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Creating a difference – a role for the arts in addressing child wellbeing in conflict-affected areas

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ABSTRACT

Background: Details findings from a project on the potential for arts activities and art therapy to support the mental health and wellbeing of children living in Kashmir.

Methods: The intervention engaged 30 school children over the course of one year who produced various forms of artwork and performances. In this paper, we report on project impacts, drawing on some of our qualitative measures including observations and interviews.

Results: Our research details impacts and improvements in areas of emotional expression, belonging, and agency. We also found an important role for schools to create safe, secure, and caring spaces to allow students to express themselves and work through traumatic feelings in a non-judgemental way.

Conclusions: School-based arts interventions can play an important role in the mental health and wellbeing of children. Critical here, however, are dedicated space, time, and resources to provide a supportive environment and to sustain activity in long-term.

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Introduction and background

According to Save the Children (2021), well over 400 million children currently live in conflict zones, twice the number from 1995. Moreover, due to the protracted nature of many of these conflicts, some of these children have lived their entire lives under the threat of violence and the context of war. Children suffer direct impacts from conflict including injuries and death, sexual exploitation and violence, displacement, unlawful soldier recruitment, and psychological trauma (Bahgat et al., 2018; Bendavid et al., 2021; Kadir et al., 2018). Along with disruptions to social, economic, and political structures, these experiences can have lasting consequences, hindering child development long after a conflict has ended (Kadir et al., 2019). Conflict contributes to poor mental health in

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children (Charlson et al., 2019; Kousar et al., 2022; Lee-Koo, 2018) and exposure to violence and trauma can result in behavioural difficulties (e.g. risk taking and disobedience at school or home), anxiety, depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and many other emotional and developmental problems (Dimitry, 2012; Lancet, 2019; Slone & Mann, 2016).

Kashmir is a contested region and conflict-affected area partly controlled by India, Pakistan, and China. In this paper, we focus on the Kashmir Valley, a region situated within Indian-controlled territory. Most children in Kashmir have lived their entire lives in a context of violence and unrest. India and Pakistan have fought three wars over Kashmir since independence from British rule and partition in 1947. Furthermore, since 1989, renewed internal resistance to Indian rule has been characterised by political unrest and violence which has led to thousands of deaths and disappearances and an almost continual state of crisis and conflict (Bhat, 2019). Kashmir is now recognised as one of the most militarised areas of the world with somewhere between 500,000 and 800,000 soldiers deployed at varying times (Mathur, 2019). In addition to militarisation, life in Kashmir can include demonstrations and protests, uprisings, stone-pelting, curfews, harassment, and mistreatment including detention and torture (Ashai & O'Brien, 2021; Bhat, 2019; Rashid, 2012). This almost constant exposure to violence and insecurity is having significant adverse effects on Kashmiri children. Recent research and studies have shown that the mental health of young people in Kashmir is in crisis (Dar & Deb, 2020; Firdous, 2015; Khan & Deb, 2016; Mushtaq et al., 2016; Shah & Mishra, 2021). Moreover, mental health facilities and resources available for Kashmiri children are limited (Paul & Khan, 2019; Shoib & Arafat, 2020). As such, the ability to manage this crisis is severely constrained. This is not atypical for conflict-affected areas. Indeed, Charlson et al. (2019, p. 240) argue that due to the vast global population of people living in conflict settings and the serious mental health issues associated with living in these places, there is an "urgent need to implement scalable mental health interventions".

Art, child mental health, and conflict

There is widespread interest in the use of art and creative activities to address wellbeing (Laitinen et al., 2020; Redmond et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2021). The Indian Subcontinent, in particular, has a rich tradition of healing arts that includes music, dance, theatre, and yoga (among other cultural art forms and practices). Venkit et al. (2016) review some of ways in which these art traditions are being employed for specific mental health and therapeutic benefits. They note that while such interventions are growing in acceptance, there remains a need for further of evidence of benefits, training, and accreditation programmes to widen participation across India.

