

Thinkpiece: the challenge of defining impact



Creative Partnerships

This much we know...

Thinkpiece: the challenge of defining impact

Foreword by David Parker, Research Director, Creative Partnerships

An essential purpose of this collection of Creative Partnerships research and evaluation is to bring together key learning and to collate disparate studies, in order to provide an overview of impact. We aim to create a similar compendium of analysis and research each year and we feel confident that this work will be robust and informative. However, we are also aware that the attempt to define and measure impact within education, and indeed within the arts, culture and creativity sectors, is not straightforward.

In this first collection of research studies we want to also un-pick some of the complexities and challenges involved in this process and we have therefore asked Dr Julian Sefton-Green to reflect on the issues underpinning descriptions of impact. We hope this think-piece will help to contextualise the findings shared throughout the publication and will provoke further debate on questions of evidence, legacy and changes to policy.

Evaluating Creative Partnerships: The challenge of defining impact by Dr. Julian Sefton-Green

Creative Partnerships has serious ambitions. By any standard, it is a significant and substantial attempt to make a difference to the quality, purpose and effectiveness of young people's learning in schools. Although it is a nationally funded programme, it is probably more accurate to describe it as a quasi-national, rather than a fully national, programme, in that it is available across 36 targeted areas in England, (and, through its method and approach, is concentrated unequally within those areas). It is also targeted at areas of designated socio-economic need, rather than being available to all. Nevertheless, Creative Partnerships undoubtedly represents a meaningful investment in the range of educational programmes on offer in the UK.

This 'mini-essay' attempts to situate Creative Partnerships in this context – as a national programme – in order to explore how we can best make sense of its effect by comparison with other 'equivalent' programmes. It will also tease out some of the problems inherent in evaluating a programme aiming to develop something as abstract as 'creative learning' – and with such a broad notion of educational change. The issues discussed here are important for two reasons. First we want to find a way to acknowledge Creative Partnerships' ambitions whilst not making over-exaggerated claims for what might be possible. Secondly, we need to have a common language and set of indicators that can describe the impact and effect of Creative Partnerships which does justice to the difference that it can fairly be said to make.

As an arts-based and/or creativity programme, it is difficult to find comparable initiatives from around the world. This is partly a question of definition (in that creative learning and arts education are different from each other); and partly a question of the difficulty of contrasting both educational systems and/or initiatives at this level.

Many national educational systems support arts-based initiatives. These can be organised in two categories. The first stem from a cultural agenda, where the arts activities revolve around dominant cultural forms in that country (e.g. Noh theatre in Japan, Folk music in Norway) and the curriculum aims to provide teaching in those artforms in order to promulgate the heritage and cultural values of that country. The second category is organised around learning, where arts education is valued for the distinctive range of skills and experiences arts curriculum and pedagogy offer. In practice, these two types of tradition are often elided and offered alongside each other and when school and teachers deliver programmes, this kind of distinction doesn't seem to matter so much. Indeed

it is a matter of some debate whether a cultural agenda can be absolutely distinguished from an attention to learning processes (and vice versa). However, evaluations of programmes need to focus on describing impact which identifies the primary objective of the programme.

Creative Partnerships may have begun as an arts education type of initiative, as implied in debates about the need to support that area of the curriculum outlined in the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) report which gave birth to the programme¹. It is located and managed by Arts Council England which, of course is a typical part of a cultural (as opposed to a learning) agenda, but nevertheless Creative Partnerships has shifted position over the last five years, and now defines its core mission in terms of developing creative learning. The national director of Creative Partnerships describes its current aims in these terms:

“[Creative Partnerships] is about creative education, by which I mean helping teachers teach more creatively, using creative journeys as educational drivers and developing creative skills in young people. Creative education will for me achieve a range of benefits like linguistic development, more confident students, more motivated students who are more committed to education, more emotionally literate students, more curious students, imaginative kids with lots of ideas, students with an improved capacity to take intelligent risks etc”. (Paul Collard, interview January 2006)

Creative Partnerships has made a very clear attempt to direct its resources and make its greatest impact in changing the quality of learning and supporting the development of creative thinking, as part of a contemporary interest in changing the quality of teaching and learning within the school system². This means that evaluation of the impact of Creative Partnerships needs to explore how programmes can be said to have made difference in this rather abstruse (and difficult to assess) arena.

