**Developing ‘active citizens’: Arts Award, creativity and impact**

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**Abstract**

Creativity has become the new watchword in UK academic and policy circles. Within this context, policy discussions about the arts and their impact emphasise economic benefits over educational value, drawing clear distinctions between quantifiable or ‘hard’ measures of impact and those described as ‘soft’, less tangible and lacking a strong evidence base. Departing from the binary logics often underpinning notions of arts impacts, this paper is novel in exploring the entwined relationship between impacts seen as ‘hard’ and ‘soft’. We draw on research examining the links between arts education and young people’s future trajectories and use the concept of ‘active citizenship’ to show how informal, softer skills fostered through creative learning are an important part of citizenship making for some young people. Participants’ accounts show how improvements in soft skills can give young people opportunities for agency, which shape progression pathways leading to measurable change. This finding is directly relevant in the context of evaluations of arts impacts in the UK and abroad, and should encourage further examination of the impact of creative learning on transfer of skills as well as policy developments in this area.

**Key words** Arts Award,creativity, active citizenship, soft/hard skills, young people, arts education, impact

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**Introduction**

Creativity has become the new watchword in UK academic and policy circles. Within the social sciences, there has been explicit engagement with the ‘performative turn’ (Gergen and Gergen, 2016; Macfarlane, 2016; Jones, 2017), where conceptual and methodological dimensions of creativity have been foregrounded (Madge, 2014; Hawkins, 2015; Jewitt, Xambo and Price, 2016; Dowling, Lloyd and Suchet-Pearson, 2017). In arts policy, much of the current discourse on creativity has focused on the significant role the arts can play in driving productivity and economic growth. An indication of this can be seen in the most recent white paper[[1]](#footnote-1), which defines the potential of the arts and cultural industries to make strong, tangible contributions to the national economy. As Belfiore (2015) has noted, such emphasis regularly overlooks the myriad other ways the arts can and do have utility beyond the economy (see also, Snowball, 2016). For example, there is accruing evidence that learning in and through the arts fosters creative and critical thinking (Nilson, Fetherston and McMurray, 2014; Cossick and Kaszynska, 2016), supports academic achievement (Hallam, 2015; Creative Industries Federation, 2016), and enriches lives at an individual and societal level (Arts Council England, 2012; Thomson and Chatterjee, 2014; Warwick Commission, 2015). Despite this, there has been a reducing pattern of arts provision in education, where much of the policy emphasis has focused on a more rigorously ‘academic’ school curriculum[[2]](#footnote-2) (i.e., maths, science and literacy). Such strategies betray and help to sustain the idea that arts education yields ‘soft’ impacts (cf. CCE, 2012), to be distinguished with the ‘hard’ student outcomes associated with non-arts subjects (i.e., maths, science and literacy). Given the current emphasis placed on learning outcomes that naturally lend themselves to quantitative assessment, it is unsurprising that the value of creativity has been overlooked in education policy, and with this, how softer impacts derived in and through creative learning, feed and translate into concrete outcomes for young people (CCE, 2012; McNeil, Reeder and Rich, 2012; European Commission, 2014).

In this paper, we make a case for the value of creative knowledge and skills to young people, particularly as such skills and knowledge pertain to the development of ‘active citizenship’. While discussions in education policy have continued to overlook the role of arts education in developing active citizens, there has been a long tradition of the arts and arts learning cultivating citizenship (see Wiles, 2016). As we shall go on to discuss, this has also been a tradition that importantly sees the arts and creativity as central to the constitution of communities (Jeffers, 2017; Moriarty, 2017), to establishing principles of human rights and democracy (Hope, 2017) and to forms of activism linked to active engagement with and in communities (Elliott, Silverman and Bowman, 2016; Jeffers and Moriarity, 2017).

We draw on ‘active citizenship’ as a useful analytical frame with which to examine the value derived through creative learning. Value, in this context, refers to a range of skills, capabilities and behaviours associated with creativity - and as such, the capacity to imagine, explore, synthesise, connect, discover, invent and adapt (NASUWT, 2017). Some commentators have claimed that such qualities are central to the development of a ‘well-rounded, culturally rich’ curriculum (Collins, 2015), in which the skills, capabilities and behaviours developed through creativity are transferred to learning within and beyond the classroom. Here, we examine how this ‘transferrable creativity’ – which can also encompass proactivity, analytical thinking, collaboration, entrepreneurism and resilience (NASUWT, 2017), can develop young people’s citizenship and lead to progression pathways.

