Fostering creative and collaborative spaces for children's mental health in South London

A Playbook

PIVOT Collective

Impact on Urban Health

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Publication Date: June 2025
Commissioned by: Impact on Urban Health

Suggested Citation:
Reynolds, L., & Petersen, N. (2025). Fostering creative and collaborative spaces for children's mental health in South London. Impact on Urban Health.

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Foreword

At Impact on Urban Health, together with our community partners we aim to influence decision-makers to improve the conditions children grow up in so that every child has access to the things they need to be healthy and happy. We work closely with local people and organisations who are trusted by their communities to develop impactful ways of improving children's mental health.

In 2022 the Children's Mental Health programme, as part of their Rethinking Evidence Strand developed a Community of Creative Practice (CoCP). This was when the programme was still in its search phase, exploring how to work outside of existing systems and reaching those who were informally recording stories and experiences outside of structured health research. Drawing on arts and health practice, we were interested in exploring how we could support artists and performers in using their creative practice as a research tool which enables individuals to share their stories through mediums that feel authentic, accessible, and, importantly, less re-traumatising; we were interested in how creative practitioners often reach those who go unheard and unseen by other forms of health research. We were also interested in further understanding the importance of communities of practice as a peer support network when working with challenging subject matter.

This learning framework provides us with further evidence that artists and performers bring a distinctive perspective to health research. Their work challenges conventional ways of thinking, opens up new possibilities for interpretation, and invites deeper emotional engagement. Their contributions support more inclusive and empathetic research practices, ensuring that the voices of those involved are not just collected but truly understood and valued. This learning framework also provides us with insight into how creatives build trust with each other and the people they work with; how they offer support and guidance; act as sounding boards for each other's work and support the development of each other's practice in a safe environment.

We hope readers of this report are provided with further insight about integrating creative practice into community-based research. It underscores the need for investment in spaces where creativity and scholarship can intersect, leading to more holistic, ethical, and impactful research outcomes. As you explore the findings and insights within this document, we encourage you to consider the transformative potential of creativity in research and its role in fostering deeper connections, understanding, and change.

Gabrielle Allen
Impact on Urban Health

Introduction



INTRODUCTION

Every child deserves to thrive, with their fundamental needs — safe, warm housing, nutritious food, and nurturing relationships — fully met. However, in urban areas like South London, many children face barriers to accessing these basic requirements for wellbeing, leading to distress that impacts their mental health. To address this, Impact on Urban Health's Children's Mental Health programme takes a transformative approach, shifting away from traditional biomedical frameworks and instead centering the social drivers of mental health, such as poverty and racial equity. The core principle is to support children and families to play a central role in generating evidence about their own experiences and needs, enabling the development of more equitable and effective models of support that are protective, nurturing and safe.

From 2022 to 2024, the Impact on Urban Health's Children's Mental Health programme supported a diverse group of community engagement practitioners from Lambeth and Southwark to develop and implement creative approaches to understanding and supporting children's mental health. At the heart of this project lies a core principle: by enabling families and community organisations to shape the evidence-building process, we can create more equitable and effective models of support. These practitioners brought unique engagement methodologies and deep local knowledge to the collective work of addressing children's mental health challenges.

PURPOSE

This playbook documents our journey of building and nurturing a Community of Practice, profiling seven innovative projects led by members. These showcase how creative methodologies, from arts-based engagement to participatory research, can generate new insights about children's mental health and establish more equitable relationships between communities and formal support systems. Crucially, this work aimed to place families and communities at the centre of evidence generation and programme design.

WHO IS IT FOR?

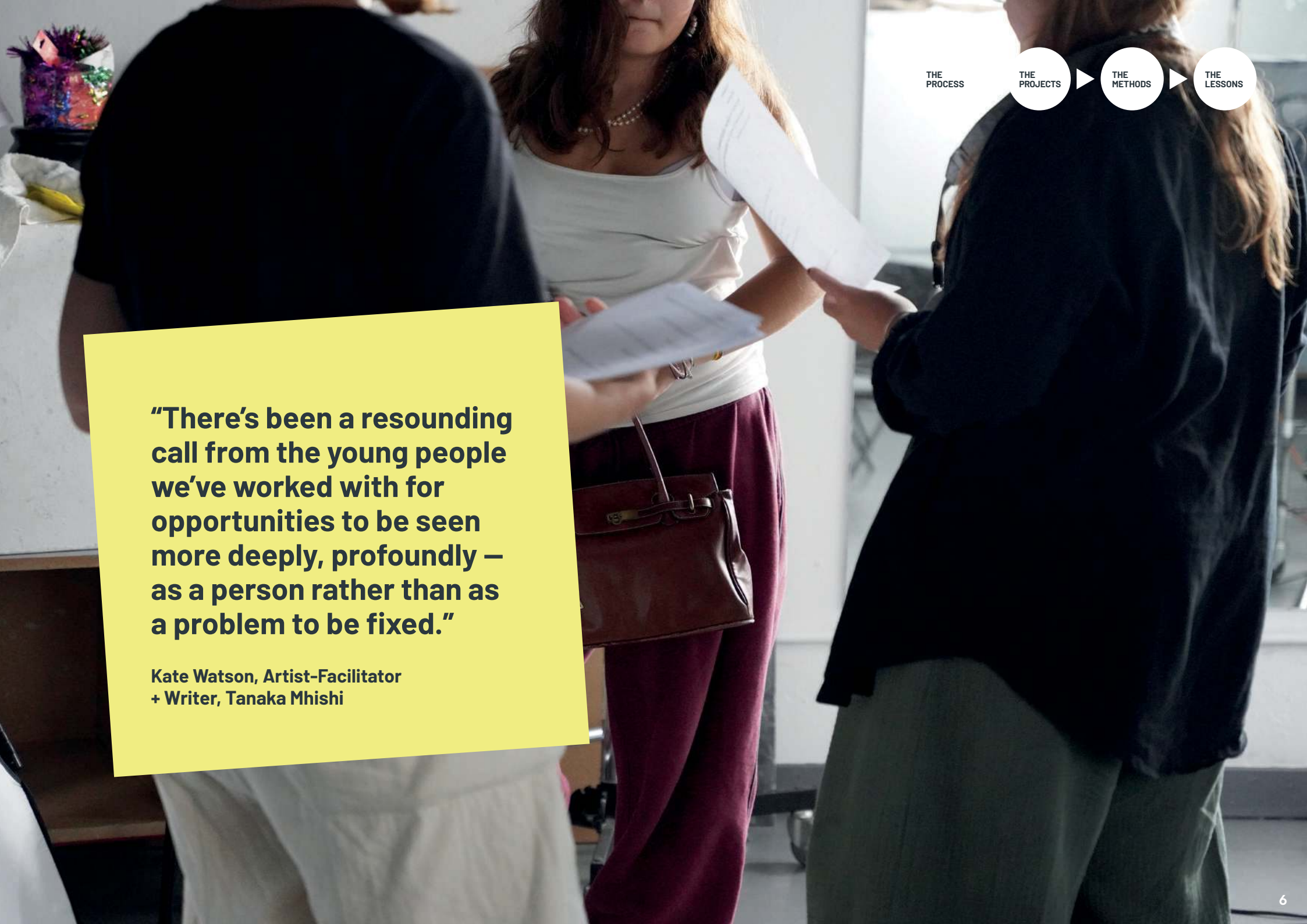
This playbook is a resource for researchers, practitioners, and funders seeking to implement community-driven, equity-focused approaches to children's mental health.

For **researchers**, it offers insights into participatory approaches to generating evidence in collaboration with children and families.

For **practitioners**, it demonstrates how community expertise can reshape our understanding of children's mental health and enhance mental health support strategies.

For **funders**, it offers key insights from an experimental grant-making process that aimed to make funding processes more participatory and focused on collaborative learning.

For **families**, it provides examples of creative ways to engage with mental health research and mental health services, showcasing projects where parents and children have worked together with creative practitioners to co-design projects that centre their own experiences, needs and priorities.



“There’s been a resounding call from the young people we’ve worked with for opportunities to be seen more deeply, profoundly — as a person rather than as a problem to be fixed.”

Kate Watson, Artist-Facilitator + Writer, Tanaka Mhishi

Learn about how and why we came together

THE PROCESS

Learn about the different creative activities

THE PROJECTS

Learn about some of the methods we utilised

THE METHODS

How creative methodologies can transform research

THE LESSONS

Learn about how and why we came together

01

THE PROCESS

Creating space for community-driven, creative learning on children's mental health

The Children's Mental Health Community of Practice represents an innovative model for community-driven research and support. Previous research with families in South London had revealed a disconnect between their lived experiences and the support offered for children with mental health issues or behaviour problems. Many families felt the standard mental health and parenting programmes did not meet their or their children's needs.

Through a structured process beginning in late 2022, the programme mobilised 17 practitioners from Lambeth and Southwark to explore three key areas:

- Understanding existing forms of community knowledge related to the determinants of children's behavioral difficulties and mental health struggles.
- Identifying and documenting community-based solutions and strategies.
- Exploring new ways of producing evidence from diverse community perspectives, including children themselves, thereby challenging traditional power dynamics in research.

