“Everything that makes you an individual is celebrated”: Assessing the impact of the Wac Arts Interactive project

Final Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Challenge
Most disabled children and young people want to have friends, pursue their interests, and be active members of their communities – just like everyone else. Yet young disabled people often have fewer friends, limited social networks, and may be excluded from participating in fun social and leisure activities, which are predominantly designed for young people who are not disabled.

The Wac Arts Interactive (WAI) project sought to turn this around. As part of the organisation Wac Arts, WAI run arts and media workshops for young disabled people at risk of social isolation. They are offered opportunities to use technologies to enhance their ability to express themselves and relate effectively with their peers, to help them develop emotional control, and to provide a sense of responsibility for themselves and others. WAI actively promotes an ethos of fun and friendship.

Our Research
The current project aimed to assess the impact of WAI on the young disabled people involved. To achieve this aim, we spoke to many of the young people themselves, their parents, WAI staff, and professionals who have worked with WAI. We also attended some evening and holiday sessions, reviewed the outputs resulting from the sessions and saw video diaries from WAI residential trips. We asked about the young people’s personal characteristics and preferences, their educational experiences, and their social lives. This set the scene for their participation in WAI and their perspectives on attending. We also asked how they saw themselves in relation to their disability and about their attitudes to disability more broadly.

Key Findings
WAI played a critical role in providing socialising opportunities for these young people with often-restricted social lives. Young people and their parents reported that WAI was somewhere that you can be yourself and “be free”, where you can develop positive feelings about yourself and your abilities, and where there were high expectations for the young people. Parents and young people (especially long-term attendees) reported strong connections with Wac Arts’ staff, noting the importance of these relationships for the young people’s confidence and aspirations for their future. Representatives from organisations outside Wac Arts were impressed by the organisation of the activities, and by the creativity and originality of the work, highlighting how WAI activities had significant impact on their own practice and, in some cases, had improved the confidence of the young people involved.

Overall, WAI made a striking – and often lasting – impression on the young disabled people, having a positive impact on their confidence, friendships and interactions with others. Critically, this was achieved in a fun, engaging way. We suggest that, as a beacon of excellence, WAI should be expanded to include greater numbers of young disabled people, and a wider range of creative opportunities. Impact should be broadened by building links with external organisations outside major cities (where more conventional social and leisure opportunities may be offered), as these might benefit most from Wac Arts’ creative ethos.
PREFACE

This report was commissioned by BBC Children in Need to assess the impact of the Wac Arts Interactive (WAI) project.

We are very grateful to Celia Greenwood, Mel Ancliff, Thomas Edwards, Chas Mollet, Kate Watson, and Jo Yeoman for giving us the opportunity to work on such an important project with a group of young people who are all too often excluded from social and leisure opportunities. We are also grateful to the professionals involved with Wac Arts who took the time to respond to our survey.

We also thank Melissa Bovis, Amy Alexander, Eilish Roy and Rebecca Sealy (all from the Centre for Research in Autism and Education, CRAE) for their help with this project. We are also indebted to all the young people we met throughout the project, and their families, for so generously taking part and to tell us about their experiences. We have done our very best to convey their experiences as accurately as possible. Any omissions or errors are entirely our own.
ABBREVIATIONS

CiFi: Creative Innovation for Inclusion  
SEN: Special Educational Need  
SEND: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities  
WAI: Wac Arts Interactive

TERMINOLOGY

A child or young person is considered to have a Special Educational Need (SEN) “if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her” (1). In the revised SEND Code of Practice (2), children’s SEN are included within four broad areas of need and support: (i) communication and interaction, (ii) cognition and learning, (iii) social, emotional and mental health, and (iv) sensory and/or physical needs. Many children and young people with SEN may also have a disability as defined under the Equality Act (3) as “a physical or mental impairment which has a long-term and substantial adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities”.

In certain communities, especially the deaf and autistic communities (4, 5) disability-first or identity-first language (e.g., ‘deaf person’, ‘autistic person’, ‘disabled person’) is often preferred to person-first language (e.g., ‘person with hearing impairment’, ‘person with autism’, ‘person with disabilities’) (6). We therefore predominantly use this terminology to describe the young people in this report.

Children and young people’s names have been changed throughout to preserve anonymity.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is structured into four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter provides an overview of existing research on promoting the friendships and social experiences of young disabled people. It also outlines the Wac Arts Interactive (WAI) project and the methods that we used to evaluate it. The second chapter presents the current social challenges faced by young disabled people – from their own and their parents’ perspectives. The third chapter focuses on the impact of attending WAI on the young people’s lives and their perceptions of the role of technology. The fourth chapter reflects on the broader impact of Wac Arts and WAI. The conclusion summarises the key findings and highlights recommendations for the future.
1. Setting the scene

Most of us – including young disabled people – want to have friends. Friends can help young disabled people to feel happier, and to be more confident and valued members of their communities (7, 8). Friends can also provide companionship and support for when things get tough, serving as a buffer to stress for young disabled people (9, 10).

Yet, young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can have a particularly difficult time building and maintaining their social networks: they tend to have fewer friends, and fewer opportunities for making and keeping friends than their non-disabled peers (11, 12). As such, they are at increased risk of social exclusion (13). Indeed, many young people with SEND, particularly young autistic people, report feeling lonely (14, 15), and are at risk of being isolated from, and even rejected by, their peers (16). Both isolation and peer rejection are thought to be precursors for depression and other mental health problems in adolescence and adulthood (17, 18), rates of which are significantly higher in some disabled populations (19, 20).

