

## **Policy Review: Childlike Joy – Participation and Perspectives on the Arts of Irish Youth**

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## Abstract

This review examines the impact of arts and cultural participation on the well-being of Irish youth, focusing on three key reports: *The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon Report on Children, Young People and the Arts*; *Engagement in culture, arts, heritage and sport by young people in Northern Ireland: Findings from the Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey 2022*; and the *Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Creative Schools Partnership Evaluation Report 2022*. These documents highlight the diverse ways in which arts engagement enhances the lives of young people, and how children and young people perceive the role of the arts in their lives. The findings all confirm the necessity of integrating young voices into policy frameworks and the power of community-driven arts and culture initiatives, and the need for sustained support and innovation in nurturing arts and culture for the next generation.

**Keywords:** arts participation; youth well-being; cultural engagement; arts education.

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## Policy Review: Childlike Joy – Participation and Perspectives on the Arts of Irish Youth

Eleanor Q. Neil

### Introduction

In Ireland, as indeed across the world, we are seeing an increasingly anxious, depressed, and isolated population of young people. In the Republic of Ireland, data on youth mental well-being remains somewhat spotty, but the US and the UK have both seen significant increases in reports of mental ill-health that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Lynch et al., 2022). Furthermore, the recovery appears to be slower within this population and the social ill effects of COVID-19 are still being felt most acutely by those between the ages of 10 and 24 (McGorry et al., 2022).

It is likely unnecessary to convince the readers of this journal of the importance of arts and culture, but what exactly is the sector's role in addressing this bleak prognosis? To begin with, furnishing policymakers and the public with clearly defined data on these issues is essential. The three documents reviewed here approach the need for data collection differently and focus on different aspects of youth engagement with arts and culture.

The first document, *The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon Report on Children, Young People and the Arts*, analyses how art makes children in the Republic of Ireland feel, the types of creative activities they enjoy, and the environments in which they are participating in these activities. The second, *Engagement in culture, arts, heritage and sport by young people in Northern Ireland:*

*Findings from the Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey 2022*, examines youth participation in culture and heritage, primarily outside of the formal school setting. The final document, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's *Creative Schools Partnership Evaluation Report (2022)*, outlines the success of a specific programme that paired schools with practising artists in areas of Northern Ireland particularly affected by sectarianism and economic depression.

Each of these documents presents something different, but the overall picture they paint is that children and young people benefit enormously from participation in and engagement with arts and culture. Furthermore, these documents outline how the enrichment and increased self-esteem and self-expression that young people experience are then conveyed outward into their communities and are important generators of social cohesion and increased community vitality. In turn, creative and enjoyable outlets and supportive environments have direct, positive impacts on the mental ill-health and disconnect affecting young people across Ireland.

### **Arts Council/ *An Chomhairle Ealaíon*. Report on Children, Young People, and the Arts**

An important aspect of the Arts Council/ *An Chomhairle Ealaíon* Strategy (2016–2025) *Making Great Art Work* is the planning and provision of creative arts education and participation. The Arts Council has therefore published two new policy documents entitled: *Ag Fás leis na hEalaíona / Growing with the Arts: Arts Council Policy for Children and Young People's Arts (2023a)*. *The Report on Children, Young People and the Arts (2023b)*. This represents a key dataset from which they have developed the contents of this policy, and its accompanying *Plan for Children and Young People's Arts 2023-2025*.

For *The Report on Children, Young People and the Arts*, the Arts Council interviewed and collected data from 676 children from a diversity of backgrounds, including underprivileged and minority groups across Ireland. To gain a sense of children's changing relationship with the arts over time, this report collected data from children as young as 3 and as old as 19. The report clearly demonstrates the importance that the arts have in children's lives. The majority of young people reported that their creative activities (the types of which are impressively diverse), improve their mood and their overall emotional outlook. Leaving aside the critical role that creative practice has, especially in early years development and educational practice, this report documents that participating in the arts also brings children and young people joy and a sense of calm. This alone would indicate the importance of arts and creative outlets for all children but held alongside the important developmental milestones and educational benefits this study clearly indicates that creative practice within school settings is vital.

