was advocated in three of these groups. This would mean that the guides would avoid being “two-dimensional” “tips” for teachers, especially if they were underpinned by an understanding of how “professional development” takes places, perhaps through “action research” (England).

Three of the groups focussed on discussing how the guides should meet the needs of the children and that arted should be “checking in with their interests and needs” (Germany). In England, it was felt that a “toolkit developed by young people with artists would be amazing”.

All of the groups agreed that the guides should be easy to use by: being clearly structured; involving choice and a “flexible” approach; including short, “7-minute” activities to avoid “the feeling of having to do a huge project right away”; describing the methodologies of the disciplines step-by-step; being process orientated; including philosophy; promoting “error culture”; adopting the format of a “recipe book”; being comprised of “cards” which a teacher could print out and use; being linked to a database of artists and cultural institutions.

Finally, it was felt important that the guides were “differentiated” from existing guides and that co-design with young people could help achieve this (England).

Ideas for guide for parents and carers

Participants across the focus groups were much less certain about the nature and purpose of a guide for parents and carers as opposed to a guide for teachers. In Iceland, for example, they questioned the very “purpose of it”, whilst in England it was articulated that decisions needed to be made as to whether the guide was about: facilitating access to the arts; raising cultural capital; or creative learning at home?

Four of the six groups tended to talk about the guide in relation to creative learning at home, with a focus on including all parents and not, therefore, reproducing “hegemonic notions of creative practice” (England). Key aspects of this included: ensuring the guides were fun; focussing on parents’ listening and questioning skills to develop productive conversations with their children; giving children and parents choices over activities and who does them; taking a simple approach and using “small steps”; using mindfulness techniques. In Austria, it was felt that such a focus on home learning would enable parents to “get to know our children in different situations - creativity is very important.”

In Greece, however, it was felt that the aspect of “learning at home should be limited” and that the guides would be better conceived of as encouraging parents and carers to access cultural institutions within their community. The limiting of learning at home was echoed in Germany, where it was felt that often “parents don’t want to be involved.”

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the six focus groups undertaken in six partner countries with a range of stakeholders, the following points are recommended for consideration to the arted partnership in the development off their IOs:

- Inclusive
 - ◇ The guides should be potentially accessible to all teachers, trainee teachers, parents and carers, regardless of country, social context and personal biography;
 - ◇ The activities should promote the engagement of all children;
 - ◇ The guides, therefore, should include flexibility and choice, allowing users to select short activities or longer projects;
 - ◇ The guides should follow a logical structure and be simple to use;
 - ◇ For parents, the purpose of the guides should be clarified (access to arts, cultural capital or home learning?).
- Child-centred
 - ◇ The guides should be developed with young people;
 - ◇ The activities must have the potential to engage young people;
 - ◇ The guides can be differentiated from other guides by involving young people in do-design, production and evaluation.
- Curriculum-facing
 - ◇ The guides should be multidisciplinary, with a focus on arts based subjects;
 - ◇ The guides should lay bare the artistic processes;
 - ◇ The guides should also be interdisciplinary, with links to other subjects in the curriculum, particularly for primary (elementary);
 - ◇ The guides could be linked by a loose theme, particularly for primary (elementary);
 - ◇ The guides should be linked to soft skills.

- Promoting positive wellbeing
 - ◇ The guides should be framed in terms of developing the positive mental health of young people;
 - ◇ The activities could be linked to aspects of positive mental health, which can be specifically developed through participation.

- Transforming practices and identities
 - ◇ The guides should include immersive, online experiences, with which the target audience can engage;
 - ◇ The guides should promote reflection for all adults and all young people;
 - ◇ For teachers and trainee teachers, the guides should be underpinned

Appendix

<i>TABLE 1: Focus Group themes and prompt questions</i>	
Question 1: Creativity	<p>What do artists' practices look like in schools?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you give some examples of excellent practice in primary/ secondary schools? <p>What does creative arts learning look like in schools?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you give some examples of how children learn and develop as a result of artists' practices?
Question 2: Benefits and Barriers	<p>What are the benefits of artists working in schools?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss the benefits for young people/ teachers/ parents/ artists <p>What are the difficulties experienced by artists working in schools?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do these difficulties exist? • What difficulties are experienced by young people/ teachers/ parents and why do these difficulties exist?
Question 3: Guides for Teachers	<p>For our project, we are producing guides for teachers and trainee teachers about how to support young people's creative learning in the arts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What should these guides contain and how should they be structured? • Discuss a guide for primary teachers/ secondary teachers/ and an interactive guide for trainee teachers in primary and secondary schools.
Question 4: Guide for Parents	<p>For our project, we are also producing an audio guide for parents and carers about supporting their child's creative learning in the arts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What should this guide contain and how could it be structured? • How can artists help connect home and school learning?
Question 5: Other Thoughts	<p>Do you have any further thoughts that can help us produce highly effective guides?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there any underpinning values and concepts which should shape all 4 of our guides? • How can we ensure that the guides are widely used with young people across Europe for a significant period of time?