A core principle driving the work is that by allowing families and community organisations supporting children with behavioral difficulties greater autonomy in creating evidence about their experiences and needs, we can build more equitable and effective models of support. The programme therefore sought to shift mental health research away from traditional, top-down approaches and towards more holistic, community-driven approaches that center the expertise of children, families, community organisations, and grassroots practitioners - the people closest to the challenges.

Over two years, the group of practitioners collaboratively developed and refined a set of creative engagement projects that put families and children at the centre of evidence building and service design. Each project used innovative, participatory approaches tailored to the local context and needs, including participatory photography, embodied arts workshops, radical co-design, and other creative methodologies. Pivot Collective worked alongside the group of practitioners as the learning partner, supporting community engagement practitioners to design, develop, and capture learning from their creative, community-driven learning projects.

PHASE 1

Proposal development & funding

Unlike traditional funding approaches that rely on external review panels and competitive grant-making, this initiative trialed a new collaborative model where practitioners worked in collaboration to design their projects and co-produced the review process. With a total funding pot of £250,000, the programme encouraged collaboration between teams to develop co-designed projects, and supported both implementation and continuous learning through practice.

Key features of this model included:

1. ***Collaboration over competition***: The programme was structured so that all practitioners who fully engaged in the development process and produced strong proposals could receive funding. Rather than competing against each other for limited resources, teams were incentivised to collaborate, with the possibility of accessing larger funding amounts for joint initiatives.

2. ***Iterative Development***: The funding process was integrated into the proposal development phase, with decisions emerging through ongoing dialogue and refinement rather than a single competitive assessment. Through group workshops and individual feedback sessions, practitioners were supported to strengthen their proposals over time.

3. ***Ongoing Learning and Adaptation***: The programme incorporated continuous learning and adaptation into the structure of the community of practice.

4. ***Flexibility in awards***: Unlike many traditional funding schemes, this programme allowed for more flexible funding arrangements that enabled freelance arts practitioners and others not within traditional institutional structures to receive funds to lead projects.

Through four structured proposal development sessions from November 2022 to March 2023, practitioners worked collaboratively to deepen their understanding of the local context, co-develop initial project ideas, design learning methods, build on existing knowledge, and address ethics and care in their work. Monthly mentorship meetings and peer support networks provided additional scaffolding as practitioners designed projects to engage children and families in new ways. Each team received guidance from the Pivot team, who provided regular feedback throughout the proposal development phase.

The resulting project proposals drew on diverse creative methodologies such as participatory photography, forum theatre, participatory design, and other arts-based engagement. Some projects focused on supporting young children exhibiting behavioral difficulties and their families, while others focused on enabling young people to reshape mental health programs based on their own lived experience.

Ultimately, seven projects were selected and funded for implementation in 2023-24. These projects demonstrate how creative, community-driven approaches can generate new insights about children's mental health and establish more equitable relationships between communities and formal support systems.

PHASE 2

Implementation & learning

After the proposal development phase, the programme transitioned into an intensive period of project implementation and learning from September 2023 to November 2024. The learning approach prioritised co-production and mutual support, establishing multiple channels for practitioners to strengthen their work while contributing to broader programme learning. Instead of primarily focusing on collecting evidence about children and families' experiences, the collective focused on understanding the methodology and process of learning alongside communities.

Aligned with this focus, the implementation phase was structured around three key learning questions:

1. What is the potential contribution of creative and participatory learning methodologies to understanding children's mental health?

2. How do creative methods unearth new insights from families about their lived experiences?

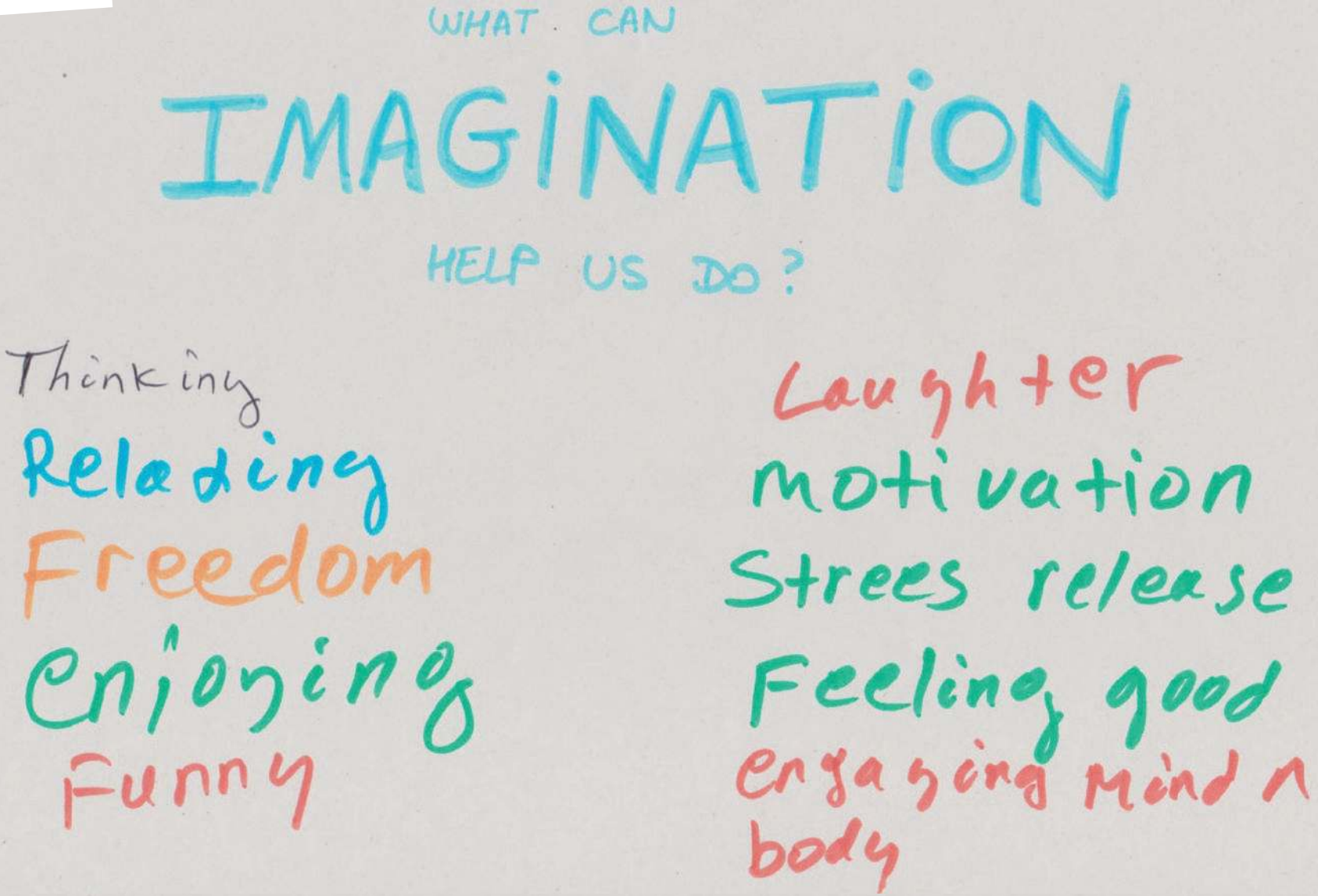
3. How can we best support community practitioners to conduct participatory research with children and families?

The learning approach centered on creating focused and supportive spaces for projects to learn from and support each other. This included bi-monthly online check-ins for sharing insights and participatory co-learning workshops.

As learning partner, Pivot's key role was to help the group to establish a collaborative, peer-learning environment where participants could share knowledge, experiment with new methods, and collectively build evidence. Pivot also engaged with individual project teams to provide technical assistance related to research methodologies, facilitate reflection, and support the documentation of learning as the projects unfolded. Given the sensitive nature of work with children and families facing mental health challenges, who are often excluded from formal systems of care, this ongoing support was important for creative problem-solving and addressing ethical concerns.

The next section presents brief case studies of the seven funded projects, exploring how each team adapted creative methodologies to engage with children, families, and support providers in Lambeth and Southwark. Through these case studies, we examine how different approaches — from participatory photography to forum theatre — enabled new insights about children's mental health. We also reflect on key learnings about supporting community practitioners to conduct participatory research, highlighting the challenges and innovative solutions that emerged. These stories demonstrate the value of investing in community-led approaches and offer practical insights for shifting power in research and service delivery to communities themselves.

Notes from Parents in Playmode workshop, June 2024



Insights from the Community of Practice Process

The Children's Mental Health Community of Practice (CoP) was a pioneering initiative that brought together 22 practitioners across 7 projects working in Lambeth and Southwark to collaboratively explore creative, community-driven approaches to children's mental health. Over two years, the CoP aimed to foster collaboration, mutual learning, and the development of innovative projects that placed families and communities at the center of evidence generation. While the process yielded valuable insights and strengthened local networks, it also revealed challenges inherent in convening a diverse group of practitioners with varying priorities, capacities, and working styles. Here is a synthesis of key insights from the CoP process.

SUPPORTIVE STRUCTURE FOR LEARNING AND COLLABORATION

The CoP evolved into an intentional "watering hole" where practitioners could meet, share, and reflect on their work. This structure provided a supportive environment for members to learn from one another's methodologies and approaches. For example, members shared tools like evaluation forms or creative prompts for engagement, which others adapted into their own projects. Regular meetings also encouraged deeper reflection on individual practices by requiring members to explain their processes to peers. However, while digital tools like shared drives were introduced to facilitate knowledge sharing, they were underutilized due to time constraints and competing priorities.

