

Expression and Empowerment: Utilising Collective Mural-Making to Nurture Children in Diasporic Communities

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Abstract

In our increasingly complex global and local communities, the visual arts hold a powerful vitality for connection, inclusion, expression and empowerment. With the value of the arts firmly established in early years education and care, this essay considers the potentiality of collective mural-making beyond the early years setting and toward the wider community. I cultivate a specific focus on the Somali diaspora community in the neighbourhood of St Paul's (in Bristol, United Kingdom). Drawing on my personal experiences as an early years educator and artist living in this visually vibrant neighbourhood, this essay is framed around a speculative community mural-making project. Through this exploration, I hope to provide a rationale and motivation for future projects involving shared art-making experiences.

Introduction

As an early years educator in England, I have had the privilege of working in diverse communities and participating in many shared art-making experiences with children and families. During my time working in Bristol, I witnessed the pivotal toppling of the Colston statue during a Black Lives Matter protest (Bristol City Council, 2026). The energy of this event was electric; a shared community action with visible impacts. This experience vitalised my studies and my practice, particularly concerning the 'symbolic violence' of colonial legacy in public spaces around the city. My own experiences of mural-making in public spaces have strengthened my sense of agency and reciprocity within the community. Purposeful collective mural-making with marginalised communities could hold a valuable potential for reconceptualising public spaces. The following musings are drawn from my experiences as a graduate student, an early years educator, and a participant in collective mural-making with the Bristol Mural Collective (RTiiiKA, n.d.). This essay is a speculative exploration of collective mural-making as a tool for cultivating belonging and agency in diasporic communities, with a specific focus on the Somali diaspora in St. Pauls. I draw inspiration from the community of St. Pauls in Bristol, which is home to an outstanding children's centre and a rich diversity of cultures and ethnicities.

A particularly colourful area of the city, St. Pauls is filled with an abundance of street art. Particularly inspiring are the 'Seven Saints of St. Pauls', a community initiative celebrating local residents through the medium of mural-making (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2015). This vibrant and visible celebration of West Indies culture contributes to a strong sense of community in the area. The 2021 census (Bristol City Council, 2023) highlighted that over half the local Somali population live in St. Paul's and surrounding neighbourhoods. The context of Somalian diaspora, with many seeking asylum as the result of longstanding conflict, violence and drought (Black South West Network, n.d.) requires thoughtful consideration. As such, I will begin this essay with a reflection on visual arts, early years education, and inclusion, followed by exploring the context of the Somali diaspora in Bristol. The essay will be concluded by considering a potential project in St Paul's which brings together these various elements. With hope,

this thought experiment aims to contribute to the growing rationale for collective art-making experiences as a powerful inclusive force for children and adults alike.

Figure 1

One of the ‘Seven Saints of St. Pauls murals. Carmen Beckford was Bristol City Council’s first community development officer and a founder of St Pauls carnival.



Note: From Bristol Museum Collections, by Bristol City Council, 2026, copyright Bhagesh Sachania Photography.

(<https://collections.bristolmuseums.org.uk/stories/bristols-black-history/the-seven-saints-of-st-pauls-memorials-and-black-joy-in-bristol/>)

Visual Arts and Early Years Education

The value of the arts in education has historically been side-lined; educational paradigms in the UK continue to be underpinned by the ideology of neoliberalism, with an emphasis on working skills and functionality. Within this system, the arts hold limited economic value. Yet art transcends quantification, and despite these challenges the arts continue to thrive as an intrinsic part of daily life and culture. My own pedagogical journey has led me to settings that value aesthetics and creativity, inspired by Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches. Within these approaches, visual arts are essential to creating a welcoming environment. The thoughtful presentation of artwork in the learning environment becomes inspiration for creation and experimentation. From a Reggio Emilia perspective, visual environments move beyond objects and into relationality: “built environments are always windows for ideas” (Vecchi, 2010, p. 76).

