

North Manchester Cultural Pilot Programme

Manchester Art Gallery with Higher Blackley Sure Start Centre

An evaluation of the Becoming a New Parent project 2011

Background

The *Becoming a New Parent* project was funded by Manchester City Council as part of its North Manchester Cultural Pilot Programme. The aim was to run a pilot project to examine how culture could address a social issue.

Manchester Art Gallery staff discussed with staff from Higher Blackley Sure Start Children's Centre about how the Gallery might assist the Centre in achieving some of its aims. A big issue for the Centre is the relatively low rate of breastfeeding in the area and it was agreed that a project with the Gallery would be designed to address this issue.

The gallery is experienced in using its resources to address social and personal issues. Essentially it uses art to encourage dialogue and creativity which are known to enhance people's sense of themselves.¹ The Centre manager appreciates the potential of art in this area and so was firmly behind the project although other Centre staff without experience of this way of working were initially dubious. Two other Sure Start Centres were involved in the initial discussion but they decided not to be involved.

Higher Blackley is referred to by an interviewee as a 'forgotten corner of the city': its geography and its culture mitigate against people making use of cultural facilities in the city centre.

The budget was £3,000.

Breastfeeding

From the outset the Centre recognised that this was a risky project. It has done creative arts projects before but these hadn't taken an issue-based approach. They wanted to do something a bit different and creative to try and unpick some of the issues that women grapple with with breastfeeding.

¹ See for instance Lynn Froggett, 'Artistic output as intersubjective third' in Simon Clarke et.al. (eds) *Object Relations and Social Relations* London: Karnac 2008 pp.87-111

Both the Centre and the Gallery were well aware that issues about breastfeeding could not be tackled head on through the project so the approach was not to simply advocate the advantages of breastfeeding. Rather, the Gallery's resources were used to enable conversations to take place which would build confidence so that better informed choices could be made. The project was promoted to potential participants as about 'Becoming a New Parent'.

One participant said

It must be hard if your baby doesn't breast feed straight away cause it must feel like a rejection of you. You'd take it very personally wouldn't you?

For some women with low body image, something so intimately linked with their bodies as breastfeeding must be vulnerable to failure. Formula milk comes from elsewhere, so it is safer to give your baby that. Reluctance to do art can perhaps be viewed in the same light as again one is dependent on one's body to nurture, to create. They both require the same leap into the dark and faith in one's self.

The project addressed this weak sense of self that can inhibit breastfeeding.

Evaluation methods

This was both a formative and a summative evaluation. Discussions were held between the evaluator and the project officer as the project progressed. The project officer also held regular discussions with her manager.

Free-flowing semi-structured interviews were held with the artist, project officer, head of the Sure Start Centre, two of the participants, the Centre outreach worker and two midwives. Some of the interviews were recorded. Photographs of the project were used to stimulate conversation.

The project officer kept an observation diary and participants filled in summative questionnaires.

The evaluator works at Manchester Art Gallery and is not therefore an 'independent' evaluator. Every effort has been made to take an objective stance.

What happened?

Three mothers came to Manchester Art Gallery for six morning sessions from March to June 2011. An artist led each session using artworks as starting points for conversation. This was then followed by creative art-making activities.

A crèche was available for the young children who accompanied their mothers.

One of the mothers is a volunteer at the Centre, running an 'open surgery' where she talks about breastfeeding with parents who are attending a clinic.

Staff from the Centre also attended – an outreach officer and two midwife assistants. All three were not present at the same time, at most two of them were there. They joined in as the mothers did and talked about their own experiences. On at least one occasion a midwife wore her uniform which reminded people of her role but did not seem to inhibit discussion. In fact it seemed to add to the power of the sessions that professional health staff were engaging with the activities. But as one interviewee said, the uniform 'disappeared'.



The participants were encouraged to talk about themselves through the activities in the galleries and the practical making. The approach was experiential as opposed to didactic although there was some direct teaching about photographic styles and fonts. In the education studio they sat around a table with tea and cake and talked whilst they carried out an art or craft activity. On a number of occasions the conversation spontaneously moved to breastfeeding. Typically, one participant would ask the experienced breast feeder, how do you do it?

The overriding theme of the activities was identity which was discussed in particular through looking at portraits, photographic activities and making portraits of themselves.

In one session in the gallery of craft and design the participants were asked to choose an object which they felt represented them in some way. They then discussed their choice with the group. One woman chose a large industrial jug, the biggest in a cabinet of jugs, which she felt expressed the way in which as a mother she was always being filled up and then emptied out. She saw the smaller jugs as her family members: 'Everybody pours their stuff into the jug and I get fuller and fuller'.



Someone else chose a small 18th century Chinese cabinet. The person liked it because it was small, organised and beautiful. She said that you have to be organised with children. She likes things to look nice and feels out of control when the house is messy.