Probably the most influential research in this area is the ‘Champions of Change – the Impact of the Arts on Learning’ project from the USA, produced in 2002³. This brought together a set of arguments and a range of research which, as the subtitle suggests, articulates the new agenda for the arts in education – as a traditionally neglected curriculum area with great possibility for affecting widespread change through the use of a demanding student-centred, culturally meaningful and relevant curriculum. The publication recounted a range of learning experiences, often organised in non-formal, out of school sites and often working with disadvantaged social groups, especially, in the context of North America, run-down inner cities. The key indicator of impact relied on an analysis of cognitive-linguistic abilities.

¹ <http://www.artscampaign.org.uk/campaigns/education/summary.html>

² for example, Jupp, R. Fairly, C. & Bentley, T. (2001) *What Learning Needs*. London: Demos

³ <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/champions/pdfs/ChampsReport.pdf>. For an example of recent post Champions of Change style research and mainstreaming of its message, see: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/education/lrcas-12.asp>

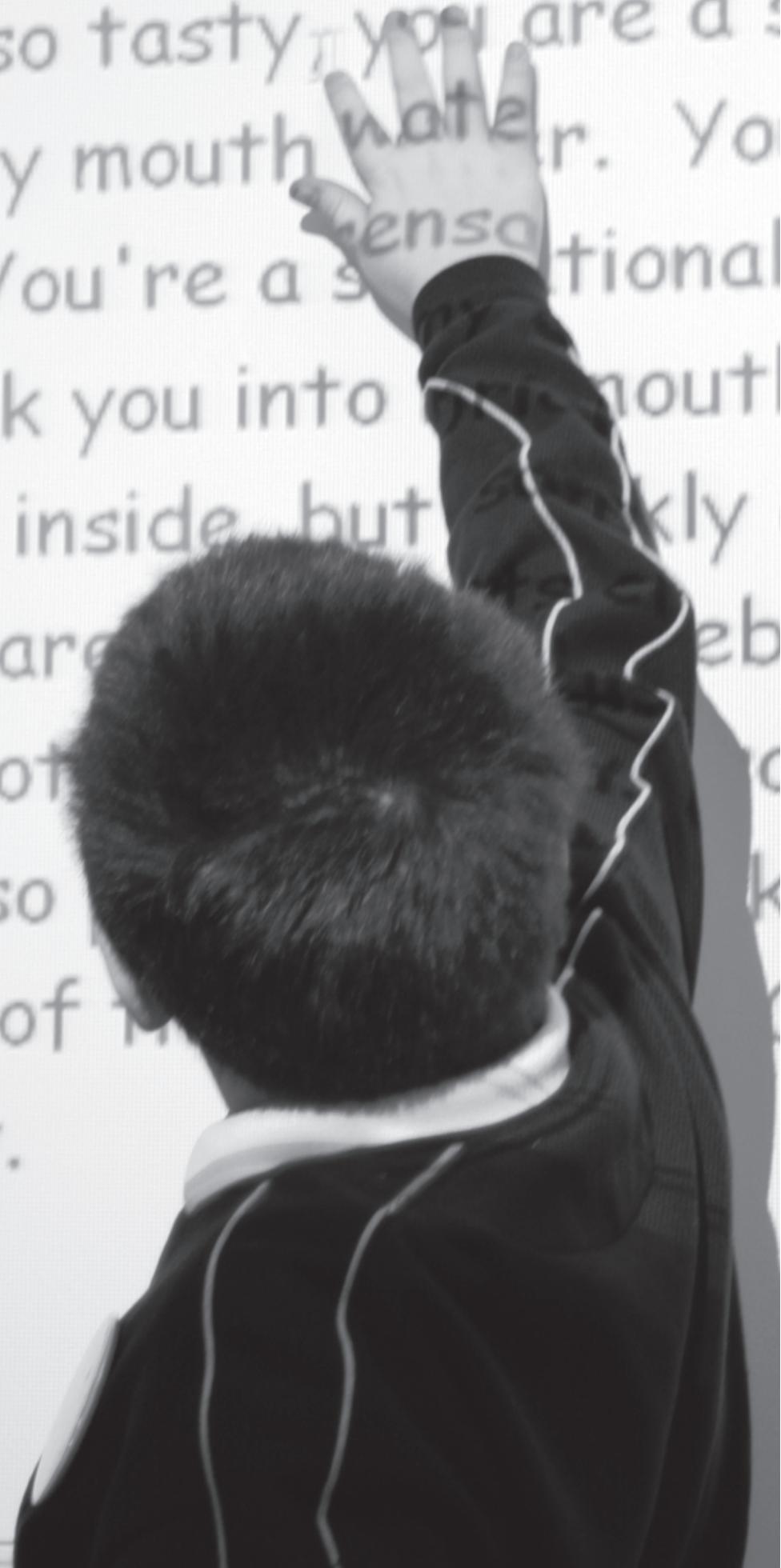
Put simply, the research showed how sustained participation in arts-learning activities could be shown to have a major (and lasting) impact on young people's use of language, which in turn impacted on raising performance in other related academic and social areas. It is this argument which bridges the two traditions of arts education/creativity learning described above, because although the authors of the Champions of Change report do not simply describe arts-learning as 'creative', they did characterise the processes they observed as being a special and important component of the curriculum. The research equally tracked how participation in arts projects had a major impact on engagement and motivation. This was deduced from showing how the young people involved attended projects and continued within the school system.

