Arts policy and practice for disabled children and young people: towards a ‘practice spectrum’ approach

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<th>Journal:</th>
<th>Disability &amp; Society</th>
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<td>Manuscript ID</td>
<td>CDSO-2015-0003.R3</td>
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<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Original Article</td>
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<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>Disability Arts, arts policy, children and young people, practice spectrum, austerity</td>
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Arts policy and practice for disabled children and young people

Points of interest

• This study explores the extent to which a Disability Arts perspective has penetrated arts and cultural policy for disabled children and young people through a case study of the East Midlands region of England.

• It is argued that contemporary practice for disabled children and young people is best understood as a spectrum that spans across three categories: programmes designed specifically for disabled children and young people; programmes that are purposively designed to be inclusive and allow all young people to participate; or, programmes that are inclusive only if it is a funding requirement.

• We argue that there are two major determinants of where an organisation or specific activity appears on the spectrum: the moral and ethical commitment and experience of the practitioners; and funding policy.

• The moral and ethical commitment of practitioners tends to be far ahead of current policy. Policy, therefore, should learn from contemporary practice.
Arts policy and practice for disabled children and young people: towards a ‘practice spectrum’ approach

Abstract

This article argues for an approach to the evaluation of arts policy and practice for disabled children and young people that goes beyond the dialogic antagonism between Disability Arts and community arts, and towards a ‘practice spectrum’. Little is known about the extent to which a Disability Arts perspective has extended into arts policy and practice for disabled children and young people. This article aims to redress this knowledge gap. It is based upon two sets of data collected in relation to the East Midlands Region of England during 2014. First, a critical evaluation was conducted of official and institutional attitudes to arts practice with disabled children and young people. Second, interviews exploring contemporary practice were conducted with 24 arts organisations. Their practice represents a diverse range of art forms and programmes undertaken in the region, and a range of attitudes and positions taken towards disabled children and young people. We argue that the best way to conceive of current practice is as a spectrum, as opposed to an antagonism between community arts and Disability Arts perspectives. There is, however, little evidence of the penetration of a Disability Arts perspective into policy and practice for children and young people.

Keywords: Disability, Disability Arts, arts policy, arts practice, children, young people, cultural policy, practice spectrum, austerity

Introduction

Academic research on disability and the arts can be grouped into two categories: on the one hand it is a specialised area for those working in applied studies such as health care and social work and there is a body of work that explores arts practice and engagement as a therapeutic tool (Cameron 2007, Boeltzig, Sulewski et al. 2009, Taylor 2005). On the other, Disability Arts (Sutherland 2003) has been associated with the development of more empowering, autonomous and distinct conceptions of arts practice (for a discussion see: Barnes 2003, Cameron 2007, Cameron 2011, Solvang 2012). Disability Arts is especially noteworthy for
its success in pushing arts practice to the forefront of the disability rights movement (Solvang 2012).

As a result, Disability Arts has had a discernable – although lamentably small – impact on adult arts policy and practice (see, for example, Barnes 2003, Arts Council England 2011). Little is known, however, as to how far this has extended into policy and practice for children and young people. This is important for a number of reasons: arguably, disabling attitudes of paternalism and a lack of autonomy are magnified within attitudes towards children and young people, making the penetration of more autonomous and affirmative understandings of disabled arts practice more difficult. Yet the opportunities for inclusive and empowering arts practice for disabled children and young people must, surely, be a central part of strategies to address the systemic exclusion of disabled people from careers in the cultural and creative industries. Furthermore, the austerity agenda embarked upon by the Liberal Democrat-Conservative Coalition Government, and since 2015 Conservative Government has disproportionately impacted upon more progressive arts and cultural policy (Newsinger 2015).

Like other regions in the UK, the East Midlands has suffered under the October 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review with public funding cuts of between 15% and 30% to the operational budgets of some of the largest and most important cultural institutions (see HM Treasury 2010). This was followed up in 2013 with a further 7% cut to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport and a 10% cut to local authority spending, upon which many smaller, regionally-based cultural organisations depend, contributing up to twice the amount as Arts Council England (Green and Newsinger 2015). There has been a decline in local authority spending on culture by 4.2% for 2013/2014 which is larger than reductions to any other area of spending (Bagwell, Bull et al. 2014: 57-58). A 2014 report by the Local Government Association notes that cuts to local government funding, combined with
increases to the costs of delivering statutory services such as adult social care will mean
discretionary funding will need to be cut by 90% by 2020, all but eradicating this vital source
of funding for regional arts (Local Government Association 2014). The cuts to local authority
spending places local government in the unenviable position of having to cut arts funding in
order to meet their statutory responsibilities to maintain basic services and choose between art
forms and organisations in ways that have a negative impact on diversity, equal opportunities
and access by prioritising more ‘mainstream’ popular venues and services.