Globally, there is also expanding interest in the use of art, creative activities, and art therapy in the context of conflict, particularly for those who have experienced trauma (Lenette & Sunderland, 2016; McCormack & Henry, 2017; Pavlicevic & Impey, 2013; Soulsby et al., 2021). Findings from recent studies (Morison et al., 2021; Van Westrhenen et al., 2019) suggest that involvement in arts interventions may support increased expressive ability, resilience, and a shift in an individual's sense of self-worth. However, the presence of ongoing hardships and traumatic experiences could be limiting the potential for measurable improvements in wellbeing. In other words, long-standing and enduring

conflict, such as is the case in Kashmir, will likely influence outcomes and the relative success of arts interventions as these are not conducted in isolation, but rather within daily life.

For children, schools and school-based relationships are critical for wellbeing and mental health (Berkowitz, 2020; Constandinides et al., 2011; Gao et al., 2015; Moula et al., 2021; Way et al., 2007). Particularly in the context of India where mental health services are uneven and under-resourced (Amin & Khan, 2009; Shoib & Arafat, 2020), schools can "increase access to suitable interventions over and above existing mental healthcare systems" (Parikh et al., 2019, p. 2). Ul Hassan et al. (2017) argue that schools in areas of conflict must be engaged in promoting the mental health of children. They highlight an opportunity to develop individual resilience and wellbeing through a range of psychosocial interventions which include being involved in art, sport, and other activities that contribute to a supportive and caring environment. However, in Kashmir, there are significant barriers and challenges to the implementation of such programmes including, for example, funding and training. Schools must also address the lack of awareness and knowledge about mental health and the stigma that can be associated with involvement in wellbeing activities. Further, mental health programming can sometimes be seen as a distraction or less important than the conventional school curriculum (Parikh et al., 2019).

Our paper is situated in this context of school-based arts interventions for child wellbeing in areas of conflict. Within this setting, we set out our two main objectives. First, we respond to Ul Hassan et al. (2017) and others who call for more study and research on the ability of psychosocial interventions to lead to improvements in mental health and emotional expression in children living in conflict-affected areas. Our second objective is to expand the evidence specifically regarding children in Kashmir, an under-researched population. We begin to address this absence by drawing on the qualitative elements of our research to bring the experiences of Kashmiri children into academic research. The central research question that we explore in this paper is: "to what extent can arts interventions support the emotional expression, sense of belonging, and agency of children living in areas of long-term conflict?"

Study design

The intervention was co-designed by an academic team, artists and art therapists, and a school in the Kashmir Valley. The academic team included six individuals in the areas of Child and Public Health; International Relations; Psychology; Visual Arts (two academics); and Participatory Research. Reflecting the challenges of working during COVID-19 restrictions and in an active, long-standing conflict area, the academics based in the United Kingdom (UK) did not travel to the project site. Rather, Indian and Kashmir-based artists and researchers were employed to help design the research, deliver project activities, and conduct fieldwork. To support ethical relations, the team discussed and reflected on positionality, identity, and the inherent power imbalances associated with global north/global south research (Sultana, 2007). Efforts were subsequently made to shift leadership away from conventional "principle investigator" roles and towards Indian project members in leadership positions. Further, we broadly situated our research in a model of socially engaged arts practice (reference withheld for anonymity). This framing positions

artists as key partners in research design and delivery. It also recognises that "artists need to critically engage with the big issues of the day – ageing populations, social isolation, addictive behaviours, substance abuse, obesity and mental ill health" (Parkinson & White, 2013, p. 186). As such, detailed design of the intervention was led by the Indian-based arts team which included a trained art therapist (artist 1) and a socially engaged arts practitioner (artist 2) who specialised in puppetry (several others were involved in various project components including a local visual artist, a puppeteer, a musician, an illustrator, a writer/storyteller, and a dance artist). This combination meant that the interventions were situated within a *trauma informed* understanding of the social and cultural context of youth life in Kashmir and a performative framing of the arts activities (Field, 2016; Karcher, 2017).

Our study took place in an area of Kashmir where there have been regular violent clashes between the Indian military and militant groups. These include protests and stone pelting, lockdowns, and curfews, as well as more intense episodes including a suicide attack in February of 2019 that resulted in 41 deaths. In August of 2019, the Indian government abrogated Article 370 of the Indian constitution which had provided a level of autonomy to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Subsequently, the region was placed in lockdown (this included, strict curfews, closure of public services such as schools, restricting access to hospitals, suspension of mobile phone, landlines and internet services, and other restrictions), while many individuals accused of separatist or pro-Pakistani ties, as well as politicians and journalists, were detained or arrested. Lockdown conditions continued (and were renewed) as COVID-19 cases rose in India.

