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The Ark

An Evaluation of the Operation and Impact of The Ark Children's Council

Executive Summary

Dr. Deirdre Horgan, Dr. Shirley Martin,
Dr. Annie Cummins-McNamara

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CORK | **MARCH 2019**



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Cover image: The Ark Children's Council working with international artists as part of PUSH EU. Photo by Geraldine Heaney

Foreword
From The Ark

THE ARK WAS ESTABLISHED in 1995 just 3 years after The Republic of Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Funded by the Irish State through The Arts Council and the Department of Education and Skills, The Ark makes and presents Irish and international visual art, theatre, music and dance for children aged between 2 and 12. Its award winning building was designed with children in mind and its theatre, gallery and workshop are programmed year round for children who attend with their families, friends and teachers.

The Ark Children's Council was established in March 2016 as a pilot project with the dual purpose of creating an ongoing participation practice in arts and culture for a diverse group of children which would, in turn, inform artistic programming for The Ark's child audience and overall institutional decision making. It has now become a core part of our activity.

The Council is a unique opportunity for a group of children to participate in all events at The Ark for a year. They work collaboratively, engaging with and responding to The Ark's programme. It is a central part of our work, amplifying the voice of the child within our organisation, making sure their voices are included in decision-making. The Council has at least one key event each month as a group and they can also avail of their free Access All Ark pass to attend performances and events with their friends and family.

In 2018, with the support of a grant from The Department of Children and Youth Affairs, The Ark commissioned child participation experts, Dr. Deirdre Horgan and Dr. Shirley Martin and Dr Annie Cummins-McNamara (University College Cork) to evaluate the operation and impact of the Children's Council. The aim of this research was two-fold. We were keen to find better methods of incorporating the Children's Council into the overall governance structure of the organisation. Secondly, we wanted to share our challenges and learning with others who are developing their own child consultation practices. It is our hope that this research will be of benefit to our colleagues in the arts and in education and that it can contribute to a wider body of work in recognising children's right to be heard.

Aideen Howard, Director
For more about The Ark, see ark.ie



Photo: Luca Truffarelli

Introduction

THE ARTS COUNCIL'S RECENT 10-year strategy, *Making Great Art Work: Leading the Development of the Arts in Ireland Arts Council Strategy 2016-2025* is critical for recognising arts as an integral part of children and young people's lives. According to the public engagement objective of the strategy, the Arts Council commits to advocate for and invest in the centrality of the arts in formal education for children and young people. The strategy commits to giving children and young people a voice in 'decision-making and, where appropriate, into our funding agreements with arts organizations' (Arts Council, 2015: 26). Furthermore, the first pillar of the *Creative Ireland Programme 2017-2022*, Children and Youth, focuses on securing opportunities for children and young people to become creative citizens. The key commitment is that every child in Ireland has practical access to tuition, experience and participation in music, drama, art and coding, in formal and non-formal sectors by 2022.

Much of the research in this area to date has focused on children's formal engagement in arts and culture. The ESRI/Arts Council report published in 2016 - *Arts and Culture Participation among Children and Young People: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study* - is the first national report to examine children's cultural experience outside of the school curriculum. This report adopts a broad definition of cultural participation that incorporates a diverse array of activities that children engage in during their daily activities, including popular culture, creative play, drama, dance and literature. It offers valuable insights in terms of children's participation in arts and culture activities throughout the different stages of childhood and has serious implications for future arts and culture participation state initiatives and policies. However, this report focuses on children's consumption of arts and cultural activities rather than their impact in decision-making activities within the arts. This research will examine the experiences of current and past participants of The Ark Children's Council (CC), as well as the impact of their participation on The Ark's artistic programming and decision-making, on the wider arts community and government policy.



Some of the Children's Council acting as Children's Jury for the Dublin International Film Festival's Fantastic Flix programme. Photo: Simon Lazewski

The Ark Children's Cultural Centre

THE ARK IS A DEDICATED cultural centre for children from the ages of two to twelve which was established in 1995 to commission, produce and present work for, by and about children. Its stated mission is 'To spark childhood imagination by making and sharing great art for, by and about children, bringing joy and creating a cultural engagement that lasts a lifetime (The Ark, 2017: 4). The Ark's mission and values are inspired by Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child [1989] ratified by Ireland in 1992, which enshrines children's right to art and culture. The Irish policy context, particularly the publication of the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making 2015-2020* (DCYA, 2015), was an important factor in the establishment of The Ark Children's Council in 2016. *The Ark Strategy 2017-2020*, informed by consultation with key stakeholders including the Children's Council, identifies four clear areas of strategic priority for The Ark: Excellence, Engagement, Sustainability and Advocacy, a key theme of which is the child's voice. The Ark Children's Council was set up alongside the year round arts programme to engage with and respond to The Ark's artistic programming. Council membership is free and participants attend at least one key event each month. The members of the Children's Council are mentored and guided by The Ark's Artist in Residence. As well as participating in bespoke drama workshops, the Council avails of exciting opportunities to look behind the scenes, work with The Ark staff, see and respond to work in development and meet and work with visiting artists. During their year they can also make use of their "Access All Ark" pass which means they can attend any program or event at The Ark for free. The Council provides feedback on The Ark's artistic programming and ultimately influences The Ark's decision making. Established as a pilot in 2016, there have been 3 Councils to date including a total of 78 children. The current Children's Council comprises a group of 33 children from in and around the greater-Dublin area. The Council is made up of a wide ranging socio-economic demographic with 17 of the current participants attending the neighbouring DEIS schools, 1 participant living in Direct Provision and the remainder recruited through a public application process.

