



ANNUAL RESEARCH REPORT 2024/25

END OF YEAR RESEARCH SUMMARY

THE MILDRED FUND

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The Mildred Fund builds young people's personal, social and creative confidence through art. It supports visual art institutions to work with schools and community groups to provide 13-19-year-olds with creative skills for them to thrive.

www.mildredfund.org

Image: Whitworth Art Gallery

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The role of artists and institutions was pivotal. Their sensitivity and adaptability shaped every encounter



Introduction

This is the Mildred Fund's second Annual Research Report and summarises research activity during 2024/5. It brings together the learning from the network of organisations across the programme, identifying points of reflection and creating a narrative of findings synthesised into themes. It draws on a wealth of research and evaluation conducted by the individual organisations as well as interviews and group discussions across the network.

As in 2023/24, this report is peppered with reflective thinking points for Mildred Fund partner organisations present and future, and we hope they are also relevant for those working in similar fields. It is also accompanied by two case studies that explore the process and learning in greater depth.

The first Annual Research Report (2023/24) can be accessed [here](#).



ABOUT THE MILDRED FUND

The Mildred Fund, established in 2022, supports art institutions to develop relationships with local schools and communities to design programmes of focused art activities meeting the specific needs of young people aged 13-19. These institutions each develop projects across three years with artists, schools and youth/community groups, to build young participants' social, personal and creative wellbeing through a wide range of artistic approaches and mediums. The young people explore artworks within collections and exhibitions, and create their own creative responses, often for public display within the galleries or in schools and community settings.

This is the second full year of programming, following a small pilot in 2022/23 with Turner Contemporary and an initial cohort of three organisations in 2023/24. The network now includes seven organisations across England: **Camden Art Centre** in North London, **Kettle's Yard** in Cambridge, **Leeds Art Gallery** in West Yorkshire, **South London Gallery** in Peckham, **Tate St Ives** in Cornwall, **Turner Contemporary** in Margate, and **Whitworth Art Gallery** in Manchester.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

The Mildred Fund programme is unfolding against the backdrop of a school system under strain and communities under pressure. Across the organisations, we heard versions of a similar story: teacher capacity stretched thin; timetables that leave little room for creative risk; and high staff turnover across schools and youth professionals who face extreme challenges of funding and needs. Some organisations reflected on how the structure of schooling itself – with its emphasis on attainment – often stands in opposition to the slower pace and relational approach that some young people require.

These factors above place greater importance on visual arts and opportunities for creative learning. However, the Cultural Learning Alliance's (CLA) 2025 Report Card¹ found a decline in Expressive Arts subjects in secondary schools nationally and an 'Arts entitlement gap' that exists in regions with the highest levels of deprivation.

Teacher capacity and school resource challenges shaped most projects during 2024/25, coupled with the logistical barriers of getting students into a gallery or the emotional barriers that may prevent young people from opting to engage. As one Project Lead observed, "... the reality of getting the same [students] out of school repetitively in school time, is really challenging, and the teachers are often doing it in their lunch hour or in their PPA [Planning, Preparation and Assessment] time." Often, teachers and youth professionals wanted to do more but felt constrained, possibly by a constant churn of priorities enforced by the systems within which they are bound.

The first annual research report² explained an overview of the challenges facing the individual participants of the Mildred Fund programme, from vulnerability to neurodiversity, to experiencing anxiety, anger, disengagement and disconnection. These experiences are consistent with those of the participants during the second year, and organisations noted that the hidden complexities of young people's lives are frequently a factor.

Paying attention to context surrounding young people is vital across the Mildred Fund. The systems, environments, pressures and possibilities that envelop young participants shape their experience and serve as indicators for what they need.

"They don't feel like they can really shine at school because there's so many pressures on top of them."
(Teacher)

The data on young people's emotional challenges, particularly for older teens, make difficult reading. For instance, national research commissioned by the NHS in 2023 found that 12% of young people aged 17-22 reported often or always feeling lonely, double the figure for children aged 11-16 (5.5%).³ In the Belonging Barometer, a new national study released in 2025, nearly 49% of young women surveyed aged 18-24, reported feeling lonely – substantially higher than the overall adult population (29%).⁴

This is made even more relevant as two of the 2024/25 schools are single sex girls' schools and another project focuses specifically on working with teenage girls.

Office of National Statistics research has found a cyclical relationship between repeated school absence and mental health: **absenteeism is both a risk factor for poor mental health and a consequence of it.**⁵

Meanwhile, it must be recognised that young people experiencing challenges often develop strengths and resilience, and **the arts sector holds significant value for supporting mental health and for the range of skills that creative practice develops.** The CLA's Capabilities Framework helps articulate what arts and cultural learning offer beyond exams: across three pillars – Being, Becoming & Belonging; Relating; Cognition & Critical Thinking – young people build seven capabilities: agency, wellbeing, collaboration, communication, empathy, creativity, interpretation.⁶

Understanding context creates a deeper understanding for how the Mildred Fund's visual arts programmes can meaningfully support young people's personal, social and creative growth.

Reflection: What do the numbers tell us?

Recent reports on youth loneliness paint a worrying picture. While loneliness appears to increase with age from childhood into teenage and early adulthood, these figures suggest the need to act sooner rather than later with the younger age groups. Early experiences of connection and belonging can prevent later isolation. As evidenced by the Cultural Learning Alliance, arts learning, with its unique capacity to build personal and social skills, is one of the most powerful tools in our hands for early intervention.

Thinking Point:

- **What do we need to pay attention to now, so that fewer young people grow up to become part of these statistics later?**

"Each organisation shapes its own enquiry question to explore wellbeing within the specific contexts of their gallery and their young participants. They also complete interim and end-of-year reports for review of progress and analysis of learning."



ABOUT THE PROGRAMME RESEARCH

The programme-level research is guided by an overarching question: what are the vital ingredients within the Mildred Fund programme that can support young people in developing social, personal and creative wellbeing? We also use three main research questions:

- What is the journey for **young people** who participate in focused arts provision?
- What learning do **art institutions and artists** gain through working long term with/alongside young people?
- What do **those who are caring for and educating young people** learn about the value of the arts?