In a spatially and culturally diverse area like the East Midlands, the potential loss of
arts and cultural infrastructure, knowledge and expertise will be of greater significance for
disabled children and young people’s participation. In particular, for the importance of
trained arts professionals and the opportunity to network with disabled artists as role models
for the development of more empowering Disability Arts practice. Ruth Gould, artistic
director of DaDaFest, highlights this intersection of poverty and marginalisation with
disability:

“We do have concerns that such a big cut (nearly 15 per cent) to the funds supporting
user-led disability arts organisations will impact negatively on inclusion, engagement and
high quality arts by and with disabled people […] These cuts need to be seen in light of
the on-going welfare cuts to disabled people who are the hardest hit in these austerity
measures.” (Quoted in Pring 2014)

The overall picture that emerges from the above is one of a combination of extreme
challenges to local arts and culture, particularly in community and participatory settings,
which disproportionally affect participation for disabled children and young people. It is the
maintenance of provision and opportunities like this that present particular challenges in the
current funding climate.

This article is based upon research conducted with arts organisations in the East
Midlands region of England during 2014. It was conducted as part of a funded project that
sought to establish and explore current policy and practice regarding the arts and culture for
disabled children and young people, and explore the effects of funding cuts and austerity (Green and Newsinger 2015).

In this article, we focus on current policy and practice in the East Midlands region with regard to disabled children and young people. The first section briefly outlines the main theoretical perspectives on arts and cultural practice and disability. With this established, we use it as an evaluative basis from which to explore current policy and practice, beginning with institutional and official understandings of disability and the arts and culture. Finally we discuss data collected from arts and cultural organisations themselves. It is noted that disability is marginalised from official institutional arts and cultural policy. There are a diverse range of art forms and programmes undertaken in the region, and a range of attitudes and positions taken towards disabled children and young people. There is, however, little evidence of the penetration of a Disability Arts perspective into policy and practice. We argue that the best way to conceive of current practice is as a spectrum, as opposed to a dialogic antagonism between community and participatory arts, and Disability Arts perspectives (Riddell and Watson 2003).

Disability, the arts, and Disability Arts

The issue of disabled people and the arts has traditionally been dominated by paternalism, with arts practice for disabled people taking place within segregated contexts such as special schools, day centres and other institutions (see Barnes 2003). It is for this reason that “developing their own art, in environments controlled by themselves” (Barnes 3002: 9) has been so central to the development of more empowering Disability Arts practices.

Disability Arts is defined in an Arts Council England publication as “art made by disabled people, which may or may not reflect the experience of disability” (Sutherland 2003: 2). Disability Arts is a diverse and debated field of practice (see Barnes 2003, Cameron 2007,
Cameron 2011, Solvang 2012 for a discussion of more recent developments) but many writers comment upon the particular transformative, communicative and socially empowering role that participation in arts and cultural events can have for disabled people. Colin Cameron provides examples of how this transformation can occur:

> For many disabled people, attendance at a disability arts cabaret, performance or exhibition has been a moment of epiphany. To begin to understand that the negative experiences you thought were yours alone, are shared and felt and understood by others and to begin to understand that it is not you, but the social environments around you that need to change is a powerful awakening. When an artist can communicate these things in words or music or through dance or image, a sense of connection and solidarity is established. (Cameron 2007: 505-506)

It is upon understandings such as this that Cameron and others champion the ‘Affirmative Model of Disability’ which identifies impairment as a normal part of the human experience and rejects the “personal tragedy narratives” associated with mainstream attitudes to disability (Cameron 2007: 508; see also Barnes 2003: 9).

