



**Positioning Arts Practices for Inclusion
as a National Framework for
Relational and Systemic Inclusion**

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This publication reflects the collective efforts of a community of practitioners, educators, artists, and organisations committed to exploring the transformative possibilities of the arts in building more inclusive social environments.

Abstract

Over the past thirteen years, Snehadhara Foundation has evolved from delivering Arts-Based Therapy (ABT) within direct-care settings to developing Arts Practices for Inclusion (API) as a broader, systems-oriented framework. Documenting this journey is not an exercise in record-keeping. It is an act of accountability, clarity, and future-building.

This compendium traces a movement that began in therapeutic environments and expanded into classrooms, practitioner networks, community spaces, and institutional cultures. The early phase of ABT was grounded in twelve action-research projects conducted within direct-care settings. These studies demonstrated measurable improvements across motor coordination, attention, cognition, speech, social interaction, and expressive capacity. The findings validated what practitioners observed in practice: that creative processes, when intentionally facilitated, produce tangible developmental shifts.

Yet sustained engagement revealed a deeper insight. While ABT strengthened individual capacities, it did not automatically dismantle the relational and systemic barriers that prevent belonging. Therapeutic growth did not guarantee social inclusion. This recognition marked a turning point.

Arts Practices for Inclusion (API) emerged not as a departure from therapy, but as an expansion of its scope. The focus shifted from individual developmental endpoints to social, emotional, and inclusion-oriented indicators. API reframed the arts as relational infrastructure, processes that shape group dynamics, influence institutional culture, and enable community participation.

Across six structured practitioner-training cohorts, hypothesis-driven research projects were conducted to examine API's impact. Quantitative pre-post assessments combined with qualitative thematic analysis consistently demonstrated statistically and practically significant improvements in social engagement, emotional regulation, collaborative participation, and perceived belonging across diverse populations — including children with special needs, adolescents, and vulnerable communities. By integrating descriptive statistics, longitudinal cohort analyses, and systematic coding of practitioner reflections and participant narratives, the compendium offers a triangulated body of evidence. The data reveals that arts-based practices do more than support individual development; they reshape relational environments and strengthen inclusion within groups and systems.

We are documenting this journey for three reasons.

- First, to articulate clearly what practice has been teaching us that inclusion can be measurable without becoming mechanical.
- Second, to ensure that belonging is studied rigorously without being reduced to sentiment.
- Third, to position API as a transferable and adaptable framework that can inform education, disability services, community development, and institutional culture-building across contexts.

Chapter 1:

Origins of Snehadhara Foundation: The Emergence of Arts Practices for Inclusion

Snehadhara Foundation was established in 2012 in Bengaluru by Gitanjali G. Govindrajan, emerging from her early work with children who were unable to find a place within mainstream schools or existing educational institutions. The formation of the organisation was deeply connected to the experiences of several children who were excluded from formal learning environments due to the absence of supportive and inclusive educational spaces. Among them was Sneha, a four-year-old child with Down Syndrome whose experience became emblematic of a broader systemic gap within the educational and social landscape.

Like many children with developmental disabilities in India, Sneha struggled to access a learning environment that could recognise her abilities and accommodate her pace of development. While educational policies in principle support inclusion, the realities of classroom structures, teaching practices, and institutional expectations often make meaningful participation difficult for children who learn differently. Families are frequently left navigating fragmented systems that offer limited long-term solutions, creating both practical and emotional uncertainty about the future of their children.

Snehadhara emerged as a response to this gap. The organisation began modestly from a three-bedroom apartment in J.P. Nagar, Bengaluru, which served as its first Direct Care Centre for children and young people with disabilities. The early years were characterised by small groups of children gathering in an informal yet structured environment where they could participate in activities that supported expression, engagement, and learning.

What distinguished Snehadhara from many other centres working with disability at the time was its emphasis on the arts as a central methodology. Instead of beginning with a purely clinical or therapeutic framework, the organisation explored the possibilities of music, rhythm, movement, drama, visual arts, storytelling, and play as ways through which individuals could communicate, explore ideas, and participate actively within a group environment. These practices created opportunities for children to express themselves in ways that did not depend solely on verbal communication or conventional academic performance.

Families began to observe meaningful changes in their children's confidence, participation, and willingness to engage with others. Children who had previously struggled within rigid educational systems often responded positively to the open and creative structure of arts-based activities. These early experiences gradually revealed that the arts could function not only as recreational activities but also as important tools for communication, emotional expression, and social participation.

The name Snehadhara, which translates to "stream of love," reflects the philosophy that guided the organisation's formation. The metaphor of a flowing stream captures the idea of care that adapts continuously to the needs of individuals rather than forcing them into predetermined structures. Just as a stream moves fluidly through different terrains, Snehadhara sought to create environments that could respond to the diverse abilities, rhythms, and expressions of each participant.

From these modest beginnings, Snehadhara gradually evolved into an organisation working across multiple domains including disability, education, mental health, and community wellbeing. The arts remained central throughout this evolution, eventually forming the basis for a broader framework known today as Arts Practices for Inclusion (API).

