



Research Summary

For Arts Council England

**Raising the standard of work by,
with and for children and young
people: research and consultation
to understand the principles of
quality**

Pippa Lord

Caroline Sharp

Ben Lee

Louise Cooper

Hilary Grayson

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Introduction

Arts Council England has a strategic focus on achieving great art for everyone (Arts Council England, 2010 and 2011a) and a specific goal around ensuring high quality arts experiences for children and young people. It is within this context that the Arts Council commissioned NFER and Shared Intelligence to examine the values or principles that are considered important in creating quality in arts and culture *by, with* and *for* children and young people¹.

The work had two main aims. First, to reveal and debate the principles of quality which the arts and cultural sector believe should underpin work *by, with* and *for* children and young people. Second, to examine how these might be supported, measured or demonstrated by reviewing existing frameworks and tools in this area.

Thus there were three main objectives:

- Research and analysis of existing quality and outcomes frameworks
- Consultation with arts and cultural sector specialists to explore the principles and values of quality which guide their work, and the approaches that individual practitioners or organisations take to ensure these are achieved
- Analysis of the findings of the research and consultation to produce a detailed report which makes explicit the principles of quality which underpin arts and culture projects.

The team analysed 31 existing quality frameworks relevant to work with children and young people in the arts and cultural sector. We also conducted telephone interviews with 31 arts and cultural practitioners from a range of organisations. A Quality Seminar was held in December 2011 which was attended by around 200 arts and cultural practitioners. An online blog with posts by 12 contributors attracted 2,200 visits.

Seven principles in improving quality

From the review of frameworks and the consultations, the research team identified seven common principles in achieving quality in work *by, with* and *for* children and young people:

- 1. Striving for excellence**
- 2. Being authentic**
- 3. Being exciting, inspiring and engaging**
- 4. Ensuring a positive, child-centred experience**
- 5. Actively involving children and young people**

¹ See the full report by Lord et al. (2012) for further details

6. **Providing a sense of personal progression**
7. **Developing a sense of ownership and belonging.**

In addition, an underpinning principle, vital to the whole process of quality improvement, is to consider the effect of the work and how this is demonstrated. This means completing the cycle of planning, monitoring, review and reflection, to gain a better understanding of the outcomes and impact of the work for children and young people.

Drivers for improving quality

There are a number of purposes that could be fulfilled by efforts to articulate and demonstrate quality. These include:

- self-improvement
- recognising excellence
- comparing organisations/activities against a common standard
- providing evidence of impact to demonstrate value.

Our consultation with the arts and cultural sector showed a strong interest in self-improvement in particular.

Demonstrating outcomes and quality

Our research revealed a range of outcomes associated with arts and cultural work *by*, *with* and *for* children and young people. Whilst outcomes from individual projects and programmes vary according to aims and desired effects, it was possible to identify some common categories of outcomes for children and young people. These are:

- Artistic skills, knowledge and understanding
- Attitudes and values towards the arts
- Activity, involvement and progression in the arts
- Personal, social and communication skills
- Health and wellbeing
- Aspirations, career and life pathways.

A range of tools and approaches are suggested in the frameworks for measuring these outcomes, for example, using questionnaires, feedback sheets, checklists, focus groups, blogs, observations, and so on. However, there is little detail given on some of these outcomes and the focus tends to be on short-term outcomes rather than longer-term impact.

Approaches to demonstrating quality also vary. Different kinds of approaches seem appropriate for different functions. When demonstrating self-improvement, self-evaluation and reflection tools are suggested. For achieving a standard or an award, there are frameworks requiring specific evidence against criteria. If benchmarking organisations' activities and work, indicators of success may be used, alongside moderation, and peer or external assessment. And for demonstrating the value of the sector, a range of project and organisational-level evaluation is needed, focusing both on participation and on outcomes.

Gaps and issues

Our exploration of quality frameworks and sector-engagement highlighted a number of gaps. These included:

- detailed definitions and applications of the core principles of quality
- detailed distinctions in work *by*, *with* and *for* children and young people
- principles and measures concerning the quality of the art itself
- specificity and differentiation by age group of children and young people
- specificity and differentiation according to the needs of particular individuals and groups
- standard guidance on measuring outcomes robustly, and on demonstrating quality.

A number of 'sticky issues' for further discussion remain, including:

- How far do quality principles apply across the sector?
- What are the drivers and barriers to engaging in quality improvement?
- How can the barriers faced by particular practitioners (e.g. those producing work 'for' children and young people; individuals and small organisations) best be addressed?
- If self-improvement is the key driver, how do we ensure that the process is rigorous and achieves the desired improvement in quality?
- How can the cost and capacity issues in improving quality be addressed?
- Which outcomes are of primary interest, and which demonstrate that quality has indeed been experienced or achieved?
- To what extent are benchmarking/recognition, inspection and cross-sector comparison necessary or desirable parts of a quality improvement system? What other developments are needed to support these ends?
- How far do others (e.g. consumers, other funders, venues) relate to the quality principles being espoused by the sector?

Conclusions and next steps

This work is designed to provide a starting point for further development. Where does Arts Council England go with this? What can the sector do? What else is needed to support the process?

Defining quality or 'what excellence looks like' in work *by, with and for* children and young people is inherently challenging. However, this research has been able to identify some key principles which appear to be common to most types of work. These now need to be further considered and applied in practice, using the available frameworks and best practice examples as a starting point. There is an appetite for developing greater peer support and challenge and sector-led professional development, with ongoing conversations about quality and a stronger culture of rigour and challenge. The voice of children and young people themselves needs to be heard the quality debate.

Arts Council England's road map for this work will include a continuation of the sector-led conversation started here, and supporting the debate in all its guises.

Key recommended next steps for Arts Council England are:

- continue engaging with practitioners to develop and test the quality principles
- develop the Arts Council's relationship with the sector so leading practitioners become advocates for quality
- support knowledge-sharing among practitioners (including helping practitioners develop skills to provide 'challenge' to one another)
- ultimately, help ensure that all arts and cultural providers supporting work *by, with and for* children and young people are committed to monitoring quality and self-improvement.

References

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**National Foundation for
Educational Research**
The Mere, Upton Park,
Slough, Berks SL1 2DQ

T: 01753 574123
F: 01753 691632
E: enquiries@nfer.ac.uk

www.nfer.ac.uk

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