The research draws on a wider literature review on art and wellbeing,⁷ alongside interviews and twice-yearly focus groups with project teams from the organisations. Each organisation shapes its own enquiry question to explore wellbeing within the specific contexts of their gallery and their young participants. They also complete interim and end-of-year reports for review of progress and analysis of learning.

Methodologically, the organisations have utilised a wide range of approaches including observations, interviews, post-session reflection with artists, and co-research with participants – a new methodology for 2024/25 (South London Gallery).⁸ Some organisations have employed frameworks to support their research such as the Generic Learning Outcomes⁹ (Leeds Art Gallery) and the NHS Five Ways to Wellbeing¹⁰ (South London Gallery). This helps them to track shifts and developments for young people.

Our programme research in 2023/24 focused on how projects worked across three key areas: people, space and art. For 2024/25 we have undertaken a deeper enquiry into **space, time, content, and method (STCM)**. This is a research framework and methodology developed by the Mildred Fund research consultant, Anna Cutler.¹¹

We have adopted this framework to understand the “constituent parts” of each organisation’s project and further understand the conditions and ingredients that underpin personal, social and creative wellbeing. It helps us to understand the factors in our growing body of research, where programmatic features vary vastly: participants’ ages, locations, mediums and frequency of sessions differ so widely they are not meaningful to compare. Rather, the use of space and creation of environments; considerations of timing and pace; and the thoughtful application of artistic input and methodologies, afford greater understanding of the range of outcomes we are observing.

It helps the programme move beyond measuring outcomes across a relatively small pool of participants and organisations, toward deeper learning on how to nurture wellbeing.

Crucially this has afforded us a deeper understanding of **attentiveness** – a key observation from our 2023/24 research – and the layering of attentive approaches across space, time, content and method. In the previous report, we defined attentiveness as approaches that were “individualised, hyper-focused on need, and centred on the people (young people, teachers, youth workers), space (gallery and workshop environment) and art (mediums, disciplines, processes, artists).” For 2024/25 we explore attentiveness even further, pulling out significant shifts throughout the process.

The young participants are not interviewed for the programme-level research, although they are involved in the organisations’ own research. This is a deliberate decision which reflects the sensitivity around this practice and recognises that **trust-building is a vital component of the programme**, and that the organisations are best placed to establish and deepen those necessary relationships of trust with young people. We feel that in this context, it is essential to protect participants from feeling treated as subjects of research rather than collaborators in their programme.



H. J. Walker, Kettle's Yard, 2025

Summary of progress 2024/25

ABOUT THE ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR PROJECTS

As of 2025, seven organisations across England are participating in the Mildred Fund programme forming a continually evolving and growing network of practice. Collectively, they worked with 20 artists (up from 7 last year) and engaged over 350 young people aged 13-19 (increased from 136). These participants came from 13 different schools (previously 6) and 4 community groups (up from 3).¹² Altogether, approximately 360 hours of art activities were delivered.

For 2024/25 the programme balances the steady increase in scale with the depth of relationships: these figures represent a model that favours a deep focus on engagement over a high-volume model, prioritising focused, sustained, relational and inclusive approaches.

Each organisation takes a deep approach to learning through its enquiry process while working with a wide range of participants, from school and college students and learners in alternative provision to LGBTQ+ youth groups, neurodiverse young people and those navigating complex life circumstances. A small number of young people are returning from last year and **this blend of returning and first-time participants has allowed organisations both continuity and fresh focus.** At this stage the numbers are too small to explore any specific outcomes for those returning.

Across the organisations' projects, the range of artistic mediums has been broad. Young people have worked with painting, drawing, sculpture, collage and printmaking; experimented with sound and sculpture; and engaged in photography, filmmaking and AI-based art. Artists have utilised their practices to provide an invitation to explore themes such

as migration, myth and reality, as well as explicit discussions of wellbeing in some cases.¹³ They have shared both traditional and contemporary methods, from marble-run installations and collaborative assemblage (Turner Contemporary), to sensory objects and fidget toys (Tate St Ives and Leeds Art Gallery), and have used analogue photography and sketchbook-based reflection (South London Gallery). The young artists have exhibited everything from outdoor sound pieces (Tate St Ives) to hoax exhibitions (the Whitworth). The materials and approaches have remained deliberately open-ended, creating space for discussion and discovery.

A key development for 2024/25 has been a sharpening focus on wellbeing.

There is a growing rigour that underpins the work: the organisations have developed their enquiry questions and methodologies to attend more closely to emotional, social and creative wellbeing and the process of enquiry has allowed the project teams to adapt responsively and share insights collectively across the network. Analysis across all enquiry questions shows the organisations broadly centering their enquiries around understanding ways to increase a sense of **belonging**, develop **skills** and foster collaborations across partners and within participant groups. **These three broad enquiry areas have supported the organisations to focus on what needs their attention. The quality of attentiveness has deepened as a result.**

As last year, attentiveness has been about prioritising the needs and interests of young people and being attentive to the worlds around them, an approach that demands a different type of listening, a deeper kind of noticing. We will explore this in greater depth in the next chapter. Based on organisations' perceptions

and observations through their own research, **outcomes indicate powerful impacts on participants' confidence, belonging and connection to self, to others and to art.**

The resulting **depth of engagement** witnessed across the programme was also significant – forming the foundation for creative risk-taking and sustained participation. This is also explored further in the following chapters.

What unites and underscores the year's achievements is a shared commitment across organisations, partnering schools/ community groups and artists to working together in the long-term, and in relational, inclusive and reflective ways.



Table of gallery activity

Table of gallery activity The table below summarises each organisation's activity during 2024/25, including their project focus, their enquiry question and the number of young people they engaged.