An interesting inclusion in this report is research on eight children with autism. While addressing children with additional needs' response to their creative activities and art environment is crucial – both to understand their needs and the potential of artistic practice – such a small sample size means that it is unclear exactly how representative they can be of children with autism overall. Furthermore, there is no indication from the report of how autism is manifesting for these children: where these children fall upon the Autism Disorder Spectrum is likely to influence all manner of ways in which they engage with the arts, and the small sample size is unlikely to give a good snapshot of children with autism's perspective broadly. It is also interesting that no other

developmental or physical needs were examined within this report, while autism was singled out. It is not meant to be a report on learning and developmental differences, but the inclusion of one specifically begs the question of why others were not included. Compare this to the *Creative Schools Partnership Evaluation Report* (to be discussed below) which simply listed numerically how many children needed additional educational support within each school, giving a better indication of how those children are integrated into the school and any other intersectional indicators for why they may (or may not) be struggling.

Another key point in *The Report on Children, Young People and the Art* is what *children* want done to increase participation in the arts. At first glance, the statistics that most children and young people in the 8-12 group (73.8%) and the 12-19 group (65.3%) primarily participate in the arts at school, and that 21.9% of children felt that schoolwork was a barrier to their participation appear contradictory to each other. Furthermore, when asked for input on future initiatives to increase participation both groups again said school-based arts activities more than any other avenue. This suggests that the students see the creative arts as an embedded feature of their formal education, less than an extracurricular activity and that they want more of it in this setting.

This report's impact on the *Ag Fás leis na hEalaíona / Growing with the Arts: Arts Council Policy for Children and Young People's Arts* and the Arts Council's *Plan for Children and Young People's Arts 2023-2025* is clear. The *Growing with the Arts* (2023, p.21) policy document states explicitly, "The Arts Council will continue to seek and listen to the views of children and young people throughout the implementation of this policy and plan [...]" and the *Plan for Children and Young People* (2023, p.10), responds to the point above, and affirms a commitment to "use our influence to expand access to arts provision for children and young people outside school." It remains to be seen whether these commitments will have practical outcomes or the desired effects. However, as an indicator of institutional priorities, it is heartening that at the very least the Arts Council is discussing publicly the ways in which to improve inclusive practices through direct dialogue with children and young people.

### **NISRA/Department for Communities. Engagement in culture, arts, heritage and sport by young people in Northern Ireland: Findings from the Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey 2022**

This report is derived from the school-based Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey (YPBAS) 2022. YPBAS is a survey carried out among 11-16-year-olds and asks a wide variety of questions aimed at gaining insight into young people's behaviour and lifestyles. This report specifically focuses on young people's responses to the questions focused on arts, heritage, and sports participation within Northern Ireland. This report extrapolates findings for the Northern Irish population aged 11-16 from the participation of 74 schools and uses random class sampling from that. While no sampling method is flawless, it is worth exploring whether the type of classrooms that have the time to complete a 20-page questionnaire are also those which are more likely to already have a robust programme of sports, arts, etc. This report does highlight pupils who qualify for free lunch (meaning that their household income is below £14,000 per annum), which may suggest a more diverse cross-section of Northern Irish youth being surveyed. However, the report

does not record the overall number of these students surveyed – only the percentage of their participation in arts and heritage compared to the overall percentages.

The findings in this report show that across the board participation in sports and the arts is extremely high in Northern Ireland, at 98% and 91% respectively. However, it must be said that this report's definition of "engagement" is vague, as it makes a distinction between "attended arts events," "participated in art activities," and "engaged with the arts" – which could all be counted in a single event. Nonetheless, a 91% engagement with the arts by young people is impressive. Unfortunately, museum and science centre visits were at their lowest observed trend since 2007, and down to 53% from 69% in 2019. Public libraries have also continued their downward usage trend, with only 43% of respondents reporting having visited a public or mobile library; used a public library website; attended a library event; or utilised free downloads of eBooks, audiobooks, etc. However, visits to historic buildings, gardens, or monuments; or towns with historic character have mostly remained steady at 73%.

The primary distinction reported between student demographics was whether they qualified for free lunches or not and there is no discussion of additional learning supports or other demographics. Economic status is an important aspect in identifying the contributing factors in participation and demonstrates, perhaps unsurprisingly, that those in receipt of free lunches are consistently less likely to participate in the arts and heritage. What was noticeable in this report was that children used public library services equally, regardless of their financial status. So, while usage overall is down, it suggests that the services both active (such as lending books) and passive (as a third space) are viewed with equal importance regardless of socioeconomic circumstance. An important demographic that is missing from this report is religion and ethnicity, which seems to be a noticeable gap in a document discussing cultural activities in Northern Ireland (and is included in the YPBAS). Furthermore, considering the prevalence of historic sites, it would be interesting and worthwhile to know which historic buildings, etc. are being visited and by whom. It is not hard to imagine that that may be dictated, at least in part, by a school's religious denomination or conversely by attempts to visit sites that can be interpreted as non-partisan (Durrer et al., 2022, p.5).