However, many writers are critical and even hostile to community arts and profoundly negative about the possibility of traditional arts practices to take on board a Disability Arts perspective. Take the following as an example:

> The problem is that you will almost never see any actual Disability Art in a theatre, museum, gallery or even at a Disability Arts festival. Even if you do, it is there because it has been mis- or re-interpreted. Mostly, though, what you will see is pseudo-therapy workshop products or impairment-orientated works. Usually, it will be from a craft basis or developed in an empowerment course, superficially structured within the social model of disability but actually impairment-specific. This might be described as low level Community Arts [...] Such art ‘activities’ have nothing to do with Disability Art, but they are to do with traditional preconceptions of art or therapy or, worse, as some form of inspirational role modelling. (Riddell and Watson 2003: 133 - emphasis added)
This description by Riddell and Watson illustrates a clear dialogic tension between the perceived transformative, communicative and socially empowering impacts made possible through Disability Arts practices noted by Cameron (2007) and some of the traditions of community and participatory arts that tend to work in impairment-specific contexts, often in partnership with the education, health and social care sectors. It is important to note that it is precisely these forms of participatory and community arts practice that tend to be most prominent in the forms of cultural participation available for disabled children and young people.

There are studies that have found strong relationships between arts practices, affirmative understandings of impairment, and the development of shared, empowering, positive identities among disabled children and young people. For example, Margaret Taylor’s research found that arts education can offer disabled young people ways of moving past negative perceptions of disability and impairment towards an empowering multi-identity perspective (Taylor 2005). Taylor’s research highlights the importance of disability awareness among arts professionals and teaching staff, and the importance of disabled artists as role models to the processes of empowerment and the development of shared identities.

Similarly, in a study of the career development of 47 young disabled artists, Heike Boeltzig et al found that art making helped disabled young people overcome barriers, particularly in education, communication and socializing (Boeltzig, Sulewski et al. 2009). Like Taylor (2005), their study (Boeltzig, Sulewski et al. 2009) found a relationship between arts practice and positive, affirmative understandings of living with impairments. They provide a number of examples to illustrate these in participants’ own words, which we quote at length:

Several finalists saw impairment not as a hindrance, but as a factor in their choice to be an artist or even as an asset to their artwork. Others with mobility or fatigue issues said art provided a substitute for other pursuits. For example, one artist chose the art
profession because after the onset of her impairment she could no longer work a 45-hour per week job. Teaching art accommodated her needs and interests. Others said that from childhood, art had helped compensate for their limited ability to participate in physical activities, such as sports or outdoor play. One finalist said ‘I was never good at sports; my disability made it difficult. Instead, I developed and proceeded to explore the other areas that were open to me [such as music, writing and art] ’. Another said, ‘art almost completely replaces the fact that I can’t walk’. A third artist said ‘I do not dance and I do not run – when I’m driven to express all that is within I pick up a brush and this girl’s life force pours out’. (Boeltzig, Sulewski et al. 2009: 757)

This extract supports Boeltzig, Sulewski et al’s (2009) emphasis on the importance of professional networking opportunities for the development of young disabled artists.

It is clear from the quote above that impairment-specific activity particularly in community and participatory arts settings emerges as, potentially, reproducing and reinforcing some of the disabling categories of mainstream attitudes towards impairment. From this perspective, policy should enable children and young people with impairments to explore arts practice and engagement in inclusive, expressive and communicative ways, building confidence through collective experiences whilst avoiding segregation and specialisation. At the same time, policy should seek to enable children and young people with impairments to receive more specific training and career development opportunities, particularly focusing on encouraging networking and exposure to disabled artist role models.

To establish the extent to which these tensions and aspirations reflect current policy and practice towards disabled children and young people in the England we now turn to the East Midlands region.

Capturing the experiences of organisations

Two related research questions emerge from the literature. What principles and practices are reflected in the policies of major public and government organisations towards disabled children and young people? How is access to the arts and culture for disabled children and
young people understood at an institutional level in the East Midlands? To answer these questions, two approaches to data collection were adopted.

First, secondary data analyses of all publicly available policy documentation of the six local government authorities in the East Midlands were audited during August 2014. Information captured through the organisations websites were reviewed for the city councils of Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Loughborough, Northampton and Nottingham. Key search query terms were used to find information. These were: ‘disability’ + ‘arts’. To capture additional region specific information, the leading search engine, Google, was used with search query terms, ‘disability’ + ‘arts’ + ‘East Midlands’. All documentation was reviewed and if relevant was analysed through a document content analyses.