Cohort Year	Organisation Project lead and team members	About the projects	Notes on progress and partnerships at the end of 2024/25	Young people 2023/24	Young people 2024/25	Total engagements ¹⁴
Cohort 1 2023/24	Camden Art Centre, London Project Lead: George Collum, Learning Curator Project team member: Stephanie Wong, Learning Coordinator (Children and Young People)	Based within school settings, community settings and the gallery environment, the projects aim to nurture "creative confidence" and establish a voice among young people aged between 13-19 years. Enquiry questions: How can process led art sessions nurture the development of creative confidence and establish "voice"? Can combining this "voice" with accessible artistic techniques and media increase agency and confidence in young people?	Camden Art Centre has completed its second year of project activity and is developing its third and final year of delivery. In 2024/25 the gallery expanded its project to include two new partners that join the original two: Sidings Youth Centre (since 2023/24), Maria Fidelis School (since 2023/24), UCL Academy (new for 2024/25) and The Hive (new for 2024/25). Most participants were new to the programme with a small number returning from the previous year. The group from The Hive have multiple complex needs.	41	90	131 engagements
Cohort 1 2023/24	Tate St Ives, Cornwall Project Lead: Jenny Tipton, Curator, Families, Schools and Young People Team member: Joseph Lyward, Assistant Curator: Young People's Programme	Locating activity mainly at the gallery, the projects Create Club and YAY Resident! aim to foster creativity, confidence, and collaboration among participants aged between 13-17 years through peer-led and process-led methodologies. Enquiry questions: Thinking about collaboration: Who is collaborating and how? Young people; artists; youth partners; teachers; gallery; art; wider audiences.	Tate St Ives has completed its second year of project activity and is developing its third and final year of delivery. The gallery has continued to work with the YAY! Community group and small groups of students from three schools across the Truro and Penrith Academy Trust: St Ives School, Hayle Academy, Cape Cornwall School. Most participants were new to the programme, although the school and community partners remained the same.	28	27	55 engagements
Pilot 2022/23	Turner Contemporary, East Kent Project Lead: Toby Parkin, Head of Learning and Participation Team member: Sara Jackson, Learning Producer	Locating activity mainly at the gallery, the Young Art Critics project aims to support the development of critical thinking, creativity and curiosity for young people studying art, aged between 16-17 years. Enquiry questions: How does encouraging creative self-expression foster confidence and contribute to overall wellbeing? Is there a progression for students having more opportunity for self-expression leading to greater confidence and improved wellbeing. Is this more of a marked growth in confidence and wellbeing for students in their second year of the project.	Turner Contemporary completed its third and final year of funding as the gallery was the Mildred Fund's pilot project in 2022/23. For 2024/25 the gallery has continued to work with East Kent College, a partnership established since 2023/24.	67	51	118 engagements

Cohort Year	Organisation Project lead and team members	About the projects	Notes on progress and partnerships at the end of 2024/25	Young people 2023/24	Young people 2024/25	Total engagements ¹⁴
Cohort 2 2024/25	Kettle's Yard, Cambridge Project Lead: Karen Thomas, Community Manager Team member: Hannah Walker, Young People's Programme Coordinator	Locating activity within the gallery, the project aims to support young people aged 14-16 to be "culturally confident" and able to use art to connect with their own and others' emotions. Enquiry questions: Bridges – What, who and where do we connect to? How can art feed social, personal and emotional wellbeing?	Kettle's Yard has progressed with two programmes: Bridges and Young Art Mentors. Its key partner in the development of the school programme has been North Cambridge Academy. The gallery will continue to deepen its partnership with North Cambridge Academy into 2025/26.	N/A	26	26 engagements
Cohort 2 2024/25	Leeds Art Gallery Project Lead: Carl Newbould, Learning and Access Officer (Careers for All)	Based mainly in school settings the project works with students aged 14-19 years with complex needs to explore how art can build confidence, communication and a sense of belonging. Enquiry questions: What methods and indicators are valuable for demonstrating a shift in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) students' feelings of wellbeing (how to assess non-verbal students)? What processes, ingredients and conditions in the project delivery support a greater sense of belonging?	Leeds Art Gallery has completed its first year of project activity and is developing its second of three years of delivery. For 2024/25 the gallery developed a key partnership with John Jamieson School and a short project with PINC College. Both are education settings for learners with special educational and profound learning needs.	N/A	26	26 engagements
Cohort 2 2024/25	South London Gallery Project Lead: Paul Crook, Head of Communities & Learning Team members: Polly South, Communities & Learning Manager	Based mainly in school settings the project works with students aged 14-19 years with complex needs to explore how art can build confidence, communication and a sense of belonging. Enquiry questions: What methods and indicators are valuable for demonstrating a shift in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) students' feelings of wellbeing (how to assess non-verbal students)? What processes, ingredients and conditions in the project delivery support a greater sense of belonging?	SLG has completed its first year of project activity and is developing its second of three years of delivery. The gallery has developed key local partnerships with Harris East Dulwich and Sacred Heart School – both are schools for girls.	N/A	71	71 engagements

Cohort Year	Organisation Project lead and team members	About the projects	Notes on progress and partnerships at the end of 2024/25	Young people 2023/24	Young people 2024/25	Total engagements ¹⁴
Cohort 2 2024/25	Whitworth Art Gallery Project Lead: Andrew Vaughan, Education Partnerships Manager Team members: Steven Roper, Schools Producer. Direction and support from Ed Watts, Head of Civic Engagement and Education.	Based within the gallery, the project uses art as a tool for social change, supporting young people aged mainly 13-14 years to become change-makers. Enquiry questions: How can young people use art as a tool for positive community change? How far and in what ways can regular and repeated arts intervention at KS3 support students to gain a deeper understanding of the value of art and can this positively influence meaningful decisions about GCSE subject choices and future career aspirations? How far and in what ways can regular and repeated	The Whitworth has completed its first year of project activity and is developing its second of three years of delivery. A key partnership has been nurtured with Manchester Academy as well as Rekindle, a supplementary school for young people outside formal education.	N/A	60	60 engagements
TOTAL YOUNG PEOPLE				136	351	487 engagements



Camden Art Centre 2025. Hive showcase

THE MILDRED FUND EXPANDED DEFINITION OF WELLBEING

The Mildred Fund identifies three main wellbeing themes as the focus for its research: personal, social and creative wellbeing. Within these themes, the organisations co-define the meaning of wellbeing that is relevant to their own context and that of their young participants. Co-defining wellbeing allows the programme-level research to capture the specific areas of change that matter most to organisations and their participants. We call this the Fund's *expanded definition of wellbeing*.

Over the course of year two, as the new cohort of organisations has joined the Fund, the collective understanding of wellbeing has grown and deepened, moving toward a more definite balance of individual and relational definitions: personal aspects of confidence, focus and calmness are balanced with the more social aspects of connection, community and belonging. Also, the development of voice and agency sits in equal priority alongside being heard, valued and understood.