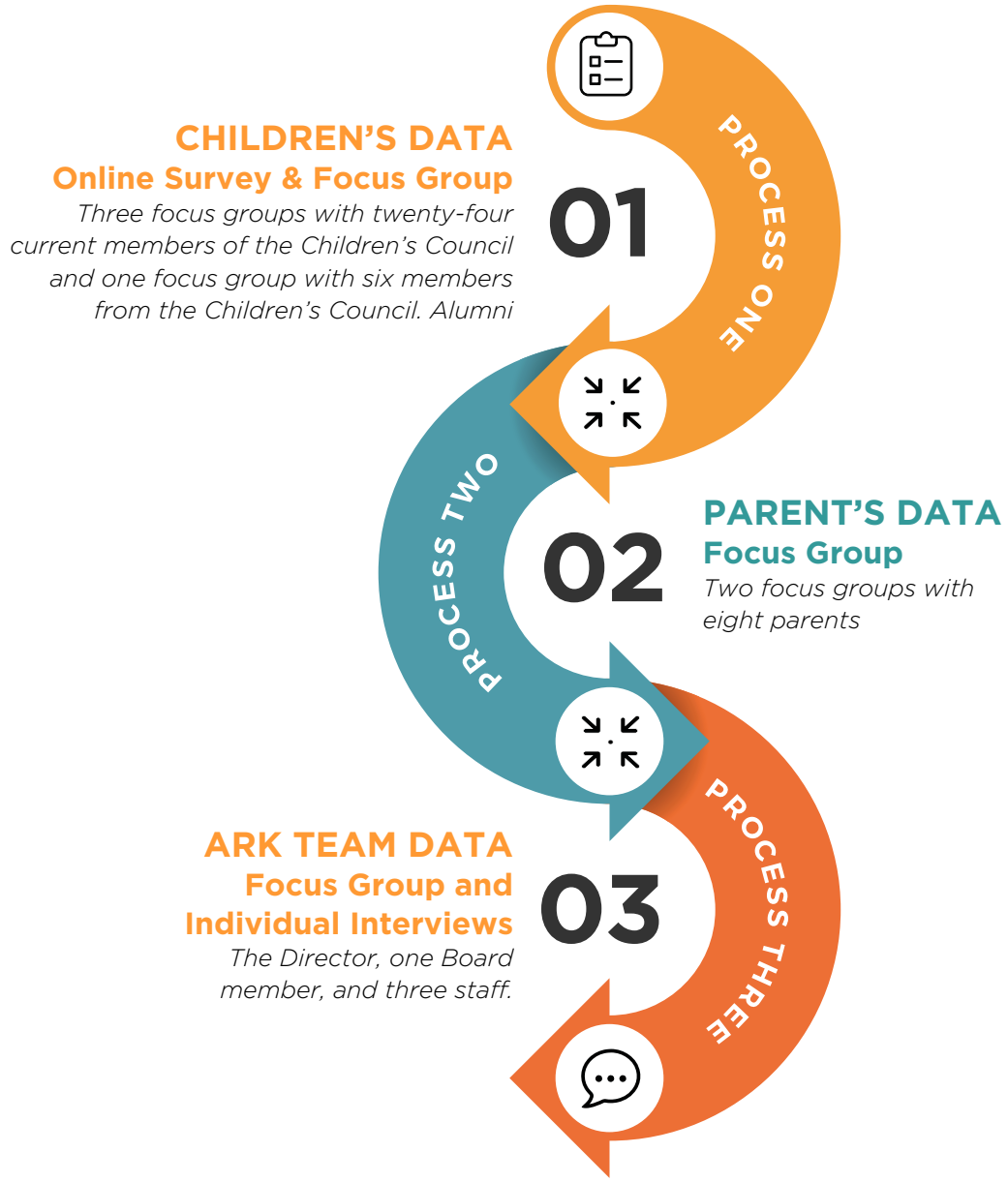
Research & Evaluation Brief

Methods

THIS RESEARCH IS INTENDED to create an understanding of how The Ark's practice of child consultation could be developed, enhanced and further embedded into the organisation's structures alongside the objectives of *The Ark Strategy: 2017-2020*.

THE RESEARCH FOR THIS report was conducted between November 2018 and February 2019. Methods included a literature review, an online survey with current and past members of the Children's Council using Google docs; three focus groups with twenty-four current members of the Children's Council and one focus group with six members from the Children's Council Alumni; interviews with five members of The Ark team (comprising the Director, one Board member, and three staff); and two focus groups with eight parents. There were thirty respondents to the Children's Council online survey in total comprising a 38% response rate. Focus group interviews were held with children (9-14 years) using a variety of methods as deemed appropriate to their age and understanding. The emphasis was on a fun, relaxed environment where they would feel comfortable to discuss issues related to the CC. Methods included: a warm-up game, focus group discussions and 'pretend you are a researcher' exercise. The focus groups were all subject to standard ethical guidance and procedures for research with children. The research team regularly conduct research and consultations with children and young people on a variety of aspects of public policy (Horgan et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2015; Horgan et al, 2017, Horgan, 2017).

Figure 1: Fieldwork Methodology



Literature Review

SINCE THE RATIFICATION OF the UNCRC in 1992, there has been a growing emphasis on children's participation in matters that concern them. However, there is much ambiguity in the 'interpretation and implementation of participation' (Mason and Bolzan, 2010: 130). Although 'children's voice' has gained significant political support, there remains no universal definition of participation (Malone and Hartung, 2010). Dominant discourse frames child participation as 'taking part in' activities (Mason and Bolzan, 2010: 128) or as 'forms of social interaction' (Lansdown, 2010:11) or as 'a process of partnership between young people and adults, whereby they share ideas and come to common solutions' (Wilkinson, 2000:7). The UNCRC (2009: 3) General Comment No. 12 regards participation as an 'ongoing processes, which include information sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes'. Similarly, the *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020* defines participation 'a process, a way of working that engages children and young people on matters that concern them, individually and collectively. The process itself is respectful of the dignity of children and young people and the contribution they have to make based on their unique experiences and perspectives' (Government of Ireland, 2014: 31). Equally, the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020* describes participation as 'the process by which children and young people have active involvement and real influence in decision-making on matters affecting their lives, both directly and indirectly' (Government of Ireland, 2015: 20). The level of children's participation in decision-making is dependent on adults 'taking children and young people seriously and where possible responding to their suggestions, ideas and views in an appropriate and timely manner' (Government of Ireland, 2015: 21).