A comprehensive list of 183 arts and cultural organisations from across the East Midlands region was created. Out of these over one hundred organisations were emailed in relation to participating in the research. Of those that replied with interest, 24 organisations were interviewed through August and September 2014. In order to generate rich, qualitative descriptions of arts and cultural practitioners experience of engagement with disabled children and young people, data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The structure of the questions was designed using principles of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Woolsey 1986). CIT is particularly appropriate for its utility to generate data on self-understandings of phenomena, in this case arts and cultural practitioners’, and as an inductive tool to generate and develop theoretical models (Woolsey 1986, Butterfield, Borgen et al. 2005). With a participant-centred emphasis, CIT allows interviews to be exploratory whilst gathering authentic data which has direct real-world applicability and relevance. It relies, therefore, on sufficient rapport between the investigator and participant, and the articulacy of the participant to select, recall and describe critical events.
For the main focus of the interview, participants were required to describe stories of particularly positive and particularly challenging examples of their organisation’s engagement with disabled children and young people. As part of the stories, participants were asked to describe determinants and characteristics that they felt underpinned the positive or challenging impacts of the projects.

All interviews were transcribed from the audio recordings and analysed systematically. Qualitative software was used to support coding and knowledge gained from the literature reviews drawn upon to sensitise analyses (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Stories were coded and compared collectively through a method of constant comparison (Charmaz, 1997). The descriptions of practice that emerged were then generalised into a ‘practice spectrum’ that sought to explore multiple determinants of inclusivity and empowerment.

Findings are presented in two sections. First, the secondary data document content analyses of publicly available information; second, the analyses of the 24 organisational interviews.

Institutional perspectives on disability and the arts in the East Midlands

Written documentation is the record of negotiations by various policy actors – some from above in the form of national legislation and central government policy, and some from below in the form of pressure groups, arguments, contemporary issues and local conditions. Publicly available written documentation of this kind only gives a partial and highly mediated picture of the understandings and principles that guide provision within any ‘policy field’.

These official discourses often act only as guidelines to discussions at the micro-level, informing but rarely fully defining the principles and practices of organisations or individuals. This sort of research, therefore, serves to illuminate some of the categories, assumptions, concepts, values and so on, that make up the institutional understandings of
particular issues but it should be noted that there is often significant variation and distance between these official policy discourses and the ways in which they are interpreted and negotiated by organisations and practitioners ‘on the ground’. Nevertheless, there are a number of points which can be made about the institutional perspective on the arts and culture for disabled children and young people.

The main official attitude towards disability and the arts in the contemporary period was outlined in Arts Council England’s (ACE) publication, ‘What is the Creative Case for Diversity?’ (2011). Here, ACE argue that diversity, rather than presenting a problem to the arts and cultural sector, is actually beneficial; that ‘diversity and equality are crucial to the arts because they sustain, refresh, replenish and release the true potential of England’s artistic talent, regardless of people’s background’ (2011: 3). It continues:

Our key guiding principle will be that inclusivity of outlook and practice creates a better, richer and more dynamic arts sector. At the heart of this is the Arts Council’s desire to forge a new relationship with the arts sector on issues of diversity and equality characterised by shared discourses and critical debate. (Arts Council England 2011: 15)

The Arts Council England calls for an ‘arts and artists-led approach to diversity and equality’ in which artists ‘take ownership’ of the policy on diversity and equality, ‘to tailor it to its needs, to develop and share good practice, to probe the questions that it raises and to innovate creative approaches and solutions.’ (Arts Council England, 2011: 15)

In its advocacy of the creative and artistic benefits of a more diverse arts and cultural sector, the Creative Case, potentially, conforms to a Disability Arts perspective which sees the experience of impairment and the contribution of disabled artists in an affirmative and empowering way. Furthermore, the Creative Case advocates an inclusive approach to diversity that breaks down ‘existing disability and race ‘silos’’ (Arts Council England, 2011:
6), which fits very well with some of the critique of impairment-specific arts practice to have emerged from the movement.

On the other hand, the Creative Case is open to the accusation of being vague, non-committal and light on detail and policy applications. The case for diversity as a catalyst for innovation in arts practice is not made convincingly, for example. The removal of barriers to participation faced by disabled people is clearly a prerequisite to genuine equality and social justice, but it is hard to see how it will inevitably lead to an improved resilience in the arts sector. While specific problems are identified – such as widening inequality and narrowing participation, with entry to arts professions increasingly being secured through networks and unpaid internships, restricting entry to a privileged elite – there is little in the way of actual policy that can be implemented to address these problems. In particular, the pathological, systematic, structural inequalities and elitism inherent in arts and cultural institutions remains largely unchallenged. The field is left open for organisations to interpret and implement.