Participation in many areas of life – such as school, play, leisure and community activities – can be critical for providing opportunities to form friendships and to develop language and communication skills (21). Yet accessible activities that actively seek to promote young disabled people’s social lives are few and far between. When such activities are available, they tend to be more informal in nature, and are undertaken alone or with their immediate or extended family members rather than with their peers (22, 23). This necessarily limits these young people’s opportunities to develop their social networks and skills, and to build their independence.

A recent review of the existing literature highlights elements that are essential for participation in social, recreational and leisure activities to be meaningful for young disabled people (24) – they need to be able to have fun, experience success and find a sense of belonging. They also need freedom to express themselves, opportunities to develop and explore their (disabled) identity, and the chance to form authentic friendships. But, unfortunately, we know very little about the experiences of young disabled people participating in inclusive projects outside of school.

Wac Arts Interactive (WAI)

We examined the impact of one such project, WAI, on the lives of young disabled people and their families living in London. Wac Arts is a multi-functional charity aiming to work in fresh and imaginative ways to support young people facing exceptional challenges and hardship, to discover their talents and fulfill their potential through arts and media programmes. It was devised and created at the charity’s community hub based in London’s Belsize Park.

The WAI project, funded by BBC Children in Need, offered young people (12-18 years) with mild-to-moderate learning disabilities opportunities to explore their creativity and enhance their communication and independence skills, while providing a context for forming friendships and having fun.
The project aimed to achieve these goals by hosting performing arts and media workshops, providing opportunities in filmmaking, radio and television production, in 3D printing, and in other new technologies. The technologies were proposed to enhance the young people’s ability to express themselves with confidence, relate effectively with their peers, to develop emotional control, and to provide a sense of responsibility for themselves and others. WAI also aimed to influence the wider context for disabled children and young people across the UK, by engaging in outreach projects with partner schools and disability organisations. Young people were offered residential trips and a core group were coached to act as ‘Project Ambassadors’, to lead peer to peer training and outreach workshops. WAI also organised bi-annual Creative Innovation for Inclusion (CiFi) Think Tank meetings – forums for industry professionals and young people to discuss how to create wider, more sustainable impact.

Overall, WAI had three key aims:
1. To support young disabled people to enjoy social lives that are as independent and sustainable as possible;
2. To support young disabled people to understand and develop the communication and social skills required to successfully build friendships/relationships, and to increase the confidence levels of young people to interact socially;
3. To influence and improve the wider context or environment for young disabled people.

About this Research

The Centre for Research in Autism and Education (CRAE) was commissioned to determine the impact of the WAI project on the young people themselves, as well as on the wider community. We used three distinct strategies to determine whether the project met its stated aims in terms of enhancing young people’s socioemotional skills and independence. Some of these strategies were designed to capture the views of the young people who formed the initial cohort and remained with the project for the full three years (“long-term attendees”); others were for those who joined the project at later times and for shorter periods (“new attendees”); and others sought to access the views of the broader community.

This research project aimed to:
1. Explore young people’s experiences of participation in WAI and their views on the impact of attending;
2. Examine the views of families about the role of WAI in the young people’s wider social lives;
3. Assess the impact of WAI on the broader environment for disabled young people by surveying the views of professionals linked with WAI.

To address these aims, we saw several young people, between 13 and 19 years of age. They often, but not always, had mild to moderate learning disabilities and their
speech, language and communication levels ranged from minimally verbal to highly articulate. They were often autistic or had Down syndrome, and some had additional medical issues such as insomnia and epilepsy. They were attending a mix of schools, including mainstream schools (with or without SEN units), special schools and college provision. One older attendee was seeking employment.

We sought to find out about the young people’s personal characteristics and preferences, their educational experiences, and their social lives to set the scene for their experiences of Wac Arts (particularly WAI), and their perspectives on what they had gained by attending. In view of the WAI remit to promote social inclusion and positive attitudes towards disability, we also asked how they saw themselves in relation to their disability and about their attitudes to disability more broadly. We achieved this using interviews and focus groups with the young people, their parents (where possible) and Wac Arts’ staff.

We also sought to obtain a broader overview of WAI activities and outreach. To achieve this aim, we observed WAI evening sessions and holiday provision, and reviewed and discussed the young people’s output (including audio and video productions of various kinds, and a computer game). We also accessed records of attendance, schedules of activities, programme plans and interim reports, and discussed activities, procedures and plans with WAI staff. Lastly, we surveyed the views of professionals linked to WAI to capture their views on the quality and impact of the project.

This study’s procedures were granted ethical approval by UCL Institute of Education’s Research Ethics Committee (REC 710).

Who took part?

1. **Long-term attendees of Wac Arts and WAI (3+ years)**

We spoke to 12 long-term attendees (13 to 19 years; 2 female, 10 male) during the course of the project about their views of the role of Wac Arts and WAI. For many of these attendees, involvement had persisted over a number of years and encompassed other Wac Arts provision before participation in WAI. In view of this, we traced their involvement as a whole, but with particular focus on current experience with WAI.

We asked attendees about their friendships, relationships and social lives (in the spheres of home, school and Wac Arts) and the perceived impact of the project in these areas. We explored their strengths and weaknesses (as they perceived them) and asked them to reflect on their experiences of attending Wac Arts by comparison with other educational and leisure opportunities available to them. We also asked them about their reasons for long-term involvement. Finally, we probed the attendees’ use of, and interest in, technology: before and after participation in WAI and in the context of their plans for their future.