Chapter 2:

Context and Need: Disability, Social Exclusion, and Inclusive Practice in India

The emergence of Snehadhara Foundation must be understood within the broader context of disability and social inclusion in India. According to the Census of 2011, India is home to over 26.8 million persons with disabilities, a number that many experts believe significantly underrepresents the actual population due to limitations in reporting, awareness, and classification systems. Despite increasing recognition of disability rights and the passage of important legislation such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, many individuals continue to encounter substantial barriers in accessing education, healthcare, and meaningful participation in community life.

Educational inclusion remains a particularly complex challenge. While inclusive education policies have expanded in recent decades, implementation often varies widely across regions and institutions. Schools may lack trained educators, adaptive teaching methods, or adequate infrastructure to support students with diverse learning needs. As a result, many children with disabilities either struggle within mainstream classrooms or are directed toward segregated environments that limit opportunities for interaction with broader peer groups.

Access to therapeutic services presents another significant challenge. Families frequently seek support through occupational therapy, speech therapy, behavioural interventions, or other specialised services. Although these services can be valuable, they are often expensive, geographically inaccessible, or limited in duration. Moreover, therapy alone cannot address the broader social dimensions of inclusion, such as participation in community spaces, development of friendships, or opportunities for creative expression.

Alongside disability, other forms of social vulnerability further complicate access to support systems. Children and adults from low socio-economic backgrounds often face barriers related to poverty, unstable housing, and limited educational opportunities. Individuals who have experienced trauma, abuse, or institutionalisation may require long-term care environments that support emotional wellbeing and stability. Young people who have come into contact with the legal system or who have grown up in shelter homes frequently encounter additional layers of stigma and social exclusion.

These realities demonstrate that inclusion cannot be addressed through isolated interventions alone. Sustainable approaches must consider the wider ecosystem within which individuals live, including families, educational institutions, community organisations, and policy frameworks. They must also recognise the importance of environments where individuals can express themselves, participate in group activities, and develop confidence in their abilities.

Within this broader context, arts-based approaches offer unique possibilities. Artistic practices provide accessible forms of expression that do not depend on linguistic proficiency or formal academic skills. Through music, movement, visual arts, and storytelling, individuals can communicate ideas, explore emotions, and participate in shared creative experiences. For many communities that remain marginalised within formal systems, the arts can therefore become powerful mediums for participation and inclusion.

Snehadhara’s work developed within this context, responding to the need for environments where individuals across diverse backgrounds could engage meaningfully through creative processes. Over time, this approach expanded beyond direct engagement with individuals to include practitioner training and institutional partnerships.



Chapter 3:

Programme Architecture: Direct Engagement and Systems Strengthening

As Snehadhara's work expanded over the years, the organisation gradually developed a structured programme architecture designed to address both immediate and long-term needs. The model rests on two interconnected pillars: Direct Beneficiary Work and Arts Practices for Inclusion (API). Together, these pillars allow the organisation to provide direct support to individuals while also strengthening the systems that shape their everyday experiences.

Direct Beneficiary Work forms the core of Snehadhara's engagement with communities. Through this pillar, the organisation works directly with children, adolescents, and adults who have been excluded from mainstream education or social spaces. Programmes are designed to support individuals with disabilities as well as those from vulnerable backgrounds including shelter homes, low-income communities, and other marginalised settings.

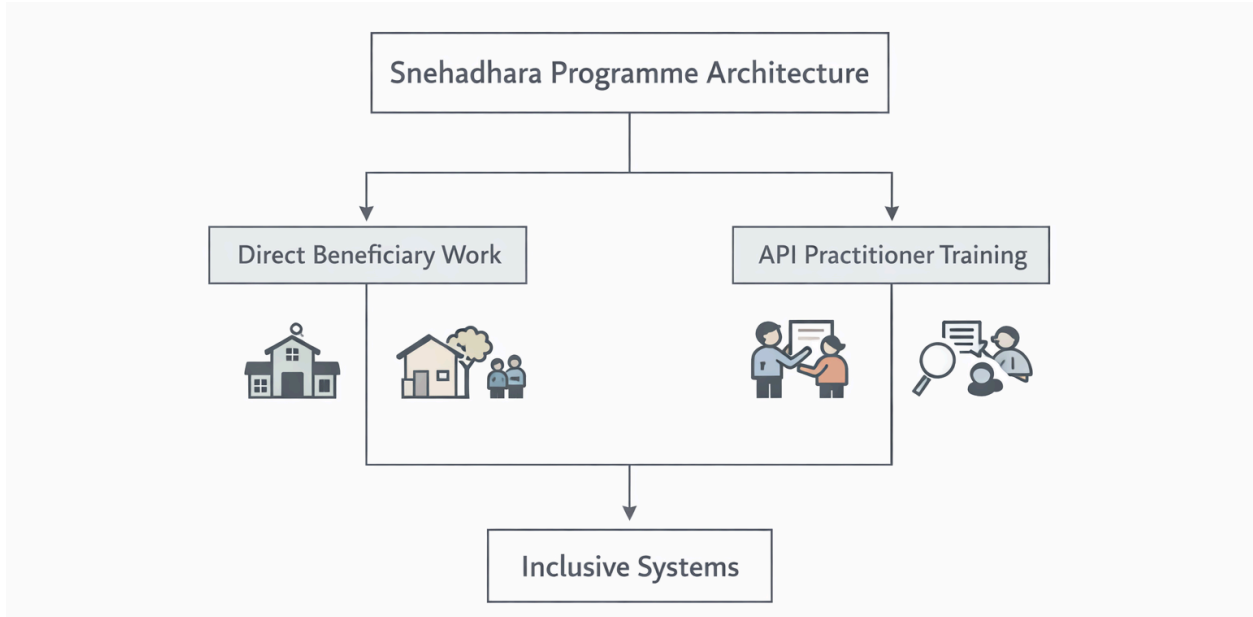
These engagements take place through a variety of formats including semi-residential programmes, assisted living initiatives, school-based partnerships, and community-based care environments. The focus extends beyond academic learning to include life skills development, emotional wellbeing, communication, and participation in group environments. Activities often involve creative processes that encourage individuals to explore their abilities and build confidence through shared experiences.