Whilst academic research has examined the links between creativity and transference of skills, repeated concerns have coalesced over the privileging of outcomes-based assessments of creative impact (Bala, 2019). In an effort to pay better attention to ‘less tangible’, subtle and ambiguous impacts (Pain et al, 2015), we focus on the value obtained in the process, and as an outcome of, creative encounters. Specifically, our analysis draws on empirical data from an Arts Award Impact (AAI) study completed for Trinity College London and Arts Council England (Hollingworth et al, 2016), which sought to explore the impact of Arts Award[[3]](#footnote-3) (AA) on young people’s education and career trajectories.[[4]](#footnote-4) The data collected captures the complexity of the relationship between intrinsic soft and instrumentally hard impacts: Young people described accumulating a range of intrinsic, softer skills - skills which were fundamental to the creative experience and which were also fostered through the process of creative participation in AA. The fostering of such skills facilitated opportunities for personal-development and self-realisation which were an important part of citizenship making, enabling young people to navigate instrumental pathways to education and employment change. Taking AA as a case of active citizenship, therefore, offers an alternative and valuable strategy for hypothetically evaluating the dynamics at play in constructing citizenships. As such, it is also instructive about the use and value of creativity to lived experiences of youth citizenship in the UK.

The following section presents a background on ideas about the transformative effects of the arts and the role of the arts in fostering citizenship, before looking at the utility of ‘active citizenship’ for understanding the experiences of young people participating in the AAI study. Next, we look at recent policy discourses in education and suggest a miss match between the promotion of citizenship skills traditionally associated with arts learning and the ‘deprioritization’ of the arts in UK education. We then focus on empirical analysis from the AAI project. After discussing the research methods used, we give a general overview of the soft impacts young people reported having gained through AA. We then explore the experiences of three participants, who show in different ways, how an intrinsic valuing of the arts as well as the development of skills and expertise through creative and experiential learning, helped them become (more) active citizens.

**Background: citizenship and social transformation through the arts**

The notion that the arts can have transformative effects at both the individual and societal level has a very long history (see for example, Belfoire and Bennett, 2008). This idea has consistently fed into thinking about the ‘good society’ and the role of the arts in cultivating citizenship - a sense of commonality and responsibility between individuals and the country where they reside (Marshall, 1950, 1975, 1981). The past thirty years has seen this emphasis on the power of the arts to foster citizenship form the basis of a number of arts-in-education initiatives in the UK (for example, Creative Partnerships and CAPE UK). This reflects similar trends in other countries, where the perceived civic value attributed to aesthetic expression underpin arts programmes aimed at facilitating participation amongst targeted groups (Skelton 2007; Staeheli and Hammett, 2010). More recent efforts have promoted a form of citizenship described as ‘active’, a shift reflected in arguments within the social sciences for more nuanced understanding of the differentiated ways in which citizenship is lived and experienced (Yuval-Davies, 1999; Gilroy, 2002). Such analyses expand notions of citizenship as bounded formal status, in recognition that it is a dynamic practice imagined and enacted in multiple spaces (Lawy and Biesta, 2006; Strunk, 2015).

In broad terms, active citizenship is understood as any kind of productive contribution to society, although that contribution remains strongly associated with paid work (Hammett, 2014). By contrast, researchers of arts impact have drawn attention to the ways in which engagement with different forms of arts activities can inform everyday actions which also contribute to society (Flinders and Cunningham, 2014; Bennett and Parameshwaran, 2013; Catterall et al. 2012; Rooke and Kendall, 2011). For instance, from their work on youth volunteering, Bennett and Parameshwaran (2013) showed how young people’s enhanced engagement with the arts promoted experiential learning and raised their perceptions of civic responsibilities and obligations. Catterall et al. (2012) have highlighted how opportunities for creative collaboration and the sharing and drawing out of ideas enabled the young people in their study to develop self-confidence while mobilising them as agentive and with valuable contributions to make to their local communities. Such efforts demonstrate the building of social capital (i.e. networking and interpersonal ‘soft’ skills) and a range of skills acquired through artistic encounters which instil practices of citizenship (Flinders and Cunningham, 2014; Rooke and Kendall, 2011).