The intervention sought to provide children living in these conditions with opportunities for expression and improved wellbeing through the arts. Creative activities and arts interventions were conducted across one academic year (August 2020 to August 2021) and allowed participants to conduct work both individually and in groups. In total, 30 students participated in the programme (21 girls and 9 boys) across the ages 12 to 15. Most students volunteered to participate while others were encouraged to join by the school administration, based on recommendations from teachers and staff. The programme, which was integrated into the school curriculum and day (i.e. it was not "extra" and took place during school hours) included activities such as painting, writing, sculpting, puppetry, movement, and music. An arts room – the makers' lab – was set aside for project activities. However, a great deal of the artwork moved out into hallways and other spaces in the school.

Arts activities were framed by the use of metaphors designed to engage the children in non-threatening, non-judgemental ways (e.g. participants were not explicitly asked to speak to specific traumatic experiences). Central to this framing was the "butterfly" metaphor which was used to weave together disparate narratives and help participants explore the idea of journeys and transformation. The butterfly enabled participants to explore their own journeys, emotions, and sense of self in a non-threatening way.

Due to varying political and COVID-19 restrictions, activities were delivered both virtually and in-person. Participant involvement took place in small groups delivered twice a week for an hour each session, with more intense periods of work taking place in the run-up to performances and exhibitions at the end of the year. Arts programming was delivered predominately in English (the school teaches in English) with some components taking place in Hindi and Urdu (the local team included members fluent in these

languages). Following a series of discussions and moderations to project methodologies, ethical approval was given by the lead university.[1] We also worked carefully with the partner school to ensure our practices were consistent with their safeguarding protocols.

Evaluative methods

At the outset of the project, we outlined key contextual issues to better understand the challenges facing the school and students. This included the most recent political situation as well as the impacts of long-standing conflict and uncertainty on children. The school had identified several difficulties facing their students including an inability to focus on studies, deflection into militant narratives, risky behaviour, absence of agency and voice, frustration, lack of motivation, hopelessness, depression, self-harm and dissociative behaviours, and evidence of PTSD symptoms. Next, we set out a series of ambitions and change-oriented objectives drawing on team experience, review of literature on the arts and wellbeing, and discussions with school staff. Project objectives focused largely on supporting children's agency and ability to express themselves through the arts and to facilitate a wider sense of belonging. Further, we hoped to see improvements in motivation, behaviour, and attention and reductions in anxiety and depression. We then established a range of evaluation protocols to understand project impacts and to measure outcomes. In this article, we discuss some of the qualitative elements employed to understand how the activities impacted emotional expression, agency, and belonging amongst participants – three areas where we hoped to see positive change.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews are widely used for gathering data in the social sciences. They are a flexible and conversation-orientated tool for gathering data that, while drawing on a guide of questions, involve listening and reflecting to interviewees and adapting to particular responses (Tracy, 2019). Short (approximately 10–15 minute-long) semi-structured interviews with student participants took place twice during the project (n = 11; n = 19) in the makers' lab. At both instances, the children were asked to reflect on their involvement in the project generally (what they liked and disliked) and how it had impacted them. They were also asked to reflect on aspects of their artwork and to explore some of the emotions associated with both the process of making the art and the expression of meanings found within their work. Researchers on the project also interviewed the arts and school support team to understand process issues and challenges, to reflect on progress, and to track child involvement and wellbeing (n = 5). Formal interviews were supported by regular team meetings and informal dialogue and discussion. After interviews were transcribed, researchers went through a process of data familiarisation which involved reading and listening to the data (Creswell, 2007). Subsequently, they were analysed thematically through simple codes related to our three main evaluative themes: emotional expression; belonging; and agency. These themes were set out in advance of the analysis and reflected our interest in examining the effectiveness of particular intervention objectives.