Families and caregivers play an important role within this work. Many parents of children with disabilities carry significant emotional and practical responsibilities, often with limited support systems. By involving families throughout the process, Snehadhara seeks to create environments where individuals can develop independence while remaining connected to supportive networks within their communities. Over time, it became evident that the practices developed within direct care environments could benefit a much wider group of professionals working in fields such as education, therapy, and social development. This realization led to the creation of Arts Practices for Inclusion (API), a practitioner training programme designed to equip educators, therapists, social workers, and facilitators with tools for integrating arts-based approaches within their own work settings.

API is structured as a one-year certificate course that combines theoretical learning with experiential engagement. Participants explore a range of artistic practices including music, rhythm, visual arts, theatre, drama, movement, and play. Alongside these creative processes, the programme introduces perspectives from psychology, human development, philosophy, cognitive neuroscience, and indigenous knowledge traditions.

A distinctive feature of the programme is its emphasis on supervised field engagement. Participants apply their learning within real-world environments such as schools, community organisations, and care institutions. This ensures that the knowledge gained through the course remains grounded in practice and responsive to the needs of the communities being served.

Through the integration of direct engagement and practitioner training, Snehadhara has been able to strengthen both individual and institutional capacities for inclusion.



Chapter 4:

From Arts-Based Therapy to Arts Practices for Inclusion: The Evolution of Practice

The development of Arts Practices for Inclusion (API) can be traced to the early years of Snehadhara Foundation's work with children who experienced exclusion within conventional educational and therapeutic systems. When the organisation began its activities in the early 2010s, the immediate concern was to create supportive environments for children with developmental disabilities who were struggling to participate meaningfully in mainstream schooling. Many of these children encountered barriers within structured educational settings that relied heavily on verbal instruction, standardised curricula, and rigid behavioural expectations. In response, Snehadhara began experimenting with creative processes as alternative modes of engagement.

During this initial phase, the work was broadly framed within the language of Arts-Based Therapy (ABT). Sessions incorporated artistic modalities such as music, movement, visual arts, storytelling, and play as ways for children to express emotions, regulate attention, and participate in shared activities. The emphasis was not on artistic skill or performance but on the therapeutic potential of creative processes to support emotional expression, relational connection, and experiential learning. These early sessions revealed that artistic engagement often created pathways of participation for children who found conventional classroom environments difficult to navigate. There were three batches of Arts Based Therapy that were offered across the country from 2017-2019, training practitioners for the same as well.

As practitioners continued to work with diverse groups of participants, several insights began to emerge. While the arts clearly supported emotional and social development, the changes observed were not confined to individual therapeutic outcomes alone. Artistic processes also appeared to transform the dynamics of the group environment itself. Children who were often positioned as "participants in need of therapy" began to engage with one another through shared creative activity. The space gradually shifted from a clinical orientation toward a more participatory and relational environment.

Over time, the work expanded beyond individual sessions with children to include collaborations with schools, community organisations, and care environments. Practitioners began facilitating arts-based processes with wider groups that included educators, caregivers, and community members. In these contexts, the arts were no longer functioning solely as therapeutic interventions but as shared practices through which participants could explore expression, participation, and collective experience.

These developments gradually led to a rethinking of the original framework. While Arts-Based Therapy had been useful in the early stages of practice, it did not fully capture the broader social and participatory dimensions that were emerging. The work was no longer limited to therapeutic contexts, nor was it centred exclusively on individual treatment outcomes. Instead, it was evolving into an approach that emphasised participation, relational engagement, and inclusive environments across diverse social settings.

From this process of reflection and practice emerged the framework now known as Arts Practices for Inclusion (API). Rather than positioning the arts primarily as therapeutic tools, API understands artistic processes as relational and experiential practices that enable individuals and groups to explore communication, creativity, and shared human experience. The framework integrates insights from psychology, human development, artistic practice, and community engagement, while remaining grounded in the lived realities of the communities with whom practitioners work.

The transition from Arts-Based Therapy (ABT) to Arts Practices for Inclusion (API) reflects an important shift in orientation that emerged through years of practice within community contexts. The early work in Arts-Based Therapy demonstrated clear benefits in supporting emotional expression, communication, and relational engagement for individuals, particularly children with developmental disabilities. Artistic processes created opportunities for participants to explore feelings, regulate attention, and participate in shared activities in ways that conventional educational or therapeutic settings often did not allow.

However, as the work expanded across different communities and institutional contexts, it became increasingly evident that while therapeutic approaches offered valuable individual support, they did not fully address the broader question of inclusion within social environments. Many individuals who benefitted from therapeutic engagement continued to encounter barriers within schools, community spaces, and everyday social interactions. The challenge therefore extended beyond individual development toward creating environments where diverse individuals could participate meaningfully together.