From a research point of view, the engagement indicator needs to be measured in terms of attendance, retention and other kinds of participation statistics. By contrast, evaluating the learning can only be deduced through detailed qualitative studies analysing young people's changing linguistic use. Importantly, the meaning of this data (across both areas), that is, its effect, can only really be assessed over a longer period of time. We need to see the long-term effect of such programmes before we can comment on their impact. Whilst this project clearly lay behind much of Creative Partnerships' ambition, and indeed (as will be discussed later) related to the programme's orientation towards socially and economically deprived regions, not all of these research indicators have been systematically built into the Creative Partnerships evaluation programme.

In a sense, this is sensible as there is no point in spending money on research which has already been proven, even if Creative Partnerships needs to demonstrate to funders that it is doing what it set out to do. The programme does collect a range of data to demonstrate engagement but it still needs time to show longer term effects – that is the transfer of Creative Partnerships experiences into other domains, either of the curriculum (showing enhanced achievement) or even in other kinds of social outputs, such as increased participation in education or greater success in employment.

Of course, this transfer isn't a simple process. The Champions of Change research does suggest that arts-learning is, broadly speaking, educational, in that it increases linguistic fluency and thinking, but this is not the same thing as saying that it will improve performance in assessments. Indeed, part of the point of the research was to show how performance can be demonstrated in other ways (here linguistic facility) than simple examination performance. Whilst there is a host of evidence to suggest that the participants in arts projects speak highly of these experiences (often in contrast to school), it is difficult to prove the 'exclusive' difference such experiences do play in their individual development.

Oh curious kiwi,
you are so tasty, you are a s
makes my mouth water. Yo
savour. You're a s...tional
slam dunk you into my mouth
clay-like inside, but...kly
never share...eb
You've got...o
you are so...k
smelling of...
you away.



These kinds of evaluation problems are exacerbated by the fact that Creative Partnerships isn't a national programme like the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. Not only was Creative Partnerships established deliberately to complement the standards-based approach to improving education, it is almost a contradiction in terms to evaluate it by the same criteria as the approach it aims to challenge. There are also a host of practical problems facing the evaluation of Creative Partnerships as a national programme. As noted above it is really an aggregation of local or regional programmes. These are very much directed by local directors who have to maximise local resources and, of course, be steered by local needs. This means in practice that it is very difficult to compare or contrast one Creative Partnerships region against another. In some areas, programmes are at whole school level and at others located in the community. Arts education specialists and the whole cultural industries infrastructure are unevenly distributed across the country and sometimes Creative Partnerships activity is at the level of small groups of children, or a whole class, at others, curriculum innovation and so on.