Observation

Observation methods in health and wellbeing research settings can provide unique and rich insights into participant behaviour (Morgan et al., 2017). Observation methods were used to understand the effectiveness and impacts of arts interventions and to identify ongoing programme needs and/or changes. Critical to observation methods is the ability to record the actions of participants accurately and systematically (Mays & Pope, 1995). To facilitate this process, the team developed session record sheets (SRS) which were completed after weekly sessions. Each SRS included goals and objectives, planned activities, materials and resource needs, and practitioner notes. The practitioner notes section included field notes and observations on group working and individuals as well as reflections on the effectiveness of intervention activities. To analyse the observations and SRS documents, after familiarisation, we identified and coded statements related to our three main themes and noted statements that reflected on the effectiveness of particular activities.

Results

In this section, we examine the extent to which involvement in the arts intervention programme led to wellbeing improvements for participants. We focus on three main areas of examination – emotional expression, belonging, and agency – where we hoped to see changes amongst the students.

Emotional expression

One objective of our project was to enable children to feel comfortable enough to express their emotions through art. This was based in an understanding that such activity can lead to improvements in wellbeing, self-efficacy, and positive affect. To facilitate this, we set out a number of key working principles including: a foundation in listening and acceptance; non-judgemental dialogue and discourse; and a move towards non-hierarchical relationships with facilitators.

During early sessions, the arts team conducted orientations and icebreaker activities to build trust and connection with and between the participants. Later, individual painting projects were conducted that were specifically intended to help participants explore and express emotions. For example, across several weeks, participants imagined and created worlds of colour through paintings that represented unique landscapes of exploration (the butterfly's journey). Facilitators asked participants to consider the connections between individual colours and feelings in their paintings. During project interviews, students were asked to reflect on the experience of working through the colours. One noted how the activities enabled her to express her feelings:

> *I felt I could relate to the blue painting and it felt great to do work that related to feelings. I also learnt that you could express feelings in different ways and styles.* *(Riya)*

Another noted how the activities provided relief and expressive ability that could be applied outside of the project.

> *. . .one day I was feeling perturbed by noises from construction work going on at home. So, I picked up a sketch pen and I made a man who was very troubled, denoting his inner turmoil with red and the surroundings with green. So, my anger got converted into a painting*. He went on to explain that through painting: *you can show what is going on inside of you, you can draw your imagination on the page.* *(Zeeshan)*

Another noted that previously:

> *. . . I did not know how we could relate ourselves to colours* *(Aisha)*.

Finally, another student reflected on how the programme enabled her to use painting and colours to express her emotional state. She said:

> *As a child, I painted without awareness. I did not know I could express feelings through colour. But now when I put colour on paper or walls, I see the feeling and emotion conveyed*. She also noted how the process of painting was a source of relief, she continued: *Like when I feel angry and I paint, the anger goes out* *(Shaista)*.

Figure 1. Participant artwork, learning about the expression of emotions via colours (Photo: Suhail Parry).

This awareness of emotional expressivity was not universally evident as a few only noted that they had learned to paint through participation in the project. Yet, it was clear through our interviews, discussions with school staff and the arts team, and by examining the artwork itself, that most participants were finding ways of expressing emotional content through processes of painting and working with the art facilitators in other activities.

Belonging

Another objective of the project was to facilitate participant belonging, group interaction and sense of involvement in part of a community. We know that many students at the school felt isolated and were lacking peer contact due to the extended lockdown and political unrest in Kashmir. We understood that a sense of belonging can contribute to motivation as well as improvements in physical and mental wellbeing (Greenwood & Kelly, 2020). In this section, we highlight evidence and experiences across two project elements that supported notable changes in these areas. The first centres on group

activities that were geared towards significant public-facing outputs (e.g. performances) while the second details the impacts of some of the physical spaces dedicated to the activities.