The top words used to define wellbeing across the two years are identified below:

- Belonging
- Confidence
- Connected / community
- Voice / agency
- Heard / valued / understood
- Calm / focus
- Enjoyment / happiness
- Enthusiasm / motivation

Further to this, a synthesis of the organisations' enquiry questions highlights their interests in three broad areas: belonging, collaboration, and skill development – reflecting a definition that strikes a **balance across both the individual and the collective**.

"What surprised me was how much the group wanted to be heard. Once they felt safe, the conversations were deep and really insightful."
(Artist)

"Co-defining wellbeing allows the programme-level research to capture the specific areas of change that matter most to organisations and their participants. We call this the Fund's expanded definition of wellbeing."

Reflection: Building collective wellbeing

The enquiry questions across the organisations hint at a definition of wellbeing that balances individual and collective elements. When we think of wellbeing **as something shared rather than merely an individual state**, the focus of work shifts from attentiveness for young people to attentiveness *for those within the ecology around them*. **Collective wellbeing grows through the quality of our connections – between artists, educators, families, and the young people themselves**. It is sustained through attentive gestures: listening, making time, noticing change, and valuing each person's contribution to the creative process.

Artists, educators, and young people each contribute to a collective wellbeing and a shared ecology of care. At Tate St Ives, for example, attentiveness to an artist's access and health needs prompted slower, more flexible working – quiet spaces, adjusted schedules, and time for travel – reminding teams that wellbeing extends to everyone involved. Such practices of care and adaptability have become a feature across the Mildred Fund projects.

The challenge, then, is to ask not only how we can build young people's wellbeing, but how we can keep one another well within the ecology of relationships that make this work possible.

Thinking points:

- **In what ways can we nurture attentiveness so that wellbeing is not only individual, but shared – something that grows between people, space, places, and practices?**
- **If wellbeing is something we build together, what small acts of collaboration could strengthen the web of connection that holds young people, artists, and educators in creative balance?**

Attentiveness as process

In the previous annual research report, we found that the organisations demonstrated a particular type of detailed approach that we identified as attentiveness, which seemed to go further than listening or observing needs. Last year's organisations reflected on what young people needed: to be seen, to be heard, to be remembered, to work with their friends, to have a balance between structure and freedom, and to feel trusted.

During 2024/25, the programme research adopted the Space, Time, Content, Method framework. We have used this framework to further understand the layers of attentiveness in the processes developed for the projects. These break down in the following ways:

- **Space** seeks to explore attentiveness across choice of venue (for example in the gallery vs in the school); location and local context; and the nature of the environments created for the creative activity
- **Time** seeks to explore attentiveness across session timing, pace and duration
- **Content** seeks to explore attentiveness across art forms, materials, artists
- **Method** seeks to explore attentiveness across approaches, pedagogies, attitudes and models

This has allowed us to understand the value of creative inputs and to interrogate the emerging processes and approaches across the Mildred Fund programme as a way of determining the value of the work and depth of the learning.

SPACE AND ENVIRONMENTS

Across the partner organisations, **attentiveness to space emerged as both an ethic and a creative strategy**. Galleries, classrooms and studios became environments designed to hold young people with warmth, care and respect. From Tate St Ives, Kettle's Yard and South London Gallery to Camden Art Centre and Leeds Art Gallery, teams prioritised welcoming, safe and empathetic spaces where young people could relax, experiment and belong. Facilitators paid close attention to detail – the atmosphere of the room, the arrangement of furniture, the food, and the music created **"comfortable spaces that created ease, trust and belonging."** (Project Lead)

For those with complex needs, familiarity and safety were vital; sessions by Leeds Art Gallery in school settings reduced anxiety and enabled curiosity to emerge. At Camden Art Centre, spaces were deliberately *"free of judgement or expectation"* and inclusive. Artists working with Turner Contemporary, observed the importance of *"safe and validating environments"* that encouraged greater risk and agency.

Attentiveness also meant **reimagining what a learning space could be**. Camden Art Centre challenged classroom hierarchies by deinstitutionalising space, while South London Gallery described its community venue as *"radically different from school"* reflecting that *"low-stakes and supportive environments can be hugely beneficial for students who demonstrate challenging behaviour at school."* The Whitworth's mythical exhibition developed through AI blurred the line between gallery spaces and imaginative spaces, giving students permission to claim institutional authority.

Across all organisations, this attentiveness translated into **ownership and connection**. As one artist reflected, "The immediacy with which I was able to sense that the space was truly theirs was striking." Young people not only cherished these environments but helped redefine them: these were **spaces where attentiveness itself became a relational artform, and where the sense of belonging was transformative**.

"This authentic fostering of agency and community and play is very evident in how young people navigate the space." (Artist)

"A key reflection from most organisations was the value of long-term, consistent and continuous work, shaping the development of confidence and trust. Project teams and teachers reflected that regular visits, familiar routines and predictable structures gave young people a sense of safety and continuity."

TIME AND RHYTHM

"What's particularly impressive is the consistency of engagement. The young people attending these sessions are navigating complex challenges - ranging from anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder to social issues like risk of homelessness, as well as additional needs such as ADHD and autism. Many struggle with routine, so for them to attend something every week is a huge achievement." (Youth worker)

A key reflection from most organisations was the value of **long-term, consistent and continuous work**, shaping the development of confidence and trust. Project teams and teachers reflected that regular visits, familiar routines and predictable structures gave young people a sense of safety and continuity. As the project team at Camden Art Centre noted, the importance of the *"continuous investment in time"* and the ability to *"stay the course,"* particularly when building engagement in groups, presents a challenge. Consistency for Turner Contemporary, Leeds Art Gallery, Kettle's Yard, and others, was seen as essential to building trust, confidence, resilience and personal, social and creative growth. Over time, organisations observed that this familiarity made young people more likely to experiment, reflect and take creative risks. For Turner Contemporary, the education assistants created *"a consistent, trusted bridge between students, teachers and visiting artists."*

Many partners also recognised the value of slow and flexible pacing. At Leeds Art Gallery, slow engagement and slow learning allowed students with complex needs to feel secure and curious. For Tate St Ives this slow approach extended to the needs of the artist: acknowledging that whilst young people often need time to settle into a new space and feel comfortable *"with all the brand-new sensory input they're getting from the building, the lighting, the people"* the artist is in *"exactly the same boat."* The South London Gallery used a *"slow-start model"*



Steve Jackson, Turner Contemporary 2025

that began with food, socialising and gentle conversation – an approach that helped participants transition into creative work. The team at the Whitworth observed the vital role of students waiting their turn for technical assistance, providing space for reflection between activities. This contrasted with the pace of school life: *"It was actually a different type of learning and boredom ... [but] in a school-environment way, [it looked] like they were not doing something productive with their time."* Many of the other organisations spoke of the need for *"slow practice"* to support focus and reflection.

