

## **Co-producing an evaluation strategy in Kashmir: Assessing the impact of an arts intervention with school children in an area of conflict**

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### **Background to the project**

About 1 in 6 children live in areas of conflict globally (Save the children, 2022), with significant impact on mental health, behaviour, and life outcomes (Buser et al., 2023). Research on ways to help prevent and reduce suffering is paramount, yet assessing the impact of interventions on children in the context of conflict is challenging, beset with ethical, cultural and psychometric difficulties (Newman et al., 2006). This practice report shares and reflects on the research strategy developed to evaluate the impact of an arts intervention in the Kashmir Valley, funded by an AHRC Urgency bid to help children in crisis. The study took part in a highly militarised area, where children were regularly exposed to violence, protests and resistance, and education and family life were heavily impacted by military lockdowns. When the study began (June 2020) conditions were further intensified by rising cases of coronavirus. The arts-based intervention occurred at one school and ran throughout their academic year (from August 2020). Thirty children (aged 12-15) were referred by the school to participate in a programme that was integrated into the curriculum and included a range of art activities: painting, writing, puppetry, music and performance, designed to enable expression and improve wellbeing, led by an artist and art therapist (Buser et al., 2023).

### **Co-production of the evaluation method**

The research aims were to deepen understanding of the benefits and barriers to using art-interventions for children in areas of conflict using mixed methods. The project was guided by a realist evaluation strategy. Over two months team members (academics from multiple disciplines, school staff, and artists/art therapists) met online to develop a programme theory (outlining anticipated changes in child and community wellbeing due to the arts programme) and to co-produce approaches to assess outcomes. During this process it was agreed that a non-invasive approach, avoiding asking children directly about mental health and traumatic experiences, was important, for various reasons: **trust, safety, cultural context and narrative.**

In terms of trust, the therapeutic alliance between the artists and children was considered, where asking direct questions or administering questionnaires about mental health involved methods of disclosure that were viewed as potentially harmful to practice, relationship building, and power balance (Green & Denov, 2019; Fancourt & Poon, 2015). Especially in the context of trauma, power inequalities introduced into the research process may enhance feelings of a lack of power held at a community level, and suggest a hierarchical relationship that is detrimental to trust (Newman et al., 2006). In terms of safety, there was a concern

that administering questionnaires on trauma and mental health may increase anxiety and distress amongst children, especially if asked for information that is difficult to articulate verbally or forced recall and disclosure of difficult experiences (Mitchell et al., 2019; Skybo, Ryan-Wenger & Su, 2007). Distress in response to such methods is predicted by symptoms of mental health and post-traumatic stress (Newman et al., 2006), and while the use of generic wellbeing questionnaires has been reported as being acceptable to children (Eklund et al., 2018), this is supported by research in Western settings, and does not consider the impact on consequent therapeutic alliance or cultural context. In terms of cultural context, high levels of stigma towards seeking treatment for mental health have been reported in Kashmir, with fears amongst adolescent that disclosure could have negative impacts, e.g., on future employment (Ahmed et al., 2023). It was a concern that asking questions about mental health, and framing project involvement in these terms, would be met with resistance by parents and children, potentially decreasing engagement and consent to participate in the programme. Finally, methods to represent the children’s ‘narrative’ in a meaningful and engaging way were seen as important, using creative activities that enabled expression through various modalities (and without having to speak) and hence activities were embedded into the design of the art programme that enabled children to express themselves through storytelling, writing, metaphor, performance, and visual art, connecting with the world in their own ways, and which could be analysed through narrative and thematic analyses (Johnson *et al.*, 2012; Mannay, ). By using non-invasive research methods, never questioning children about their mental health or exposure to trauma, it was hoped to build trust and produce a research programme that benefitted the children, enabling them to focus on engaging with the arts and develop a therapeutic alliance with the artists.