BALANCING FLEXIBILITY WITH ACCOUNTABILITY

The CoP's emphasis on flexibility allowed for organic connections and collaborations between members. Practitioners adapted ideas from others' projects into their own work, demonstrating the value of open-ended collaboration and co-learning. However, this flexibility sometimes led to challenges in decision-making and accountability. Inconsistent attendance and unclear expectations occasionally slowed progress and limited the depth of discussions during meetings. Members reflected on the need for clearer structures and shared goals to balance openness with productivity.

NAVIGATING POWER DYNAMICS

The CoP highlighted important questions about power dynamics within collaborative structures initiated by funders. Some members questioned whether a CoP could be truly participatory if convened as part of a funding requirement rather than emerging organically from shared interests. This raised broader reflections on whether participants joined out of genuine interest or obligation tied to funding eligibility. These dynamics underscored the need for funders to carefully consider how they shape such initiatives and how power is distributed within them.

CAPACITY CONSTRAINTS IMPACT ENGAGEMENT

Many CoP members were freelance practitioners juggling multiple responsibilities across various projects. This limited their ability to engage

consistently or contribute beyond monthly meetings. While stipends were provided for participation in proposal development sessions, some members suggested that additional resources or clearer upfront expectations could have supported more sustained engagement. The capacity constraints also affected how much members could share beyond meetings, with some reflecting that they lacked time to document or exchange insights outside of scheduled sessions.

BUILDING TRUST THROUGH SHARED EXPERIENCES

Despite these challenges, the CoP succeeded in fostering trust among its members over time. Regular meetings created a sense of community where practitioners felt comfortable sharing both successes and struggles. This trust was particularly important given the sensitive nature of work focused on children's mental health. Members emphasized that creating spaces for honest dialogue both about project challenges and broader systemic issues — was critical for building solidarity within the group.

REFLECTIONS ON FUTURE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Looking ahead, several lessons emerged for designing future Communities of Practice:

- *Clarify Purpose*: Establishing a clear vision and purpose for the group at the outset can help align individual projects with collective aims.
- *Support Organic Collaboration*: While funder-initiated CoPs can provide valuable scaffolding, allowing space for organic collaboration ensures greater buy-in from participants.
- *Provide Tailored Support*: Offering mentorship or one-to-one guidance can address individual needs while ensuring all members feel supported.
- *Encourage Knowledge Sharing*: Building systems for documenting and sharing insights — such as regular reflective exercises or collaborative workshops — can maximize learning across projects.
- *Balance Flexibility with Accountability*: While allowing room for organic collaboration is important, setting clear expectations around attendance and contributions can ensure consistent engagement.

The CoP demonstrated the potential of collaborative learning spaces to generate innovative approaches to children's mental health while strengthening local networks of practice. By addressing challenges related to capacity, structure, and knowledge sharing, future iterations could build on this foundation to achieve even greater impact.

The next section presents brief case studies of the seven funded projects, exploring how each team adapted creative methodologies to engage with children, families, and support providers in Lambeth and Southwark. Through these case studies, we examine how different approaches — from participatory photography to forum theatre — enabled new insights about children's mental health. We also reflect on key learnings about supporting community practitioners to conduct participatory research, highlighting the challenges and innovative solutions that emerged. These case studies demonstrate the value of investing in community-led approaches and offer practical insights for shifting power in research and service delivery to communities themselves.



“We made the decisions about the project because I think if the adults decided what we did, it would have been boring.”

Young designer, Curious Collective

Learn about the different creative activities

02 THE PROJECTS



Methods Map

Collaborative Photography

Kate Watson



Movement & Play for parents

Company Concentric



Green Space & Wellbeing

Hassun El-Zafar

Forum Theatre & Speculative Design

Tony Cealy



Radical, Participatory Design

Curious Collective

Creative, expressive spaces

Writerz & Scribez/ South London Gallery



Building a Community of Care

Clare Douglas



Movement and Play for parents

Led by Yanaëlle Ritter, Mik Livadiotis and Duncan Lawrence (Company Concentric)

Movement & play for parents

Company Concentric



Parents in Playmode was a creative movement and music project led by the organisation Company Concentric that engaged mothers of children with special educational needs and disabilities in South London. The project emerged from a recognition that parents of children with special needs and behavioral difficulties rarely get opportunities to play and express themselves creatively and to connect with other parents with shared experience.

Parents and carers of children with special educational needs and disabilities face day to day challenges. Their caring role usually sits alongside other pressures and often means that they put their child's needs before their own health, self-care, relaxation, and social needs. The project aimed to foster a supportive community of care in which parents could explore their own inner worlds through creative expression, and build bonds with other parents in similar circumstances. The focus on movement and music was intentionally designed to help participants access and express their emotions in a non-verbal way.

Through the implementation of the programme, the project aimed to learn whether and how (1) engaging in music, movement and creative play might help improve parents' own emotional wellbeing and resilience and (2) attending regular creative workshops with other parents and carers might support them in their parenting or caregiving roles. The project also aimed to document new forms of learning about the lived experiences, perspectives and needs of parents and carers of children with special educational needs and disabilities, fostered through creative and non-verbal forms of expression as well as through group discussions following movement-based activities.

Led by a team of dance and music facilitators, the project invited mothers to come together for workshops that combined dance movement, music, and group discussion. The project worked closely with a community organization supporting families of children with additional needs.

The project engaged a total of 20 mothers over the 10 months of its implementation. Two dedicated participants maintained perfect attendance across all 12 sessions, while most others attended over 75% of sessions. The project was delivered through:

- 2 initial focus groups to understand needs and interests.
- 10 movement and music workshops held on Wednesday mornings.
- Digital engagement via WhatsApp during school holidays.

Each 2-hour session followed a consistent structure: opening circle and check-ins, rhythmic warm-up activities, 30-40 minutes of movement (including Zumba, creative dance, and improvisation), a refreshment break, and a closing group discussion. In the movement activities, the team used props like silk scarves and percussion instruments to facilitate creative expression and storytelling. To support the building of these skills, the facilitators encouraged participants to find connections with each other both visually and rhythmically through group improvisations.

Each creative workshop concluded with a friendly, informal and confidential 30-minute discussion. An experienced therapist and facilitator (Clare Douglas), also a member of the broader community of practice, helped facilitate some of these discussions, which were either held as a whole group or in subgroups (depending on the number of attendees). The parents and carers used this time to share their experiences, thoughts, and dilemmas regarding their caring role with each other, building a strong community of support and friendship. The project culminated in October 2024 with the creation of two short films showcased at a gala event at Lambeth Town Hall on World Mental Health Day.

Reflecting on their time in the group, participants valued being with other immigrant women with children with developmental delays as a destigmatising experience. They felt comfortable in a peer group and no longer felt like outsiders. They reported this increased their confidence and their sense of their own worth. One of the participants observed that she had always been reluctant to speak because she didn't feel her English was good enough, but as a member of an "English-as-a-second- language" group she was happy to speak English.

KEY LESSONS!

The Parents in Playmode project demonstrated the transformative power of creative, participatory activities in building connection, community, and confidence among a highly marginalized group.

1. Building trust through play
Movement and creative activities provided a safe space for mothers to reconnect with themselves as individuals outside their caregiving roles. The project team's initial assumptions about delivering movement-based workshops with parents shifted significantly through implementation. While they anticipated heavy emotional conversations requiring safeguarding support, participants brought unexpected lightness and playfulness to the space. The sessions allowed them to "dance out their frustrations or low moods" while building supportive peer relationships.

2. Sustained engagement enables co-creation
The extended timeframe and regular sessions proved crucial for building trust and relationships. While digital tools like WhatsApp helped maintain connection between sessions, face-to-face human connections emerged as essential for meaningful engagement. As the project evolved, the approach shifted from directive teaching to more collaborative co-creation. Rather than simply teaching rhythms and steps, facilitators incorporated opportunities for participants to lead activities and share their own creative ideas.

3. Power of non-verbal communication
Non-verbal communication through music and dance created powerful connections, especially for parents of neurodivergent children. This was particularly important for parents in this group, most of whom were not first-language English speakers. Participating mothers were often apologetic about the limitations of what they could express through words, and would repeatedly say "sorry, my English is not very good" when taking part in group conversations. These barriers fell away when the group was participating in movement-based activities. Parents also shared how they used similar approaches to connect with their non-verbal children at home. The combination of movement, rhythm, and music created opportunities for expression beyond words, offering parents new tools for connecting with their children, particularly valuable for families with non-verbal children.

“They are starting to become more confident with exercises given to them and with new material. They are using their voices more (literally) and feeling able to unlock a more playful side in our warm-ups.

My sense is that the giggles that arise are less self-conscious and rather stem from enjoyment.”

YANAËLLE RITTER

Photo credit: Isabel Salmon



Building a Community of Care for mothers of children with special educational needs

Led by Clare Douglas, Stephen McQueen, and Gillian Marshall-Dunkley

Building a Community of Care

Clare Douglas



This project engaged mothers of children with autism and special educational needs in South London through creative reflection sessions. The sessions combined art-making activities with facilitated discussions, allowing the mothers to share and document the wisdom they had gained through their own lived experiences as parents of neurodivergent children. Through creative arts and group dialogue, participants exchanged strategies for managing complex healthcare interactions, discussed practical solutions for daily challenges, and supported each other in navigating often traumatic experiences with service providers.