This shift towards active citizenship has also been marked by increasing moves to use the arts and thus creativity, as a tool for social change. Such moves, which draw on the artistic practices of theatre practitioners such as Brecht (1965), Growtowski (1968) and Boal (1979), engage citizens in participatory and collaborative practices to find ‘bottom-up’ solutions to local concerns. In this vein, *The People’s Theatre Project* in the US, create theatre projects which give young people voice to participate in issues which affect them. Imagined as a political instrument for, and of, power when it was established, recent projects have centred on the experiences and wellbeing of young people marginalised from society (e.g. through disability, socio-economic disadvantage, mental or physical ill-health). Similarly, UK-based projects like Collective Encounters[[5]](#footnote-5), have sought to assert young people’s agency and integration through their participation in innovative arts practices, and in such a way, seek to transform youth marginalised from society to citizens actively involved in civil society (Rooke and Kendall; 2011).

We use this wider lens of active citizenship to show how involvement in AA encompassed a wide spectrum of citizenship practices, including those embedded in everyday ‘playful’ encounters; those that expanded opportunities for young people to broaden their personal horizons; and those which led to more pivotal engagements for young people (such as education and/or career progression). Our conceptualisation also acknowledges the relational aspects of citizenship (Hörschelmann and El Refaie, 2013); that is, aspects of citizenship formed in relation to others, and also recognises that citizenship is already practiced by young people in their moment to moment activities, and is not solely a future achievement (Gaskell, 2008; Skelton, 2010). We demonstrate how this broadly conceived notion of citizenship can help us to understand the connection between soft and hard arts impacts, and move away from understandings which reinforce a simple binary between the two. In education policy, this binary has been implicitly reinforced through the attribution of value to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics – so called STEM subjects, and as such, promotion of outcome over ‘processual’ benefits (see Rooke and Kendall, 2011). We now go on to outline the paradox inherent in policy efforts to promote citizenship skills through classroom learning and the marginal position the arts have acquired in education.

**Policy Landscape: the arts, education and citizenship**

The arts and arts education in the UK have been positioned currently within a policy landscape that emphasises their value and at the same time renders them under increasing threat. The Culture White Paper, launched in England in March 2016, placed great emphasis on the strategic value of the arts to generate wealth and exports; to transmit a rich cultural heritage to the next generation; to improve the health and well-being of the nation as well as to deliver social cohesion (see also, Arts Council England, 2010; 2013). The arts have also been noted for the key role they can play in the emotional, social and educational well-being of young people (Bragg, Manchester & Faulkner, 2009;). Conversely, arts education occupies increasingly uncertain ground in schools, further and higher education institutions where it has become vulnerable to budget cuts and shifting priorities (MacLaren, 2012). Aróstegui (2016), in relation to the decline of music education, has suggested that arts in education is particularly vulnerable because the ‘returns’ from creative endeavour are more difficult to determine and capture, and the utility of their associated output difficult to quantify ( Bunting and Knell 2014). Such perceptions have been reinforced by the emphasis placed on STEM subjects and their promotion as a sure route to educational progression and employment[[6]](#footnote-6).

There is tangible evidence of the ‘deprioritization’ of arts education, which has been implicitly designated in policy documents, such as the Browne Report (2010), as a non-priority area (see also, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010). Despite this, policy discourses in education continue to call for young people to develop skills widely acknowledged to be obtained through arts learning. This is exemplified in the government’s promotion of Character Education, which encourages young people to develop skills including ‘confidence’, ‘perseverance’, ‘drive’ and ‘self-management’ as foundations of citizenship (DFE, 2015; see also, Weinberg and Flinders (2018) for a critique). The incongruence of such moves, combined with a high-stakes ‘audit culture’ in education (Collins, 2016), has undermined the intrinsic valuing of the arts ‘for arts’ sake’ - the sense of fulfilment and motivation they bring to young people, while also encouraging social, cultural and affective growth. McNeil, Reeder and Rich (2012), have similarly noted the myriad of ways learning in and through the arts acts as a driver of citizenship, by promoting communication, a sense of agency and opportunities for social integration. Nonetheless, imperatives like Character Education encourage the building of moral and ethical tools as well as behaviours associated with responsible citizenship while simultaneously closing off space for creative endeavour in schools (Brown, 2015).