Despite political support, children experience varying levels of participation in the different spheres of their lives (Bjerke: 2011; Horgan et al, 2015). Although there is a move towards consulting children in decision-making, there is, 'a long way to travel before the reality of effective inclusion catches up with the symbolism of token inclusion' (Bennett Woodhouse, 2003: 759). Participation needs to move beyond the process of 'taking part' and ensure the safe and inclusive space for children to express their views [Space], embrace a commitment to recognising children's right to be heard [Voice], establish mechanisms to enhance participation [Audience], and develop a process to monitor and evaluate the impact of participation [Influence] (Government of Ireland, 2015; Lundy, 2007). Providing a safe space for participation involves actively creating a child-friendly space where children can express their views openly and honestly (Kennan et al, 2018). Furthermore,

the participation space must seek inclusion, diversity and difference by being as equitable as possible. Bennett Woodhouse (2003: 758) notes that participation space and resources should be 'accessible to children who would otherwise be marginalised'. Furthermore, children's participation in decision-making is tokenistic at best unless adults are willing to listen and act upon the issues and concerns that are raised. Feedback should be provided to ensure that children are aware of the impact of their participation (Lundy, 2007; CRC, 2009). Kirby and Bryson (2002) assert that lack of feedback is a common complaint among youth participants and the provision of feedback is good practice in participation work. Research on children and young people's experience of participation in Dáil and Comhairle na nÓg, found that lack of feedback can mean that young people are unaware of the impact of their involvement and this can lead to feelings of frustration with the participation process (Martin et al, 2015). Monitoring and evaluating the impact of children's involvement in decision-making, such as in this research, is important so that participation is 'sustained, replicated, resourced, and institutionalised into the wider communities in which children live' (Lansdown and O'Kane, 2014: 9).

This research uses Lundy's model of participation (Lundy, 2009) along with Ackermann et al.'s (2003) 'four realms of impact' which encompass all areas of children's lives – individual, family, community and institutions, as a platform for investigating children's impact on The Ark Children's Council. The impact participation has over a broad spectrum of settings will help assess the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the Children's Council project.

The importance of cultural citizenship in childhood

Stevenson (2001) writes that cultural citizenship requires that society makes commonly available through public institutions the semiotic and material cultures necessary in order to make social life meaningful. Research on arts engagement by children across the domains of home, school and community has shown a positive impact on a number of academic and non-academic outcomes, including self-esteem and life satisfaction (Martin et al., 2013).

Stevenson (2001) further argues that to be excluded from cultural citizenship is to be excluded from full membership of society. In this regard, the study by the Arts Council and the ESRI (Smyth, 2016) highlighting that children's cultural citizenship is to a large extent influenced by socio-economic factors and decisions made in the public realm are important. Children from lower social economic groups, non- English speaking migrant families, and boys all appear to face significant barriers to their cultural participation (McCoy et al., 2012; Coughlan, 2014; Smyth, 2016).

Findings

THE FINDINGS FROM THE Children's Council, parents, and The Ark team, are overwhelmingly positive. Children have a positive experience on The Ark Children's Council and are very positive about the activities and staff they engage with during their time on the Council. They feel they have an important role in art production and in representing children's voices in The Ark and are interested in having a broader voice in policy.

Children's data

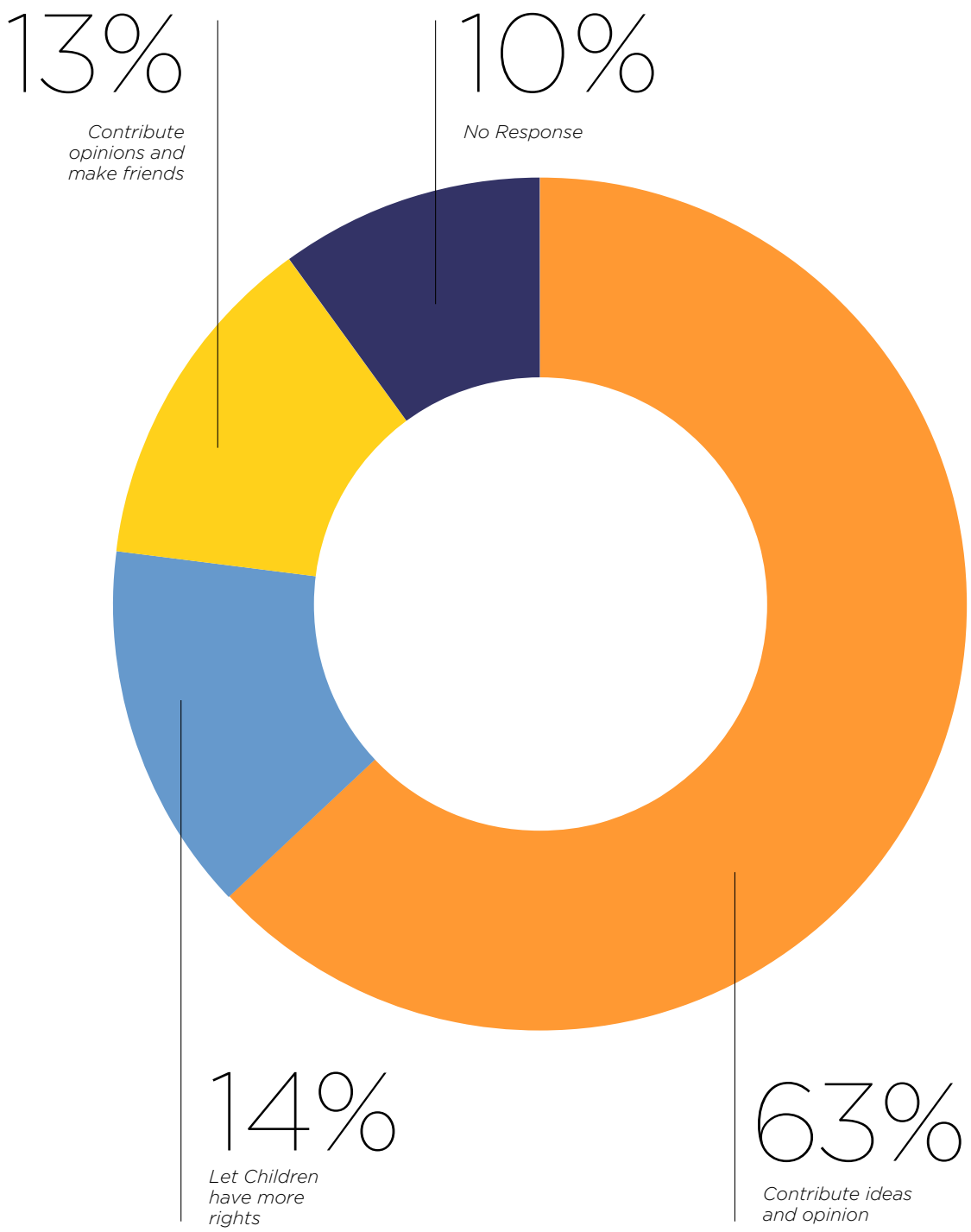
Children's Council description of their work
The online survey of current and past Children's Council members of The Ark asked them to describe some of the work they have been involved in with the CC. The responses provide a good snapshot of the activities of the Council and highlight those things which seemed to be important to them in their role as CC member – naming the Children's Festival, and their role as the Fantastic Flix Children's Jury as part of Dublin International Film Festival, and more generally in reviewing and providing feedback on plays and exhibitions, as well as specific high profile events such as meeting the Taoiseach featured strongly.

