

CASE STUDY:

SOUTH LONDON GALLERY 2024/25

THE
MILDRED
FUND

A Welcome Space | Sarah B. Davies

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-to-19-year-olds with creative skills for them to thrive.

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South London Gallery

Project details

	School Project
Project title	Your Space to Make
Partners	Harris Girls' Academy East Dulwich and Sacred Heart Catholic Secondary School
Participants	71 students aged 13-15 years (Year 9 and Year 10)
Artists	Communal Clay (Tabitha Weddell and Alice Kasahara Macrae), Hannah Kemp-Welch, Alexis Parinas, Different Gravy
Project team	Polly South, Communities and Learning Manager and Paul Crook, Head of Communities and Learning (Project Lead). Also Eireny Akubeze (Project Coordinator), Esme Wedderburn and Nora Bzheta, learning assistants and emerging artists
Programme details	51 sessions at 2 hours each – weekly since September 2024
Project activity	Clay sculpture, sound and radio broadcasting including building radio transmitters, film, analogue and DSLR camera photography, Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR), zines and comics, collage, sculpture, creative writing

ENQUIRY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does creative practice support a wide range of skill development?
2. What are the key ingredients for creating spaces that young people find welcoming, and how do these enhance wellbeing?

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Your Space to Make at South London Gallery is an after-school arts programme that offers young people a welcoming, inclusive, and and creative environment based at Art Block, the Gallery's dedicated space for its Communities and Learning projects. The project aims to explore how creative practice can support **skills development** and **wellbeing** through sustained engagement between artists and young people. It is underpinned by two key frameworks: the DfE Skills Classification¹ and the NHS Five Ways to Wellbeing.²

The Gallery's intention to create "a space that was radically different from school,"³ was supported through its regular sessions inspiring a range of technical skill development and a deep consideration into what helps create spaces of ownership, trust and belonging for young people.

Running weekly throughout the year, including during school holidays, Your Space to Make has the largest volume of session activity across the Mildred Fund to date. The sessions have been built with the interests of the participants placed at the centre:

"Throughout the project, staff have been speaking to the young people about what skills or mediums they would like to work with in future sessions." (South London Gallery, April 2025)

"There is a clear sense of ownership over the space, noticeable in the way that young people operate within it – they have agency ... and treat it as their own. This, in turn, has a significant impact on the wellbeing of young people."



Photography workshop (Different Gravy, 2025)

CO-RESEARCHERS

Central to the project was the establishment of the co-researcher roles: two project participants who volunteered to support the enquiry. The Project Lead reflected that the co-researchers liked *“being part of the session but also having a slightly outside lens.”*⁴

Each week, they helped document the session through prompts such as ‘What made you feel welcome today?’ They took Polaroid photos, reflected in journals and contributed insights that became central to the Gallery’s evaluation.

“[We are] trying to make it quite light touch, so it doesn’t feel like too onerous, but also so that we’re very much getting their regular insights.” (Project lead)⁵

The team also utilised the co-researcher role to provide a closer look into some of the skills being developed through the project. A light-touch reflective tool called Skills Bingo presented a playful way for the co-researchers to identify the skills they hoped to explore or develop during the

project, without the pressure of formal assessment. As the Communities and Learning Manager explained:

*“It’s interesting data for us to collect. It [gives us] an idea of what things they would like to achieve and for us to then build that into our programme planning ...”*⁶

At regular points throughout the project, the co-researchers would also select skills they felt they’d worked on, highlighting a wide range of capabilities which was illuminating for the team.

YOUNG PEOPLE

Two partner schools in Peckham and Camberwell were central to the project in 2024/25: Harris Girls Academy and Sacred Heart Catholic School. Local young people from other schools who had either been invited by word of mouth, or had attended South London Gallery’s youth activities, also joined on an ad hoc basis.

“We have ... seen young people become natural advocates for the programme, often turning up with new friends to join.” (South London Gallery, September 2025)⁷

Most participants were girls aged 13–16. For most this was their first experience of a gallery programme and – according to school staff – some of the students had previously struggled in formal learning settings.

For these young people with limited experience of, or access to, arts or creative environments, Your Space to Make provided a place of trust, experimentation and wellbeing.