Alongside nurturing creativity, visual arts provide an opportunity to reflect the self and encounter difference. Through intentionally sharing a range of visual art from a variety of artists and cultures, including the work created by the children of the setting, young children have opportunities to interact with a diverse range of creative expression. We know that dominant ways of thinking begin their insidious development in the early years, notably the othering of differences. Exposure to multitudinous ways of being through the arts can be a salve to this wound. Over the course of my career, I have been truly humbled by the creativity of young children. My own artistic expression has been inspired by the full-hearted, experimental and curious qualities of the children I have worked with over the years. When listening to the “100 languages of the child” (Malaguzzi, in Reggio Children, 2022) early years educators, environments, and children come together to form a space to deeply explore artistic expression. Furthermore, the exhibition of children’s creations enriches the physical space with connection and meaning.

Figure 2

Multi-generational joy: a painting I facilitated with an unschooling community in Denmark.



Note. Photograph taken by author.

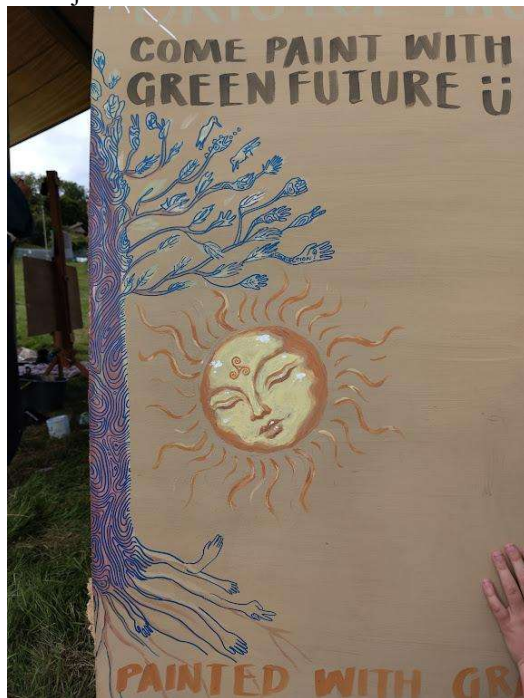
Visual Arts and Inclusion

In an ever-changing global landscape fraught with complex tensions, creative education plays a role that is “pivotal in enabling them [children] to participate as citizens within transitional societies” (Bianchi, 2020, p. 178). As cultures meet and communities diversify, new ways of thinking are required. The dominant epistemology of objectivity in UK culture has perpetuated marginalisation and power imbalances; in claiming a universal truth, the ambiguous, the other, and the in-between have been subjugated. Creativity plays a crucial role in reconceptualising these exclusionary and often implicit paradigms. In essence, creative expression and the arts are an embrace of the what-could-be, an opening up to potentiality. By recognising that the seeming solidity of knowledge and curriculum are constructs, bound by culture and ideology, a space opens to address difference in a more curious and open-minded manner. In this way, creativity is at the forefront of reconceptualising early years education in an ever-shifting global landscape.

The particular value of street art, including murals, lies in its subversive and democratic qualities. Public spaces are often controlled by governments and businesses, yet street art reclaims these spaces. Murals in the nearby Stokes Croft call to ‘boycott Tesco’ - a community stand against transnational corporations overtaking public spaces. For more context, see Peoples Republic of Stokes Croft (2026)). The aforementioned ‘Seven Saints’ murals make up just a fraction of Bristol’s powerful street art. When painting murals as a community art project, Sabeti’s (2019) research notes the value of both the journey and the finished work. The murals in this research were painted to create a “transformative and relational space” (Sabeti, 2019, p. 73), with a focal emphasis on displaced Marshellese children in Hawai’i. Children were respected as active participants engaging with their community in public spaces. In a similar vein, one resident of St Paul’s said: “Having these murals up in the air is a conversation with your child on the way to school” (Curtis, in BBC, 2015, up).

Figure 3

A communal artwork in process with Bristol Mural Collective at a nearby festival. As I painted, I piqued the interest of two young girls nearby who were delighted that they could join in.