2. **Parents and carers of long-term attendees**
We interviewed 7 parents of long-term attendees (6 mothers, 1 father) to gain an additional perspective on the young people’s educational experiences and social lives, as well as the impact of attendance at WAI. We spoke to parents about their views on their children’s levels of independence, social and emotional skills and social networks. We also asked about the young people’s preferred activities and the opportunities available to them over time. Finally, we asked about their views on the impact of attendance at Wac Arts and WAI, within this wider context.

3. New attendees (less than 1 year)

Wac Arts made extensive efforts to recruit new young people to join the original WAI cohort. Of these new attendees, we saw 8 young people (13 to 17 years; 1 female, 7 males) involved in a variety of different activities. These included an interactive treasure hunt, a review of the previous term’s productions, drama-based warm-ups, and break-time table tennis. To access their views, we invited them to attend focus groups (with some also taking part in additional short interviews) to hear about their perspectives on their own strengths, weaknesses and interests, and their perception of the role of WAI in their lives. We focused on their available social opportunities, their independence, their attitudes towards disability and the perceived impact, if any, of attending WAI. Finally, we asked them to reflect on their use of, and attitudes towards, technology (before and after involvement with WAI).

4. Members of the broader community

WAI made two distinct attempts to widen the impact of their work on the broader community. First, they hosted four Creative Innovation for Inclusion (CiFi) Think Tank meetings, intended for a range of media and disability professionals and Project Ambassadors. The meetings aimed to provide a platform to generate ideas and share knowledge on how inclusive technology might be utilised to engage young people and communities affected by disability. These meetings were an opportunity for WAI to refine the content and delivery of their technology starter pack (“The Wonder Pod”), which was targeted at other inclusive organisations, to allow them to benefit from the activities designed by WAI.

To determine the impact of this work on the broader community, CRAE researchers: (i) attended three CiFi think tanks, gathering information on attendance, activities and intended outcomes; and (ii) developed a survey for completion by attendees, facilitators and staff to determine the perceived impact, if any, on their practice because of their participation in the think tank(s).
2. The peer group ‘life line’

Friends are important for everyone, but young disabled people can find it especially difficult to make and keep friends. Indeed, all the young people attending WAI reported struggling with social relationships to some extent. For example, some described themselves as “quite insecure … quite shy”, as “intimidated by bigger people” and as having two sides, “my over-talkative and annoying side and my very, very silent side”. Other friendship difficulties were reported, including a description of being ‘used’: “I’ve been messing up in the past with friends and I’ve been taking, you know, letting them take the advantage”.

Parents also described their children’s social difficulties. They referred to their children, for example, as “quite reclusive”, as having “very poor social skills”, as suffering from “anxiety and social exclusion” and as “just not grasping how to keep and maintain friends”. Even when young people were perceived to be socially motivated, they were not always successful. A mother described her daughter as “desperate” to make friends, but as having “very limited” friendships at school, with some history of teasing and unpleasant comments.

Some young people were reported to have sometimes acute difficulties with communication: “he seems to just freeze and you can see his brain’s whirring. He just finds it really hard to articulate, I suppose”. One young person also had minimal spoken language. The situation faced by all these young people was summed up by another parent: “It’s just a fact of life that outside school he won’t get invited and wouldn’t be able to keep up anyway”. For these reasons, as a group, the young people were “just not able to access what normal kids his age are able to access”.

Research suggests that disabled teens feel a greater sense of belonging and are more able to create sustainable friendships when with peers who are similarly disabled (25, 26). This appeared to be the case for the teens attending WAI. Our interviews highlighted that WAI provides a peer group and a place and time to interact with others who have similar limits to their social autonomy. Parents and young people referred to this as a main reason for attending WAI. For example, one parent said, “He goes to Wac to find friends, be with friends. It gives him somewhere to go”. A young person also talked about the purpose for him: “you can, like, meet new people. It’s a good place for, like, people with disabilities”.

This peer group ‘life line’ was seen as increasingly significant throughout adolescence. Parents described how non-disabled teens begin socialising independently, outside the home and without the adult support that is still needed by their disabled children. They felt that their children’s inability to travel independently or maintain social ties without support was excluding their sons and daughters from most “mainstream” socialising opportunities. As one parent explained, “I can’t be letting him go and hang around on the street corners or whatever they’re doing or go off to the cinema on his own”. Another said, “you just need to look elsewhere if you’re not in a special school and don’t have kids who are at your exact level”. Parents felt that they were no longer able to bridge the skills gap between their children and typical teens, as they had in
childhood. One mother said, “other teens don’t want to come to visit us here – they
don’t socialise like that and they don’t want me there to facilitate. It’s just not
appropriate”.

The need for an appropriate peer group and appropriate expectations was seen as
key, by both parents and young people, because “friendships don’t just continue out
of school”. Without such provision, young people with disabilities may have to rely
exclusively on home and family for their social network and leisure opportunities.
 Particularly for those in mainstream school, there were limited opportunities to
develop and maintain friendships. One parent thought that sending young people
with SEND to mainstream schools was “great”, “but they also need to have a chance
to interact with people like them and, I mean, in his school, there’s just no one else
with Down’s”. Her son, amongst other young people, appreciated the signifi-
cance of the peer group provided at WAI, saying that “they have the same disability as me.
And that is really nice”.