Timing and rhythm within sessions also mattered, but organisations found that this varied from group to group. Some found that shorter, more regular workshops – often delivered in the morning or in familiar settings – best sustained

engagement, whilst others found longer sessions across a condensed time period generated energy and motivation. At Turner Contemporary, one artist learned through shorter sessions to *"strike a balance between focus and fatigue,"* and found that sessions too close to lunch or busy periods affected concentration. The Whitworth described moments of learning that were *"fluid and not time-centred ... adapted and responsive,"* with ad-hoc breaks built in as needed.

Finally, **social time and self-led time** were recognised as vital. At the Whitworth, *"the social element of time together has been of significant importance"*. One young person simply summed up how the self-led approach worked for them: *"Maybe we can go at our own pace instead of going with the group."*

ARTISTIC CONTENT

Attentiveness showed itself in the artistic content of the programmes, in the careful design of accessible, inclusive and responsive projects. Across the seven organisations, a wide range of mediums invited participation and exploration: **sound art, drawing from soundscapes, scented paintings, make up, analogue photography, AR/VR, AI, storytelling, performance and manifesto building**. Some projects were skills-led with “multiple entry points” (Turner Contemporary and South London Gallery), allowing each young person to join at their own level of comfort or curiosity.

As with spaces, the artistic content was described as low-pressure, open and judgement-free. Camden Art Centre described activities that were “expansive” as well as accessible and relevant, offering a route into artmaking that connected with young people’s interests and experiences. Leeds Art Gallery designed **sensory and exploratory** sessions, where touch, sound, smell and movement supported self-expression for participants with SEND.

At South London Gallery, where attendance patterns were unpredictable, projects could not build over time; instead, each workshop was a stand-alone, contained experience. This responsive approach ensured that every session offered value, even for those attending infrequently.

Artistic practice became a means of creating safety, agency and joy. As one young person described, the sessions felt “free, inclusive and enjoyable.” Through diverse, open-ended making, attentiveness in artistic content became a quiet invitation – to explore, and to be seen.

METHODS AND MODELS

Attentiveness was expressed through the **pedagogical models** shaping each programme, which were principally relational, and collective models that scaffolded connections, belonging and trust. Across the seven organisations, the projects were often co-designed as a **shared journey**. At the Whitworth,

“Inclusion remained central; from Leeds Art Gallery’s adoption of an ‘engagement model’ to a broader commitment across the organisations to accessibility and inclusion.”

young people were led by their own interests and driven by their own ideas. Kettle’s Yard modelled attentiveness as co-production, voice and agency, creating room for young people to contribute to decisions about artists and themes.

All the projects were deliberately **organic and adaptive**, shaped around the strengths, insights and interests of the young people: “embracing their interests” (Camden Art Centre) and maintaining a process-led, open and porous approach (Camden Art Centre and Kettle’s Yard). Flexibility allowed creative activity to feel relevant, while inclusion remained central; from Leeds Art Gallery’s adoption of the ‘engagement model’¹⁵ to a broader commitment across the organisations to accessibility and inclusion.

Through relational and organic methods, the **role of the arts organisation** was redefined: not to steer or instruct, but to hold open space. By balancing power between teachers, artists and engagement assistants, they created gentle, responsive structures: frameworks that adapt, listen and nurture growth.



Attentiveness in practice

More than listening, and more than responding, attentiveness is a team-wide approach foregrounding both the individual and the collective: meeting young people as they are, listening to what is said and unsaid, and being inclusive and cognisant of their personal, social and creative needs. It is holding in balance the needs of the institution, the education context, and the wider systems and the ecologies around the young person. **To be attentive is to create the conditions where young people feel seen, heard, remembered and trusted.** In practical terms, this might look like creative, welcoming spaces; slowing down the pace of an activity; adjusting to an individual's rhythm; offering choice; or recognising that quiet presence and stillness are as meaningful as active participation.

STORIES OF ATTENTIVENESS IN PRACTICE

Kettle's Yard: Creating social connections

Attentiveness at Kettle's Yard was expressed through calm, relational spaces that allowed young people – in this case teenage girls – to feel safe and connected. The project team and artist prioritised listening and noticing, creating moments where participants could regulate, express emotions and support one another. Collective trust was built through peer collaboration and co-production, where young people's voices guided the process. Attentiveness meant honouring each individual's story, recognising the importance of safety and building connections across the group. The organisation found the participants moved from feeling defensive to a feeling of belonging at Kettle's Yard and indeed other visual art spaces too. The team also observed that the group became more inclusive, empathetic and supportive of each other. This was observed by their teachers: *"I saw students working together who never would in school."*

Leeds Art Gallery: Deep observation

Attentiveness at Leeds Art Gallery was embodied through the careful observation of students with profound and multiple learning disabilities. The Gallery facilitated the sessions in the school to support learners to feel at ease. The facilitator (also the Project Lead in this case) tuned in to small gestures – eye contact, movement, sound, stillness – as signs of curiosity and communication. Sessions were adapted to each young person's sensory preferences, creating a feeling of safety, agency and discovery. Attentiveness was about relationships with individuals: it involved patience and delight in the tiny transformations noticed. In these interactions, young people's independence, confidence and wellbeing were observed through deep observation. As the Project Lead reported:

"At the beginning of our project [young person] would always stand at the back of the room away from the activities and the activity leader. However, over time her confidence continued to grow ... and after several weeks she would greet me as I walked into the room by standing next to me and holding my hand." (Project Lead)



H J Walker. Kettle's Yard 2025 Collage workshop with Maraid McEwen



Whitworth Art Gallery

South London Gallery: Creating a space of welcome

Attentiveness at South London Gallery is rooted in welcome and reciprocity. Embedding wellbeing as a design principle, staff and artists created an emotionally safe space where young people, including those who find school challenging, can engage at their own pace. Artists listen to the rhythms of the group and respond with flexibility, shifting activities to match mood and need. Attentiveness is visible in how adults noticed and validated expressions of learning, and in how the gallery shares decision-making with participants. The result is a space where young people feel welcomed, recognised, comfortable and empowered, becoming advocates and co-researchers within the programme.