Unlike the Excellence in Cities⁴ initiative or even Education Action Zones⁵ where a raft of joined up government initiatives focus on improving standards, measured by classic indicators like examination performance or even attendance, Creative Partnerships is far too thinly and unevenly spread to be evaluated against those sets of criteria. Again, the tendency to produce evaluations over a short period of time works against ambitions to affect long-term structural change through a creative programme of this kind.

As noted, Creative Partnerships does have an interest in using arts-learning programmes as a mechanism to affect wider social change, especially to affect greater social inclusion. Here, it might seem to have much in common with a programme like Sure Start⁶ which (like the standards-driven Excellence in Cities or Education Action Zones, mentioned above) are joined up initiatives aiming to drive up performance in a region. However Creative Partnerships is no way comparable (in resource terms) to these kind of comparators and despite a concern with collecting data reflecting social impact, this is, of course, only one outcome amongst many.

⁴ <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR675a.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/studysupport/impact/eazs/>

⁶ <http://www.surestart.gov.uk/research/evaluations/ness/latestreports/>

The accounts of Education Action Zones do report back across a series of targeted outcomes. These can vary from attendance to, say, the use of white boards in developing interesting lessons. In a sense Creative Partnerships is most like this kind of programme. Albeit on a much smaller scale it can show a series of effects across a variety of interests. Like that programme Creative Partnerships' main thrust has been to model inventions and change, as a large and serious kind of arts-learning lab. The reports it has produced so far read best in this way, as possible options in the changing landscape of educational reform. Like Excellence in Cities or ConneXions⁷, one of Creative Partnerships' most enduring impacts has been on how partnership delivery, helping schools, teachers and creative practitioners develop new and sustainable models of teaching and learning, are in themselves important outcomes for education professions. Here, the reports describing delivery arrangements are themselves significant effects of the programme – as they seek to influence how teaching might best be arranged to support creative learning.

Set alongside the big reforming programmes which characterise New Labour's mode of government, Creative Partnerships is, despite its £146m, not an enormous project. It is spread thinly across regions and even within them. Its impact has been felt not just on direct beneficiaries, students and young people, (although, of course, all programmes, have offered young people direct experiences), but on professionals, teachers, and the creative sector. Here the accounts of practice have articulated a range of issues and aim to impact on how, where and when, learning might be more imaginatively provided. Like many standards-based initiatives it is important to show value for money and reach.

However, it is how we can describe the intangible benefits of Creative Partnerships that may be of more importance in the years to come. Engaging reluctant learners, stimulating and inspiring all students and developing creative potential are clearly difficult to measure, and certainly difficult to prove over a brief period of two or three years. Comparing Creative Partnerships to other national programmes is useful, but such a contrast also exposes its experimental, its innovative and its varied nature.

⁷ <http://www.connexions.gov.uk/partnerships/index.cfm?fuseaction=content&CategoryID=3&ContentID=171>

Perhaps a better kind of comparison might be the 'New Basics' reform still being implemented in the Australian State of Queensland⁸, or those being carried out in the Canadian State of Quebec. These states are trying to define whole school, whole system kinds of reform (in the way that school reform in the United States is often carried out at school or district level). Some of the educational aspirations to create more dynamic and contemporary learning environments, of focusing on engaging those traditionally failed by the school system, resonate strongly with Creative Partnerships' interest in a contemporary vision of arts-learning. Their scale is greater than Creative Partnerships and the research from these projects cannot be compared to the evaluation of Creative Partnerships but Creative Partnerships' most enduring legacy may be to produce enough accounts of practice which describe meaningful models of change.

The aim of this piece was to lay out some of the challenges facing Creative Partnerships as it tries to find a language and an evidence base that captures its successes. Although people in this kind of work often demonstrate more passion and commitment than is common in other educational endeavours, Creative Partnerships wants to be honest and take these challenges on the chin. This means that we need help and ingenuity from the best and most imaginative members of the research community, as well as finding ways to weave together evidence which can accurately describe the full range of effects of the programme. This is not easy and it will also require new kinds of theory to capture the full dimension of impact. However if Creative Partnerships makes the kind of difference its proponents claim it does, then this challenge will be well worth taking up.

⁸ <http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/newbasics/>

Photography Credits

Pg 5 Creative Partnerships Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham (BDR): Roughwood Primary School worked with a “poet in residence”, Matt Black. Photographer: Gavin Joynt.

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