For some attendees, WAI was reported to be the only social or leisure activity available
to them outside school. Young people spoke about spending long periods of time at
home, “I spend 99% of my time at home. I do go to college, but I would say in general
about 99%. When I’m not at college, I go straight home”. As reported for other young
disabled people (27), the activities that the young people engaged in at home were
mainly solitary and passive in nature. As one young person said, “sometimes I like
watching TV all day and all night, but I spend too much time at home”. Another young
person explained, “I like being at home, but I also like being active”.

We specifically asked parents and young people what they might be doing at the time
of the weekly sessions if they were not attending WAI. We received similar answers
from each source: young people were usually engaged with TV, Netflix or You Tube,
or “sitting wired to the iPad”. One boy said: “I spend most of my time at home from
Friday onwards and that’s being electronic all day and all night”. Without WAI, one
parent said, her son would be “watching TV in his room, videos in his PJs, on the
internet, inappropriately dressed. Regressing completely”.

It was evident that parents and young people, especially those not attending school
or college full-time, had difficulty productively filling their leisure time and
participating in social activities.

“Colour in our lives”

Against this backdrop, WAI was seen by young people and their parents as an oasis of
“colour in our lives” – not just something to fill the socialisation gap, but something
truly pivotal. Young people described Wac Arts as “a fantastic place”, “exciting, like a
party”, “awesome” and “fun, it brings out my hyper mode”. Parents thought it had
“heart and soul”, and was “absolutely fantastic”. Wac Arts was seen as something
quite different from – and vastly preferable to – “standard” disability provision.

Parents and young peoples explained how WAI was somewhere that: (i) you can be
yourself and be free; (ii) you are valued, and your feelings about yourself and your
abilities change in positive ways; and (iii) expectations are high.
(i) You can be yourself and be free

Most of the young people we spoke to had experienced some difficulty in their social relationships and were accustomed to negative experiences. They clearly felt their experiences at Wac Arts were different. A 16-year-old described painful experiences of exclusion from school: “I think they find it hard to kind of deal with me there”; yet went on to draw a sharp contrast with her experiences at WAI: “It’s different to everywhere else. At Wac Arts, it’s kind of like everything that happens is okay”. A mother described how her own, and her daughter’s, lives were constrained in many ways: “Life is messy. Young people have too many rules and regulations to live by. Wac avoids all that. She is cut some slack”. She was aware that her daughter’s personality was not always seen in a positive light by peers at school, because “she is quirky, but at Wac everyone is, so it’s OK. She does not feel judged”. The idea that attending WAI represented liberation from normalising expectations came across strongly.

An important element in the sense of being “cut some slack” was the behaviour and attitudes of staff. One young person described the tone set by staff: “At Wac everyone is different but it doesn’t really matter. Every quirk or everything that makes you an individual is celebrated”. The creative arts background of staff may have contributed to promoting an ethos in which individuality and self-expression were valued.

One parent noted that just as young people did not have a sense of being “judged” by staff, so too staff might be able to be “more free, because they know they are not judged themselves”. Young people also spoke about freedom from social norms that was shared, or that appeared to be shared. As one boy said, “the staff, they start acting like us 15-year-olds, which I love”.

Impressively, we also heard how WAI’s commitment to young people’s lives extended well beyond the dedicated WAI workshops. Two parents described how staff had supported their sons in difficult personal circumstances, through changes at home and school, providing a “constant” in their fluctuating lives. One of them reflected that, as a result, “he’s very, very comfortable there, you know, I do regard it as his second home, he just loves the place and the people”. We heard many expressions of gratitude (“I owe them a lot”) and admiration (“staff are terrific”). According to the parent of a long-term attendee, “the staff are passionate about what they do and they get it right. They work relentlessly. If there’s something wrong or something not working – they’ll come to your home, they’ll do whatever it takes to get it right with that particular child”.

In this sense, ‘belonging’ to Wac Arts and attending WAI appears to have had a significant impact on young people’s social and emotional quality of life. This was reported by both the young people themselves and their parents. It also extended significantly beyond the specific learning objectives of workshop sessions.

(ii) Your feelings about yourself and your abilities change in positive ways

Parents and young people both felt that attendance at WAI had changed how the young people perceived themselves. This was persuasively expressed by one 19-year-old young woman who had experienced difficulties at school. At WAI, she said, “I’ve learnt to be confident in myself and to be happy and to be who I am, and if any child
out there or young person is going through what I’m going through, come to Wac. You’ll see a big, big difference. A big change in your life”. Asked to explain how she thought this had occurred, she went on: “I think ‘cause I’ve been coming to Wac about five years, I’ve kind of, my confidence has built up so much and without Wac I wouldn’t be where I am now. So thank you Wac for doing this!” Other young people mentioned increased confidence from having attended WAI, and also conveyed their gratitude to the wider organisation, for example, “I’ve learnt to be confident in myself. I don’t let people kind of get to me ... I don’t know where I’d be without Wac Arts”.

Increased self-esteem and acceptance of disability were also seen as outcomes of attending WAI. A 16-year-old (who was not a long-term attendee) said that in the months she had been attending, “I have learnt to value myself more”. One 14-year-old, speaking in a focus group session, was quite comfortable discussing his disabled identity, saying “some people ask me a lot of questions like about what’s my life like with a disability, and I say that’s fine, we all have different things in common and all that”.