What is working well in The Ark Children's Council
SPACE: All of the children who participated in the focus groups felt that The Ark Children's Council was a safe space where they were listened to and trust the facilitator *You feel safe with them like you can tell them anything you want and they'll help you with the problem if something is getting you down and you're upset. (Boy, Current Member, Focus Group 3).* In the online survey, children overwhelmingly reported the CC meetings to be enjoyable (93%) and well run (90%), while 90% of participants felt participation in the children's Council was a worthwhile experience.

Figure 2:
Description of the Children's Council work



Figure 3:
Children's views on their individual role within The Ark Children's Council



Voice - children were asked to discuss what they thought their individual role at the Council was and in the online survey, the majority felt it was to contribute their ideas and opinions (Figure 3).

Similarly, in the focus groups, the majority of children felt it was their role to give their ideas and feedback to The Ark. A number of children felt they were there so The Ark could hear children's voices.

> *I think we are here because The Ark is all about children and they want to get children's opinions because they have adult's perspectives of things and I think that's why we are here to get children's views.* (Girl Current Member Focus Group 3)

> *I think I'm here because I like drama and that's what The Ark is all about. I also think The Ark needs children because they are a Cultural Children's Centre and they need children's ideas and ... if they need children to be the audience they want to know what the audience likes* (Girl Current Member Focus Group 3)

> *The job of the Council is to be a voice for children who didn't have a voice, whose opinions wouldn't be taken into account* (Alumni Boy)

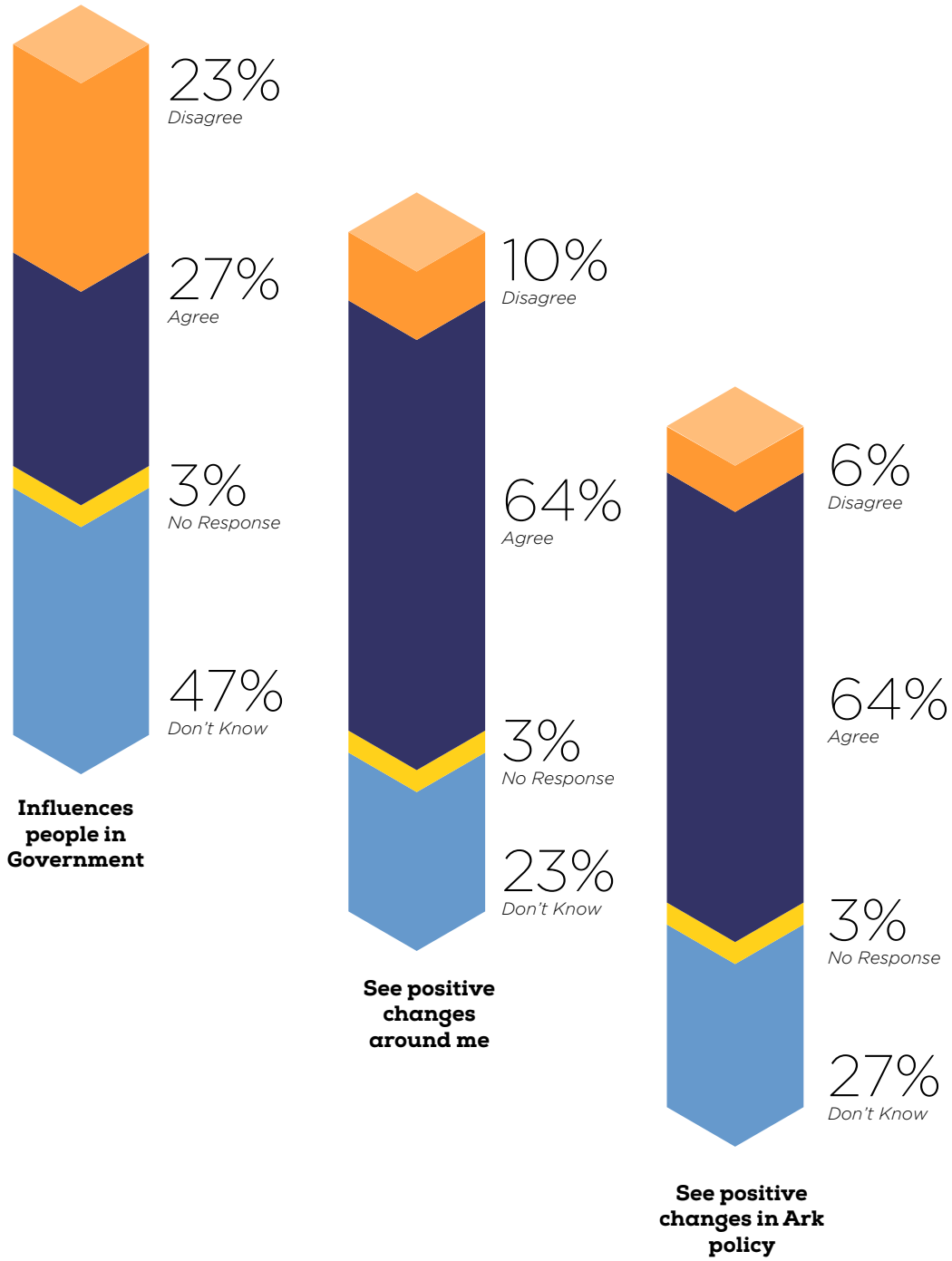
The strongest positive findings in terms of Voice in the online survey relate to children feeling respected by staff (90%) and getting enough information to make decisions (83%), while 70% of respondents felt they received enough training to support their work on The Ark CC.