Arts Practices for Inclusion (API) emerged in response to this realisation. While building upon the strengths of Arts-Based Therapy, the framework introduced a more explicit focus on participation, shared experience, and inclusive community engagement. In this sense, the shift from ABT to API represents a movement from a primarily therapeutic orientation toward an inclusion-based practice model that situates artistic engagement within broader social contexts.

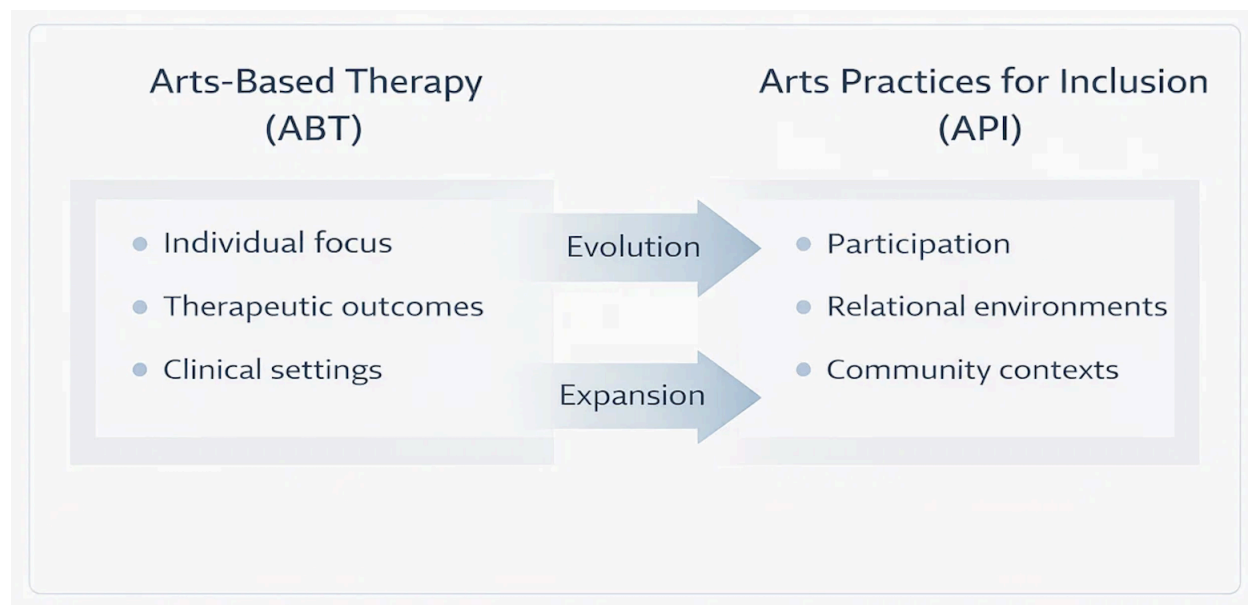
The introduction of the National Commission for Healthcare and Allied Healthcare Professionals Act (2021) created regulatory uncertainty around the practice and training of Arts-Based Therapy in India, requiring formal approval for therapeutic practice. This context further strengthened the shift toward Arts Practices for Inclusion, positioning arts engagement within broader domains of education, social inclusion, and community wellbeing beyond the scope of clinical regulation.

Within the API framework, the arts are understood not simply as tools for therapy but as relational and participatory processes through which individuals and groups can explore expression, communication, and collective experience. Artistic engagement creates spaces where participants across different abilities, identities, and social backgrounds can interact on more equal and accessible terms.

Through this evolving framework, practitioners have begun implementing arts-based practices across a wide range of environments including schools, disability organisations, community institutions, shelter homes, and care settings. As practitioners adapt these methods within their own contexts, a growing network of individuals and organisations committed to arts-based inclusion has gradually emerged.

Arts Practices for Inclusion is therefore both a practice framework and a pedagogical model developed through more than a decade of direct engagement, action research, and institutional collaboration. The programme focuses on developing practitioners who are able to facilitate arts-based processes within inclusive environments. Through a structured learning journey combining contact sessions, field engagement, reflective documentation, and supervision, practitioners are equipped with the conceptual foundations, facilitation approaches, and ethical orientation required to work with diverse communities.

In this way, the evolution from Arts-Based Therapy to Arts Practices for Inclusion represents not a rejection of therapeutic insight, but an expansion of its possibilities. By placing inclusion and participation at the centre of practice, API seeks to create environments where artistic processes support not only individual wellbeing but also the development of more inclusive social spaces.



Conceptual Foundations of the API Methodology

The API framework integrates insights from multiple knowledge traditions, bringing together perspectives from psychology, human development, cognitive neuroscience, artistic practice, and indigenous and eastern traditions of learning.

Within this framework, artistic engagement is understood as a process through which individuals can access forms of knowledge that are sensory, embodied, and experiential rather than purely cognitive. Artistic processes enable participants to explore identity, emotion, and relational awareness through movement, rhythm, colour, gesture, narrative, and symbolic expression.

This orientation is particularly significant when working with individuals who may experience barriers to participation within conventional learning environments. Many educational and therapeutic systems rely heavily on verbal communication and cognitive processing. Individuals who communicate differently due to disability, trauma, or social circumstances may therefore find limited opportunities for meaningful engagement.