The complexity of this debate has been compounded by declining access to arts education, which has been experienced particularly harshly in schools. Further reduction in state support has meant that schools are increasingly accountable for the impact of all their spending decisions on educational outcomes, which has led to a highly controlled curriculum with no space for formal or informal arts learning. While creativity, as a concept in higher and further education, has become indispensable for building the knowledge economy, current practices in schools (i.e. rigid curriculum, prescriptive student outcomes) run counter to the known conditions that creativity flourishes (NASUWT, 2017; Alexander, 2017). There is a clear lack of connection between the impulse towards creativity and active facilitation of creative practices in education. Criticisms of the perceived disconnections between the arts and initiatives like Character Education have been put down to the still fragmented nature of research on the impact of creativity and creative processes (See and Kokotsaki, 2015). In light of this, we go on to reflect critically on the value of creative knowledge and skills with recourse to the AAI project.

**The study**

This paper uses data collected from a wider study exploring links between the impacts of AA and young people’s paths to education and employment. Arts Awards are vocationally relevant qualifications run by Trinity College London where young people take part in arts projects and work with creative professionals and organisations. They offer arts qualifications to children and young people up to 25 years and are seen to provide a pathway into further training and careers in the creative industries through qualifications ranging from Arts Award Explore, Bronze, Silver and Gold. The qualifications can be achieved in established art forms (such as visual arts, music, dance and theatre) as well as emerging arts, like hip hop, digital art or games design. The study incorporated a longitudinal methodology, involving three, semi-structured interviews with 68 young people - who were either undertaking or had recently completed an AA qualification - in AA settings across the UK. Settings were purposively selected based on their location and their delivery of AA. Young people were identified from 14 different case study venues and followed by the authors between 2012 and 2016 for up to three years after completing an AA.

Young people came from a range of ethnic backgrounds including White British, Black African and Black Caribbean, Eastern European, South Asian and mixed heritage. The sample was mixed gender and ranged in ages from 11 – 25 years. Interviews explored young people’s general attitudes towards, and experiences of AA, its impact on their personal and creative skills as well as education and career trajectories. The qualitative data was analysed systematically through repeated readings of transcripts and research summaries for each interviewee. Transcripts and summaries were entered into Nvivo 10, which assisted with coding for key themes. These themes informed understanding of young people’s experiences in relation to the perceived impact of creative learning opportunities provided through AA.

**Soft skills for active citizenship**

 Central to the ethos of AA is the social and cultural enrichment of participants through arts-based activities geared towards providing a pathway into work within the creative industries. To this end, arts projects, which provide opportunities for young people to respond to artists’ work as well as lead their own arts projects, are structured in ways which challenge young people to work autonomously while learning to adapt to meet new challenges and situations. Equally, considerable effort is devoted to channelling young people into particular kinds of arts engagements which practice them in citizenship skills while also preparing young people for the future (arts) world they will engage with. In this context, young people described the impact of AA in terms of ‘the experience’, which was largely based around the ‘taking part’ in, and ‘doing’ of creative activity. Notions of value tended to be framed around gaining vital softer skills, which were transferable to other areas of young people’s lives. For example, Kendra[[7]](#footnote-7), who had undertaken both Bronze and Silver awards, was one of many who spoke about the importance of social skills garnered through the process of working and collaborating with other participants, and which she had taken on and utilised in her part time job:

“…[A]lthough] my work isn’t arts-based [communication skills] help a lot at work, because I’ve got to talk to people that I don’t know and literally I can just go up to them and say ‘oh hi, how are you and do you want to sit down’; I can talk to people because I’ve got communication skills and I know how to kind of be confident around them, so confident people skills and social skills and things like that…”. (Kendra, 17, Arts and Media School)

In similarity with Rooke and Kendall’s (2011) research, the intrinsic value of arts learning ran throughout young people’s narratives of their experiences as AA participants (see also, Broadwood, 2012; Catteral, 2012). Young people placed a lot of value on the process of participation itself, indicating the significance of softer measures of impact, such as the ability to ‘communicate’, ‘cooperate’ and ‘debate’, seen as crucial to their self-development. Perhaps most vividly, participants described how experiencing boosts to their confidence could lead to an increased sense of autonomy, which enabled them to gain and project a confident sense of ‘who they are’:

“[I learnt] how to go up to a new person that I hadn’t met before and say I want to be your photographer. It gave me a lot of like experience of: ‘this is me, I’m trying to sell myself to you’ ”. (Carl, 19, Sixth Form School)

“Before the Arts Award I was kind of like really shy and I didn’t speak at all and if I did, when I did, it was actually a whisper so now I can talk normally which I find really helpful.” (Leanne, FE College)