In the East Midlands region, most councils¹ have a publicly professed commitment to provide equality in access and participation in the arts in line with their responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 to ensure that arts and cultural venues do not discriminate against people with impairments. Many go beyond this and outline sets of principles and strategies around the arts and disability. However, the extent to which this is evident across the publicly available documentation of the local authorities in the region is inconsistent, suggesting significant variation in official understandings of disability and the arts, and variation in the penetration of more sophisticated understandings of diversity such as those outlined in the Creative Case and emerging from Disability Arts.

¹ No documentation specifically addressing disability and the arts could be found through a search of the Nottingham City Council website.
Access to facilities and activities is the most prominent kind of initiative targeted towards disabled people, and the participatory arts sector is seen as having a key role in this. For example, Leicester City Council’s Cultural Services Division: Service Plan 2006-2010 lists eight priorities for cultural services management, one of which is to ‘Achieve a more representative workforce’ and another to ‘Improve disabled access’. Among the strategies for doing this are ‘Address disability through participatory arts programmes’ and ‘Participatory Arts taking proactive steps to facilitate greater use of facilities by physical & mentally disabled, younger & older persons’ (Leicester City Council 2006: 43, 45).

At an organisational level, commitments to access often manifest as a process of monitoring of audience demographics to record the number of people who self-report a disability who take part in an event or activity. The Northampton Museums Strategy 2008-2011, for example, mentions disability explicitly only in relation to visitor numbers self-reporting an impairment (6% compared to 16% of the general population). The Leicestershire and Leicester Arts in Education Music Ensemble Groups 2010/2011 rules and procedures information sheet (2010) states that

The county council is committed to ‘making equality a reality for disabled people’ and a first step for Arts in Education is to monitor take up of performance groups by disabled children and young people. The Disability Act (1995) defines a person as disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day to day activities. We would encourage you to complete the question about disability on the registration form for your child.

This is also manifest in professed commitment to staff training in issues related to impairment, disability and access, although again the extent to which this is taken up – in terms of designated roles within institutional bureaucracies, for example – is patchy.

Often commitments towards disability and the arts are expressed within a discourse of economic development as citizen empowerment and community regeneration, with cultural
and arts services seen as an instrumental vehicle for the development of employability and independence for disadvantaged groups. For example, Derby City Council’s Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) for Grant Aid Strategy (2011) makes the commitment to ‘Enable children and young people to be included in mainstream learning or activities that reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training, particularly teenage parents, young people with disabilities and young people who have been in the care system.’ (Derby City Council 2011: 6) It further states:

Participation in arts activities can contribute greatly to people’s wellbeing, quality of life and sense of belonging. It can also develop individual and community aspirations and help people realise their potential. Services […] will demonstrate that they support a vibrant city centre arts programme that connect with all sections of Derby’s communities enabling everyone to have the opportunity to participate. (Derby City Council 2011: 6)

Overall, while a commitment to improving access to the arts for disabled people is present pretty consistently at a local authority policy level, there are varying degrees of specific strategy and research represented in publicly available documentation. The issue of disability and the arts, as in arts provision more generally, is primarily focused upon service level agreements and performance monitoring with little emphasis on developing innovative practice or incorporating more sophisticated understandings. There is little made publicly available of more sophisticated policy or information on disability and arts participation regarding the dynamic and evolving nature of the experience of impairments and the arts. The criticism can be made, therefore, that official, institutional discourses about disability and the arts reproduce the category of ‘disability’ that has been effectively critiqued through the Disability Arts movement, outlined in the previous section. While efforts made to adhere to equalities legislation are to be welcomed, the limitations of these most basic prerequisites of equal participation are demonstrated through the still pervasive exclusion of disabled people
from arts and cultural organisations. This issue is articulated by an anonymous senior arts professional:

The view that prevails in our sector is that we have sorted disability – our buildings are accessible so everything must be alright. As a mid-career arts professional with 25 years in the creative industries who happens to be disabled, I can tell you everything is certainly not alright. It is my contention that there is a lack of training opportunities for disabled people in the arts, and consequently disabled people are nearly invisible in our sector with embarrassingly few leaders. Despite complex legal frameworks, discrimination thrives, and if anything, it is more insidious than it ever was before.

(Anonymous 2014)

Furthermore, despite the emphasis on measurement and monitoring of audience and user demographics, getting an accurate or even indicative picture of access to the arts for disabled children and young people in the region is difficult. There is no source of aggregate data across the region’s different authorities of access to the various services and venues that might constitute the arts; a problem further compounded by the difficulties in measuring ‘disability’.