Audience - in the online survey, 90% of the participants said they felt the staff in The Ark listened to them. In the focus groups, children were asked how their ideas were communicated to adults in The Ark and the majority felt that the facilitators who support the Council would tell the other staff and Artists about their ideas. One boy mentioned speaking directly with the actors and directors after shows as a way of communicating their decisions.

> *After the plays, Shaun gets us to see the actors and actress and directors...After the show, we get to ask them questions.* (Boy Current Member Focus Group 2)

The children were asked to name decision makers in The Ark and most mentioned the facilitators of the Council. A smaller number mentioned the Director and gave examples of when she engaged with them during their time on the Council. One child pointed out that responsibility for final decision-making is with the Director and the role of the children's Council is to help her make decisions.

Figure 4:
Rate how well you were able to tell if The Ark Children's Council made a difference



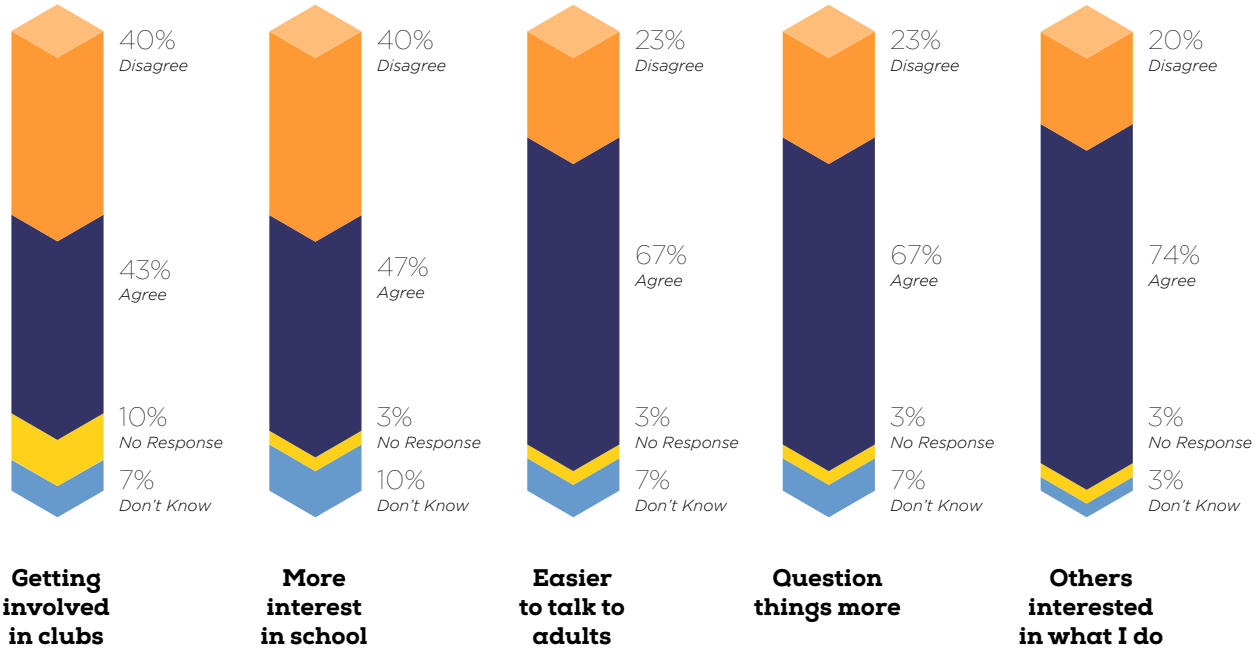
Influence - in the online survey, 80% of children said they received feedback on their work. In the focus groups, children were asked if they felt their work impacted on any changes in the work of The Ark. In one focus group, a number of current members of the CC said they did not know if their work had an impact or were not clear.