"I noticed how much young people enjoyed coming here by the fact that most of them arrived early and would want to stay until the very last moment of the session." (Workshop assistant)

The Whitworth: Embracing curiosity and ideas

Attentiveness meant creating an atmosphere of trust and dialogue, where questioning, critique and even disagreement are welcomed. The Gallery was attentive to emotional and intellectual shifts, moments of pride, valuing of art, curiosity. Attentiveness sometimes meant holding space for resistance: when one student was sceptical of AI as an artform, their perspective was taken seriously and embraced by the artist. The student has gone on to be invited to lead an after-school club:

"As a result of her challenge, we have decided to ask her to lead on a 'digital detox' after-school club in year 10. The club will focus on wellbeing and mindfulness approaches that use non-digital arts practice to help reconnect young people with hands-on making."

Through this attentiveness, participants learned the importance of being heard and valued. The result was a project that nurtured conversations around authenticity and the confidence to explore ideas that challenge convention.

"Embedding wellbeing as a design principle, staff and artists created an emotionally safe space where young people, including those who find school challenging, can engage at their own pace."

What was the journey for young people in 2024/25?

As in 2023/24, it is important to note that it is difficult to compare outcomes across the different groups. They are different in age, location, ability and need. They have had different experiences of challenge and joy in their lives. Some are in school, some attend alternative settings that do not follow the national curriculum. Some have had experience of artistic practices, some have not. Instead, the research seeks to pay attention to key observations and noticeable shifts identified by the organisations through their own enquiry – understanding that the context for these shifts may be different in each case.

The organisations reported a range of outcomes across personal, social and creative wellbeing. Many observed that the programme supported self-expression and authenticity through creative dialogue and making, and some, including the teachers, recognised **shifts in emotional regulation**, often in contrast to how they are at school. One teacher commented: *"the change in their behaviour ... is drastic."* **A pupil reflected that attending the sessions "provides a sense of peace and freedom after the stress and the pressure that school traps you with."**

Organisations reported seeing **stronger interpersonal skills**, including peer relationships, generosity and teamwork, alongside growing social confidence. They also reflected that, through exploring new mediums and ideas, **young people developed creative and technical skills as well as confidence** in questioning and critique through art. **Many organisations remarked on young people's attitudes towards art shifting from little to no engagement; to active, critical participation.** For many, wellbeing manifested in simply attending regularly or sitting peacefully within

the creative space – small but profound indicators of trust and safety. Others have found their voices through collective action, co-producing manifestos, exhibitions and public sharing events that affirm their sense of agency. **Pride was a consistent thread across the organisations.** Whether through exhibitions, performances or shared reflection, young people proudly celebrated their work with gallery staff, peers, family and friends.

And there was disagreement too, which was welcomed as critical engagement – affirming young people's **individuality and voice.** The potential for projects to nurture critical skills was a deliberate consideration for most projects. As one senior team member reflected, their project presented *"a safe space for young people to express their thoughts and meaning."*

Overall, there was a strong sense of joy across the projects, with all seven organisations observing

laughter, excitement and happiness and many participants commenting on fun, play and enjoyment.

"There is no right or wrong way of doing art so there's so much freedom and room to experiment and explore ... It's also really fun." (Young person)

"This project is important for self-development ... Mum says I smile after." (Young person)

The expanded definition of wellbeing reinforces this multidimensional view. Words like 'belonging' and 'connection' are balanced with 'confidence' and 'calm.' It would come as no surprise that the enquiry question foci across the organisations – belonging, skills and collaboration – may have helped shape understanding of impacts and outcomes for young people in 2024/25, with **confidence, belonging and connection** being some of the consistent findings across all seven organisations.



CONFIDENCE, BELONGING AND CONNECTION

Based on the organisations' research there are common threads being evidenced across the personal, social and creative wellbeing themes, albeit on different scales. Our review of project reports and research interviews identified three main outcomes for young people across the seven organisations:

- **Confidence:** Increased self-confidence, emotional expression and creative confidence
- **Belonging:** Sense of identity and ownership through sustained engagement
- **Connection:** Improved social connections and connection with art

These outcomes have a clear alignment with the CLA's Capabilities Framework, referenced earlier – linking to the pillar 'Being, Belonging and Becoming' and 'Relating' in particular.

Confidence

"The problems she was facing before about her appearance had gone. This was incredible to see and continue to see every time she comes back." (Artist)

A clear impact across all organisations was the growth in young people's confidence: through "bold compositional choices" in their artmaking; in their social communication; within art spaces; and in their personal confidence. Young people have developed confidence not only in making art, but in talking about it. At Tate St Ives, students who were initially hesitant began "confidently talking about art" and taking pride in their

collaborative work, even bringing family members to final shows. Camden Art Centre observed "huge leaps in confidence", with one SEND student, usually reserved, speaking "eloquently and enthusiastically." Turner Contemporary found that returning students became "more vocal, confident and rebellious", increasingly comfortable speaking publicly and expressing opinions – a **demonstration of art institutions finding positivity in rebellion where education settings may not**. At Kettle's Yard, this confidence took the form of agency: a shift from seeing art as a school subject to confidently expressing their own identity and ideas through art.

Belonging

Belonging was observed in moments of inclusion, laughter and ease in the environment. Students with complex needs working with Leeds Art Gallery and Camden Art Centre showed visible comfort and relational trust through different signs and signals, such as increasing their attendance, gradually increasing their proximity to the artist/facilitator and engaging through eye contact, smiles and movement. Belonging was nurtured through consistent relationships and safe, validating spaces. At South London Gallery, participants who struggled in school settings developed a sense of ownership and could "actively participate and thrive," and the teacher observed, "they've found a space that they really feel like they belong in." Kettle's Yard and the Whitworth described how young people felt heard, part of a community, and able to be their authentic selves. Across the organisations, this relational trust translated into peer generosity, sustained attendance, and young people becoming advocates for the programme itself.