The project emerged from a critique of traditional parenting programs that often start with sound theories and good intentions but fail to acknowledge the lived experiences and wisdom of parents themselves. The project sought to flip this traditional model by creating spaces where parents could share their expertise about navigating complex support systems, acknowledging that parents of neurodivergent children already possess deep knowledge about their situations and recognizing that collective knowledge-sharing between parents could be more powerful than expert-led interventions. The approach recognized that many challenges faced by families weren't purely clinical but deeply social, tied to issues of access, resources, and cultural understanding. By bringing together mothers who shared similar experiences — particularly around managing neurodivergence and behavioral difficulties while navigating racial and cultural barriers — the project created opportunities for authentic forms of peer support.

While initially designed to work with parents from other Community of Practice projects, the program evolved to recruit directly from the local area, particularly around Angel Town and Loughborough Estate, creating stronger geographical connections. The project reached a diverse group of 20 mothers in total (with an average attendance of 19 mothers per session), including a vibrant mix of British-born mothers alongside a number of women from Horn of Africa countries.

Initially planned as a 12-week program, the project was adapted to be delivered in six intensive sessions due to scheduling constraints. Sessions were co-led by a group of 3 facilitators with complementary expertise in psychotherapy and group processes, autism, child development, arts and music practice, and community activism. The facilitation drew on both their professional expertise and their own lived experience to foster mutual understanding and establish a sense of safety.

Each two-hour session combined creative activities with facilitated discussions, including:

- Opening circles and check-ins.
- Art-based activities using paint and creative materials.
- Facilitated group discussions about how parents were navigating support systems.
- Knowledge sharing between participants.
- Documentation through collaborative note-taking.

The use of creative methods, particularly painting while discussing difficult topics, was deliberately chosen to help process and document participants' wisdom in ways that validated their expertise, rather than trying to "teach" them predetermined content. Discussions covered practical challenges such as accessing medical care (for example when women felt disempowered and dismissed when they raised concerns about their non-verbal child's health), managing medications, and dealing with public situations where disability and racial stigma intersected (for example when a non-verbal adult child had a meltdown and a bystander called the police).

The facilitator would capture participants' contributions on flipcharts, regularly checking back with the group to ensure their experiences and insights were accurately documented. This collaborative documentation process formed the basis of a book that collected participants' wisdom and artwork. The book, alongside a series of short films documenting the group process, were showcased at a collaborative gala event at Lambeth Town Hall on World Mental Health Day. The book and event served to document and celebrate the deep knowledge and expertise of the participating mothers.

KEY LESSONS!

1. Creative Expression Enables Difficult Conversations. The combination of abstract painting and other creative activities with group discussions created a unique space where participants could process challenging experiences. While expressing themselves creatively through abstract art, mothers felt more comfortable sharing difficult realities about raising neurodivergent, including stories of stigma and systemic barriers. Mothers also reported using some of the activities and conversational techniques at home with their children and families.

2. Knowledge Exchange Through Peer Support. The methodology revealed the power of facilitated peer learning. British-born participants shared key areas of expertise about how to navigate the care system in London, while immigrant mothers contributed different cultural perspectives and coping strategies. This exchange was particularly effective because it happened organically during group discussions and creative activities, rather than through a formally structured knowledge exchange.

3. Documentation as Validation. The creation of a collaborative book proved transformative, serving both as a way to capture participants' wisdom and as tangible recognition of their expertise. This creative documentation helped validate participants' experiences and knowledge in a way that traditional parenting programs often fail to do. Participants reported that seeing their artwork and wisdom displayed publicly at the final gala event had a significant impact on their sense of self-worth. They also reflected on how meaningful it was for them to be able to show their children the work they've created, creating an opportunity for these mothers to share a bit more about their own experiences and stories with their children and families.

4. Safe Space Creation. Rather than offering solutions or minimizing challenges, the facilitators created space for participants to express difficult realities and to share their own perspectives. This more open and participant-led approach to facilitation was important in the creation of a safe space within the group. Where solutions did emerge it was often via peer support as women encouraged each other to push harder for services they may not have been aware they were entitled to.



“I think the individual counselling model is too Euro-centric, and just doesn’t work for more diverse people. Groups are where you really get to know people as themselves. In a group, the group members talk and share and gradually come to trust each other, bringing their own selves into the room. They affirm and support each other.”

CLARE DOUGLAS

Creativity, health and community – an exploration with Radical Participatory Design

Led by Curious Collective

Radical Participatory Design

Supported by Curious Collective, led by the Radical Research Group

Founded in South London, Curious Collective seeks to centre the power rooted in local communities and reimagine futures beyond structural oppression. The Collective explores creative health practices, shaped by the culturally specific, place-based priorities of people within their neighbourhoods. Building on its existing community work, Curious Collective partnered with Coin Street Community Builders to initiate a programme of creative health sessions with young women (aged 11–17) across Lambeth and Southwark, London.

Collaborating with an intergenerational group of community members, referred to in the research as community designers, the project used Radical Participatory Design (RPD) to develop a place-based programme focused on health and wellbeing. The aim was to create a space with young people to explore and share their experiences through activities of their choice. The project opened with an exploratory question, inviting a process of discovery. As it evolved, questions, outputs (creative things made) and outcomes (changes that happened) were shaped by the group learning as part of the RPD approach.

The design process was framed through the lens of intersecting marginalisations, reflecting the community involved. In practice, this meant that community designers, community members engaged in local activities (through work or leisure), also led the design, delivery, and evaluation of their own programme. A key learning thread throughout was developing a practice of identifying and navigating power dynamics — between adults, between adults and young people, within peer groups, across age groups and different settings such as schools. The research enquiry remained rooted in the connections at play.

The project involved 17 younger community designers (young people), including 2 peer community designers (older young people transitioning into work), and 6 adult community designers (adults). Each session typically included around 15 younger designers, 2 peer designers, and 3 adult designers. With both young people and adults shaping the process, power dynamics were fluid and continuously fluctuating. While younger designers could lead up to a point, adult designers had a responsibility to uphold their duty of care and step in to address any safeguarding, child protection, or health and safety concerns.

Younger designers played a central role in decision-making and were actively involved in setting session schedules, choosing snacks, planning weekly activities, drafting shared agreements, and shaping assent and consent processes. They made a key decision to reframe the narrative, moving away from a ‘mental health’ label in favour of creating a space that felt calm, supportive, and joyful. In the words of one younger community designer: *“We made the decisions about the project because I think if the adults decided what we did, it would have been boring.”*

After the initial planning phase, sessions were paused. Younger designers aged 16 and over expressed an interest in employment opportunities, prompting the creation of a 'peer designer layer' to facilitate their transition into the world of work. The project continued to offer space for younger designers to reflect, learn, evaluate, and plan ahead. The approach was agile, adapting to collective wishes and dynamics in real-time. For example, during Ramadan, some people were fasting and wanted to share a meal for Iftar, so sessions were extended to finish at a later time. On Eid, the session was postponed, to take care of those who were celebrating with loved ones.

Project activities revolved around making, creating, and exploring together — whether working with clay, paint, paper and beads; baking cookies and making tanghulu; enjoying games and picnics, and trips to the park; experiencing art or roller-skating; and practising self-care with face masks and manicures. Everyone who contributed to the research was paid for each session attended, as an adult, peer or younger community designer, reinforcing the culture of 'recognition through remuneration'.

Throughout the process, reflections and evaluations were woven in using individual and shared scrapbooks, self-directed interviews, open conversations and group-generated questions. At the end of the project, one peer designer reflected on their journey saying: "We gained more independence and experience through having more responsibility!"

KEY LESSONS!

1. Sharing power: The project highlighted the persistent power dynamics between adults and young people. Adult community designers had professional responsibilities, which limited the extent to which younger community designers could fully lead the project. However, there were 'spaces' where power was shared, and power relations shifted — creating opportunities for younger designers to lead within a supportive framework. At first, some seemed to find the freedom of choice challenging, possibly reflecting ingrained hierarchical attitudes etched into everyday experiences and habitual ways of being. Over time, however, more younger designers appeared to grow into this freedom, suggesting the potential for this approach to foster creativity and a sense of shared ownership.

2. Navigating uncertainty: One of the key challenges was interacting with uncertainty, even for adult designers. The unstructured nature of the sessions required a departure from the norms of top-down 'leadership' hierarchies. It encouraged designers to step back and get comfortable with the discomfort of less control and predictability. The uncertainty seemed especially challenging for community designers who were more anchored to structure, as this was a move away from the familiar. However, this approach facilitated a more fluid collaborative process that nurtured creativity and adaptability. Regular reflections, discussions, and debriefs invited open dialogue where ideas, questions, and suggestions were shared. These conversations created opportunities for people to acknowledge and navigate (dis)comfort zones.

3. Fostering choice: Greater autonomy, experienced by the younger designers, was both a strength and a challenge. While the opportunity to make decisions could be empowering, the responsibility of choice could also feel overwhelming, especially for young people navigating the complexities of transitional life phases. The tension between freedom and structure raised key questions such as: "how much choice is too much?"