Not all of the young people we saw had the conceptual or communicative ability to reflect on their experiences at this level. Yet, parents (including parents of children who were less verbally and cognitively able) gave somewhat similar accounts of how they felt that the workshops improved the young people’s confidence. One mother described her son’s mood on returning home after WAI workshops: “I can see how confident he is, ‘cause you know, he’s got his chest puffed out and he’s really smiling and he’s happy and that’s how I interpret it, ‘cause a lot of the time he’s quite down and – when he goes to his session, he comes home very happy”.

Another parent reflected on his own, and his son’s, attitudes towards his disability and how they had altered over time, with positive changes occurring over several years of being associated with Wac Arts and the WAI project: “Just before he came to Wac, he was becoming more aware of himself and that he was different. And I think Wac kind of made him shake that off and re-establish his own self-esteem”. His son’s changing attitude had repercussions for himself, too: “I was getting quite sad about it, seeing him become a little bit introverted in himself as he went into the bigger world, and then becoming more aware that he was different to other people. But now he’s kind of like appreciating the fact that he’s a likeable person. And he can make someone else happy. And he can maybe help someone else”.

As suggested in these accounts from young people and parents, increased self-esteem was closely related to positive social experiences in the peer group and with staff. The other factor often referred to in this context was the experience of performing in public, either by demonstrating WAI productions, such as during residential trips (see Box 1, p. 13), or by taking part in public performances, such as the ‘iPad Orchestra’ project. One father described his son’s participation in this: “I think for someone at that age to get up on the stage and perform in front of a massive crowd of people – that’s quite something. He used to be very sheepish about it and now he’s like, yes, yes, Daddy, I want to do it, I want to do it”.

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Expectations are high

Parents recognised that expectations of their children were high: “they don’t patronise him and they do expect a lot of him, and they give him responsibilities”. This was perceived as a contrast with expectations elsewhere: “There’s too many things where they treat them like babies”.

The young people were clear that they were expected to be productive and to collaborate in workshops at WAI. One described a working session: “We split off into groups, Isaac made a rap, Zara made a song, I did a commercial, Josh did a pirate wrestling thing. It’s on YouTube. We also did a pirate story.” Staff described “pushing”...
young people “to be really creative and interactive” and moving quickly towards an end-product.

We saw several examples of young people working patiently to keep peers on task; handling challenging interruptions and provocations by peers with tact. A climate of equality and mutual respect was also reflected in young people’s descriptions of project work. They named the peers with whom they had collaborated, without making distinctions between the relative contributions of different members, and without suggesting that some young people were more/less desirable team members than others. We asked how one 13-year-old would describe the members of his team, which included young people considerably less verbally and cognitively able than himself: “I’d definitely call them my friends ... I’d call them my true friends 'cause probably the ones I talk to a lot more often”.

Staff set expectations of behaviour and commitment to the project that were accepted and practiced by young people.

SUMMARY

- The young people we saw often struggled with social communication and social relationships;
- They had limited social networks and were at risk of social isolation, especially as teenagers, since their non-disabled peers were increasingly socialising independently;
- WAI provided a ‘life line’ of social contact, a place and time to interact with other young people with similar disabilities;
- Wac Arts and WAI were seen as bringing vitality and ‘colour’ into young people’s lives;
- WAI was seen as somewhere i) you can be yourself and be free; (ii) your feelings about yourself and your abilities change in a positive way; and (iii) where expectations are high.
3. Developing meaningful relationships

It was striking how many of the WAI participants we saw had long-term relationships with Wac Arts. In one case, a young person had been attending sessions at Wac Arts since early childhood; several others had participated for periods of more than five years. Many were simultaneously attending other Wac Arts programmes and/or individual mentoring sessions with members of staff. Long term attendance at Wac Arts was described as having a major impact on the lives of young people and their families. Two key themes emerged in relation to long term attendance: (i) the quality of relationships with staff, and (ii) the impact of these relationships on aspirations.

Quality of relationships with staff

The young people spoke with great warmth about their relationships with individual staff members and the opportunities given to them. Many parents paid tribute to the “skills and commitment” of staff: “I’m incredibly impressed by how committed and dedicated staff are and I’m really impressed by the things [my son] brings home”.

Parents of long-term attendees expressed a sense of indebtedness to the staff at Wac Arts for the major contribution they have made, which had a real impact on their lives. One simply said, “I owe them a great deal”. Several parents felt that their family had been supported through very difficult periods: “I’m very grateful to them … the thing that was drummed into me was to try and maintain his stability. And I don’t know what I would have done without Wac”. Another mother described, “when his dad died, it was a very hard time, you know, and we had to move areas and Wac was a constant in his life”. We were also given an account by one parent, which explained, “For parents who are really, really struggling, that’s amazing what they do”. The attention paid to individuals and individual circumstances appears to have had a significant positive impact and created strong bonds of loyalty.

Aspirations

In the accounts of young people, staff appeared as strong role models. One lasting legacy was evident in the way that aspirations had been shaped by involvement with staff at Wac Arts.