The arts provide alternative pathways for participation by allowing individuals to engage through multiple sensory and expressive modalities. Through creative processes such as music, movement, visual arts, theatre, and play, participants are able to communicate intentions, emotions, and experiences in ways that extend beyond language.

Within API, artistic engagement is therefore treated as a relational practice through which individuals encounter themselves and others within shared creative environments.

Structure of the API Training Programme

The Arts Practices for Inclusion programme is offered as a one-year certificate course designed to prepare practitioners for inclusive arts-based facilitation across diverse social contexts. Participants in the programme include educators, therapists, social workers, artists, facilitators, and individuals working within community development and care environments.

The structure of the programme combines several interconnected learning components that together support practitioner development.

These components include:

- contact learning sessions
- supervised field practice
- reflective documentation
- practitioner supervision
- ongoing dialogue and peer learning

The design of the programme recognises that facilitation skills cannot be developed through theoretical instruction alone. Practitioners must engage directly with real communities and reflect on their experiences in order to develop sensitivity to group dynamics, participant needs, and inclusive facilitation processes.

Through this integrated structure, the programme seeks to ensure that learning remains grounded in lived experience rather than abstract theory.

Contact Learning Sessions

Contact learning sessions form an important component of the API training programme. These sessions introduce practitioners to the conceptual foundations and facilitation approaches that underpin the API framework.

During these sessions, participants explore key areas such as:

- the philosophy of Arts Practices for Inclusion
- understanding participation and inclusion in diverse social contexts
- facilitation of multi-arts practices
- observation and reflective practice
- ethical considerations in inclusive facilitation

Contact sessions also provide opportunities for experiential learning. Rather than focusing solely on theoretical discussion, participants engage directly in artistic processes such as movement, rhythm exercises, visual exploration, storytelling, and improvisational activities.

Through these experiences, practitioners develop a deeper understanding of how artistic processes influence emotional expression, group participation, and social interaction.

The contact sessions therefore function as laboratories of practice where participants experience arts-based processes from the perspective of both participant and facilitator.

Field Practice and Community Engagement

A defining feature of the API programme is its emphasis on sustained field engagement. Practitioners are required to facilitate arts-based sessions within real community contexts as part of their learning journey.

These facilitation contexts vary widely and may include:

- organisations working with persons with disabilities
- alternative and inclusive schools
- residential care environments
- community learning spaces
- institutions supporting vulnerable populations

Through these field engagements, practitioners facilitate structured arts-based sessions using modalities such as music, movement, visual arts, theatre, storytelling, and play.

These sessions are not treated as isolated activities but as evolving processes through which participants explore expression, interaction, and collective participation.

Field engagement allows practitioners to encounter the complexity of real group environments. Participants bring diverse abilities, communication styles, emotional histories, and social experiences into the learning space. Facilitators must therefore learn to observe group dynamics carefully and respond to emerging needs in ways that support participation for all members.

Reflective Documentation

Reflective documentation is an essential component of the API methodology. Practitioners are required to document their facilitation experiences through structured facilitation reports.

These reports typically include:

- description of participant context
- objectives of the session
- facilitation strategies used
- observations of participant responses

- reflections on group dynamics
- practitioner insights and learning

These documents provide rich qualitative data that captures the lived process of arts-based facilitation. They allow practitioners to examine moments of engagement, hesitation, transformation, and relational interaction that may occur during sessions.

Reflection through documentation also supports practitioner development by encouraging facilitators to analyse their own responses, assumptions, and facilitation decisions.

Within the research conducted across API cohorts, these facilitation reports have served as an important source of data for understanding how arts practices function within diverse community contexts.

Supervision and Practitioner Support

Supervision plays a critical role in the API training process. Practitioners receive guidance and feedback on their facilitation practice through structured supervision sessions.

Supervision enables practitioners to:

- reflect on challenges encountered during facilitation
- analyse participant responses and group dynamics
- examine ethical considerations in inclusive work
- refine facilitation approaches

These conversations create opportunities for practitioners to develop deeper insight into their facilitation process.

Supervision also ensures that facilitators remain attentive to the needs of participants and that arts-based practices are implemented in ways that are responsive and respectful to the communities involved.

Through ongoing dialogue between practitioners and mentors, the programme supports a reflective learning environment in which facilitation practice continues to evolve.

The Facilitation Structure of API Sessions

Within the API framework, artistic sessions are often structured through a facilitation arc that guides the flow of group engagement.

This arc typically includes four stages:

Circling

The session begins with participants gathering in a circle. The circle establishes a shared space of attention and presence where participants acknowledge one another and prepare to engage in the session.

Warming

Warm-up activities help participants transition into the creative environment. These may include simple movement exercises, rhythm activities, or sensory explorations designed to stimulate attention and participation.

Creating

The central phase of the session involves creative exploration through one or more artistic modalities. Participants may engage in drawing, movement, storytelling, music-making, or collaborative creative activities.

Closing

The session concludes with a closing process that allows participants to reflect, share experiences, or simply return to stillness together. The closing stage provides emotional closure and reinforces the shared experience of the group.

This facilitation arc provides a flexible structure rather than a rigid script. Facilitators adapt activities based on the needs and responses of participants while maintaining the overall flow of engagement.