ART ACTIVITY

Each term featured a new artist and medium. The shifting artistic forms offered multiple entry points for participation and learning.

- **Communal Clay** (September 2024 to January 2025): Young people learned sculpting, glazing and creating their own kiln in the Gallery's garden to fire their work. This project culminated in a self-curated exhibition, and they photographed their work using a professional light box and DSLR camera.

*"Communal Clay recognise that the tactility of clay can be very **therapeutic, helping to let go of anxieties and stress, and to focus and think clearly.***

Communal Clay's approach is focused on promoting these mindful benefits ..." (South London Gallery, 2024)⁸

- **Radio and Sound Art** with Hannah Kemp-Welch (February 2025): Participants built their own radios using simple materials, tuning into local stations and producing their own radio shows such as 'Summer Songs' and '2000s Emo.'

*"To the surprise of the young people and staff members, the radio equipment was created using deceptively simple materials (cardboard tubes, copper wire, crocodile clips) and required **intricate work** in piecing together, following plans given by Hannah. The payoff for this was a **genuine sense of amazement** when the group took their radios out onto the local estate and discovered they could tune into Punjab Radio UK."* (South London Gallery, April 2025)⁹

- **Photography and Printmaking** with Different Gravy (March to April 2025): Young people learned to use medium-format cameras and recreated iconic album covers.

"We invited artist duo Different Gravy to work on a project in response to the young people's request ... to work in analogue photography ... We were pleased that the collaborative nature of the project facilitated increased interaction between young people across different schools and friendship groups." (South London Gallery, April 2025)¹⁰

- **AR/VR and Collage Animation** with Alexis Parinas (May–July 2025): Exploring digital and analogue filmmaking, cyanotype prints, eco-printing and collage.

*"AR and VR was highlighted by the young people at the beginning of the project as a technique they were keen to work with in the sessions ... Sessions combined **skill-building with participant-led exploration, enabling the group to experiment collaboratively and apply these techniques to their own interests.**"* (South London Gallery, September 2025)¹¹

A summer holiday project also included storytelling, sculpture, and zine making, guided by South London Gallery's learning assistants and emerging artists Esme Wedderburn and Nora Bzheta, whose roles had grown within the Gallery's learning team.

- *"Stepping up to the role of lead artists gave [the learning assistants] **the opportunity to share their own practices, and for young people to see the different career paths [that] emerging artists take.**"* (South London Gallery, September 2025)¹²

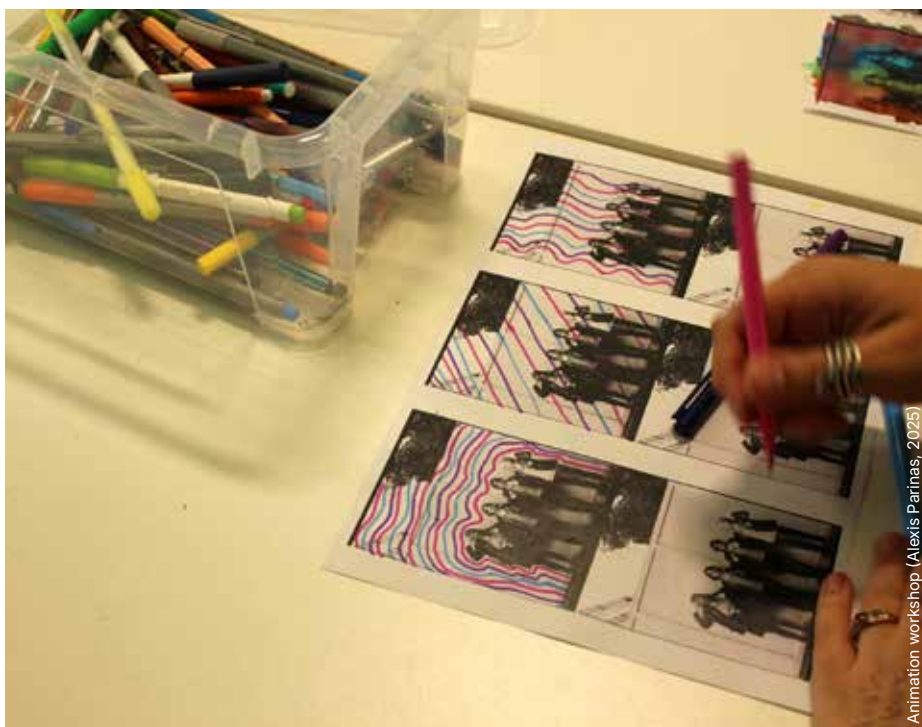
The young people's reflections¹³ captured how highly they valued these encounters and the creative freedom they enjoyed:

"Free, inclusive, enjoyable."