"At South London Gallery, participants who struggled in school settings developed a sense of ownership and could 'actively participate and thrive.' The teacher observed that they had found a space where they really felt they could belong."



Reflection: Relational confidence

In Year One, confidence emerged as one of the most visible outcomes of the programme: creative confidence in artmaking, social confidence in groups, and individual self-confidence.

For Year Two, confidence appears to be more relational. Could it be that confidence grows not only from personal achievement, but from belonging and connection?

Thinking points:

- **How can we continue to nurture confidence as something that grows between people as much as within them – deepening belonging and connection through mutual trust?**
- **In what ways can we nurture confidence as something that grows between people, spaces, places, and practices?**

We have observed that belonging is nurtured by inclusive, relational approaches which is consistent with wider research:

"In short: belonging is not only about how many friends a young person has, but also about how included, safe, and empowered they feel in their local context – and this matters for their personal wellbeing, social health and future prospects." (The Belonging Barometer, 2025)

Art is a powerful conduit for belonging: Kettle's Yard's participants worked with photography which would be exhibited in public spaces, the images acting as *"quiet but powerful statements of belonging, shifting the question from 'Do we belong here?' to 'Here we are.'"*

Connections

"Art doesn't stand still, it travels, connects and inspires people." (Young person)

Connection emerged in many forms across the programmes: connection to self, to others, to place, and to creative purpose. For young people to connect they must first feel a

sense of trust and confidence, safety and feeling valued. At South London Gallery, friendships and generosity grew as participants collaborated and supported one another, describing a deep connection to the space as something they *"cherished."* For Turner Contemporary, returning visits and independent engagement revealed a genuine relationship with the gallery itself. Art was an important element to building connections, providing a *"gateway for young people to meet peers and form connections"* (South London Gallery) and the chance to develop a *"shared visual language"* (Camden Art Centre). Across the organisations, connection grew through attentiveness and long-term engagement which has signalled a shift from passive attendance into a deeper engagement.

"... feeling connected, valued, safe and able to influence one's surroundings appears to support wellbeing, social engagement and life satisfaction." (The Belonging Barometer, 2025)



DEEPENED ENGAGEMENT

"This programme has reminded us that deep engagement with young people takes time – but the outcomes, even if quiet or subtle, are deeply meaningful." (Project manager)

Long-term, consistent relationships between artists, organisations, young people and schools have been vital to achieve a depth of engagement during 2024/25.

Across the organisations, there were examples of shifts in engagement to a deeper commitment. There were instances of students who brought in sketchbooks unprompted, returned independently to galleries and joined new youth programmes. Young people who had been self-critical began to take expressive risks, returning regularly with confidence and pride.

Across all seven organisations, there were indications of engagement being reciprocal: **a shared exchange built from layers of attentiveness from both sides.** Participants developed listening, questioning, and observing skills through art, and they brought these into how they chose to engage. What began as passive attendance may evolve into deeper engagement, with organisations learning to listen differently and young people feeling genuinely heard and stepping forward with a sense of ownership and purpose. This has the potential



to grow into a sustained relationship with art, with self and others: a transformation rooted in confidence, belonging and connection.

Far from being a fixed state, deep engagement is neither a straightforward nor a linear journey. It is fragile and fluid, perhaps like many things in young people's lives. Deep engagement requires a demonstration of, and nurturing of, commitment and a handing over of power.¹⁷

A key example is the Whitworth's acceptance and engagement with the student who disagreed with AI as their chosen art form. By welcoming disagreement, they developed a genuine partnership with the young participant, welcoming dissent and co-designing alternative ways for the student to engage, including new leadership opportunities. This highlights a distinctive feature of the Mildred Fund: it provides the support, time and openness needed for dissent to be explored constructively, which is something that many other projects are not typically structured or resourced to accommodate. Additionally, for South London Gallery, young people were positioned as co-researchers. These are examples of invitations to engage in deeper ways, which are reminiscent of Arnstein's Ladder of Participation: where a sense of partnership grows and deepens at each stage.¹⁸

At Leeds Art Gallery, students with profound and multiple learning disabilities demonstrated engagement through quiet but powerful actions, echoing Hart's Ladder of Participation¹⁹ and its inclusive adaptations for SEND contexts, where engagement and agency are often expressed through gesture, rhythm or sensory interaction rather than speech.

However, as the Project Lead acknowledges, individual approaches are vital: *"Access is not the same for everybody and through delivery of our project we have learned that different engagement techniques are needed for different people."*

Reflection: Connectedness and creative engagement

Connectedness and belonging are often combined but their meanings are subtly different. Connection is a different feeling: when young people feel connected to something larger than themselves, their confidence to explore, take risks and express ideas grows, and their engagement deepens. Organisations observed moments of connection to materials, to ideas, to one another, and to the gallery space. It is highly individual, as we have seen.

"Spending time with new unlikely people. I can connect with people. Connecting to the [local] art community has really helped me feel part of something." (Young person)

How might the quality of engagement be observed more powerfully through the understanding of what helps build a sense of connection?

We briefly refer to two models of participation: Arnstein's original Ladder of Participation and Hart's Ladder of Participation for children and young people, but there has been extensive exploration into participation and shared power within arts practice and research. What other models and tools feel relevant in the context of the Mildred Fund?

Thinking points:

- **What does your model for deeper creative engagement look like?**
- **What role does attentiveness play in your model?**
- **How important are confidence, belonging and connection in your model?**
- **How might we design creative spaces where connection itself becomes the measure of quality engagement?**

Conclusion

WHAT WAS LEARNED ABOUT ATTENTIVENESS?

"I think [the term] 'attentiveness' feels like our approach is more detailed, and I think that really reflects how we aim to treat individuals with respect and ask them what they need – what their needs are." (Project team member)

Attentiveness has become a deepening quality and an ethos of the programme so far: **a tacit layering of listening and noticing, relating, including, reflecting and responding, across the different 'composite parts' and conditions of the projects.** It is the giving of time to the hidden complexities of young people's lives and the contexts around them.