Practitioner Development Through the API Programme

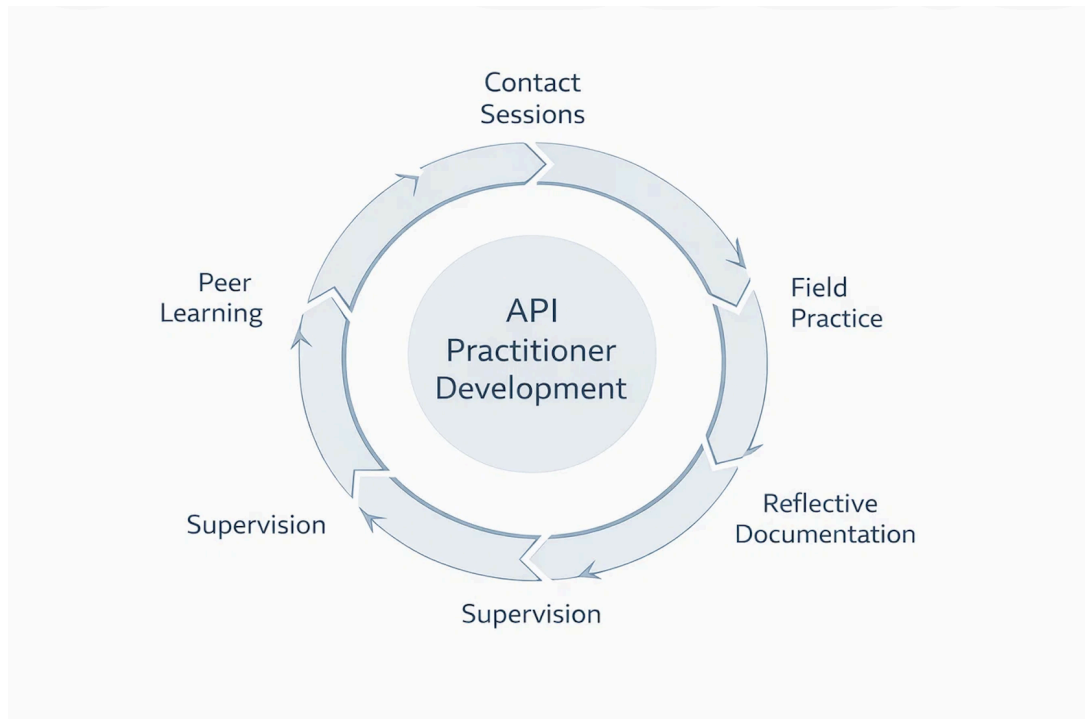
The API programme recognises that the process of learning to facilitate arts-based inclusion involves significant personal and professional transformation.

Many practitioners initially approach facilitation from instructional frameworks where the facilitator directs activities and participants follow instructions. Through repeated engagement with artistic processes and group dynamics, practitioners gradually develop a different orientation.

Facilitators begin to shift from controlling outcomes toward holding space for exploration. They learn to observe subtle changes in group energy, respond to unexpected moments, and support participants in ways that allow creative processes to unfold naturally.

This transformation is not immediate but develops gradually through practice, reflection, and supervision.

By the end of the programme, practitioners often report greater confidence in facilitating inclusive environments and deeper awareness of the relational dynamics that shape group participation.



Building an Ecosystem of Practitioners

Beyond individual practitioner training, the API programme contributes to the development of a broader ecosystem of arts-based inclusion practitioners. Practitioners trained through the programme frequently continue implementing arts-based practices within their own organisations, educational institutions, and community settings. Through these continued engagements, arts practices gradually become embedded within existing systems rather than remaining isolated interventions.

This ecosystem-oriented approach reflects the broader vision of Snehadhara Foundation: to strengthen institutional capacity for inclusive practice while supporting practitioners who can carry these methodologies into diverse contexts.

Arts Practices for Inclusion has reached and trained over 170 practitioners across India, Nepal and Sri Lanka to take this methodology to their grassroots levels. A diverse practitioner network has gradually emerged—individuals trained in arts-based facilitation and equipped to work across education, health, and community contexts of inclusion. These practitioners carry the practice into schools, NGOs, care settings, and organisational spaces, adapting arts-based approaches to varied social realities. Many go on to initiate independent programmes, organisations, and research initiatives rooted in inclusion. Together, they contribute to the growth of a distributed ecosystem that continues to expand the reach and possibilities of arts-based inclusion practice.

In this way, the API programme contributes not only to individual practitioner development but also to the gradual expansion of inclusive arts-based practice across communities and institutions.

Chapter 5:

Arts Engagement and Wellbeing: A Review of Interdisciplinary Research

Over the past two decades, the relationship between artistic engagement and wellbeing has received increasing attention across several academic disciplines, including public health, psychology, sociology, and cultural studies. Researchers across these fields have begun to examine how participation in artistic activities contributes not only to emotional expression but also to psychological resilience, cognitive engagement, and social participation. As the scope of research on arts and wellbeing has expanded, scholars have increasingly recognised that creative practices play a significant role in shaping how individuals experience and interpret their lives within broader social and cultural environments.

One of the most comprehensive syntheses of this research is presented by Daisy Fancourt and Saoirse Finn in their report prepared for the World Health Organization. Their study reviews more than three thousand research articles examining the impact of arts participation on health and wellbeing across different populations and stages of life. The authors demonstrate that engagement in artistic practices—including music, visual arts, theatre, dance, and literary expression—can positively influence emotional wellbeing, cognitive functioning, and social interaction.