### **Observational, qualitative, and arts-based methods**

Nevertheless, it was a creative challenge to develop mixed methods to assess the wellbeing impact of the intervention without direct forms of assessment. The qualitative evaluation focused on art-based methods and end-of-programme interviews with children about their experience of the programme, designed to be part of its celebration and closure, which have been reported on elsewhere ( ). To augment this, stakeholders selected a range of psychometric tools to assess change across the programme (detailed in Table 1), that had previously been used to assess the mental health and wellbeing of children in the context of trauma. In this way it was planned to triangulate different perspectives on the children’s wellbeing across the programme, integrating observations of researchers, teachers, and artists (made at the start of the art programme, mid-way and at the end), with the voices of the children expressed through art-based and qualitative methods.

**Table 1: Quantitative tools used to assess children’s wellbeing**

Tool	Authors	Domains assessed	Method	Person observing/scoring
Child Behaviour Checklist (CBC)	Achenbach (1991)		Observation of recent behaviour in school setting	School teachers

Art Therapy Checklist (ATC)	Save the Children (2016)		Observation of recent behaviour at start and end of art programme	Artists/art therapist
Art Observation Scale (ArtObs)	Fancourt & Poon (2015)		Observation of behaviour during art workshops	Researchers
Human Figure Drawing Test	Koppitz (1968; 1989)		Rating of drawings	Researchers

### Challenges to consider in future research and evaluation

The outcomes from interviews and analyses of images proved to be a successful way to gain insight into the identity and experience of children (Buser et al., 2023; Brannlund et al., 2024). While quantitative measures provided useful insights into processes of change across the programme, and provided clinical metrics, a number of challenges were identified: **context, resource and training.** Firstly, since, due to the coronavirus pandemic, some of the art activities moved online, it was challenging to observe the behaviour of children using the ArtsObs during art workshops due to interrupted internet access, cameras sometimes being turned off, etc., leading to missing data. Observational data is time consuming to code and ideally requires training for consistency and inter-rater reliability to be assessed across multiple raters, which is resource intensive. The CBC is a reliable and well-validated scale as a clinical tool for use in schools, however, it requires high resource in terms of staff training and teacher's time, and requires teachers to have observed children at each time point (and for the children to have been in a school setting in that time frame), all of which have resource implications. We further noticed, when two researchers coded The Human Figure Drawing test, that cultural context could lead to inflated emotional distress scores, if the scoring was not adapted. For example, shadows and marks on faces were to be coded as signifiers of distress, however, children were drawing masks on faces, which was culturally appropriate at this time, due to the coronavirus pandemic. Nevertheless, the arts-based, qualitative and quantitative observational data worked together to tell a cohesive story about the benefits of the arts programme for children, despite these limitations, which we hope was facilitated by the non-obtrusive evaluation approach. However, it must be recognised that this comes at a higher cost with regards to time and resource required to gather detailed observational data and care taken over the cultural appropriateness of measures. In the end it was the qualitative and arts-based data that enabled the powerful narratives of the children to shine through amongst all of the data.

### Conclusion

In this study we evaluated the impact of the arts on children living in an area of conflict, in the Kashmir Valley, through non-invasive measures, using observational and art-based methods. The voice of the children was enabled through metaphor, drawing, story telling

and performance, while standardised methods to assess clinical symptoms and engagement with the art intervention were collected through various observational tools. Due to the complexities of delivering this project in the context of conflict and a coronavirus pandemic, there were multiple challenges, and the arts-based data and interviews enabled the richest interpretation of outcomes, the quantitative observational approach being useful but more challenging to implement in this context. However, we hope that sharing our co-produced methodological approach will be useful for other researchers seeking to evaluate the impact of arts-interventions with children in complex and cross-cultural contexts, seeking to create research that feels safe, trusted, culturally appropriate and rewarding.

### References – ten allowed

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Mitchell

Save the Children

Buser et al

Brannlund et al

Koppitz

Fancourt & Poon (2015)

Green & Denov, 2019;

Achenbach (1991)

Johnson *et al.*, 2012

These measures enabled: observations of children's recent behaviour in school settings made by school staff (Child Behaviour Checklist [CBC], Achenbach, 1991); observations of children's recent behaviour on the art programme made by artists (Art Therapy Checklist [ATC], Save the Children, 2016); and observations of children's behaviour during individual art workshops (Art Observation Scale [ArtObs], Fancourt & Poon, 2015). Also included was human figure drawing (Koppitz, 1968; 1989).