In general, Wac Arts and WAI were credited with raising attendees’ aspirations. As one parent said of her son, “they give him the belief that anything is possible”. Through long term involvement and their changing roles in Wac Arts, attendees identified strongly with staff and developed a sense of commitment to the Wac Arts project. We heard young people aspiring to follow their leads: “I want to be a sort of person that wants to help people with autism – you know, disabilities and all that”. Many others said that they wanted to volunteer or to do work experience at Wac Arts (see Box 2, p. 16).
For some young people, the aspiration was more specifically to develop the media and technology skills ‘tasted’ at Wac Arts, and follow the specialisms of staff in courses at college and professionally. One attendee explained: “I come ‘cause it helps me, hopefully it just – because I really want to become an animator and just be creative in an industry. It just gives me that experience”. This view was echoed by parents: “He loves films, you know, loves film and media and, and production and he’d love to work in, in that area, that would be his absolute dream”.

**WAI technology: “It looked so much fun”**

WAI has a focus on introducing young people to a wide variety of new media and technologies. The acquisition of precise technological skills is not the main purpose. Rather, staff want young people to contribute towards the creation of an end-product. One staff member said, “I put an emphasis on tangible things, so they take ownership of something, they don’t just learn something for six weeks and then walk away without some sort of demonstration of the work that they’ve done”. Productions were created collectively, often with significant input of staff skills, so that some individuals acquire familiarity with approaches rather than independent knowledge or understanding of sometimes complex technologies.

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**Box 2: Matthew**

Matthew is a 22-year-old young man, who has attended Wac Arts since secondary school. After graduating from university, he returned to Wac Arts as a volunteer (with WAI). He was keen to give an account of what Wac Arts had meant in his life: “Before I came to Wac, I was a very quiet person, a very shy person, I had trouble communicating. Before I came here I never really had a lot of friends. When I came here, the first thing I noticed was everyone is really friendly, everyone helps you, and they recognise pretty quickly if you have any problems and they help you out”. By continuing to attend, while seeking employment, he thinks he will continue to “feel more like a leader, maybe feel more confident from it”.

In Matthew’s view, Wac Arts is not only about learning skills: “**To learn is a bit of a part of it, learning to get along is the most part of it**”. Wac Arts has also furnished a large part of his social network, including his best friend. Even though he has been away at university, he says, “I would say about 40% of people I know now, I met at Wac, including some people that have now been my friends for years”.

Matthew has made a successful transition from attending Wac Arts disability provision to supporting others, “I would say, I go to have fun and teach people. I go to assist them”. He continues to see gains: “At this point in time, my Asperger’s stopped being a problem because I was more concerned about the work, and everyone else was more concerned about the work”. He believes that other young people at WAI are likely to take a similar path, developing their roles within Wac Arts over time: **“They [can] take the skills they have been able to use, and maybe they will teach them to other people as well. Like the chain keeps on going”**.
Generally, parents and young people responded very positively to the technology aspect of WAI. Most young people were clearly pleased to have taken part in creative technology projects: “I have learnt how to make my very own video game”. They see the products as “cool” and socially desirable: “I can’t wait for it to go on YouTube!”.

Parents were also pleased to see young people participating in stimulating and innovative practices: one said, “Technology is the future, they need to really understand it”. Another commented, “It’s a very cool subject making videos”. A third returned to the theme of contrasting WAI with dismal ‘standard’ provision: “It looked so much fun. And fun is not so much associated with disabilities!”.

Quite a few parents and young people confirmed a pre-existing interest in technology at some level. One young person said of himself, “Manny love computers”; and one parent reported, “he’s interested in that, in, you know, media production, video production, cameras and that, all that stuff, he loves it”. Just a few participants attended WAI without a specific interest in technology. One parent reported: “he’s not really into computers and stuff, which a lot of them is – he likes gardening”, and one young person definitely preferred other forms of activity (see Box 3, p. 17).

**Box 3: Ella**
Ella is a “quirky” and socially motivated 16-year-old with Down syndrome, living with her mother. Space at home is limited and the budget very tight. At school, she is the only pupil with Down syndrome, and she spends time in the autism unit. Outside school, she spends long periods of time at home. Her mother feels the difficulty of playing the role of both companion and parent, recognising that she cannot provide the social contact that Ella needs.

Ella’s mother was very positive about the role of Wac Arts in their lives, saying “she takes great care preparing for Wac Arts – in her most flamboyant outfits. She loves doing this and it defines her personality. It’s a very special occasion”. When we spoke to Ella, she was more circumspect, saying: “I wasn’t that happy [to come] ... I like it here but it’s just I like to spend time with my friends and sometimes I like spending time by myself away from family, but I never get to do that stuff”. Ella was slightly unsure about the technology aspect of WAI, expressing a preference for the drama component and for dance. Nevertheless, Ella said she wanted to do work experience at Wac Arts.

Of all the young people we interviewed, Ella was the least comfortable with her status as a disabled person, expressing a strong desire to be allowed more independence, like a “normal girl”. When asked if there was anything she’d like to be different at WAI, Ella said she wanted to be allowed to travel to Wac Arts independently, because “I never get to do that”. Ella’s mother and Wac Arts staff were trying to facilitate independent travel for her, but she could not yet reliably make the journey without support. For this reason, her mother said, staff at WAI were surreptitiously checking that she had caught the right bus home.

Facilitated by Wac Arts, Ella’s mother had met other parents involved in WAI, who had given general advice and guidance, which she had found invaluable. Otherwise she did not meet other parents; she said, “the parents of SEN children are isolated as well as the children and Wac is helping with this”.
In general, parents felt that their children learned key skills at WAI. One father told us that his son was able to transfer his technology skills outside the Wac Arts context: “he uses [the technology] outside of Wac. He uses it in school, he’s said, ‘I’ve been doing this and I’ve being doing that’ and I’m, ‘so how do you know how to do that?’ and he says, ‘well, we do it at Wac’”.