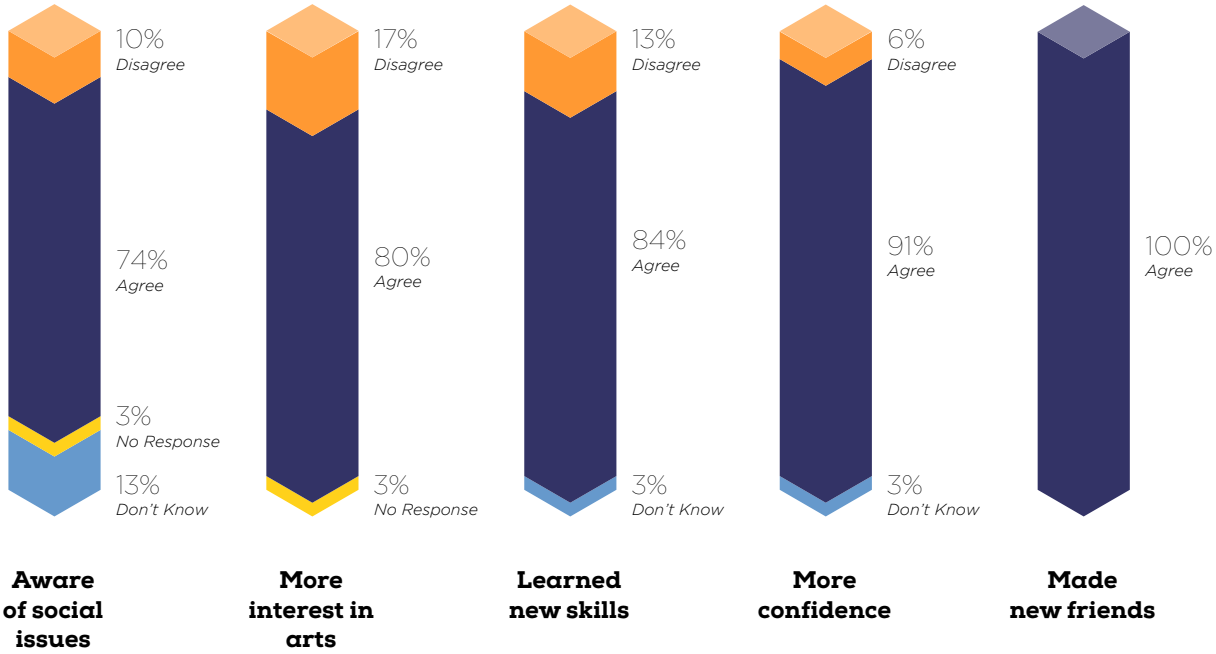
> *After a play, we went to see we had to write on a sheet of paper what we thought and we had to say to the group and give feedback about what we thought about the play I'm not really sure what happened then with that feedback.* (Boy Current Member Focus Group 1)

63% of respondents to the online survey felt that The Ark CC brings issues to the attention of the media. In one focus group, the children discussed their concerns that there was not enough media attention given to The Ark and there need to be more advertising of The Ark programme throughout Dublin rather than just in Temple Bar. Children were asked in the online survey if they saw any positive changes because of their work on The Ark CC and 64% felt they did. Similarly, 64% of respondents felt they saw changes in The Ark policies because of their work on the CC. Children were also asked about the influence of The Ark Children's Council work on Government and the wider Arts community. Although this is not strictly the remit of the CC, which is to engage children in the arts and art production and to facilitate their participation within The Ark, nonetheless it was felt to be important in terms of gauging the children's sense of meaningful participation across key realms of impact arising from their participation in the CC (individual, family, community and institutions). In the online survey, only 27% of respondents felt The Ark CC could influence people in Government while the majority, 47%, felt they did not know if the CC could influence people in government (Figure 4).

Children reported very strong personal gains from their involvement on the CC (Figure 5).

Figure 5:
CC views on personal impact of participating in The Ark Children's Council





Parent Data

Space - parents recognised that the staff who facilitated the Children's Council were supportive of the children's voice and interests. Parents listed forming friendships, developing artistic skills, building confidence and self-esteem, and improved mental health, as some of the benefits of their children's involvement in the CC.

> *'It is the emotional intelligence [they gain]* (Female 4)
> *'The character building'* (Female 3)
> *'The self-confidence grows'* (Female 2)

Voice - parents expressed their support for the way The Ark incorporated children's voice in social, political, economic and cultural matters.

> *'There are very few opportunities for children to meaningfully participate in an organisation…so it wasn't only the arts, it was the whole participation that we thought would be beneficial and it has been. It has been great for her'* (Male 3)

> *'They have their own minds, their own opinions, their own feelings and all those things come out through the art…they mix with different children from different backgrounds and that gives them the opportunity to meet and share [their] opinion'* (Female 1)

There was a distinct difference in the interpretation of the impact of the Council facilitating children's voice. The parents of the children who were selected through the DEIS school system focused on how the Children's Council positively impacted on their children wellbeing i.e. confidence, self-esteem, opportunities for expression. Whereas, the parents of the children who entered The Ark through the application process, focused more on how the Council supported their child to become active citizens i.e. awareness of social issues, the experience of representation, reinforcing familial values.

Audience - Parents were generally supportive of the staff that facilitated the Children's Council. Some parents mentioned how perceptive the staff was to the children's interests and how supportive they were towards ensuring the child's voice was recognised.

> *'What I kinda like was when we would arrive here they concentrate on the child rather than me. They are not referring to the adult, which I think is great. They are kinda picking up this child, who is the Council - person, and you are the support person, and that is good. It is great because every other situation in life, the person speaks to the adult first but they are very good at that. It is a skill. This is a deliberate decision they made' (Male 1)*

Influence - parents were asked what level of influence the Children's Council had on

influencing decision-makers. Although parents were unsure of the level of influence the children's voice was having in The Ark, they were supportive of the opportunities children have to express their views and the ways their views were communicated to people in positions of power.

> *'..they met the board last year and they met the government last year. As to how much influence they had on either – I don't know. I would hope but I think that will take a few more years of them banging on doors of the government and the Minister of Arts (*Female 4)

> *I think generally, we are probably a long way from children's voices actually being heard but I think that this is an opportunity for them to be gathered together and be represented but to what extent that actually matters, I am not sure'* (Male 3)

Broadly speaking, the data supports findings in the literature that effective and meaningful participation supports active citizenship, empowers children, (EuroChild 2014; UNICEF, 2009) and has a positive impact on adult-child relationships within the family and wider community (Ackermann et al, 2003).