The ‘practice spectrum’ model

The previous section explored the policy environment of arts and culture for disabled children and young people in the East Midlands. Our research also sought to explore the contemporary practice environment through interviews with arts organisations.

The majority of interviews were conducted at the arts and cultural organisation’s base. A reasonable distribution of arts organisations is observed by county (Figure 1), when population is considered, and by Arts Council England art form categories (Figure 2). No organisation from Rutland participated. Organisations were asked to self-select the different art forms they work in, in addition to their core art form. When the Arts Council England
categories are compared to the self-selecting art forms we can see that organisations select more than one art form, with the notable exception of libraries (Figure 3).

Figure 1. Distribution of arts and cultural organisations across counties

-Insert Figure 1 here-

Figure 2. Categorization of organisations by Art Council defined art form

-Insert Figure 2 here-

Figure 3. Self-selecting categorisation of art form across sample. The total number of art forms is above 24 as organisations often engage in more than one kind of activity.

-Insert Figure 3 here-

The organisations that participated in this research deliver a hugely diverse range of programmes and art forms to a wide range of audiences from early years through teenage years into older age. Programmes are delivered in a wide variety of settings from schools; outdoor, public spaces; care homes; and prisons. Activities go well beyond those art forms detailed in an organisation’s website as their core competency. For example, cross-art forming, choir, organizing consortiums, engaging in debates, learning programmes, promotional activities, residencies, networking days, knowledge exchanges and conferences.

Participants very often reported working in the arts and cultural sector because of their commitment to their practice as a vehicle for enriching lives. This is most often described explicitly as an ethical, political, social and moral commitment. Take this quote from O6 for example:
So the motivation difference for those artists who want to work in these kinds of areas is seeing the that it can make; is knowing that they have made a difference. I think the artists that we work with have a strong kind of social and ethical conviction about working with different groups of people, and belief in the universal message of the arts. What they get out of it I suppose is that satisfaction of knowing that they’re living their values, perhaps. (O6)

This moral commitment to the power of the arts and culture can translate into a moral commitment to equality of access and a belief in the particular benefits of arts practice to children and young people with impairments, as in O5:

I want to make opportunities for children and young people, and I don’t believe that just because somebody has a disability that should stop them being able to access the same sort of enriching cultural experience that any child can. Maybe even more so, sometimes, because there’s a lot of – you see a lot of – from my experience you see a lot of young people who do have disabilities of various severities that arts and movement can bring things out of them that aren’t there through other means. And they find ways of expressing themselves that they can’t do otherwise. (O5)

The ethical and moral dimension to arts and cultural practice with disabled children and young people emerged very strongly and consistently at the forefront of the self-understandings of our participants.

All organisations were asked about equal opportunities policy in general, and policy towards disabled children and young people specifically. Organisations were unanimous in stating that they do not have a specific policy concerning disability. Reflecting, perhaps, the demands of the Equality Act 2010 all participants stated that they have an equality policy emphasizing inclusive programme delivery. This reflects the situation at the institutional level, as described above. A typical response when asked about policy was expressed by O3, ‘We don’t have a formal policy around disability; we have formal policies more around equality of access.’ Many of the policy descriptions focus on accessibility such as provision
of accessible buildings. We represent the different positions in relation to policy regarding
disabled children and young people in figure 4 below.

Figure 4. Linear model of contemporary policy adoption.

Participants were asked to describe specific activities or programmes involving
disabled children and young people that are representative of their practice in some way. The
descriptions that emerged can be divided into three categories: programmes designed
specifically for disabled children and young people (separate programmes); programmes that
are purposively designed to be inclusive and allow all young people to participate (inclusive
programmes); or, programmes in which disabled participation is not purposively addressed
unless it is a requirement of the funder (non-inclusive programmes). Organisations’ policy
and practice, therefore, tended to fall somewhere across these three different positions in
relation to wider disability arts policy and practice. We call this the ‘practice spectrum’
represented in Figure 5 below. While it is reasonable to assume that the positioning of
organisations and specific activities across this spectrum is to some extent determined from
above in the form of the funding strategies and priorities of, for example, local government or
Arts Council England, it is clear from our research that the core values and experiences of
organisations are also significant determinants of contemporary practice. Organisations with
the most experience, the most well developed equal opportunities policies, tended to be those
that could be found towards the upper end of the spectrum. Here, the importance of the
expertise of project workers to the quality of practice is highlighted by O2:

For me, what makes a good practitioner or project worker is the ability to see past those
barriers and the ability to ask the questions and not be scared to say, ‘I’ve never worked
with somebody that has William’s disease, what does that mean for me to work with you? How can I help you to be in this session?’ Or ‘I’ve never worked with somebody who is in a wheelchair, and I need to be able to deliver this piece of dance...’ So asking those questions: ‘Are you able to get out of your chair? Are you happy with us swinging your chair around the room?’ (O2)

Therefore we identify two main determinants upon an organisation or programme’s positioning on the ‘practice spectrum’. The first determinant is in the form of funding policy and operates from above, placing limitations upon organisations; the second is the moral and ethical understandings and commitment of arts practitioners themselves, and operates from below.

Figure 5. The ‘Practice Spectrum’ Illustrating how programme design differs between organisations according to the extent of inclusive practice.

-Insert Figure 5 here-

Individual organisations may move within the spectrum over time, and/or operate across it at any one time in different activities, depending on the core organisational and programme determinants. Different positions taken across this spectrum are illustrated in the following quotes from O4, O16, O10, O1 and O14.

Here, O4 describes seeking to offer accessible programmes in line with equalities legislation. The organisation recognises certain limitations in its activities that reflect a lack of specialist knowledge and experience:

We have an organisational policy; it’s sort of standard if that helps! It’s sort of, you know, the standard procedures of being inclusive and ensuring that all of our opportunities are accessible. For example, providing disabled access or access for disabled... physical disability, in each environment that we hold a workshop, and things like that. But I think there is obviously, there’s a lot more we can do. There’s a lot more any organisation can do to make sure that we’re doing as much as we can to support people with disabilities, because there’s obviously such a wide scope of uh... [pause] I
don’t know. There’s different disabilities, really, isn’t there? From learning disabilities to physical disabilities, mental illness. One thing to mention is we also do work with a group of people with mental illness. (O4)

Another example, O16 purposely seeks funding to support equal opportunities and to develop an inclusive environment. In this case they describe installing a hearing loop to ensure that deaf young actors could participate in their performances:

We’re always fundraising for those kinds of resources. We’ve been successful in getting a new hearing loop installed, we got the money for that, so y’know, but it is always… y’know the money is there, but it’s expensive to support. In this particular area that I’m describing we also have some young people, deaf young people that are active in […] a professional show, but they worked alongside three teams of young actors […] we didn’t necessarily set out to recruit young deaf actors, but we did and we want to be able to support them and work with them […] but obviously supporting, interpreting those rehearsals every day is a lot of money, so that is a challenge. (O16)

In contrast, O10 describe ensuring that they are inclusive across all programs of work as part of their ordinary delivery across mainstream and ‘special schools’:

It kind of crosses throughout all the different strands of work. […] Within those schools programmes, we have four who are special schools in the local area. What we think’s really important is that those schools which are for children with disabilities work with the mainstream schools as well. So it’s side-by-side, they’re exhibiting their work and sharing their practice. (O10)

Here, O1 describe a strong desire to work with all children and young people but acknowledging that they are being led by their funding and are only inclusive when a funder requires it for specific projects:

You know it’s very important work, to work with children and young people with special needs, or disabilities. So we do take a lead. But it’s not – we don’t particularly initiate the projects, it will be as a result of somebody coming to us and saying ‘We’d like to work with you. Can you help us with this project?’ Or ‘We’ve got an idea.’ Or a local authority
might come to us and say ‘We would like some work doing in this school, can you do the
delivery?’ We’re sort of back to that point that I made at the beginning – we don’t just sit
around the desk and think ‘Oh I know, let’s go and do a project in a special school’. (O1)

Finally, other organisations demonstrate more nuanced understandings of equal
opportunities that go beyond the basics of legislation towards actively seeking to remove the
myriad barriers to participation for disabled children and young people. O14, for example:

It's about the ability to openly engage and say ‘what can we do to make your
(engagement more comfortable)?’ I'm always very keen—I have always been very keen
and I have always liked questions in interviews on what is an equal opportunity for me,
because the number of people who still say, ‘well it’s about treating everybody the same’
and to my knowledge that would be completely opposite of that. It's about treating people
as an individual and recognizing everybody's uniqueness so that end experience that they
have is the same. You might have to treat somebody completely differently to allow that
experience. You see what I mean, and that's what partly we're doing with our (delivery).
(O14)