Impact of Access to Green Spaces and Community Gardens on children's mental health

Led by Hassun El-Zafar

Green Space & Wellbeing

Hassun El-Zafar



This project sought to explore the impact of access to green spaces and community gardens on children's mental health. Leveraging the expertise and facilities of the Max Roach Community Centre and Loughborough Junction, the project built on existing community engagement and environmental initiatives to explore new dimensions of community wellbeing and sustainable living. The project engaged local children and their families in gardening activities designed to explore and enhance mental wellbeing, promote healthy lifestyles, and create sustainable community gardens.

Access to green spaces has been increasingly recognised for its potential mental health benefits, particularly in urban environments where natural spaces are limited. However, a number of studies have shown that children are spending more time indoors, while paediatric mental and behavioural health problems are on the rise. To address these challenges, the project was designed as a community research initiative to understand the impact of access to green spaces and community gardens on children's mental health. The project also sought to develop sustainable community gardens and resources to help other communities implement similar projects.

In addition to the focus on green space, the project centred three core principles in the design and implementation of this project. First, at the heart of this project was a commitment to a community-led approach, which prioritises the voices, ideas, and leadership of local participants, ensuring that the project is shaped by their needs, experiences, and aspirations. Second, the project emphasizes a process-informed approach, where ongoing reflection, feedback, and adaptation are embedded throughout the project. Third, an important value of this project was the allowance for unstructured, organic engagement. Rather than adhering strictly to predefined plans or schedules, the project team embraced spontaneity and encouraged natural, creative interactions, providing participants with the freedom to explore their interests, express themselves, and contribute in ways that feel authentic to them. The project's intended outcomes included: increased access to green spaces and community gardens for local children and their families, improved mental health and wellbeing among participants, enhanced knowledge of and skills in gardening and healthy eating, and the development of a sustainable community garden for long-term use.

To realise these aims, the project worked to build a bridge between various community gardeners, the Loughburough Junction Action Group at Grove Adventure Playground, the Loughburough Community Centre at Maxx Roach, the Loughburough Farm and Myatt's Field Park Project to explore new dimensions of community wellbeing and sustainable living. This was achieved by engaging local children and their families in a series of workshops that aimed to promote mental wellbeing, healthy eating and active lifestyles. Workshops, engagements, interactions and excursions were focused on gardening, mental wellbeing, healthy eating, and promoting active lifestyles, and sought to understand the impact of access to green spaces and gardens on mental wellbeing.

At project initiation, both participant partners hosted garden parties to engage parents and begin the sign-up process for the programme. The first workshops centred around site visits to Kew Gardens in London, designed to incentivise children's participation and involve parents during the colder months. Following the Christmas break in 2024, both sites conducted a series of 10-11 bi-weekly workshops tailored to the staff and participants' availability and needs. These workshops focused on gardening, mental health, healthy eating, and promoting active lifestyles. Data collection through surveys, focus groups, and observations was carried out to gather insights into the impact of these activities. The project coordinator, Hassun, and the community researcher, Maheer, were responsible for collating and interpreting the data. The project lead worked in direct collaboration with project partners to build on existing engagement and initiatives locally. Additionally, the budget was managed by project partners directly as local connectors in existing green spaces servicing residents.

KEY LESSONS!

The following core principles and values have been integral to the design and implementation of this project:

1. Collaborative Leadership. This approach demonstrated that collaborative leadership, where expertise and responsibilities are shared, can be highly effective in community-based projects. It allows for more flexible decision-making and a greater alignment with local needs.

2. Community Co-Ownership. By giving partners direct control over the budget and decision-making, the project fostered a sense of co-ownership, which led to greater investment in the project's success and stronger community ties. It also helped to ensure that the outcomes were relevant, meaningful, and sustainable within the community.

3. Local Knowledge and Context Matter. The success of this methodology also reaffirmed the importance of local knowledge and context in designing effective initiatives. Partners who are connected to their communities understand the nuances of engagement and can adapt quickly to challenges as they arise.





“The project work challenged me to look again at my assumptions and biases, encouraging a more empathetic and inclusive approach to project design.

Personally, it fostered a deep sense of fulfillment and purpose, knowing that our efforts can contribute to concrete, positive change within the community.”

HASSUN EL-ZAFAR

Fostering creative expression through Participatory and Collaborative Photography

Led by Artist-Facilitator Kate Watson, supported by Writer Tanaka Mhishi and Photographers Isabel Salmon & Anna Lily Howell

Collaborative Photography

Kate Watson



‘[Un]easy Listening: Conversations on Care’ was a youth-led, artist-centered, collaborative photography and creative writing project that engaged young people in exploring experiences and understandings of mental health and care through visual storytelling. Initially conceived as a traditional participatory photography project, it evolved into a more expansive creative exchange, which worked responsively with the young people, incorporating photography, creative writing, and performance. Central to the project was the development of supportive spaces where young people could engage with their experiences of and priorities for change around issues of care and systems of support, both within and beyond mental health services. In doing so, it aims to build a more nuanced understanding of young people’s mental health experiences, exploring how societal and family-level protective factors can mitigate risks of poor mental health.

The project was driven by the recognition that young people’s voices are often absent from discussions about mental health services and support systems, and that many young people feel unseen and unheard by people, institutions and support systems who aim to ‘care.’ It thus aimed to create supportive spaces where young people could explore how they wished to be seen and heard, asking ‘How do we understand care? How do we receive care and what are the spaces which can hold conversations around care?’ In doing so, the project sought to support young people to find autonomy over these experiences and connect to others who might be experiencing similar things. Working creatively enabled participants to control how much of their own stories they wanted to share, with options to work abstractly or imaginatively rather than solely through direct testimony, finding creative language to enable expression where traditional mental health language falls short.

The project engaged a group of six young people aged 14-19 who were interested to explore mental health and support, creatively. Over the course of the project, 12 weekly creative workshops (2-3 hours) were facilitated by Artist-Facilitator Kate and Writer Tanka Mhishi, combined with individual support sessions to respond to each participant’s needs. The project combined participatory and collaborative photography methodologies alongside other creative practices to enable participants to explore different modalities for creative expression. Working with photography, performance and text, the group worked to explore visual representations of their priorities around care and their voices in mental health support.

The project began with foundational sessions focused on creating supportive and ‘brave’ spaces and establishing group dynamics. Employing a collaborative approach and leaving the creative direction of the project relatively open requires balancing and a responsive approach which centers ‘care’. Grounded in an ethics of care, each session was shaped by what the young people brought to the space that day. Over the course of the project, participants played games, wrote poems, took pictures, and shared their work with others.Through an ongoing process of listening, reviewing, adjusting and re-establishing, the project was able to respond to participant interests and priorities, both in the issues that felt relevant and resonated with them, and the creative methods and tools they needed to explore them. Visually and through text, the group explored and found ways to represent

conversations on care, including what they had experienced and what they imagined or hoped to. Collectively, the group reflected on the limitations of language to convey what they wanted to share about how they receive care and support, and worked to find a visual representation for conversations of care, including one they we had experienced and what they imagined or hoped to. In considering the spaces which can hold conversations around care, we thought about the sites where they can take place but also how our bodies hold these conversations, their emotions and what is unsaid.

Throughout the project, participants received individual support through one-to-one sessions, accommodating their different needs and engagement styles. The project implementation was also adapted to allow for multiple access points for participation. These included voice recording alternatives to written work, session documentation rather than direct participation for those feeling overwhelmed, flexible scheduling and catch-up sessions for participants managing anxiety or care commitments, and integration of participants' individual coping strategies into the creative process. The process remains as central as the work produced. Young people met new people, built relationships, worked together as a group, explored and developed creative skills. They played a central role in shaping and capturing this process, documenting what was done and made, and the narrative of their collective experience.

Negotiating what was and wasn't appropriate and how to share outside the 'safe' boundaries of the space the group had created, while ensuring young people's autonomy over their narratives, was an ongoing consideration. For the group, identifying what supported them in their mental health felt important in connecting with other young people. Equally important was being able to use art to criticize the systems that are failing them and imagine something better.

As the project evolved, the group prioritized protecting this space and the creative freedom and conversations it enabled, deciding to maintain the youth-only space as a protected environment allowed participants to explore more freely within the space before considering how to present their work to wider audiences.

The project resulted in a body of co-produced work around conversations of care, which culminated in a photography exhibition, showcasing participants' work at Oxford House in March 2025. The work is also captured in a publication, which you can access here.

KEY LESSONS!

1. Safety Through Creative Distance.
Moving away from traditional photovoice approaches that require direct personal testimony, the project found value in allowing participants to work more abstractly and imaginatively. The project approach enabled young people to control how much of their story they wanted to share, providing safety while still allowing authentic expression. This approach proved particularly valuable for participants who felt constrained by traditional mental health support systems.

2. Technical Skills as Engagement Tool.
The project revealed how professional photography equipment and technical skill-building served as powerful engagement tools. Rather than following a traditional photovoice approach with simple cameras, incorporating professional equipment and studio sessions helped validate participants' creative abilities and built their confidence as young professionals.

3. Flexible Access Points. The methodology's success relied heavily on providing multiple ways to participate, including voice recording alternatives to written work, session documentation roles for those feeling overwhelmed, flexible scheduling and catch-up sessions for participants managing anxiety, and integration of participants' individual coping strategies into the creative process.