The Ark team data

Space - It is clear that all The Ark team interviewed felt there is more work to be done regarding the inclusion of marginalised children's voices on the CC. Currently, there are no Traveller children or children with a physical disability on the Children's Council. Greater diversity, it was felt, would enrich the CC and The Ark further.

> *I think there is more work that we could be doing ... we have no Traveller voices and we never had. There are young people who have various learning differences but we don't have any with physical – we don't have anyone with an access issue for example. I think someone with an access issue would bring a certain perspective to the group that we haven't had yet* (Team Member 3)

A real dilemma in terms of balancing investment of time, staffing, and resources in the CC and outreach to a broader community of children was evident.

> *We are investing really heavily in these 30 kids. We want to be able to start giving opportunities to others but the big challenge is how to replicate that with others in the community* (Team member 2)

Voice - The role of the Children's Council was explained by The Ark team as children engaging with productions and events and then influencing what happens at The Ark as well as at a wider active citizenship level.

> *Their role is to see everything, engage in some way and respond to that and then, through how we garner that or facilitate that, they influence everything we do at The Ark – the programme, our policy and wider active citizenship* (Team member 1)

In their responses to what works in The Ark Children's Council, team members referred to the value of children's unique access to international and Irish artists;

> *We are trying to give the children art and cultural experiences and we are also trying to integrate their voice into the running [of The Ark]. I think it is fair to say that the cultural experiences are certainly happening. All three Children's Councils that we have run has had amazing access to national and international artists, they have got up close and personal with really senior figures in the international art world* (Team member 2)

The Ark team cited specific examples whereby The Ark Children's Council has successfully involved children in the process of art/theatre production – including the *Still Loading* Festival and the play *PEAT* that were influenced by three successive Children's Councils. Team members also mentioned the CC role in representing other children in relation to arts and wider social issues through, for example, meeting the Taoiseach. Finally, the CC's involvement in governance through consultation on The Ark Strategy and their current role in the development of The Ark's Diversity and Inclusion policy was seen, by the team, as important.

Audience - A number of current challenges related to feedback were raised by The Ark team. There were suggestions that opportunities for more formalised and embedded mechanisms such as direct reports to and from the Children's Council and the Director of The Ark. Furthermore, team members highlighted that there are clear structural challenges related to feedback given the short duration of the CC (12 months) and the more prolonged nature of theatre and arts production so that projects (artworks and policy development) that the children may have been involved in during their period on the CC may not come to completion until after they have left. This makes the Alumni so important and where the real and sustainable work must be done. The CC was seen as *'a perfect vehicle for public engagement'* (Team member 5). The Ark team felt that The Ark receives a lot of both traditional media coverage and traction on social media, given that it is not a national centre.

Influence - There were mixed views among The Ark team on the role of the Children's Council in influencing arts programming and policy. It was seen to be happening at some level both in-house and outward facing. A number of examples were cited of the CC influence on developing works which speak to their experiences and issues. Also, some felt that CC influence was taking place at national level citing the government strategy 'Creative Ireland' where coordinators are encouraged to look at The Ark of child participation in the arts. The Ark, it was felt, has become more visible in the advocacy space and the Director of The Ark currently represents arts on the *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures Advisory Council* while also sitting on *the Expert Advisory Group of Creative Ireland, Pillar One*.

Issues for consideration for The Ark Children's Council

The data raised some issues for consideration including, staff training in child participation, access and inclusion in the Children's Council and The Ark more generally, governance, representation of other children's views, feedback policy and practice with regard to the CC, increasing the impact of the CC, and strengthening the relationship with the Alumni. These will be discussed in terms of how The Ark's practice of child consultation could be developed, enhanced and further embedded into the organisation's structures alongside the objectives of *The Ark Strategy: 2017-2020*.

Training for facilitators in child participation

Core staff in The Ark have extensive experience of working with children, are qualified in the Arts and Theatre, and have teaching qualifications in participative drama facilitation and drama teaching. However, specific training in participation and facilitating children's 'voice' needs to be extended to all Children's Council facilitators. Furthermore, The Ark should engage with the DCYA Participation Hub for training purposes. In addition, it might be useful for The Ark team to engage with other practitioners and share their practices from The Ark Children's Council as a model of participation. The Ark has developed some very interesting practices in

working with diverse groups of children and in participatory activities which would be of interest to other practitioners working in child and youth participation.

Access and Inclusion on the Children's Council

Children who participated in the focus groups felt that they were representing the voices of other children on the Children's Council and that the differences among council members themselves represented lots of different groups of children. Similarly, parents felt that the CC is representative and inclusive. It is clear, however, that staff of The Ark interviewed felt there is more work could be done regarding the inclusion of marginalised children's voices on the CC. On a positive note, in terms of socio-economic balance, 50% of the CC are recruited through the neighbouring DEIS schools. Also, given the highly gendered nature of children's participation in arts and culture (Smyth, 2016: foreword), it is very welcome that the CC make-up is balanced with almost equal representation of boys (14) and girls (19). However, currently, there are no traveller children or children with a physical disability on the Children's Council. Furthermore, there are no children under nine years of age on the CC, despite what we know about the importance of access to the arts from a young age and that cultural exclusion is under construction almost from birth (Drury, 2016). The Children's Council are currently contributing to a Diversity and Inclusion policy for The Ark, which should support future recruitment of marginalised children.

Governance

There were a range of views expressed on the extent to which children are included in governance. Positive examples of governance included the Children's Council's contribution to The Ark Strategy and The Ark Diversity & Inclusion policy. However, providing feedback on events appears to be sporadic in nature from the parent, children, and The Ark team perspectives and there was a lack of clarity on how the Children's Council related to the wider Ark structures.