Fancourt and Finn emphasise that artistic engagement allows individuals to explore emotions, reflect upon personal experiences, and communicate aspects of identity through expressive forms. Creative practices often provide individuals with opportunities to engage in activities that are both personally meaningful and socially shared. In many contexts, artistic participation occurs within group settings where individuals create, perform, or reflect together. These shared environments encourage dialogue, empathy, and mutual understanding among participants, thereby contributing to both personal and collective wellbeing.

Importantly, the authors note that the benefits of arts participation extend beyond individual psychological outcomes. Artistic initiatives frequently take place within community contexts such as cultural institutions, community centres, and healthcare environments. Through these settings, arts engagement can foster participation, collective experience, and shared cultural expression. As a result, arts-based programmes may contribute to the development of social capital, strengthening community networks and supporting collective resilience.

Fancourt and Finn therefore argue that research examining arts engagement must adopt interdisciplinary approaches capable of capturing both measurable outcomes and the lived experiences associated with creative participation. This perspective highlights the importance of examining not only the psychological benefits of artistic engagement but also the social environments within which these activities take place.

A complementary perspective is offered by Heather L. Stuckey and Jeremy Nobel, who examine the relationship between artistic engagement, healing processes, and public health. Their review of the literature explores a wide range of creative practices, including storytelling, music, visual arts, and dance, and considers how these practices influence psychological and emotional wellbeing.

Stuckey and Nobel suggest that artistic engagement can function as a process of meaning-making through which individuals interpret and articulate personal experiences. Creative activities provide individuals with avenues for expressing thoughts, emotions, and memories that may be difficult to communicate through conventional verbal or clinical frameworks. Through artistic processes, individuals may reconstruct personal narratives and explore aspects of identity that have been shaped by life experiences.

The authors further note that participation in artistic practices can support emotional regulation and psychological resilience. Creative processes often encourage reflection and self-awareness, enabling individuals to engage with complex emotional experiences in constructive ways. In addition, many artistic activities involve collaboration and shared participation, creating environments where individuals interact, exchange perspectives, and develop supportive connections with others.

Together, these studies suggest that artistic engagement should be understood not merely as a recreational activity but as a meaningful process that contributes to emotional wellbeing, identity exploration, and participation in shared cultural and social experiences.

Theoretical Foundations of Arts-Based Research

While a substantial body of literature has explored the relationship between artistic engagement and wellbeing, scholars have also developed theoretical frameworks that position artistic practice as a legitimate form of research methodology. These approaches challenge conventional assumptions about how knowledge is generated and communicated within academic inquiry.

A significant contribution to this field is provided by Patricia Leavy in her work *Method Meets Art*. Leavy argues that arts-based research represents an innovative methodological approach that integrates creative practices directly into the research process. According to her framework, traditional research methods—such as structured interviews, surveys, and statistical analysis—often prioritise measurable data but may struggle to capture the complexity of lived experiences, emotional expression, and cultural meaning.

Arts-based research methods expand these possibilities by incorporating creative forms such as narrative storytelling, poetry, theatre, visual arts, and multimedia representation. These approaches enable researchers to explore social phenomena through expressive and interpretive forms of inquiry that foreground participants' lived experiences. Rather than relying exclusively on numerical data or verbal accounts, arts-based methods allow participants to represent their experiences through creative expression.

Leavy emphasises that arts-based research values embodied knowledge and experiential understanding. Participants are not merely subjects of study but active contributors to the generation of knowledge. Through artistic processes, participants may produce visual, narrative, or performative representations of their experiences. Researchers then interpret these representations within broader social, cultural, and theoretical contexts.

Similarly, Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner have developed influential frameworks that conceptualise artistic representation as a legitimate form of scholarly inquiry. In their work on arts-based educational research, they argue that artistic expression can illuminate dimensions of human experience that are often overlooked within conventional research paradigms. Artistic inquiry, they suggest, expands the epistemological boundaries of research by incorporating narrative interpretation, aesthetic expression, and imaginative engagement.

Barone and Eisner further argue that arts-based research aims not only to present empirical findings but also to evoke thoughtful engagement among audiences. Artistic representations encourage readers or viewers to reflect upon complex social realities and to consider perspectives that might otherwise remain hidden. Through this process, arts-based research can deepen understanding of issues such as identity, belonging, marginalization, and cultural experience.

Additional perspectives on the intersection of artistic practice and qualitative research are provided by J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole in their edited handbook on arts in qualitative inquiry. The authors compile contributions from scholars who examine how creative practices—including photography, performance, narrative writing, and visual arts—can be used to explore social experiences and cultural contexts.

Knowles and Cole emphasise that arts-based approaches enable researchers to document emotional experiences, embodied interactions, and cultural meanings that may remain difficult to capture through traditional research frameworks. Creative methodologies also offer opportunities for participants to engage actively in the research process. Rather than functioning solely as respondents, participants can become collaborators who contribute to both the creation and interpretation of knowledge.

Arts-Based Methodologies in Participatory Research

In recent years, scholars have increasingly examined how arts-based methodologies can support participatory research practices, particularly when working with communities that are often underrepresented within academic research.