"It allows us to express ourselves like in no other way."

"It lets us be our authentic selves."





WELCOMING AND CREATIVE SPACES

"The activities were the catalyst for them attending, but they cherished the space offered to be themselves and spend time with friends. This was no better evidenced by young people starting to attend the Friday session we run, which operates as an open youth space, with a range of activities on offer, not just art." (South London Gallery, September 2025)¹⁴

While the artists introduced skills and inspiration, young people repeatedly cited the welcoming space, stocked with food, soft furnishings and creative freedom, as well as the consistency of sessions and the familiarity of the staff in attendance.

The Gallery used its enquiry question to explore the conditions and ingredients that help create welcoming spaces, to enable a better understanding of the process of building trust, deep engagement and ownership of Art Block as a local resource. The team reflected on the learning so far, and the following ingredients appear to be key:

- **Consistency** of staff and sessions created a regularity and familiarity which helped build trust. Staff were described as the familiar faces who ensured that sessions felt safe and constant even as artists rotated.

- **Food** and time for snacking was an important part of an inviting space: genuine care expressed through everyday gestures. *"... pizza and drinks were welcoming because ... food just makes you comfortable."* (Young person)¹⁵
- **Social time**, to settle and catch up is important to schedule in. For the Gallery this emphasised the importance of a slower pace. *"We have learnt that scheduling the timing of sessions has been important, as we piloted a slow start model for Your Space to Make, giving 30 minutes before the activity begins for young people to arrive, eat pizza and socialise. We feel this conscious commitment to the social aspect of an after-school project is a major reason why many young people attended."* (South London Gallery, September 2025)¹⁶
- **Non-hierarchical space.** The ethos was that young people felt ownership of the Art Block through Your Space to Make. They were also invited to explore the workings of the Gallery with invitations to see the office spaces, which offers an alternative experience to how they may experience school. That simple gesture quickly broke down barriers and acted as a counter to school hierarchies.

"... if you've been at school all day where you've got this very hierarchical structure, to then have an adult ... saying 'stick your nose in there! go and look in our offices!' you could just feel it creates such a good atmosphere." (Project Lead)¹⁷

When the Communities and Learning Manager took a sabbatical, her temporary cover – a former teacher who knew the students – brought new insights. Her dual perspective as educator and gallery professional was vital, adding depth to observations about the students' creativity and how differently they behave in informal, creative spaces.

*"It is incredible to see what a difference the welcoming and creative environment of Art Block makes to the **wellbeing and focus** of the young people attending. As a former teacher to many of the young people here, students with additional needs, low confidence, and those who struggle with behaviour in a competitive and rigorously academic environment, I was so delighted to see them engaging in the projects voluntarily, as they do not typically attend any after-school clubs. These young people demonstrated **complete focus, worked collaboratively, and seemed genuinely happy while doing so.**" (Cover Manager)¹⁸*

This reinforced the power of informal, welcoming, creative learning spaces as places where young people who *"find traditional school settings challenging"*, might **"actively participate and thrive."** (South London Gallery, April 2025)¹⁹

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

*“The kind of **transferable skills** that they’re getting from taking part in their learning in a different context is just **hugely beneficial** for them and their future.” (Teacher)²⁰*

The blend of practical craft and creative thinking gave participants tangible skills that extended beyond artmaking. Young people identified a wide range of new skills using the DfE Skills Classification framework, including:

- Creative and technical skills
- Social and behavioural skills
- Cross-job/transferable skills
- Fine motor skills
- Communication

Developing the wide range of skills through art not only nurtures imagination and problem-solving but also builds transferable skills that will support young people later in life.