Feedback loop in The Ark

There was a strong belief among The Ark team members that children were part of The Ark community, and that the organisation must improve on gleaning feedback from the Children's Council. The staff made some suggestions for ensuring a more systematic feedback mechanism including, that it becomes continuous, comprehensive and formalised. This should happen through continually highlighting to the CC where their input has had an impact; that all activities are fed back sufficiently and reported on to the whole CC including where a smaller group of children are directly involved in activities (for example, the meeting with the Taoiseach or the Fantastic Flix children's jury as part of Dublin International Film Festival); and that there is a more formalised feedback mechanism in place through regular direct reports to and from the CC. Currently, the Engagement and Participation Officer reports to the Director of The Ark, following CC meetings and events, who then reports to the Board.


Children's suggestions on access
'Let more children take part'
'I would make a children's council for younger children because the younger children might understand the younger plays more than the older children.'

The Director meets with the Council and the CC met with the Board in a structured exchange last year. However, this process should be formalised and more frequent. Direct reports to and from the Children's Council and Director and other Ark team members could be better exploited. Feedback to the CC and Alumni would be an important aspect of ensuring that children view their participation work in The Ark as impactful.

Influence of the Children's Council within The Ark

Overall, the children felt that the CC role in influencing arts programming and policy was happening at some level both in-house and external to The Ark. The online survey results on whether the CC makes a difference are very revealing. Children were asked if they saw any positive changes because of their work on The Ark CC and 64% felt they did. Similarly, 64% felt they saw changes in The Ark policies because of their work on the CC. There was some confusion in focus group discussions about the level of organisational and wider impact of the CC. For example, in one focus group a number of children said they did not know if their work had an impact on any changes in the work of The Ark. The children were not clear if they received feedback on any changes or developments linked to their work on the Council. A third focus group discussed their experience of the Council asking the Taoiseach questions last year on Universal Children's Day. Parents were equally unsure of the level of influence their children's voice was having in The Ark.

Role of the Alumni in The Ark

As some of the programming decisions in The Ark are made a year or more in advance, some children felt that their voice was not heard. Similarly, for parents the one-year commitment in the Children's Council prevented children from witnessing the impact their voice had at The Ark. There was some discussion among staff about the nature and cycle of arts and policy production, which does not necessarily fit with the one-year cycle of the CC. '*They get to put a lot of input in and we get to listen to them and maybe things that we do change for the following years programme they don't get to engage with. So there is a total argument for making this a two-year programme but then you've less children involved*.' Parents were critical of the lack of feedback once the CC participants had left The Ark. There was a suggestion of the need for an alumni newsletter to keep past participants informed of the impact of their role. A more sustainable model which would better meet the Influence criteria of Lundy's participation model involves greater investment in and engagement with the Alumni of the CC (Lundy, 2007). There is evidence of a very committed and engaged core grouping whose expertise developed through capacity-building, training and exposure to the arts through the CC must be harnessed. There was reference by staff to a steering group planned with the Alumni. This would achieve the aim of a wide reach for the CC and ensuring impact

Representation and getting children more involved in The Ark

A real dilemma in achieving the right balance in terms of the investment of time, staffing, and resources in the CC on the one hand, and outreach to a broader community of children on the other, was evident in the staff interviews. Community engagement was seen as critical in this regard, and the new full-time role of Engagement and Participation Officer is welcome. Suggestions from the CC included more outreach in schools – for example. using Council members to feedback to their schools. The ESRI/Arts Council Research (Smyth, 2016) shows that children in smaller schools currently have fewer opportunities to engage in these activities, prompting us to consider the need for linking school and community arts initiatives in these areas.

The children in the focus groups gave suggestions as to how they could increase the representation of other children at The Ark. Suggestions included focus groups with other children not on The Ark Children's Council or doing more work with the children who came to the taster sessions but did not get a place on the Council. Other suggestions included Open Days, suggestions boxes in The Ark and outreach work with schools by a Council member to get '*ideas from other kid's'*. Some parents mentioned the need for a senior Children's Council as there were no facilities available for this cohort.

The Ark Children's Council team as child participation champions

Previous research on child and youth participation structures has identified the importance of participation champions (Martin et al, 2015) or adult allies (Checkoway, 2011) for successful participation initiatives. In an audit of child and youth participation in Ireland, Roe and McEvoy (2011: 8) assert that the DCYA recognises that child and youth participation requires champions, structures, systems and processes at national, local and organisational level. Interviews with The Ark Children's Council facilitators indicates that they are adopting this role as participation champions as evidenced by their commitment and interest to child participation and children's citizenship.



Children's suggestions on outreach

'Get a mobile caravan unit and visit schools with art, projects and plays'

'I think you could make workshops for disabled people. It would be very nice if they could do stuff as well.'

'maybe do more projects in schools around the county'

'kids on the Council should tell more kids about the Children's Council and The Ark, like in their schools'

'They could go and do more projects with other schools instead of the same ones all the time'

'Visiting schools maybe'

'they should get out of The Ark and visit places where children are - like help me to tell my friends in a special show and tell at school'

Conclusion

THIS RESEARCH CONFIRMS the value of The Ark Children's Council in providing children with unique opportunities to engage with and influence arts production and policy within The Ark. It further underscores the positive impact of such involvement on the children themselves, their families, the organisation, and more widely in the arts community. There are indications that their work is having some influence at policy level, although this could be further embedded in The Ark, and also better communicated to children within the Council. Participants in the Children's Council feel that they represent children's voices in The Ark but are less clear on whether decision-makers report back to tell them how they made a difference and on their level of influence. The children are extremely positive about their experience of being consulted in The Ark Children's Council. The children are interested in having a broader voice in policy which presents an opportunity for The Ark to amplify the voices of children. The Ark Children's Council is certainly achieving its aims of providing participatory opportunities for children to engage in the arts; and embedding child consultation in The Ark.

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