The longitudinal dimension and inclusion of participants at various stages of their AA journeys charted thoughtful reflections on building self-confidence in and through the process of undertaking an award (Matarasso, 1997). Many explained how particular elements of an award had proved challenging, often taking them ‘out of their comfort zones’. Yet overcoming such challenges and being able to ‘bounce back’ from difficult parts of the process could be a rewarding experience for most. In this way young people described the positive impact of being brought ‘out of their shell’ and being able to challenge their own perceptions of themselves in everyday encounters, as Carl and Leanne’s quotes suggest. McLean and Dellot (2011) in their report entitled ‘The Civic Pulse’[[8]](#footnote-8), document important drivers of active citizenship. They note that the ability to participate successfully in society is, in part, about having the confidence, sociability and desire to get involved and also point to the significance of emotional resilience to everyday citizenship (see also CCE, 2012). The fostering of self-confidence and resilience thus provided an opening through which participants developed understanding of the tools needed to engage actively as citizens (Green, 2008).

The significance of entrepreneurial skills, as another quality required of active citizens, was also highlighted by several participants, both in terms of immediate gains and being capitalised on after the award. For example, Nadine said she had learnt the important skill of ‘expecting the unpredictable’ which meant she was more able to respond creatively to a number of issues that came up in an acoustic evening she had organised subsequent to the award; Louise, who volunteered at her local primary school, felt she was better able to ‘think through solutions to problems’ in the classroom; and Nancy - echoing the mantra ‘don’t find a job get a job’, used the experience of undertaking her AA project to set up an all-female theatre company, and was taking their current show to the Edinburgh Fringe. While participation was seen to expand opportunities for young people to engage in activities which honed softer skills, skills learned in arts projects could be transferred to other projects beyond the award.

Alongside entrepreneurial skills, young people described capitalising on particular elements of the creative process in which they had been required to lead, shape and take responsibility for particular projects (i.e. plan, problem solve, prioritise). Many reflected critically on how the process enhanced their perceptions of themselves as both learners and experts, enabling them to take an active role in their own learning and that of others (Flinders and Cunningham, 2015). For example, Kathryn spoke directly of the value of learning to lead a project, which involved her taking individual responsibility for the stage design of a school production:

 “I probably wasn’t comfortable about maybe… leading an arts project myself so it took me out of my comfort zone, which I probably wouldn’t have done myself, by myself…I was the team leader of creating the backdrop for the [Les Misérables] production at our school and I had to collect all the materials, organise the time we were going to do it, organise the people, what was going to go on the backdrop and how like to manage our time in doing it ‘cos we had very little time actually before the production was ready.” (Kathryn, 17, Private School)

Resonating with established debates around the construction of active ‘responsible’ citizens (Staeheli et al, 2013), Kathryn’s comments reveal how opportunities to take key decisions practised management skills and professionalism as key elements of the arts process. According to Shanks et al (2013) the value of such skills and those who possess them is set to increase, with leadership, teamwork and innovation becoming ever important to employers (see also, European Commission, 2014). Such rhetoric runs counter to the marginal position creativity currently holds within education (Alexander, 2017), and has sometimes resulted in criticisms that creative-vocational education like AA gloss over the cracks rendered by an ever-depleting arts curriculum. Thus, by providing provision for arts learning outside the formal curriculum, creative vocational education does not necessarily lead to the ‘valuing’ of a creative curriculum or foreclose the possibility of it being undermined (Brown, 2015). What is clear from our research, however, is that AA informed the particular intrinsic benefits young people gained through their arts learning and doing. The importance of such benefits is supported in the final part of the paper, which focuses on the experiences of three participants who, in different ways, show how the development of intrinsic soft skills had both immediate and long term affects, feeding into future education and career development.

**Developing active citizens through Arts Award**

*Aamir: validation of self through creativity*

Aamir was from Afghanistan and had studied as an ESOL student before undertaking AA at East Midlands College. He was 18 years old at the time of the initial interview and had been living in the East Midlands with his brother for 6 years. Aamir came to AA articulating a desire to belong in the UK, to be a part of the college community and to build connections with students on his course. At this point he described himself as ‘shy’ and lacking confidence in his abilities. He described undertaking AA – which for Aamir incorporated a combination of visual, dramatic, and performance-based arts, as being a source of personal development where he had been able to grow in self-confidence. He reported ‘boosts’ to his confidence through the acquisition of skills linked to drama and dramatic improvisation, which he felt had also expanded his vocabulary. This acquiring of ‘new words’ as Aamir put it, meant that he no longer sat back in the classroom afraid that he would ‘say something wrong’; instead he now felt able to participate in class discussions equipped with the tools needed to successfully engage. He also reported an important emotional and embodied component to creative involvement, describing the ability to draw as a powerful way of working through ‘sad’ or ‘upsetting’ feelings and emotions. This chimes with findings pointing to the intrinsic role the arts and aesthetic expression have in everyday life (Beauregard, 2014; McLellan, Galton and Walberg, 2015). Aamir felt that his newly acquired skills and knowledge would lend themselves to his future ambitions to study and work with children. He articulated more immediate plans of finding a part time job which would enable him to move out of the one bedroom flat he shared with his brother and rent a place of his own.