“We had a nice one in a previous report version that you can bring in here: ‘When young people ask to be cared for, to be cared about, do any of us really understand what is being asked for? As we encourage young people more and more to ask for help when they need it, to access and offer each other care and support, it’s worth thinking about what that means.’”

KATE WATSON & TANAKA MHISHI

Photo credit: [Un]easy Listening | 2024



Co-designing service delivery needs using Forum Theatre and Speculative Design

Led by Tony Cealy, Adam Sealey, Zoe Nuefville, Naresh Kaushal and Christopher Gerhardt

Forum Theatre & Speculative Design

Tony Cealy



This project used speculative design and forum theatre as pathways and opportunities to envision a restructure of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS) that is more responsive to users' and audience needs. Led by Tony Cealy, the project engaged 25 young people, local stakeholders, and service providers through interactive theatre and creative design sessions between August and October 2024.

The project emerged from a recognition that traditional approaches to mental health service reform often exclude the voices of young service users. By combining speculative design (which imagines possible futures) with forum theatre (which enables audience interaction), the project aimed to create new spaces for dialogue between service users and providers. The approach recognized that art and performance can break down power hierarchies and create "level playing fields" where citizens can actively engage in reimagining services. This was particularly important given the project's focus on CAMHS, where young people's perspectives are often overlooked in service design.

The project operated through four interconnected components:

- Stakeholder mapping to identify key decision-makers.
- Creation and convening of an advisory board to consider, deconstruct and reframe CAHMS.
- Creative performance workshops with young people to co-create a public theatre performance focused on the redesign of the CAHMS system
- The organization of a mental wellbeing gala event to perform the theatre piece and invite feedback from the audience.

The project began with a stakeholder mapping process to identify and engage key decision-makers (or "power rangers" in the project language) in children's mental health services. Through persistent outreach and relationship building, the team connected with local politicians, policy makers, funders, and CAMHS representatives, creating a network of influential stakeholders who could support systemic change.

A secondary formative step of this project was to create an active 12-member advisory board that brought together young people, families, 'power rangers,' local creative and mental health practitioners. Over six in-person sessions, the advisory board used creative methodologies to identify the primary elements of the CAHMS system in need of redesign or strengthening. The insights from this creative process guided the focus of the performance by young people.

A total of 25 young people participated in the subsequent series of 11 creative performance-directed sessions, which ran from August to October 2024. These creative and improvisation sessions employed speculative design and forum

theatre techniques to explore participants' experiences of mental health services, and codesign a performance to communicate their needs and desires to power rangers, health professionals, and family members. The facilitation team for these sessions included multiple creative practitioners: a visual artist, two filmmakers (one specializing in augmented reality), and a production manager with educational experience. This diverse creative team enabled young people to document and express their experiences through multiple mediums.

The final project component involved the development and organisation of a Mental Wellbeing Gala event at Lambeth Town Hall, Brixton on World Mental Health Day on 10 October 2024. The gala event featured the interactive theatre performance developed by the young people, which focused on creating space for direct dialogue between young people and decision-makers through audience engagement. The gala also created a space for the other projects from the community of practice to share their insights and exhibit some of what they had produced. A total of 271 people attended the event including power rangers, young people and their families, creative practitioners, and other community members.

KEY LESSONS!

1. Stakeholder Mapping as Engagement Strategy: The project approach to stakeholder mapping proved valuable not just for identifying key decision-makers, but for building sustained relationships between young people and those in positions of influence. This method helped surface tacit knowledge about system operations while creating pathways for young people to directly influence service reform.

2. Building Solidarity using Performance Art and Performance: The project reinforced the values of creative, arts-based performative practices to reimagine what services could be like for communities. It emphasised how these methodologies can serve to build solidarity across difference and deepen participants' sense that communities have the power to make the changes they need.

3. Power Dynamics in Institutional Change: The project demonstrated how creative methods can transform traditional power dynamics between service users and providers. By using creative methodologies to consult an advisory group, rather than traditional meetings, new insights were co-created in a more equitable manner. Through forum theatre and speculative design, young people moved from being subjects of consultation to active agents in reimagining mental health services, creating new possibilities for institutional dialogue and change.

“People are suggesting our work to other people, and other services... So that’s helping to shape the partnerships. It’s helping to grow the movement for change through creative practice.”

TONY CEALY

Facilitating Creative Spaces for friendship

Led by Shadé Joseph, Jemilea Wisdom-Baako (Writerz and Scribez) and Polly South, Paul Crook (South London Gallery)

Facilitating creative, expressive spaces

Writerz & Scribez/ South London Gallery



"Asking for a Friend" was a collaborative research project that explored how children and young people's friendships affect their mental health. The project brought together two organisations with complementary expertise: South London Gallery (SLG), an award-winning contemporary art gallery focused on learning and participation, and Writerz and Scribez (WxS), an organization that uses art to disrupt societal narratives about excluded groups while promoting mental health and wellbeing.

This project emerged from a recognition that young people's friendships play a crucial role in their mental health and wellbeing. The project aimed to create spaces where young people could explore friendship and mental health through creative expression rather than direct questioning. Linked to this core thematic focus, the team identified two additional learning aims. First, they sought to understand what creative activities young people found valuable to improving their mental wellbeing, and whether these activities relied on individual reflection or social engagement. Second, the project aimed to explore how working together toward a shared goal would allow participants to build connections with one another and foster emerging friendships, thereby affecting participants' moods and mental health.

The project engaged 21 young people aged 11-15 through a youth collective that met fortnightly at the South London Gallery's Art Block between February and July 2024. Sessions were co-facilitated by SLG and W&S staff, with contributions from external artists and creative practitioners. Each session incorporated different creative activities, through which participants explored their understanding of friendship and mental health. Sessions included:

- Photography workshops with Different Gravy studio, teaching analog photography and portrait skills.
- Screen-printing sessions with local designer Childsdraw for clothing customization.
- Games design activities where participants worked in groups to create interactive experiences.
- Curation exercises using abstract artworks to build narrative reflections on mental health and friendship.

The initiative culminated in a youth-led public event held on International Friendship Day on 30 July 2024.

The partnership between South London Gallery and Writerz and Scribez was strategic, combining SLG's expertise in learning and participation with W&S's focus on using art to disrupt societal narratives while promoting mental health and wellbeing. This collaboration enabled the project to reach young people who might not typically engage with traditional mental health support services. This collaborative approach also proved particularly valuable as participants were able to express their experiences through multiple creative mediums — from zine-making to photography — allowing for different forms of expression beyond verbal communication.

The team adapted their approach significantly as the project progressed. Despite initial differences, the group demonstrated emotional sensitivity and care, often supporting peers who arrived at sessions in low moods.

The project culminated in "Friends Fest," a youth-led public event held on International Friendship Day that attracted 80 young people. The festival featured creative workshops, an escape room, gaming stations, and performances — all planned and delivered by the youth collective.

KEY LESSONS!

1. Creative Expression Enables Indirect Exploration: The combination of multiple creative methods — from zine making to games design to photography — enabled young people to explore sensitive topics around mental health and friendship in a more nuanced and reflective way. They were explicitly informed about the research aims and fully onboarded as co-researchers, with a clear understanding of their role in the process. This creative distance proved particularly valuable when discussing challenging experiences, as it allowed participants to express themselves through various mediums rather than relying solely on direct conversation, giving them greater control over how and what they chose to share.

2. Space and Power Dynamics Matter: The project revealed how existing friendships and territorial behaviors can significantly impact group dynamics within a physical space. This was evident after a significant shift occurred mid-project when the original collective merged with the existing Art Block collective due to session time changes.

While the transition initially posed challenges, as the original group hadn't yet developed strong bonds, facilitators actively supported the process by creating space for connection and offering tools to help participants engage with one another. When some young people were slower to build relationships, facilitators provided oversight while equipping them with strategies to manage social interactions and build positive group dynamics independently.

As the group began to show emotional sensitivity and care towards each other, this actively reinforced Art Block's ethos as a place where young people can truly feel like they belong and take ownership of the space when they occupy it.

3. Event Production as Engagement Tool: Working toward a shared goal — the Friends Fest event — provided a powerful framework for engagement. While not all participants were equally interested in event planning, the process of creating something for their peers helped reveal how young people prefer to spend time together and what activities they find most beneficial for their wellbeing. The success of the final event, attracting 80 young people, demonstrated the value of this approach for both research and community building.

“Most of our practice is based on this foundational belief that creativity is good for young people and that when we co-create with them, it produces something that serves their needs better.”

PAUL CROOK

03

THE METHODS

THE METHOD

PARTICIPATORY & COLLABORATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY

Participatory photography is a collaborative visual research method that, at its core, places cameras in the hands of community members, enabling them to document, reflect upon, and communicate important aspects of their lives and experiences (Wang & Burris, 1997). This approach emerged from participatory action research (PAR), a methodology that emphasizes collective inquiry and experimentation with communities as co-researchers rather than subjects of research (McIntyre, 2008). Aligned with PAR's emphasis on collective knowledge production and action for social change, participatory photography has been widely used to engage marginalized communities in documenting their lived experiences and advocating for social change.

Collaborative photography builds on participatory photography by emphasizing co-production between facilitators and participants. Unlike traditional photovoice projects, where participants independently create visual narratives, collaborative photography involves shared decision-making about the creative process and a commitment to co-production (Gubrium & Harper, 2013). This can include co-designing themes, experimenting with different mediums (e.g., still photography or moving images), and integrating complementary methods like creative writing or spoken word (Pink, 2013). This flexibility allows projects to adapt to participants' interests and needs while maintaining a focus on shared ownership of the process and outputs.