Some young people said that they had tried to practise skills acquired in WAI independently, but few had the competences, resources or confidence to do so. One young person explained that he did not use his newly acquired skills outside Wac Arts, although he would have liked to: “I wish I can, it’s just my computer doesn’t have the sort of skills to edit things. I don’t have those kind of computers or it’s not installed into the computer I have”.

Within the general sense of enthusiasm and participation, young people sometimes seemed to be unsure about exactly what they were engaged in. One told us, “I play on a game called Scratch now. No, I made a game but it’s quite rude, you must collect toilets and if you collect a poo, you get a point”. Another said, “Recently I was doing a bit of making up a radio station”, and a third described how he had been “learning how to get game skills and doing buttons. You got down space, left and right”.

Surprisingly, many young people said they had not shared their productions with friends or family, were often vague about what happened to the productions, and were sometimes not aware of how to access them (for example, on the Wac Arts website or YouTube channel). Asked what happened to the projects once they were finished, one typical answer was: “I think they are showcased. Usually the teacher takes it. Takes the work and showcases it”.

It also seemed that there was some tension between the aims of acquiring and transferring skills for independent use and delivering an end-product in the time available. Participating in the process seemed to be paramount in the accounts we received, with young people perhaps showing some awareness that the group context was needed to make sense of the product.

**SUMMARY**

- Young people and parents reported having developed meaningful relationships with WAI staff, who were key role models in their lives;
- They felt that WAI staff raised young people’s expectations of what was possible for them and their futures;
- The technology aspect of Wac Arts provided an exciting focus for collaborative projects, yielding productions that were fun to discuss;
- Clarifying aims and roles might help young disabled people to understand better what is going on around them during the activities;
- WAI attendees may not be acquiring functional skills for independent use outside of Wac Arts in many cases, although participating has created aspirations in some young people to increase their skills and their involvement in other contexts.
4. Having a broader impact

One of the key aims of the WAI project was to influence and improve the wider context or environment for young disabled people. To this end, WAI staff held Creative Innovation for Inclusion (CiFi) Think Tank meetings – a forum for industry professionals and young people to discuss how to create wider, more sustainable impact – as well as travelling to other organisations (including schools) throughout the country to showcase their work and extend their reach.

To gain an understanding of the broader impact of Wac Arts and WAI, we asked professionals who were involved in Wac Arts outreach activities or attended a Wac Arts Think Tank to complete a short online survey about their experience of WAI activities, how they found them, and the perceived impact (if any) of these activities on their practice and the young people with whom they worked.

Overall, 20 professionals (14 females, 6 males; aged between 20 and 58 years) took part in the survey. Half of the professionals worked for charities, 8 worked in education, one worked for a private organisation, and one was self-employed. Most (75%) were from London and the South East, with the rest spread across the UK. Although some of the survey respondents worked at Wac Arts, it should be noted that responses from all professionals who completed the survey were very positive.

Experience of Wac Arts
All 20 survey respondents had seen Wac Arts videos, with 13 (65%) seeing Wac Arts games and 13 (65%) seeing Wac Arts audios. These productions were most commonly viewed during workshops (n=13, 65%), on the Wac Arts interactive webpage (n=11, 55%) and/or during CiFi Think Tank meetings (n=10, 50%). Asked how useful the productions were for their own work or practice, 74% (n=13) of the survey respondents reported they were “very useful”, 21% (n=4) said they were “somewhat useful” and only 5% (n=1) thought they were “not at all useful” (1 missing response). Encouragingly, all respondents felt the productions were innovative: 75% (n=15) felt they were “very innovative” and 25% (n=5) felt they were “somewhat innovative”.

One Wac Arts employee reflected on how proud they were to be involved in these productions and to see the outputs produced by the young people: “Having worked with the young people, I guess I have an insight into how much hard work goes into the productions and how much the young people love it, as well as what they learn in the process. To me this has been incredible to be a part of! When I haven’t been involved with a project but have seen the outcome I’ve also been impressed by the creativity and originality of the work. The impact it has on the young people themselves as well as audiences is great”.

Visits from Wac Arts
Nine professionals who completed our survey had received a visit from Wac Arts, and all found this useful. One respondent who worked in a school explained: “this was a project that brought some great ideas to the school – the team were great and very willing to share, be involved and be creative”. Another recalled how the visit had
been “an inspiration for other young people with more severe challenges”. Praise was also given to the Wac Arts staff because the “workshop was well planned out and memorable”. One professional felt, however, that the visits may not be suitable for everyone: “as our centre is a visual arts centre, some of our participants weren’t so keen on the performance parts (one in particular as, due to his autism and OCD, he doesn’t like the unpredictability and does not like people brushing past him)”. Yet the same professional also noted how: “We all really enjoyed the visit from Wac Arts. The team were great, friendly and made everyone feel at home, even though [the young people] were nervous about it being different to the usual workshops”.

**The Wonder Pod technology resource pack**
As part of WAI, staff developed The Wonder Pod technology resource pack, a book providing step by step guides to delivering and participating in workshops using interactive technology. Ten respondents were aware of The Wonder Pod, and nine had actually seen the pack. Encouragingly, all thought it was innovative. As one respondent explained: “I just don’t think there are many resources out there for guiding this sort of work with young people when using digital and creative technologies. What I’ve seen so far would be great for guidelines and to help other facilitators lead sessions. For my own work, I would value being able to use it very much!” However, one did comment that, although “the pack was good, the technology is beyond our budget”.