By Aamir’s second interview, a year after completing the AA, there was a shift in the way he spoke about his self-development. Now enrolled on a BTEC in Childcare, Aamir’s investment in the course had been mixed with feelings of maturity gained through his experience of undertaking an award, and the additional responsibility he currently had assisting new AA students. Aamir explained that his AA tutor had felt that he could provide useful support to other ESOL students embarking on an award, and act as a mentor, having gone through the process and achieved an award himself. When reflecting on this, Aamir described wanting to reciprocate his positive experience of arts learning, which he discussed in terms of being able to learn and develop creative skills, make new friends and succeed academically. Having been placed in a position of trust and responsibility, Aamir was keen to pass on his skills to other participants, which also meant communicating the sense of independence and validation the experience had given him: 'If I didn't go to AA, how would I help people?'.

Having the opportunity to act as an advocate for AA and having students come to him for advice was important to Aamir. He explained that he had been able to help an ESOL student who had encountered racial abuse from another student attending the college. He had directed the student to appropriate support channels within the college, and was also able to provide a listening ear. This can be understood, not only as an expression of kindness or compassion, but also as a civic act and contribution (Green, 2008). It also resonates with Belfoire and Bennetts’ (2007) conceptualisation of creativity enabling a confidence through which alternative identities can be performed in positive ways. Aamir’s growing confidence meant that he had been able to take on new responsibilities, but in a way which gave him autonomy to act in new and different ways.

Whilst being committed to the BTEC, Aamir also talked about the possibility of doing another AA because of the creative skills he felt he had gained. Much of his energy now went into his own art work, which took centre stage on the walls of his flat. Before doing AA, Aamir would keep his sketches hidden away and ‘show nobody’ through fear that his work was not good enough. He explained that he no longer felt the need to hide his work away, and was increasingly confident about his own artistic abilities. Green (2008), similarly defines active citizenship as a “…means of developing self-confidence and overcoming the insidious way in which the condition of being relatively powerless can become internalised” (p.12). Significantly, during the AA, Aamir had rediscovered and developed his skills for drawing. He recognised that he had a legitimate talent which other people also appreciated and valued. He related a story about how a friend who came to his flat had been genuinely shocked that he had produced a piece of work. Aamir felt the friend treated him more respectfully because of his skills. Aamir clearly experienced this as affirming and reflected on the possibility of pursuing a career as an artist in the future.

*Jayne: personal transformation through creativity*

Jayne was one of the older students in the sample to undertake an AA. At 25, she was living in South London with her partner and two children (four and two-year olds), and worked part-time for an IT company. Before coming to AA, she described her life as increasingly ‘boring’ and routine. She felt that an award would be a source of self-development and give her the chance ‘to do something different’ as well as facilitate new skills beyond those she utilised as a ‘housewife’. Jayne had recently stopped working a retail Saturday job, which she had described as her ‘getaway’ but which was also a zero hours contract that had begun to take its toll on family life. At this point she also reported gaining very little from day to day interactions at the IT company, and feeling the need to get involved with something that was just for her. She explained that a friend’s invitation to enrol on AA at the local arts centre could not have come at a better time. By now her eldest daughter was at nursery and the centre had onsite childcare which Jayne’s youngest daughter could use:

“…[I]t was quite nice to obviously come to the Arts Award when my oldest was at nursery. Just to do something different. You know learn new skills and also for my youngest to be able to play with other children and have a nice regular thing to come to every week…”

Doing AA can be understood as a catalyst for change. Jayne described meeting new people, notably, other ‘mums and dads’ who had come to the centre from different areas, and being able to get involved with various arts and crafts learning she had never before accessed. Doing an award not only provided her with a sense of belonging to a ‘parent community’, but also access to a range of art forms like fabric wall printing, which made different forms of interaction available to her. She said attending the weekly sessions at the centre gave her a feeling of inclusion, not only in the AA group but a larger feeling of inclusion in society. She also discussed the value of soft skills routinely highlighted by all of the participants, and being able to convert skills of confidence, for example, into cultural capital in order to engage and undertake work activities:

“I mean when it comes to like phone calls or things like e-mails etc. just again having that confidence from the group again. Obviously before I wasn’t really keen on making phone calls but taking part in this; I mean obviously I know it was the same people every week in the group; you know obviously when I was at work and I would have the confidence to just call someone else who I hadn’t really spoken to before and just have the confidence to have a phone call with them. I know that might not sound like much but going from not really liking phone calls to obviously calling three, four, five people in a day you know it has for me progressed within my self-confidence”.

Like so many of the participants in our sample, Jayne explained how engagement in AA projects gave weight to the decisions made by the young people involved; this in turn, built confidence by reinforcing the importance of their views and knowledge. Jayne also reflected on the transformation in terms of how she felt she interacted and now played with her daughters. She recognised that her experience of creative learning meant that she was no longer happy to watch her children play, having provided them with the tools and apparatus to do so; passive play was instead replaced with a more youthful creative play, which importantly involved her actively participating in ways which encouraged more critical thinking:

“Obviously I’d get the paint out, get the whatever out before [Arts Award] and then just let her [daughter] crack on whereas I actually participate a bit more and be a little bit more adventurous and I think oh let’s try and make something rather than just drawing or painting or whatever.”

Closely related to this idea of transformation through creativity was the ability to take up new subject positions and participate in ways not previously available. Jayne’s world had become broader and imaginings of what she could do and achieve, more flexible. Most importantly, she no longer imagined herself as just ‘doing boring housework all the time’, with very little opportunity to engage in activities beyond the family. While Jayne was unclear of her plans for the future, her arts-based experiences had served to transform self-image and re-ignite personal goals and aspirations:

“I would love to be involved perhaps in music again… but it’s not as easy when you’ve got children and you can’t really commit to… just kind of sing at random school ones [events] or work but yeah, that is my biggest passion”.

*Emily: rehearsal of self through creativity*

At her first interview Emily was 19 years old, was living at home with her parents and two younger siblings in South London. She was in her second year of teacher training at a London university and she also worked part time in a bar. Emily had undertaken AA as part of her involvement with a local Circus company. At the time, she was attending a comprehensive school, and she explained her teacher had also encouraged her to do an award. This she felt especially because she was in her final year at school and an award would ‘look good’ on her CV as something in addition to the degree. Like substantial numbers of students pursuing vocational study in the UK, AA reflected hopes to secure a ‘better’ future (Brown et al, 2002). Emily had planned to capitalise on skills she had developed through circus training to do the AA. She saw the award as adding value to her future – a point recognised by many of the participants - by enabling her to demonstrate a level of commitment to future employers that she could see a project through to its end. She reflected that her choice to undertake AA may have made her route to university easier because she could ‘show’ and evidence particular qualities on the CV. In a context of what Belfiore (2015) has called an often ‘questionable rhetoric of the arts socio-economic impact’, narratives of AA participants like Emily, reflect a cultural policy emphasis on potential impact upon earning capacity (p96).

Significantly having been at university for the past two years, Emily felt there had been a direct link between doing an Award and her going on to pursue teacher training. Part of the award had centred on an arts challenge which Emily had focused around teaching Irish dancing. Teaching had always been on her radar: As part of Circus activities, she regularly spent time working with the younger children demonstrating circus skills. While she enjoyed these interactions, she felt there was no real expectation or demands for teaching placed on her. This seemed to be in stark contrast to the AA challenge, which represented more concrete engagement with teaching. Perhaps because of this, Emily had worried about how she would fair in the challenge and reported finding the idea of watching participants perform a skill they’d learnt under her instruction, particularly daunting. Having completed the challenge, she reflected that being able to draw on her own skills and use them in a practical and critical-minded way, enabled her to more easily imagine a future where it might be possible to take up teaching. Doing AA thus provided an arena for nurturing active citizenship. It provided an opening through which participants were able to work and rework as well as challenge perceptions of themselves as being able to succeed. Emily said AA, ‘got me started in teaching’, and emphasised that the personal sense of satisfaction and achievement gained through the activity was the most memorable part of the award.