### **Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Creative Schools Partnership Evaluation Report 2022**

The Creative Schools Partnership (CSP) matches artistic practitioners with schools identified through the Northern Irish Executive's Urban Villages (UV) initiative, which "is designed to improve good relations and develop thriving places" in communities most affected by sectarian tensions and economic depression (The Arts Council of Northern Ireland 2018). Schools have long been recognised as a conduit for community engagement by practitioners in all areas of expertise and CSP seeks to enrich the lives of students and their wider community networks through the arts by providing local focuses for the projects. Each school participates in their own unique project, but they are focused on the school's local area. Each project had a professional artist who facilitated the projects, working in tandem with teachers and school staff, and with a particular focus on strengthening the ties between students, schools, and the local community.

The wide variety of CSP projects speaks to the level of attention paid to the needs of the community, the school, and the students' interests. Each year, the participating schools undertook a unique partnership programme, focused on different creative media – ceramics, screenwriting and film production, photography, creative writing, and screen printing to name only a few. The deep, ongoing consultation with schools has helped to identify and provide opportunities for the students and staff that may not have otherwise been available. This included visits to arts and cultural venues and the possibility of working in small groups where participants' voices were more easily heard.

CSP has been running since the 2017/2018 school year and in 2022, an evaluative report conducted by Annabel Jackson Associates, Ltd. analysed the overall outcomes and impacts of the project to date. This included significant discussions of the consequences of the COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures, which had enormous effects on students' attendance, participation, and overall performance. Schools also reported that students returned with lower self-confidence and lower communication skills and that the schools themselves did not feel supported in focusing upon the attendant mental health concerns of their staff and students post-pandemic, citing an intense focus upon returning test scores to the pre-pandemic levels. Faced with this growing crisis, however, CSP has thrived. The programme allows a space for student-centred approaches, a fostering of creativity, and the attendant positive outcomes such as community cohesion, increased empathy, and personal growth. This is borne out in the numbers — the schools were overall able to return to roughly the same level of CSP participation as pre-pandemic, indicating not only the impact of the programme, but also the recognition of that importance by schools, students, and the overall learning ecosystem.

Indeed, the determination of the 2022 Evaluation Report is that CSP has been an incredible success and should be expanded. The report is especially clear that an essential aspect of this project is its partnerships with Urban Villages, the Education Authority, and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. This tripartite support system has proven to be productive and innovative, and the 2022 Evaluation report reflects the CSP's clear-eyed approach to engaging with communities that have been burdened with sectarian violence and economic hardship. Without this direct approach, how can we, as a society and a community, address these issues, whether through art, education, or any other avenue? If we do not have a comprehensive and realistic grasp of the intricate issues faced by these communities, we cannot begin to tackle their solutions. It is therefore promising and hopeful for the future to see such a thoughtful, student-centered approach, that is so deeply and effectively rooted in communities and dedicated to the well-being of those communities overall.

## **Conclusion**

From all three of these reports, it is apparent that arts and culture remain integral parts of the lives of young people on the island of Ireland. Not only are they participating in the arts and heritage sector at a high rate, but they are also reporting high rates of positive impact on their well-being and their educational experiences. In the Republic of Ireland, the Arts Council is translating these reports into policy with increased inclusion of the voices of children and young people in these

processes and a keen eye to the protection of the creative aspects of the Irish youth experience. This is similarly apparent in the CSP projects in Northern Ireland, and the YPBAS survey which reveal that an express desire to visit and experience culture and heritage remains high in the youth population.

Together, these three reports paint a picture of Irish youth who are interested in and moved by artistic and cultural experiences. It demonstrates that in the face of a rising mental health crisis, the arts and culture sector is playing vital roles in fostering the well-being of children and young people across Ireland. Participation in these initiatives is still facing socioeconomic barriers, but acknowledging these barriers and understanding their scope is the first step in creating more inclusive and diverse access, which we see explicitly in programmes such as CSP. Especially in this current geopolitical and social climate which appears increasingly intolerant and devaluing of artistic and creative pursuits, seeing governmental initiatives such as these answer their young people with sensitivity and creativity is something worth celebrating.

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