**CiFi Think-Tank meeting**
CiFi meetings were predominantly attended by representatives of Wac Arts. Twelve survey respondents had attended a CiFi Think-Tank meeting. All found the presentations of the activities at the CiFi Think-Tank meeting to be useful to their own work or practice. For example, one commented that it was “good for sharing ideas and inspiring new ones”. Another highlighted how it provided a confidence boost: “I do not have great technical skills and it was shown to me that I can still implement [it]”.

Strikingly, 11 of the 12 respondents (92%) felt that their experience at the meeting had changed their work or practice; four of whom said it changed their practice a “great deal”. They commented that it was: “An amazing programme which not only lifted the confidence of the young people involved but allowed staff to look at and practice innovative ways to teach and support practice”. They also expressed a desire for continued, longer-term support: “Just please carry on with this work! Some more funding perhaps to make the programme an on-going thing?”

**SUMMARY**
- Representatives from organisations beyond Wac Arts reported very positive experiences of the WAI project, impressed by the way that activities were organised and by the creativity and originality of the work;
- They also felt that, on the whole, the WAI activities had had an impact on their own practice and in some cases, had appeared to improve the confidence of the young people involved.
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Friendships are important to young disabled people, who tend to have fewer friends and fewer opportunities for socialising than young people who are not disabled. The findings from this evaluation of WAI overwhelming show that this project represents a very successful attempt to turn this around. Through WAI’s weekly workshop programme, holiday and residential provision, and outreach activities, they appear to be achieving their wider aim of having a positive impact on the lives of young disabled people.

The key findings were that:

▪ WAI successfully provided a fun, creative, and accepting environment to a group of young disabled people at risk of social exclusion, particularly those at high risk of exclusion (such as those with minimal spoke language and/or challenging behaviour).
▪ The activities offered by WAI gave young people a chance to move beyond the confines of their bedrooms, both broadening and deepening their interactions with others.
▪ Young people and their parents reported having developed strong and often lasting friendships both with other WAI and Wac Arts attendees and with staff, giving them confidence in their social lives.
▪ There was evidence of significant impact of the WAI provision (and Wac Arts provision more broadly), especially regarding the lives of long-term attendees, by facilitating their self-image and a positive disabled identity.
▪ Many attendees reported benefits from having participated in activities that involved using a variety of media/technologies, either by becoming “facilitators of new technology” or by acquiring new technical skills.
▪ The residential trips seem to have been particularly popular, with young people greatly valuing the opportunity to take on the role of “leader” in those settings.
▪ Representatives from organisations beyond Wac Arts reported being impressed by the innovative activities to which they and their young people were exposed during CiFi Think Tank and/or outreach activities, and felt that the learning during those activities had had an impact on their practice.

These findings also raise important issues regarding the reach of WAI. We conclude our report, therefore, by highlighting three main recommendations.

1. Expand WAI to reach larger numbers of young disabled people

The young people, their parents and the Wac Arts staff with whom we spoke were all extremely positive about the WAI project and the opportunities it offers. The numbers of young disabled people that have been able to access these opportunities are, however, relatively small. We suggest that Wac Arts should seek to expand the activities currently offered by WAI: to engage larger numbers of young people (with a range of disabilities and challenges in long-term relationships) with the organisation; to continue to accommodate young people in increasingly responsible roles as they
develop, and as their circumstances change; and to continue to challenge expectations of what such young people might be able to achieve.

Some parents suggested additional ways of reducing their children’s isolation, including an “open club” drop-in centre, to provide somewhere for young people to go “instead of always being at home”. They felt that this would “break the isolation for young people and parents. They could meet each other there too. It would solve the problem of not being able to go out independently to socialise”.

2. **Broaden the creative opportunities available through WAI**

Although many of the young people and their parents very much valued the technological focus of WAI’s activities, there were some who would have preferred to access different creative opportunities. The broader Wac Arts programme is a beacon of excellence in performing arts and media but is almost exclusively offered to young people who are not disabled. We suggest WAI should consider ways to harness the skills, commitment and resources of Wac Arts non-disabled music, drama and creative arts students to the WAI project: to present a positive image of disability, challenge negatives stereotypes, and improve the wider climate for young disabled people through the broader Wac Arts programmes.

3. **Create links with regional disability providers isolated from centres of excellence**

WAI sought to build on its in-house activities by running CiFi Think Tanks with a range of media and disability professionals and by engaging with external organisations, including organisations outside of London, to extend the impact of the WAI project. Wac Arts should seek to create links with regional disability providers that are not in touch with the urban centres of excellence where links currently exist; that is, they should develop links that might lift expectations and inspire creative thinking about the shape of disability provision in places where such thinking is most needed.
ABOUT US

The UCL Institute of Education, University College London, is both the largest and the leading research and teaching institution into education theory and practice in the UK and internationally. It houses the Centre for Research in Autism and Education (CRAE; crae.ioe.ac.uk), a unique centre focused on helping to enhance the lives of autistic people and their families though (i) conducting ground breaking scientific and applied research to enhance knowledge about evidence-based interventions, education and outcomes for autistic children, young people and adults and (ii) working with professionals on the ground and with those directly impacted by autism to promote awareness, and acceptance, of autism.

CITATION


NOTES