In Emily’s second interview, she was more reflective about her experience. She reflected on the opportunities to build skills of research and improve communication; skills she continued to utilise in her teaching training. She drew attention to the informality of the award, commonly discussed by other participants, and emphasised the sense of ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’ it afforded, drawing comparisons with ‘other courses’ she’d undertaken which were often more ‘restrictive’. For the first time, she had been able to set the agenda of particular projects, and ‘have more say in what [she] want[ed] to do’. She felt that she was given autonomy to make decisions and set her own limits, a subject position not previously available to her. She clearly experienced the flexibility of the award as affirming, citing the ability to retrieve and draw on personal skills to succeed in various tasks, as confidence-boosting. Emily felt that she capitalised on confidence and the general experience of ownership in her day to day teacher training.

Although Emily’s involvement with the Circus had continued, she said she had become more open to the arts in general and was willing to try new and different things. She no longer worried about being unfamiliar with the particular genre of a show and had developed a more expansive outlook.

**Conclusions**

In this paper, we have sought to demonstrate the value of young people’s engagements with creative processes, and especially the accumulation of intrinsic softer skills, for their forging a sense of agency and citizenship. Our research with AA participants has pointed to the ‘hardness’ of so-called ‘soft’ skills, and to opportunities for personal recognition, reinvention and reconnection which, alongside skills development, were capitalised on in the immediate term and also informed future outcomes. Thus, while as Flinders and Cunningham (2014) have suggested quantitative measures and mechanisms commonly used in arts evaluations are likely to reveal only a partial picture of creative impact, a focus on the process of AA participation has illuminated the distinctive value of experiential creativity. This analytical vantage point has also enabled us to draw conclusions in relation to the two main contributions of the paper: furthering understanding of active citizenship through creative processes; reworking binary ideas about the impact of creativity by enhancing understanding of the entwined relationship between soft and hard arts impacts.

In relation to conceptualisations of active citizenship, we have drawn attention to the ways in which resilience, recognition, empowerment and transformation intersect as crucial aspects of citizenship in processes of arts learning and encounter. Such focus, while illuminating the pedagogical value of creativity, has enhanced understanding of the ways in which everyday citizenship is enacted, practiced and developed. Young people’s involvement in AA encompassed a wide spectrum of citizenship practices: For example, kindness and reciprocity developed through everyday ‘playful’ encounters such as in the making of arts and crafts or teaching creative skills to novice participants; arts praxis which expanded opportunities for young people to broaden their personal horizons, for instance, through attending an artistic event or growing and developing artistic skills; and practices which instilled a sense of professionalism, commitment and resilience which led to longer term engagements with education and career progression. The process afforded to young people undertaking AA developed the capacity of participants to take part as active citizens both during and longitudinally, after an award.

In relation to creative impact, we have shown that the relationship between hard and soft measures of impact can be complexly iterative. While softer outcomes such as increased confidence, independence and growing resilience led to the development of key skills young people could transfer to current educational and work contexts, the accumulation of soft skills formed a strong basis on which concrete outcomes could be later built (in terms of facilitating further access to education and/or future employment). While there is clearly a challenge around demonstrating causality where soft outcomes are concerned, it remains the case that significant value lies in considering the relationship between soft and hard impacts; the way they work together and coexist. As a focus on active citizenship has helped us illustrate, paying greater attention to the value of soft skills, we are better able to understand how AA provided access to new networks and creative opportunities for youth citizens that led to meaningful progression pathways. This has resonance beyond arts education contexts in the UK, as the impulse to define impact as a quantifiable outcome is a global trend.

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1. The Culture White Paper (2016): https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/510798/DCMS\_The\_Culture\_White\_Paper\_\_3\_.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Arts and Creativity ‘squeezed out of schools’: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-31518717 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Arts Award is a suite of unique qualifications for young people aged up to 25, managed by Trinity College London in association with Arts Council England. The awards support young people to grow as artists and arts leaders: they aim to develop arts knowledge and understanding, foster creativity and build skills in communication, planning and review. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Details of the AAI project are covered on page 8 of this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Collective Encounters is a professional arts organisation based in Liverpool, specialising in theatre for social change through collaborative practice with young people: http://collective-encounters.org.uk/ourwork/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/stem-awards/stem-hq/stem-disciplines-fun-and-fundamental/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Pseudonyms have been used for all young people in the study. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Taken from the Civic Pulse, Sam McLean and Benedict Dellot. RSA July 2011 See http://www.thersa.org/\_\_data/assets/pdf\_file/0018/408006/RSA-Civic-pulse\_2011.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-8)