At one session they visited the temporary exhibition of work by the artist Anish Kapoor. One of the works, *When I am Pregnant*, consists of a pregnancy shaped bulge in the gallery wall. It provoked different responses, some liked it others did not. The women felt

it resonated with their experience of pregnancy - sometimes you see it, sometimes you don't, sometimes it makes sense, sometimes not.

At the end of the project there was a display of photographs at the Centre and each participant received a portfolio of her work including a fridge magnet.

The participants' experience

All participants said in the interviews that they enjoyed the sessions. One said that she enjoyed making the artworks even though she thought she would be 'rubbish' at it. One of the midwives, who said that she was sceptical at the outset about the project, enjoyed 'looking around more than making things because I'm not arty'. Everyone (the mothers and the Centre and Gallery staff) grew in confidence as the sessions progressed. At the beginning

They wanted to be led, instructed every step of the way, but in the end session when they got their hands on the cameras they went off...

One of the most commented on aspects of the experience was that this was an opportunity for the women to do something for themselves:

This is good because it's different, everything is [usually] about you and your child together, which is nice but this is really good 'cause it's just for us the mums. It's like having time to yourself.

I never do anything that isn't necessary. Everything I do is because I have to do it. It was nice to do this. Something I don't get an opportunity to do.

It was novel for the mothers to find that their own particular experience was of interest to the group, as opposed to the welfare of their children.

The project helped the mothers realise that they were not alone in finding motherhood hard and in feeling at times that they were no good at it. Typical comments when asked what they had realised from the project were:

That as a mum we have good days, react the same as others, and it's ok to feel the way we do.

I am a great Mum and to relax and remember I am only human and everyone is making same mistakes as me.

It brought out all my emotions.

The project also revealed the variety between them:

...how different we all see and feel about different pictures!

Following the project one mother brought her whole family to the Gallery at the weekend.

How did it work?

Held in mind

From the interviews it was clear that the mothers felt that they were 'held in mind' at the Gallery. Their needs as individuals, not just as mothers, were understood and catered for. This sense of being held in mind is an important element in human development². Whilst the Gallery initially was perceived as an alien and unknown space it became, for all participants, a place of holding and containment. In fact they became rather childlike – playing and making a mess.

Within this safe space the participants began conversations. They did this both while looking at objects and later in the education studio whilst making work:

Everyone concentrating on something 'other' helps people open up and say what they feel.

One of the Gallery staff thought that it was the free flowing of activity through the Gallery that encouraged the conversations. During a session the group would move through the Gallery: they would look at artworks, hold someone's baby, have one to one conversations and then a group conversation, go to the toilet, move into a different gallery and so on. At times their attention would be focused intensely on an art work or on the plaster cast they were painting. This particular quality of attention to detail is important³. It is perhaps reminiscent of the quality of attention that they give to their young children and can be linked to the quality of attention that a curator gives to a gallery object.

The shared activity and conversations created a bond between the women. They were able to talk about themselves and each other through the objects. As one of the staff members said

² See for instance Jan Abram, *Language of Winnicott*, London: Karnac 1996

³ Lynn Froggett et. al., *Who Cares? Museums, Health and Wellbeing Research Project. A Study of the Renaissance North West Programme*, 2011.

http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/programmes/renaissance/regions/north_west/news/publications

You project "it" [whatever you're feeling] onto something else in the Gallery, but you're really talking about yourself. But it's safer because you're not saying "I".

One interviewee suggested that participants were able to make connections between themselves and the precious, untouchable things inside the glass cabinets, such as the jugs discussed above. Research⁴ has shown that this association between self and museum object can assist a person's ability to link with the wider society and hence influence a sense of social integration.

At the same time, the artist observed that the life of the jugs in the Gallery is quite different from the way we live our lives. The jugs are 'frozen behind the glass', will be in the Gallery for ever and are looked after so they don't 'degrade or disappear'.

And actually that's not what anyone's life is like is it?

The Gallery as a beautiful public space

The mothers and staff left the Centre and came to the Gallery in a taxi. When they were away from the 'official ground' of the Sure Start Centre the mothers and staff became 'all the same': this was a new experience for them all. It is central to the success of the project that it took place in the Gallery. There was a perception from one of the mothers that at the Centre they are under scrutiny. The Gallery is free of 'official social services' associations so that the women felt (accurately or not) more able to be themselves and that they were not being judged. The Centre uses posters and leaflets to present a strong visual message about an optimum way of parenting; the Gallery of course does not have this didactic literature and ambience.

One of the Gallery members of staff has experience of parental support groups at a Sure Start centre and so understood how different the environment of the Gallery can be. It can be freeing:

... you're in the act of physically making and you're all parents with kids of a similar age, and cups of tea and cake, and we've been looking at an art work about motherhood... when you have that space and freedom, the time out, when you're painting or pushing something into clay, there's space and room there for conversations to just happen.