Note. Photograph taken by author.

Somali Diaspora and Community Spaces

Somalia has long been an area of conflict, leading many Somali people to migrate over generations (Black Southwest Network, n.d.). The nature of this migration, rooted in tension, can compound the challenges of integrating into new sociocultural contexts. In Allport et al.'s (2019) study, Somali women in Bristol commented on the differences between play and community in their hometowns and new homes; sense of place can be vitally important for migrants and refugees. This is especially crucial in urban environments, where families often have less access to space when housed in small flats with limited gardens and parks. A sense of place is shaped by peoples past and present, by cultural interactions, and by local and global dynamics (Allport et al., 2019). Communal spaces can either ease a sense a sense of dislocation or amplify it; these feelings can significantly impact the experiences of young children. Concerningly, Somali children born in Bristol are “six times more likely [than their white peers] to be referred for consideration of social communication difficulty” (Allport et al., 2019, unpagged). As Brooker (2005, p.31) contends, the idea “whole groups of children should have lower achievement than other groups is clearly unacceptable”. Could a lack of inclusive communal spaces be contributing to adverse or limited social communication experiences for young Somali children? Or perhaps developmental norms disadvantage and marginalise their experiences?

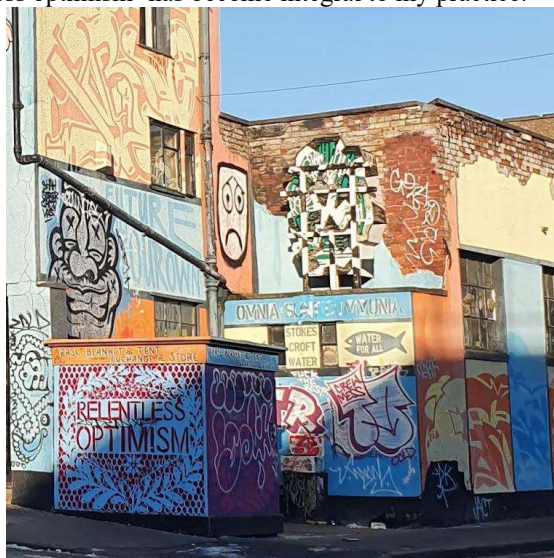
Concerningly, a recent survey (Bristol City Council, 2025) found that fewer than 45% of residents in central Bristol felt a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood. Somali women interviewed in Allport et al.'s (2019) study found social interaction difficult due to weather, lack of outside play spaces and the quality of these outdoor spaces. A local Somali-led group, Bristol Somali Youth Voice (2023) highlights specific concerns for the community such as mental health and cost of living; further inquiry is evidently

needed to identify the specific needs of the diaspora in St Paul's. The following section will consider how visual arts can improve outdoor communal spaces, as a potential means to improve sense of belonging and participation for members of the Somali community.

This essay is limited by its speculative nature and thus can only consider what might be; any assumptions I make are interwoven with my own identity and privileges as a White British person and an active agent in the educational system. Even the assumption of empowerment can be dangerous. Supposedly participatory art may in practice become a tool for political agendas, its nature obscured by claims of democracy from those in positions of power (Ke, 2025). Authentic expression and empowerment lies only in the hands and heart of the individual. With this in mind, I will continue this essay with an embrace of uncertainty and contingency. My perspective is that of an early years educator, artist and facilitator within the community but outside of the Somali diaspora; my thoughts are one thread among many others that are less platformed and less visible.

Figure 4

An example of empowering street art in the nearby neighbourhood, Stokes Croft: the message of 'relentless optimism' has become integral to my practice.



Note. Photograph taken by author.

Considering the Process...