Both participatory and collaborative photography move beyond traditional documentary photography by positioning participants as active creators rather than passive subjects. By taking, selecting, contextualizing, and sharing photographs, participants can explore personal and community issues, develop critical consciousness, and contribute to social change efforts (Strack et al., 2004). This shift in power dynamics is particularly valuable when working with communities who have historically been excluded from knowledge production processes.

These visual and creative methods can serve multiple purposes simultaneously: as research tools to generate visual data and participant insights, as engagement methods to build trust and relationships, and as advocacy tools amplifying community voices (Wang & Burris, 1994). They are particularly effective for exploring sensitive topics or working with groups who may feel unheard by traditional research approaches. In mental health contexts, these approaches create opportunities for participants to engage with sensitive topics in ways that feel safe yet meaningful. Participatory and collaborative photography often incorporate what Arao and Clemens (2013) term "brave spaces," where participants are supported to engage courageously with difficult experiences while maintaining emotional safety. This framework acknowledges that meaningful engagement with difficult experiences requires courage as well as safety, particularly when working with trauma-informed approaches. Offering creative distance — such as through abstract or imagined representations — allows participants to control how much of their story they share while still contributing meaningfully to collective understanding (Liebenberg, 2018).

Through photography, participants can choose how directly or abstractly to represent their experiences, providing an element of creative distance that can make difficult topics more approachable (Liebenberg, 2018). This creative distance can be especially valuable when working with young people or when exploring mental health experiences.

As with other research methodologies, these methodologies require careful ethical consideration, particularly around issues of consent, representation, and ownership of images. Practitioners must navigate complex questions about who has the right to capture and share images of whom, and how to ensure that the process empowers rather than exploits participating communities (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). When working with young people in particular, it is important to recognise that while the method can build technical skills and confidence, it can also raise expectations about social change that may not materialize, potentially leaving participants feeling more disempowered than before (Strack et al., 2004).

Want to go deeper?

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THE METHOD

RADICAL PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

Radical Participatory Design (RPD) is a meta-methodology — essentially a way of applying any methodology. The approach can involve multiple methodologies, chosen by community members who lead the design of their project.

One of the many complexities in **decolonising** research is critically examining the assumptions, motivations, and values that underpin conventional practices (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). RPD, a rooted relational design, is an invitation to flip the power asymmetries typical of colonial influences in health research (Udoewa, 2022). In practice, community members come together to shape the process and lead all phases of a project, from planning to implementation and sharing. The positioning of community members as designers ensures their concerns and priorities are centred, with collective insights defining each phased priorities of the people involved are centred.

RDP is centred around three broad and necessary characteristics that equally evaluates and validates the participatory nature of a process (Udoewa, 2022).

1. Community members are full, equal members of the research and design team from the beginning of the project to the end.
2. Community members outnumber non-community, professional designers on the design team.
3. Community members retain and maintain accountability, leadership, and ownership of design outcomes and narratives about the design artefacts and work.

RPD privileges the often-undermined knowledge of people facing intersecting marginalisations, by inviting (not expecting) different ways of thinking and doing to create new ways of being. If community is an active site for redistributing power (Burgess, 2024), RDP asks, what becomes possible when a local vision of change is centred in practice?

KEYWORDS

Intersecting Marginalisations – Connecting systems of discrimination or disadvantage that people may face, for example based on race/gender/age (Crenshaw, 1989)
Power Dynamics – Shifting balance of power between people/groups, which can change depending on context/relationships.
Decolonising – Rethinking and challenging colonial legacies in systems of knowledge, power and practice (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021).
Hierarchies – Systems where some people have more power or control than others

Want to go deeper?

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THE METHOD

CREATIVE MOVEMENT + PLAY

Creative movement and play offer powerful pathways for research and learning, particularly when engaging with communities facing complex challenges. These approaches create opportunities to explore sensitive topics with creative distance, enabling authentic expression while maintaining emotional safety — an invaluable asset when traditional research methods feel too direct or threatening (Proyer & Ruch, 2011). This proves particularly valuable when working with neurodivergent participants or exploring experiences that resist traditional verbal articulation.

Movement and play have been widely acknowledged as beneficial for lifelong learning, contributing to cognitive, physical, social and emotional growth (Ginsburg, 2007; Rathunde & Isabella, 2020:460). Recent neuroscience research shows that dance and movement can facilitate deeper social connections and emotional understanding (Basso et al, 2021). In particular, the combination of music, movement and creative play enables participants to develop interpersonal coordination skills and new forms of communication that extend beyond verbal expression (Brown et al., 2017).

These approaches also have important benefits for research and learning. Movement-based approaches interrupt everyday routines, create new possibilities for understanding and expressing experience. Through shared rhythmic experiences and collective improvisation, participants can access deeper layers of experience and emotion that might remain unexpressed through traditional verbal methods (Basso et al., 2021). The methodology recognizes that knowledge about mental health exists not just in words but in bodies, relationships, and shared experiences. While verbal processing has its place, embodied experiences through movement and rhythm can access different layers of understanding and connection that might remain unexpressed through traditional methods (Heras & Tàbara, 2014). For example, when participants "dance out their frustrations or low moods," they engage in both emotional release and collective meaning-making.

The approach transforms traditional power dynamics in mental health research and programming by shifting from subjects of research to co-creators of knowledge. Rather than extracting information through researcher-led methodologies such as surveys, interviews or focus group discussions, these methods validate participants' experiences while building their capacity to express their own stories in ways that feel authentic and powerful (Proyer & Ruch, 2011). This shift proves particularly valuable when working with communities who may feel unheard or misunderstood by traditional mental health services. It's also important when working with people or groups who may find English language or verbal forms of communication challenging, as it centres non-verbal forms of expression.

Want to go deeper? (Creative Movement + Play)

Check out these references for relevant research and examples of similar projects

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THE METHOD

FORUM THEATRE AND SPECULATIVE DESIGN

Speculative Design and Forum theatre are public engagement approaches that are employed as pathways for enabling conversations between citizens, experts and authorities to explore existing views and interests on public matters and to speculate on possible futures or pathways.

Such arts-based and embodied practices are particularly powerful in connecting participants, but also connecting their disparate ways of knowing and meaning-making to facilitate necessary dialogue and exchange. Presenting interactive provocative artwork (animation, short film and live performances) to communities enables citizens to actively communicate and create dialogues with those in power, breaking down the us vs. them dichotomy and presenting local nuance to enable grounded systems reform.

Pathways theatre, building on Boal's Forum Theatre, demonstrates the capacity of speculative improvisations and embodied experimentation as transformative engagement. As a communication medium, theatre provides novel avenues to visualize, examine, explore solutions. The interactive nature of forum and pathways theatre enables participants to move beyond critique to collective problem-solving. By allowing audience members to pause and intervene in scenes, the methodology creates spaces where different stakeholders can experiment with alternative approaches to service delivery, making abstract system changes tangible and actionable.

These approaches enable conversation between citizens, experts, and authorities to explore the existing views and interests on the public matter and speculate on the possible futures. These techniques can dismantle existing knowledge hierarchies and position everyone as equal, so as no one could claim full control over defining the problem or designing the solution. They thus create a more level playing field where citizens within communities can create power and propose the changes they want. These approaches also empower citizens to see the policy process as one in which they can engage and participate in democratic processes.

Want to go deeper?

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04

THE LESSONS

How creative methodologies can transform research

Creative methodologies as pathways to learning about children's mental health

Drawing on the experiences of seven diverse creative projects, several key insights emerge about how creative methodologies can transform traditional approaches to research and learning around children's mental health and/or wellbeing.

The projects shared a core aim: to shift power dynamics by enabling families and communities to shape the evidence-building process around their own experiences and needs. Rather than focusing primarily on collecting evidence about children and families' experiences, these projects explored methodologies for learning alongside communities, examining how creative approaches could unearth new insights while building capacity for sustained community-led innovation. This work represents a deliberate shift away from traditional, top-down approaches towards more holistic, community-driven approaches that center the expertise of children, families, community organisations, and grassroots practitioners - the people closest to the challenges.

These projects demonstrated how creative methods can enable authentic expression and engagement while building more equitable relationships between communities and formal support systems. The following insights draw from across all seven projects, highlighting key learnings about how creative methodologies can transform traditional research dynamics, enable authentic expression and engagement, and create new possibilities for institutional dialogue and change.

01

Creative Distance Enables Expression and Safety

Creative methodologies allow participants to explore sensitive topics through artistic mediums rather than direct conversation. This approach creates opportunities for authentic expression while maintaining emotional safety, particularly valuable when traditional research methods feel too direct or threatening. The creative distance allows participants to control how much of their stories they share while still contributing meaningfully to collective understanding.

02

Power Dynamics and Participatory Practice

Creative methodologies transform traditional dynamics between service users and providers through participatory approaches. When participants move from being subjects of consultation to active agents in reimagining services, new possibilities emerge for institutional dialogue and change. This shift proves particularly powerful when working with communities who have historically been excluded from, and/or intentionally marginalised in, knowledge production processes.