The sheer beauty and space of the Gallery, not to mention the collections, can be overlooked as a significant contribution to the success of this type of project:

⁴ Ibid

I love the open and bright rooms because a lot of our rooms in the Centre don't have windows or very small ones.

One member of the Centre staff said:

Everything I do is in a whizz. But going there [the Gallery] oh it's lovely, it didn't feel like work, an opportunity you don't have anywhere else.

Some enjoyed making a mess in the education studio because they did not like having a mess at home. One mother said:

You know it's great I can come here and make all this mess and I can walk out the door, you have to clear it all up!

The Gallery can also of course be an inhibiting space precisely because it is not clear what is expected from visitors and is so unfamiliar. It is important not to idealise it.



Connecting with the world

The participants were able to experience themselves through experiencing the objects. As the artist said, the women:

lead themselves and others to parts of the collection that intrigue them [without] being hung up on the historical or theory... this is about a personal journey. It's all about you at that moment and that's a new way of looking at art and we don't do that enough.

The project was about enabling the participants to be *with* the collection as opposed to being *about* the collection. As the project manager said:

*when you make it a **with** experience you're actually encouraging connections between an individual and the collection and that individual feeling connected to something is like feeling connected to everything, to the world, which is really really important. When you feel disconnected, which a lot of people do, that can be quite difficult to deal with. So if you are creating connections with collections it's like creating connections with the world and that's the essence of wellbeing, because that's what we're all here for, to feel connected.*

The project enabled participants to widen their perspective – on artwork, on themselves, and on others. Discussions about perspective in the artworks and how people 'see' different things in art helped them to see that people can have different perspectives about many things and that that can be alright. They became more tolerant of their own apparent shortcomings as mothers.

Recruitment

The biggest difficulty in the project was recruiting participants. The project officer spent time at the Centre talking to individual women about the project but was unable to recruit many people. It is easier to recruit from an established group of people who know each other but of course the Centre did not run a group for non-breastfeeding women.

Outreach staff from the Centre struggled to promote it to potential participants in part because they didn't totally 'get' what they were promoting. It was only after they had experienced a session for themselves that they felt confident in describing the project to potential participants and they then supported the project throughout.

Parents at the Centre were unwilling to commit themselves to something unknown and out of their locality in Higher Blackley. Thirty parents and children had recently been on a

coach trip to Chester Zoo – a quite different proposition from going to Manchester Art Gallery.

One difficulty was that some staff and some mothers did not want to be involved because they did not feel they are 'good at art'. A midwife said:

Art is a difficult subject and ladies round here don't like it. But if they'd tried it they would've liked it.

A leaflet was distributed but this was not effective, probably because people needed to talk with someone about what exactly they could expect.



The crèche

A crèche was provided for the mothers' children. On one occasion up to twenty minutes was spent doing the paperwork for the crèche which was time lost to the activities. This could have been done at the Centre or in the taxi journey.

It was felt that the children were not played with enough. It was in a screened off corner of the education studio which meant that mothers were easily distracted.

Conclusion

1. Gallery resources (staff, collections and spaces) were used to facilitate valuable reflective and associative conversations between women in order to explore their experience of motherhood. Breastfeeding was also at times discussed. The

presence of a strong exponent of breastfeeding as a participant in the group clearly helped this process.

2. These conversations encouraged greater self esteem and a sense of being less alone with their difficulties. The mothers felt that they were valued *for themselves*, they were held in mind.
3. This was the first project that the project officer was responsible for but she was able to develop a powerful experience for the participants and learned from the difficulties it posed, in particular the recruitment issues. Using her wide professional and personal experience the artist made highly effective use of the resources in the Gallery. She generously shared her experiences of motherhood with the group.
4. It was critical to the success of the project that it took place in the Gallery rather than the Sure Start Centre. This of course is so that the collections can be used. However, it is also because for one mother at least the Centre is an 'official' place which advocates a particular ideal of parenting which one should attain. The Gallery is free of this message and so enabled the women to be more relaxed and exploratory.
5. One interviewee said that some people she had talked to viewed the use of taxis to take people to the Gallery as a waste of MCC resources. This is an understandable reaction in the climate of cuts to services but is also perhaps linked to an undervaluing of themselves and a sense that the project was 'only for arty people'.
6. Both the Gallery and the Sure Start Centre are keen to continue to develop this work despite the recruitment difficulties. It is likely that in the next project more time will be spent initially in activities at the Centre in order to build up a group of parents who will then have the confidence to go to the Art Gallery. Consistent presence of staff from the Centre is necessary in a project like this in order to provide a bridge between potential participants and the Gallery.
7. Finally, recent (August 2011) riots in English cities including Manchester have raised political and social issues about parenting and the lives of young people. This project was a small intervention which illustrates the potential of cultural organisations to support parents in a non-judgemental but nevertheless challenging manner, particularly in the critical early years⁵.

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⁵ See for instance, Frank Field, *The Foundation Years: Preventing poor children becoming poor parents*, Report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances, HM Government, August 2010