Group work and performances

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, at the outset, sessions were held in small online groups (5–6 participants) and most creative activities were completed individually. Yet, when the school site re-opened (about three months into the project), sessions were conducted in person and activities shifted to group working. Project groups were created, each with the objective of working together to create a story and performance that related to a *hero's journey*. According to one of the project artists, this shift in activities and focus to face-to-face group activities helped "create a sense of community" (Artist 2). During this time, participant groups built new collective identities, giving themselves names like "Power Rangers", "Change Makers", "Mind Masters", "Euphoria" and "Delta Force". Each group then went on to construct narratives and performance ideas, building on their earlier work. While the group working supported the development of collaborative skills and peer interaction, we found that the focus of public-facing outputs strengthened the sense of a collective identity and sense of belonging. As another project artist noted:

> *. . . a certain habitat got formed . . . interacting with each other . . . They were from different classes and grades and genders and they were interacting with each other after a very long time (e.g. due to lockdowns and school closures). But there was also a certain kind of . . . focused work . . . because there was to be a performance which led to a contribution to the enriching encounters* *(Artist 1)*

Another artist explained:

> *. . . they could see this was leading up to something. There was a lot of dedicated work – painting all day . . . very physical and tedious work, and an understanding that something interesting and exciting is unfolding – knowing that something at the end, really helps to keep them on the path . . .* *(Artist 2)*

Through our observations, we found that the framing of the project as one that would lead to a significant outcome – in this case, a public display and performance – led to a notable sense of involvement and engagement. This was particularly evident during the final weeks prior to a large community performance at the school. At this stage, students were given significant control over how the performance would run. They both designed and developed the performances and artwork and were in charge of organising timings, invitations, and other logistical elements. We noticed that this shared responsibility led to a strong sense of ownership and belonging in the project and a commitment to work together. As Bazila noted in her closure interview, *"It was fun making things with my friends, making new friends, doing things I never did before"*.

Physical spaces

The research team also noted how physical spaces were supporting this emerging community. Most important here was the "makers lab", a full classroom-sized space that was set aside for participants to work on their arts activities. The space gave assurance that materials will not be disturbed as might happen in a normal classroom space where other lessons and activities may be taking place. However, the space was more than

a secure location for arts materials as the school administration actively sought student co-construction of the maker's lab. As the school's principal discussed, the maker's lab was framed by the idea that it could be a collective space where children could take ownership, in part through a direct physical interaction with the space (e.g. by bringing in their own materials or by painting on the walls).

> *. . . the maker's lab was co-created with the children . . . [they] see it as their space, ownership of the space is more collective, a space where children contribute . . .* *(Staff 1)*

Indeed, knowing that the room was "theirs", many participants expressed a sense of control and ownership over the maker's lab. It was literally a space they could write on. One of the artists explained (Artist 1) that in Kashmir many children:

> *. . . do not have a lot of privacy . . . so the idea of autonomy, having a private physical space to express themselves is unusual . . . when you come to a space where you can paint on the walls, there is a sense of ownership which emerges. It is a very personal moment – painting on the walls – was a way to put their story out there, . . . there is something about the space of the wall itself which invites them to a deeper connect.*

Figure 2. Participants working on a mural in the makers' lab (Photo: Suhail Parry)

In our project planning and design discussions, the artists told us that the physical space of the maker's lab would work like a container, allowing the children to be experimental without fear of disruption or judegement. The freedom to co-construct the space – including leaving their permanent marks on the walls – without judgement contributed to their sense of ownership and belonging. Again, one of the artists described the sense of empowerment that can go along with involvement of this kind:

> *the children leaving a permanent mark on the walls, these will endure, a value was placed on this, that the artwork would stay for a few years.* *(Artist 1)*

Eventually, the artwork filtered out of the lab and into other parts of the school as the students became more confident and explored ways to present their work to wider audiences.

In summary, we observed a range of ways in which a sense of belonging emerged across the project. Here, we recounted two key elements that contributed to this emergence. The first, was that the project included group and collective activities that built toward a series of performances and outcomes that would be largely public facing. Second, consistent with other research (e.g. Stickley & Hui, 2012), the maker's lab provided a secure space for students to collaborate and experiment without fear of disruption or judgement.

Agency

The third area of discussion here centres on participant agency. By agency, we refer to "a person's autonomous control over his or her actions" as well as their ability to take ownership and responsibility for these actions (Sokol et al., 2015, p. 284). Some ways this can be identified are through expressions of optimism, hope, self-efficacy and confidence, and one's ability to voice desires and ideas for the future (Veronese et al., 2021). As noted above, from our discussions with the school, we understood that many children at the school were experiencing feelings of hopelessness as well as a general lack of motivation. We sought to support participants' wellbeing in this area and specifically hoped that involvement in the project would both enthuse and help them develop their confidence and sense of agency.