03

Physical and Social Spaces Shape Engagement

Physical environments and existing social dynamics significantly shape how participants engage with creative processes and each other. While these dynamics can initially create challenges, careful facilitation and structured creative activities can help bridge divides and create opportunities for new connections. The intentional creation of brave spaces, rather than just safe spaces, enables deeper engagement with difficult experiences.

04 Sustained, Open-ended Engagement Builds Trust

Extended timeframes and regular sessions prove essential for developing meaningful relationships and trust. While digital tools can help maintain connection between sessions, face-to-face human connections, integrating movement, creative practice, and play, emerge as crucial for meaningful engagement. As projects evolve, approaches often shift from directive teaching to more collaborative co-creation, enabling deeper participant ownership.

05 Creative and Participatory Documentation Validates Experience

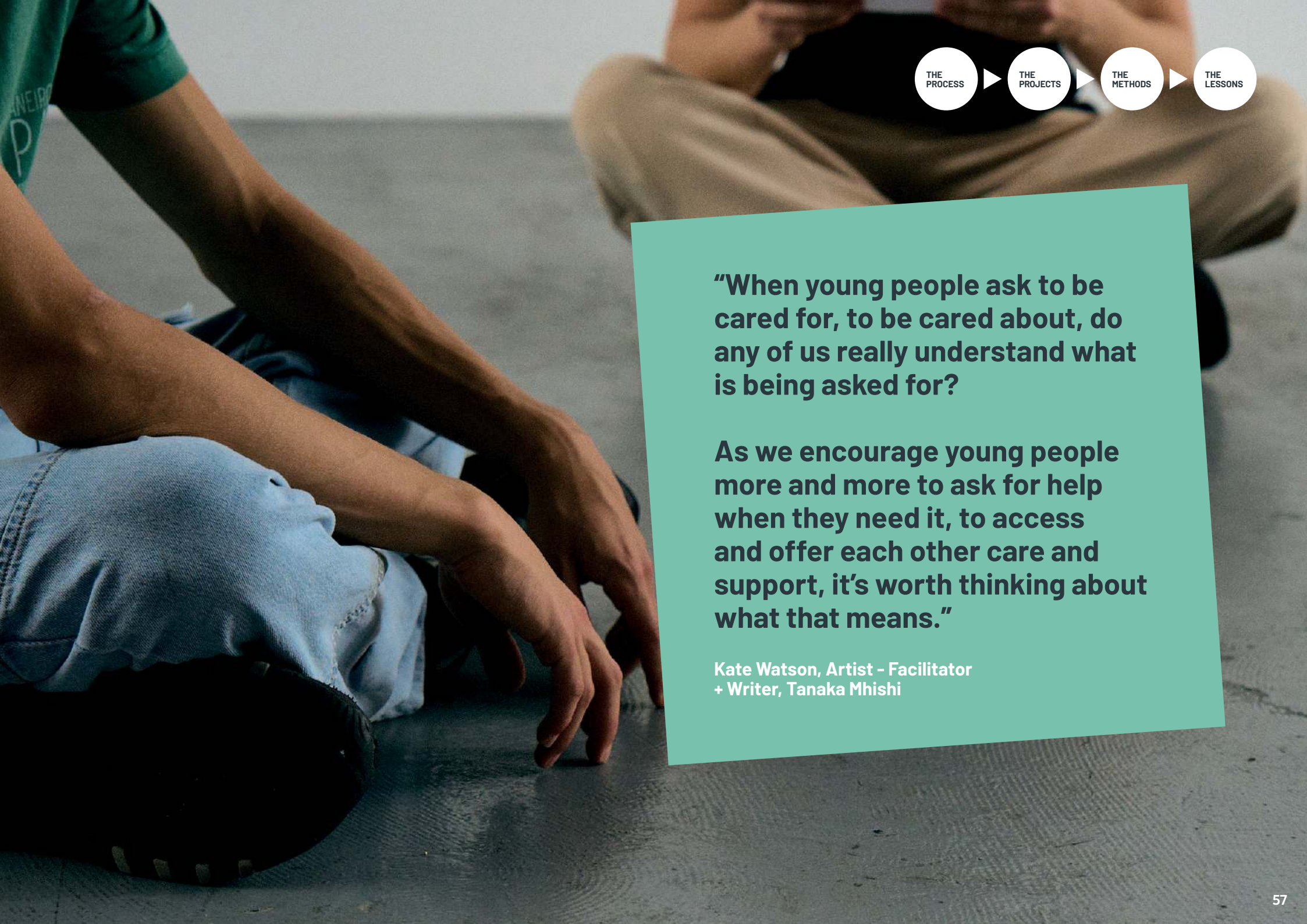
Creative and participatory documentation serves both to capture participants' wisdom and provide tangible recognition of their expertise. This approach helps validate participants' experiences and knowledge in ways that traditional programs often fail to do. Public sharing of creative outputs can have significant impacts on participants' sense of self-worth while creating opportunities for wider dialogue with families and communities.

06 Creative Methodologies as Democratic Practices

Creative methodologies transform traditional power dynamics by enabling communities to imagine and advocate for systemic change. When participants use art to reimagine services and support systems, they move from being recipients of services to active agents of and contributors to change. This shift proves particularly powerful for people and "communities" who have historically been excluded from decision-making processes about services that affect their lives.

07 Collective Goals Foster Connection

Working toward shared goals like public events provides powerful frameworks for collective action and learning. The process of creating something for peers helps build confidence and ownership while fostering meaningful connections between participants. This approach demonstrates the value of creative methodologies for both research and community building.



"When young people ask to be cared for, to be cared about, do any of us really understand what is being asked for?

As we encourage young people more and more to ask for help when they need it, to access and offer each other care and support, it's worth thinking about what that means."

Kate Watson, Artist - Facilitator + Writer, Tanaka Mhishi

Acknowledgements (1/2)

Curious Collective:

We are learning as we grow. Our project summary offers a snapshot of a multi-layered, shared experience. As we continue to reflect on our findings, collate, and connect them, we expect further insights to emerge in future iterations of this pilot. Our work illustrates an exploratory approach to decolonising research design – one that we are actively developing in practice.

Love and appreciation to all the people who made this possible (from A to Z)...

The Project Team: Abigail, Aisha, Amran, Anashe-Zarah, Anna, Camelia, Coco, Daniella, Hannah, Iman, Kerria, Libbie, Mariama, Marwah, Maya, Miilee, Miriam, Mona, Naomi, Nishi, Olivia, Remi, Sapphire, Taqwa, Yusra.

Supported by: David, Ems, Helen, Natalie, Nehla, Paula, Rehema, Rochelle, Victor.

Company Concentric:

Company Concentric would like to thank Asmara, Azeb, Bel, Esther, Helen, Lai Teng, Meaza, Mekdes, Meseret, Nigist, Roza, Selam, Shemainsh, Yirgalem as well as the women who chose not to be named. You all gave Parents in Playmode a try and turned the project idea into a unique creative community, thank you! Thanks to Rosemary Merricks at the Lambeth Parent Forum, Sherret Angus, Anna Iacuzzi and their colleagues at The Baytree Centre, Norman Murray and the staff at Longfield Hall for helping our group emerge and gather in their spaces. Thanks to Clare Douglas and Duncan Lawrence for their support and input in the planning, delivery, documentation and evaluation of the sessions.

[Un]easy Listening:

Thank you for your openness, contributions and for hearing each other: Adam, Anon, Anna, El Macho, Isabel, Kate, Nathan, Rufshana, Tanaka and Xen.

Clare Douglas:

I would also like to thank the women from Parents in Playmode who worked across the projects: Asmara, Azeb, Bel, Esther, Helen, Lai Teng, Meaza, Mekdes, Meseret, Nigist, Roza, Selam, Shemainsh, Yirgalem as well as the women who chose not to be named. Also Kamika, Mariam and the other women from CHIPS Peace, and Gillian Marshall-Dunkley and Stephen McQueen for their experience and expertise.

Writerz & Scribez / South London Gallery:

Thanks to the young people who were part of the *Asking For A Friend Collective*: Abdurahman, Aminah, Asili, Elijah, Ella, Faiza, Isoken, Joel, Joshua, Kaya, Maia, Nana, Oluwanifemi and Warwick. Thanks also to Tuke School, Different Gravy and Childsdraw.

Acknowledgements (2/2)

Hassun El-Zafar:

To Candice Owens and the Max Roach Centre, who offered more than just a home – who gave us roots from which to grow. To Collette Thomas, whose boundless enthusiasm and unshakable drive breathed life into every step of this journey. To the community supporters, the youth workers, the gardeners, the changemakers of North Brixton, whose hands shape the earth as surely as their hearts shape the future – your passion for community engagement is a force of nature. And to our participants and their families, may your paths forever lead to green spaces, where wonder grows wild and new adventures bloom.

Jonny Weston:

Thank you to all the *Parents in Playmode* women who I interviewed for their reflections and generosity, as well as to all my fellow Community of Practice Members for sharing space for this project and further teaching me. Finally, Pivot Collective for their facilitation , support and wisdom.

Tony Cealy:

With special and sincerest thanks to:

Lambeth CAHMS

Lambeth Parents Forum

Lambeth Town Hall

The Black Manifesto

Joel Impact Hub

Kamika from CHiPS

Chloe Osbourne

Serena Nalty-Coomb

Alex Jackson Public Health Lambeth