“I learned social skills – how to be more open and talk to people ... behavioural skills, getting along with people ... and STEM skills using cameras and radios.” (Co-researcher)²¹



PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND CREATIVE IMPACTS

Teachers, artists and staff all observed measurable shifts in behaviour and engagement expressed through improved communication, patience, teamwork, and joy. Underpinning these shifts are three core themes that span across personal, social and creative development:

- **Confidence and Expression:** Participants became increasingly vocal and self-confident through collective, creative moments. One young person reflected, *“I helped tell everyone what they needed to do and when to do it. We were quite focused ...”*²² The staff and artists also observed participants’ increased pride in their own work.

“We noticed throughout the six weeks many of the young people were increasing in confidence in front of and behind the camera.” (Artist)²³

- **Connection and Belonging:** Connection grew on several levels – connection to each other, to the art and to the artists, which helped build a feeling of belonging to the space itself. Staff observed that many people arrived early and stayed late and highlighted that those who may appear to be disengaged in classrooms could often *“flourish”* in creative, trust-based environments such as this.²⁴ The programme’s co-researcher model also further deepened connection and engagement.

“Art Block itself is a social space, and the project and environment gave space for connections to strengthen, whether through general socialisation throughout each workshop, or through physically creating work together, sharing ideas [...] and responding to and getting inspired by each other’s work.” (Artist)²⁵

“... The design of the space creates a sense of belonging for young people, as their work is celebrated in the Art Block space. This includes the presentation of their work on the walls, on soft furnishings (e.g. custom cushion covers), and in the garden.” (South London Gallery, September 2025)²⁶

- **Ownership and Agency:** Participants exercised choice and authorship: from shaping project ideas to curating displays and sharing work online. They suggested themes for projects, invited friends to join and treated the space as their own. *“The immediacy with which I was able to **sense that the space was truly theirs** was striking,”* reflected one of the artists.²⁷ *“Different Gravy and Hannah also note that there is a **clear sense of ownership** over the space, noticeable in the way that young people operate within it – they have **agency** at Art Block and treat it as their own. This, in turn, has a significant impact on the wellbeing of young people, as they have space separate from home and formal education **where their presence is valued and their contribution is celebrated.**” (South London Gallery, September 2025)²⁸*

“I think what I love about it is the sense of agency – they’ve chosen to do this ... they have got control over something that they wouldn’t have in school.” (Teacher)²⁹

KEY LEARNING POINTS

• Learning for teachers

Your Space to Make helped **define new collaborations between the gallery and its local schools**. Schools received financial bursaries for their art departments and the lead teacher from each school attended quarterly meetings for professional support to sustain their involvement. This “equitable,” “[non]-extractive” model recognised that teachers’ time and expertise was integral to the success of the project.³⁰

The teachers described how the programme **changed their perspective on the capabilities of the students**, observing “agency” and acknowledging that the skills developed through the arts activities has “enabled them to take ownership over their learning.” (Teacher)³¹

Another teacher noted surprise at who engaged most deeply – students who wouldn’t usually choose to take part in after-school provision. Such insights underline the programme’s success in inspiring **new connections between teachers and students**.

• Learning for South London Gallery

Welcoming is both spatial and relational

The Gallery reflected that the sense of safety and belonging emerges not only from the physical space but from warmth, food, humour, and trust. The space is the programme. As the Project Lead described, “the space and the programme are one: the creative session itself is part of what makes the space feel welcoming.”³²

Enquiry research

Grounded in the NHS Five Ways to Wellbeing and a co-researcher model, the Gallery aimed to explore how contemporary art practice could embody the five wellbeing principles: connect; take notice; learn; be active; and give. Rather than instruct artists to meet these criteria, the Gallery found that “every project hit all of them, often in unexpected ways.”³³ Clay work encouraged mindfulness



Collage workshop (Esme Wedderburn, 2025)

and presence; analogue photography fostered curiosity and connection with the environment; and sound projects opened space for playful collaboration and confidence building. “... this [framework] has really trickled into how we think, and our other programming as well.” (Communities and Learning manager)³⁴

For the Gallery, the project **deepened institutional understanding** of what a welcoming, wellbeing-focused programme truly entails. It clarified the importance of **consistency, social time, and redressing hierarchies**. The gallery developed a **lens of attentiveness**,³⁵ listening not only to young people but to the **rhythms of their lives, school calendars, and emotional needs**.