As discussed, as the arts intervention progressed, students became more responsible for the development of specific outputs and artwork. While the arts facilitators provided a framework and skills training (e.g. sessions on puppetry or painting), the participants were put in positions of leadership and responsibility for how group projects would develop. The students went on to present their "hero stories" to a public audience and later created filmed versions of the performances that could be shared online. During this time, the team observed a strong sense of commitment and engagement with students taking time out of hours to finish project components.

This growing sense of confidence was also identified during project closure discussions with participants, for example, one student reflected on the experience of performing in front of people and noted, "*It feels very good, our shyness goes away, we feel confident*" (Bazila). The same student expressed a desire to keep performing, seeing their future self as someone who is "*brave and confident*". Following participation in the project, other students expressed similar changes in terms of self-worth and confidence.

> *. . . I praise myself more . . . I've started a new habit which is before going to bed, I look into the mirror and appreciate three things about myself. That really gives me happiness.* *(Zainab)*

> *As a person . . . I feel that I am more independent today than I was before. I have more confidence.* *(Ahra)*

> *Unlike earlier, when I thought I was odd and couldn't love myself, now I love myself.* *(Aksa)*

> *It will be a kind of beginning for me. I have learnt art, and many kinds of art, from all of you here and that gives me a sense of confidence that I can do art, also the confidence to pursue other projects.* *(Bazila)*

One student talked at length about a newfound courage and sense of confidence. She noted:

I feel I don't really care anymore about what people will say. I think, what I can do instead is follow my inclinations and do what I like, instead of doing what other people want me to do. *(Riya)*

Later, she expressed this as a type of power that:

. . . reaffirms my belief in my own sense of right and wrong, and in standing my ground. *(Riya)*

When asked about their futures, many participants articulated hopeful and positive life expectations. Some wanted to become artists and continue painting and performing, while some expressed other desires, for example, to be a doctor or a lawyer and have a successful career.

I feel I might become an artist . . . *(Hoor)*

I will be a great artist. *(Masrat)*

It feels good, like I am excited about the future . . . *(Bazila)*

This ending [of the project] means a beginning actually because we learnt many new things and now we're going to use these things in our future. *(Ifrah)*

Finally, we noted that many children expressed their agency through a desire for freedom of movement. The ability to move freely has been noted as a critically important element for healthy child development (Pinkard, 2019; Veronese et al., 2021).

I'll do a world tour first, then manage a job, but I want to be an actress. *(Shafiya)*

This project gave me a sense of freedom. Gave me the strength and belief that a girl can be outside of home, alone, accomplishing things that she had only dreamt of. *(Tafzeel)*

I guess the butterfly is always free and can fly wherever it wants. It represents my soul. If I have the guts, I can fly. I can make the world proud of me, I can make my parents proud of me. *(Zainab)*

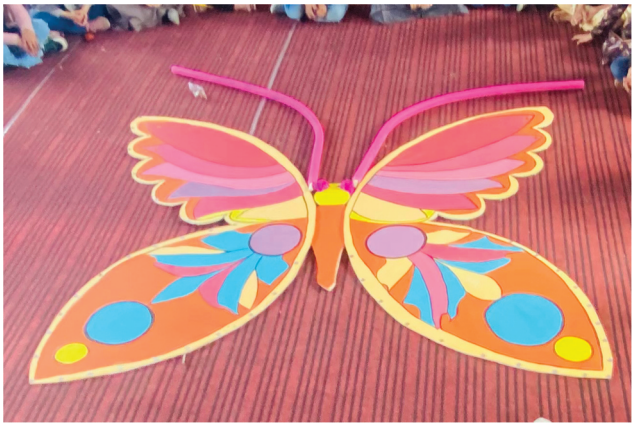

Figure 3. The butterfly metaphor helped participants explore ideas of growth, transformation, and change (Photo: Suhail Parry).