Through attentiveness, project teams could observe **small and fragile shifts in engagement as well as more obvious and tangible developments.** Attentiveness means participants are **seen, heard and remembered.** They feel **trusted, welcomed, fed and held** within a space that values who they are. Organisations were able to reflect on how **wellbeing is built, not delivered.**

Underpinning much of this is the understanding that wellbeing cannot shift without first engaging young people in trusting relationships. The project teams learned that trust begins long before the artmaking itself: in how invitations are offered, how spaces are arranged, and how staff model an inclusive welcome.

However, attentiveness isn't easy or straightforward. It involves a relational, inclusive and responsive approach which is long-term. It requires consistency and persistence. In school and youth contexts this is often challenged by shifting priorities and staff turnover, where new relationships of trust need to be built and progress feels fragile, as the organisations observed during the year. Attentiveness, like engagement, isn't linear, and neither are meaningful

shifts in wellbeing. It is the balance between what institutions give up vs what they gain from working in this deep, attentive way that will be a question underpinning the learning as organisations plan the legacy of this work beyond the life of the three-year funding.

In an education system that models large class sizes and rewards speed and accuracy, attentiveness works in smaller groups and asks for slower paces. It is, in itself, a form of resistance – **and perhaps the most powerful tool we have for sustaining wellbeing in uncertain times.**

The depth of relationship has proven essential between organisations and their partner schools and community groups. At Leeds Art Gallery, close partnership has allowed the organisation to recognise the subtle impact of their work with students with complex needs. Tate St Ives has developed stronger trust from schools through consistent communication and responsiveness. At Camden Art Centre, collaboration with teachers has encouraged more reflective classroom practice, even as it revealed the tensions between creative openness and curriculum-driven structures and assessment.

These enduring relationships are what make change possible: attentiveness ripples outward.

Reflection: Learning across the year

Five themes of learning stand out in 2024/25:

Long-term commitment and relationships remain the foundation of all meaningful engagement. Long-term consistency built the safety necessary for creative risk-taking. Co-production and co-research approaches, seen particularly at the Whitworth and Kettle's Yard, gave young people agency and ownership over the process.

Flexibility and responsiveness proved essential. Adapting session times, spaces and methods improved participation. Reflective, enquiry-led research helped teams adjust dynamically and stay attuned to changing contexts.

Inclusivity redefines what progress looks like. Success was found across the spectrum of attitudes and behaviours, from turning up, trying something new, to choosing to engage quietly,

or choosing to refuse. These subtle behavioural changes, often invisible in formal metrics, were recognised as signs of growth.

The role of artists and institutions was pivotal. Their sensitivity and adaptability shaped every encounter. The artistic and creative content was fundamental to creating shifts in wellbeing. Teachers and youth workers began to see students more holistically, recognising non-verbal communication and relational learning as part of educational progress.

Attentiveness is a vital quality enabling organisations to truly connect with young people. Attentiveness matters for confidence, belonging and connection.

Thinking Point:

- **How can the learning from 2024/25 help redefine what meaningful engagement with young people truly looks like?**

ENDNOTES

- 1** CLA 2025 Report Card can be accessed here: https://www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/CLA-2025-Report-Card_AW.pdf
- 2** The first annual research report (2023/24) can be accessed here: <https://mildredfund.org/research>
- 3** Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2023 – Wave 4 follow-up to the 2017 survey. NHS England. Accessed here: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up/data-sets>
- 4** The Belonging Barometer, 2025: https://www.thebelongingforum.com/the_belonging_barometer_2025
- 5** Child mental ill health and absence from school, England: 2021 to 2022. Accessed here: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/childhealth/articles/childmentailhealthandabsencefromschoolengland/2021to2022>
- 6** Cultural Learning Alliance, March 2025. Capabilities Framework. Accessed here: <https://www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk/evidence/#capabilities>
- 7** This contextual review was conducted in 2022 and helped shape the programme research framework. It is made available to all organisations supported by the Mildred Fund.
- 8** To some degree all organisations involved their participants in their research such as utilising sketchbook reflection journals and encouraging them through participatory methods to shape the learning.
- 9** The new framework of generic learning outcomes (GLOs) used in the museums sector was relaunched in September 2025, to include a sensory learning outcome: <https://gem.org.uk/resource/generic-learning-outcomes-framework-2025/>
- 10** NHS Ways to Wellbeing. Accessed here: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/five-steps-to-mental-wellbeing/>
- 11** The Value of Values: Reflections on Tate Exchange by Anna Cutler, 2018. Access online: <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/30/reflections-on-tate-exchange>
- 12** Of the 13 schools, four were involved last year, and of the four community groups three were involved last year.
- 13** Not all our projects cover the programmatic focus on wellbeing in explicit terms, either working with groups that were identified as needing this support and/or opting instead to design activities that implicitly support the development of wellbeing through focused activity.
- 14** We count engagements in this instance rather than individuals as this figure is likely to include a small number of repeat engagers across year one and two.
- 15** The engagement model (2020) has five areas: exploration, realisation, anticipation, persistence, and initiation. It is an assessment standard used for students with complex needs and who are not working within the national curriculum. More information can be accessed here: The engagement model - [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk)
- 16** There were also signs of connection in the first year of the research, such as the realisation by Tate St Ives' participants that collaborative exhibitions needed "to smooch" together rather than feeling like a gathering of individual artworks with no connection to each other. This led to group reflection on the wider implications of connections and connectedness, across people, ideas and artistic pursuits.
- 17** Terms such as engagement and participation have been explored extensively within art discourse, but a full exploration of those debates lies beyond the scope of this paper. We hope to return to these questions as part of the research in future stages of the work.
- 18** Arnstein's Ladder of Participation is an adult model that illustrates the levels of citizen involvement in decision-making, ranging from non-participation and tokenism at the lower rungs to genuine partnership and shared power at the top. Arnstein, S. (1969). A Ladder of Citizen Participation.
- 19** Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992) adapts Arnstein's model to focus on children and young people's genuine participation. Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship. UNICEF.

The Mildred Fund would like to thank all the young participants, artists, teachers and learning team members involved in this project.

For more information about the Mildred Fund and to see all our Annual Research Reports, Case Studies and Key Findings, visit <https://mildredfund.org/research>.