This thought exploration is framed by the consideration of creating a community mural in St Paul's, engaging young children and families in the local Somali community. The mural could be a democratic project and process, rooted in the needs and voices of the community. The question is, how can we nurture the sense of belonging that Bristol City Council (2025) highlight as lacking in the area? Participatory art provides the opportunity to bring together community cohesion, collaboration and social change; it holds the potential to make visible the act of participation itself (Ke, 2025). However, to be truly participatory and democratic, the process requires both attention and intention. Drawing inspiration from Bublitz et al.'s (2019) collaborative art framework, this could look like engaged ideation of the project through multiple meetings with stakeholders; including community members (child and adult), artists, educators, local organisations. Key questions in these meetings could include:

- How can we celebrate and make visible Somali culture?
- What are the specific needs of the Somali community?
- How will young children participate and be included?

Will the mural be an open-ended, playful process of mark-making, or do we want to structure and plan?
How do we make the process accessible for community members?

Alongside being responsive and democratic, the facilitators of the project bear a responsibility to be critically reflexive. Jamison and Kirova (2025) identify the importance of adults working with intention; not only providing materials and opportunities, but also actively addressing sociocultural contexts, power dynamics, and affirming minoritised children's experiences through playful art-making. Similarly, Ke's (2025) systematic review identifies challenges to participatory art that warrant critical consideration, such as politicisation, commercialisation, and misalignment between the artist/facilitator and true needs of the community.

St Pauls is a bright and lively area, and the local children's centre is surrounded by street art. In England, children's centres have been slowly disappearing; underfunded and fragmented by an incohesive funding system and tensions between marketisation, profit and educational values (Cameron and Moss, 2020). Children's centres are government funded and often located in lower socioeconomic areas. They offer outreach programmes and a range of support and classes for families, such as drop-in sessions, parenting programmes and training, and 1-to-1 family support (Bristol City Council, 2022). St Paul's Children's Centre has inclusion at the heart of their ethos (St Paul's Nursery and Children's Centre, n.d.) and would be an ideal context for such a community project, complementing the Seven Saint's murals nearby. There are an abundance of local artists and organisations that could support the project; such as the Graft Community CIC (Graftworkshop, n.d.), who run mural workshops and have previously worked with St Paul's Children's Centre. More examples include Bristol Mural Collective (RTiiiKA, n.d.), a non-profit group who work in the area, and the Bristol Somali Resource Centre (n.d.) whose aims include improving social interactions and promoting a culture that values all individuals and communities.

The legacy of colonialism and racial inequality litters our streets in the form of statues and namesakes. Street murals can be radical acts of agency and empowerment that stand against these symbolic violences. Participating in a collective art process is a platform for meaningful communication and community integration (Ke, 2025); particularly powerful for young children, who are often left out of these conversations. When children and families have opportunities to create their reflections in the form of mural, the relational nature of the space can be meaningfully recentred, a radical shift away from Bristol's history of colonial violence. As a lasting feature of the environment, the mural could become a key source for engagement both in and out of the early years setting. Art enriches environments and experiences not only for early years settings but for the community beyond. With this considered, collective mural-making has the enlivening potential to weave together strands of democracy, community, creativity, development and expression.

Figure 5

More street art in action, visible monuments to the values we hold as a community.



Note. Photograph taken by author.

Conclusion

The arts hold an important place in nurturing the inclusion of disenfranchised groups. They have particular value in bridging cultural gaps and creating supportive spaces for marginalised communities (Ke, 2025), such as families in the Somali diaspora. Through community visual arts projects such as mural-making, young children's voices can be amplified and made visible. The transformative nature of street art, combined with child-led visual arts processes, could bring forth encounters with otherness in a welcoming space. These experimental and creative encounters have positive implications for families and children, as well as ramifications for wider society. Collective mural-making experiences hold great potentiality for moving toward playfulness, meaningful inclusion and enriched relational experiences. As Moss et al. (2016, p. 2) state: "We live in a world rich in diversity and multiple perspectives; invigorating, since encounters with difference can provoke experimentation, movement and new thinking; and a necessary condition for a democratic politics of education". Through my own experiences as both educator and artist, I have seen first-hand the invigorating powers of collective art-making; I carry this invigoration with me in my professional practice, with intent and with hope.

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