In summary, through our observations, we recognised that students were taking ownership and responsibility for actions and outcomes and were growing in confidence through various forms of group collaboration, public speaking, and performance. Consistent with other recent research, we identified an important role of the arts in contributing to building confidence and supporting positive transformation in young people (Mannay

et al., 2022). Through discussions and dialogue with the participants, we identified their growing sense of agency, expressed by statements of hope, confidence, and positive futures as well as an ability to voice their desires and see a role for themselves as active agents in the realisation of these desires.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper reviewed a recent intervention that studied the potential for arts activities to support the mental health and wellbeing of children affected by conflict. The work was situated in Kashmir, a conflict-affected area where many children have lived their entire lives in a context of violence, unrest, and uncertainty. Research has shown that children in Kashmir suffer disproportionate levels of mental health disorders when compared to other parts of India (Paul & Khan, 2019) and that there are limited resources to address these challenges. The project discussed here provided 30 children with new opportunities for regular creative engagement over the course of a full year. The work was collaborative and geared towards the development of public-facing presentations, exhibitions, and performances. Drawing on qualitative elements of the research, we noted clear, positive impacts from the project in areas of emotional expression, belonging, and agency. These findings are consistent with other recent research (Cohen-Yatziv & Regev, 2019; Mannay et al., 2022; Morison et al., 2021; Van Westrhenen et al., 2019) that has found arts interventions can positively impact children and adolescent participants who have experienced trauma.

In line with previous research (Parikh et al., 2019; Ul Hassan et al. (2017), we suggest that schools in conflict-affected areas are critical spaces for addressing child wellbeing and school-based arts interventions can provide meaningful benefit for child wellbeing and mental health. In our case, the arts and mental health activities were strongly supported and integrated into the school's curriculum. This meant that involvement was not "extra" for these students, but rather, considered part of the normal school day. In discussions with stakeholders and parents, we recognised a tendency to pull back from arts and humanities subjects in times of uncertainty and economic precarity. Schools in conflict areas looking to support students via involvement in the arts will likely need to "make the case" that these activities are critical for a young person's education and wellbeing. Of course, there is a need for teachers to "buy-in" to the use of arts in the classroom as a meaningful and worthwhile approach. Moreover, as people living in conflict-affected areas may be underserved by psychological and mental health support, there is an important role for teacher and staff training. This is not meant to train teachers to be therapists. Rather, we found that school staff may benefit from a trauma-informed understanding of child behaviour and actions. Primarily, we argue that academic institutions must work to create an environment of support, care, and trust. Indeed, as Wiest-Stevenson and Lee (2016) note, a trauma-informed approach must be integrated across the entire school system, not only counsellors or social workers.

We note that our project benefited from extremely supportive school environment including administrative and academic staff members, resources, and programming. These included academic funding that contributed to design and delivery, dedicated spaces and time for arts activity within the school, regular and consistent involvement with "output" focused components (e.g. performances), a diversity of activities centred on

group working, and a non-judgemental ethos and framing of art that sought to allow the children to express themselves in their own ways.

While we found a number of benefits and positive outcomes from this research, it is worth noting some particular challenges and limitations. First, due to travel restrictions (both due to COVID-19 and associated with the risk of conflict), research activities were largely coordinated virtually. This limited the effectiveness of some of our field work activities. However, the arrangement also resulted in significant local ownership of the project as leadership moved away from the university institutions and towards the Indian-based arts team. Second, over the course of the year, some students dropped out of the programme. In particular, boys were more inclined to quit, especially in instances where their parents were not fully supportive of the arts. We found that the younger boys were more engaged and had more sustained support from family members. Third, as noted earlier, we are aware of the power issues relalted with global north/global south university research interchanges as well as difficulties associated with "exiting" or programme legacy. We have worked to address this by drawing on processes of co-design and collaboration. This has meant working collectively to identify future needs and opportunities and ways in which the UK-based team can provide support. Towards this objective, the team was awarded a new round of funding to continue implementation of project recommendations including teacher training and support for a local, school-based arts and mental health hub.

Going forward, we see a continued need for the study of arts activities for wellbeing, particularly in areas of conflict and communities such as Kashmir where discussions about mental health are uncommon or even frowned upon.

Note

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