While there are limitations in conceptual models such as this, conceiving of the
different kinds of practice that characterise the arts and culture for disabled children and
young people as a spectrum, as opposed to a dialogic opposition between Disability Arts and
community arts, has a number of advantages. It allows us to evaluate contemporary practice
more effectively and with more nuance, accounting for the different forces that work to
determine strengths and weaknesses in practice. Importantly, conceiving of contemporary
practice as a spectrum helps to break down some of the antagonism evident in the literature
between community and participatory arts practice and those writing from a Disability Arts
perspective, exploring and identifying elements of progressive practice where they exist even
when they are embedded within or exist alongside more conservative and exclusionary
separate programmes.
Conclusion

This research set out to answer the question, to what extent has a Disability Arts perspective influenced arts policy and practice for disabled children and young people? To answer this question a review of policy literature was conducted prior to empirical data being collected across 24 organisations based in the East Midlands. Whilst these organisations are not a representative sample, they reflect a varied range of practices and experiences across a diverse region which is facing immense challenges. Participants were requested to describe stories of particularly positive and challenging examples of arts engagement with disabled children and young people, with the findings schematized into a ‘spectrum’ used to evaluate contemporary practice.

Our research found wide variation in the levels of written, explicit equal opportunities policy and procedures across the East Midlands region, both at an institutional level and at an organisational level. Disability is, generally speaking, an implicit, assumed element of broader written equal opportunities policy, where this exists at all. In this context it is fair to say that issues around disability and the barriers faced by children and young people with impairments are marginalised from official arts and cultural policy in the East Midlands. However, the importance of policy in determining ‘better’, more empowering, inclusive and autonomous arts practices is not self-evident. All the evidence we have looked at shows that adherence to the basics of equal opportunities legislation does not offer, in and of itself, the necessary dynamism towards more empowering and inclusive forms of arts practice advocated within Disability Arts and Affirmative Model perspectives (Barnes, 2003; Cameron, 2007, 2011). In our research, policy is not a significant driver of progressive, transformative, enabling and socially empowering arts practice. Indeed, there is evidence that basic adherence to the demands of legislation can put a break on the development of more progressive, inclusive practices.
With notable exceptions, we found few examples of practice at an institutional or organisational level that would conform to a Disability Arts perspective. Arts and cultural policy and practice for disabled children and young people, in the East Midlands region of England at least, is fundamentally embedded within community and participatory arts and often takes place in segregated and separate environments. However, this sector is also characterised by a very broad range of practices, art forms and experiences, often far ahead of mainstream institutional policy, and based upon a strong ethical and moral commitment to the benefits of cultural participation for all. Therefore, to dismiss the practices that characterise the sector as conservative, or simply as reproducing disabling categories of mainstream attitudes to impairment, we argue, is reductive and inappropriate.

Many of the organisations in our sample were more progressive in their practice than the publicly available policies of institutions. Our research demonstrates that the core moral values, political commitments and experience that are embodied within organisations are more important than adherence to policy and funding requirements. It is these moral and political commitments, more than a commitment to particular art form, delivery method, or anything else, which determines the strength and resilience of the sector, and the quality of the experience for disabled children and young people.

Policy must seek to learn from the grass roots; from practice. This means identifying the most innovative and progressive organisations, empowering them and opening dialogue across the sector. In particular, it means understanding and exploring the multiple determinants on the development of empowering and inclusive practices. We argue that the best way to do this is to conceptualise practice as a spectrum. This allows us to more effectively evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of individual activities and organisations, and provides a conceptual tool with which to encourage organisations and individuals into reflection and development. The role of policy should be to identify and codify progressive
elements of practice, to empower organisations and individuals – through funding and other mechanisms – to move across the spectrum towards more autonomous, innovative and empowering arts practices. Therefore, while the opposition to the segregating practices of community and participatory arts that is evident in some Disability Arts perspectives (eg Riddell and Watson 2003) is clearly appropriate, a much more pragmatic approach that recognises both strengths and weaknesses in contemporary policy and practice will ultimately be more fruitful for disabled children and young people.

References


In informal inclusion policy, e.g. unwritten
 inclusive policy but only in minds of organisation

In formal inclusion policy, e.g. written documentation
 inclusive policy written in some form but not necessarily publicised
 formal inclusive policy written and formally adopted

234x51mm (72 x 72 DPI)