South London Gallery will enter year two of its Mildred Fund project with a clearer focus on attentiveness through the creation of welcoming programmes and spaces. Their refined research question will continue to explore the ways in which welcoming environments can impact on wellbeing: *What are the key ingredients for creating **welcoming programmes and spaces**, and how does a **welcoming environment enhance young people’s wellbeing?***

This question has intentionally merged programme and space, recognising that the environment, activity, and relationships cannot be separated.

The co-researcher role will adapt in a more collaborative way in year two, exploring a **wider range of voices** through offering all participants the chance to take on the role on a voluntary basis, week on week: “... every week, a different young person can answer the prompt questions [in the research sketchbook] and each time they do an entry, they’ll get a £5 voucher ... I think that could be quite interesting because we might get different perspectives.” (Project Lead)³⁶

“They make you feel like you’re equal to them – like you’re their friend. That makes you feel really comfortable and at ease to be yourself.” (Co-researcher)³⁷



Photography workshop (Different Gravy, 2025)

Endnotes

- 1** The DfE skills classification is a framework developed in 2023 by the Department for Education to group and define different types of skills across a range of occupations, to create a shared language for educators, policymakers and researchers to design, deliver and evaluate learning. Accessed here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/652fdb9d92895c0010dcb9a5/A_skills_classification_for_the_UK.pdf
- 2** The original Five Ways to Wellbeing were developed in 2008 by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) defining five wellbeing principles: connect; take notice; learn; be active; and give. This framework has since been promoted and adopted by the NHS as well as other organisations and charities. Accessed here: <https://new-economics.files.svdcn.com/production/files/five-ways-to-wellbeing-1.pdf?dm=1584709195>
- 3** South London Gallery Annual Report, July 2025.
- 4** Interview with the Mildred Fund Research Lead, July 2025.
- 5** Presentation given at annual gathering of the Mildred Fund cohort, July 2025.
- 6** Presentation given at annual gathering of the Mildred Fund cohort, July 2025.
- 7** South London Gallery Annual report, September 2025.
- 8** South London Gallery Application proposal to the Mildred Fund 2024.
- 9** South London Gallery Interim report, April 2025.
- 10** South London Gallery Interim report, April 2025.
- 11** South London Gallery Annual report, September 2025.
- 12** South London Gallery Annual report, September 2025.
- 13** Quoted in South London Gallery Annual report, September 2025.
- 14** South London Gallery Annual report, September 2025.
- 15** Quoted in South London Gallery Interim Report, April 2025.
- 16** South London Gallery Annual report, September 2025.
- 17** Research interview with the Mildred Fund Research Lead, July 2025.
- 18** Quoted in South London Gallery Interim Report, April 2025.
- 19** Quoted in South London Gallery Interim Report, April 2025.
- 20** Quoted in South London Gallery Annual Report, September 2025.
- 21** Quoted in South London Gallery Interim Report, April 2025.
- 22** Quoted in South London Gallery Annual Report, September 2025.
- 23** Quoted in South London Gallery Annual Report, September 2025.
- 24** South London Gallery Interim report, April 2025.
- 25** Quoted in South London Gallery Annual Report, September 2025.
- 26** South London Gallery Annual Report, September 2025.
- 27** Quoted in South London Gallery Annual Report, September 2025.
- 28** South London Gallery Annual Report, September 2025.
- 29** Quoted in South London Gallery interim report, April 2025.
- 30** Research interview with the Mildred Fund Research Lead, July 2025.
- 31** Quoted in South London Gallery Annual Report, September 2025.
- 32** Research interview with the Mildred Fund Research Lead, July 2025.
- 33** Research interview with the Mildred Fund Research Lead, July 2025.
- 34** Presentation given at annual gathering of the Mildred Fund cohort, July 2025.
- 35** We have found that attentiveness is a quality across the Mildred Fund programme model, explored in depth through the programme's annual research report 2024/25.
- 36** Research interview with the Mildred Fund Research Lead, July 2025.
- 37** Quoted in South London Gallery Interim report, April 2025.

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>.