Sharon Nathan and colleagues conduct a systematic narrative review examining the use of arts-based methods with young people experiencing complex psychosocial challenges. Their study highlights the limitations of conventional research methods such as interviews and questionnaires when working with participants who may find it difficult to articulate their experiences through formal verbal communication.

Creative practices such as drawing, storytelling, and participatory visual arts provide alternative modes of expression through which participants can communicate their perspectives. These methods allow individuals to represent their experiences in ways that feel accessible and meaningful to them. Nathan and colleagues argue that arts-based methodologies can help address power imbalances that sometimes arise between researchers and participants by creating collaborative spaces for expression and dialogue.

Similarly, Chiara Clini, Louise Thomson, and Helen Chatterjee explore participatory arts programmes developed for forcibly displaced communities. Using a participatory action research framework, the authors examine how creative engagement influences psychosocial wellbeing among refugees and displaced individuals.

Their findings suggest that artistic activities create environments where participants can express emotions, share personal stories, and engage in collective storytelling processes. Through creative engagement, individuals may reconstruct aspects of identity that have been disrupted by experiences of displacement. These artistic environments also encourage interaction among participants, enabling the development of supportive community networks.

Participatory Arts and Mental Health Recovery

Participatory arts practices have also been examined in relation to mental health recovery and psychosocial wellbeing. Angela Hui and colleagues investigate a community-based arts programme designed to support individuals experiencing mental health challenges.

Participants in the programme reported that engagement in creative activities enabled them to explore aspects of identity that had been affected by mental health difficulties. Creative processes allowed individuals to articulate personal experiences and emotions that were often difficult to communicate through conventional forms of conversation.

The authors identify several themes emerging from participants' experiences, including opportunities for self-expression, identity reconstruction, and supportive group interaction. Collaborative artistic environments encouraged participants to explore personal narratives while also developing connections with others facing similar challenges.

Research conducted in cultural institutions provides further insight into these processes. Natalia Díez-Ríos and colleagues examine participatory art programmes held in museum settings, where participants engage with artistic materials and creative interpretation. Individuals involved in these programmes described them as empowering experiences that enhanced emotional wellbeing and encouraged participation in cultural environments that were previously unfamiliar to them.

Through these programmes, participants developed confidence in their creative abilities and explored new forms of artistic identity. The collective nature of the activities also encouraged interaction and dialogue among participants, strengthening social engagement.

Social Capital and Community Engagement through Participatory Arts

Beyond individual wellbeing outcomes, participatory arts initiatives have also been shown to contribute to the development of social capital within communities. Norma Daykin and colleagues conducted a qualitative systematic review examining how participatory arts programmes support community engagement.

Their findings highlight collaborative creativity and shared artistic experiences as important mechanisms through which arts initiatives strengthen social networks. Participation in creative activities allows individuals to interact, exchange perspectives, and develop shared identities through collective expression.

These processes contribute to the development of social capital by fostering trust, cooperation, and mutual support among participants. Over time, these networks may extend beyond the duration of a specific programme, strengthening community connections and collective wellbeing.

Daykin and colleagues therefore emphasise that arts engagement should be understood as a socially embedded process. Creative activities often operate within community contexts where individuals participate together in shared experiences that shape both personal and collective identities.

Participatory Design and Creative Programme Development

Another emerging area of research focuses on participatory design approaches used in the development of arts-based interventions. Tingting Liu and colleagues investigate a co-design process used to develop a cultural arts programme for older adults at risk of depression.

In this study, participants collaborated with researchers and facilitators to design creative activities centred on calligraphy and visual arts. The participatory design process allowed participants to contribute their perspectives and preferences to the structure of the programme. The study found that this collaborative approach enhanced engagement, empowerment, and emotional awareness among participants.

In a subsequent umbrella review examining participatory arts programmes for older adults, Liu and colleagues proposed the Aesthetic–Engagement–Creativity (AEC) framework as a way of conceptualising how artistic participation contributes to wellbeing. According to this model, creative engagement stimulates emotional reflection, cognitive involvement, and social interaction. However, the authors also note that research evaluating arts-based programmes often employs diverse methodologies, making it difficult to compare findings across different studies.

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of literature examining the relationship between artistic engagement and wellbeing, several important gaps remain within the existing research.

First, although numerous studies highlight the therapeutic and social benefits of creative participation, there is still limited agreement on the most appropriate frameworks for evaluating arts-based interventions. Researchers employ a wide range of methodological approaches, including qualitative interviews, case studies, and quantitative surveys. While this diversity reflects the complexity of artistic engagement, it also makes it difficult to compare results across different studies and contexts.

Second, although arts-based research methodologies are increasingly recognised as valuable tools for exploring lived experiences, there remains a need for further empirical research examining how these approaches operate within specific cultural and community environments. Much of the existing literature has been conducted in Western contexts, leaving significant gaps in understanding how arts-based practices function within other cultural traditions and social settings.

Third, while participatory arts programmes have demonstrated potential to support wellbeing and community engagement, relatively little research has examined the long-term impacts of sustained artistic participation. Many studies focus on short-term programme outcomes, leaving unanswered questions about how ongoing engagement in creative practices influences emotional wellbeing, social participation, and community development over extended periods of time.

Addressing these gaps requires interdisciplinary research that brings together perspectives from public health, sociology, cultural studies, psychology, and qualitative research methodologies. By examining both the experiential and social dimensions of artistic engagement, future research can contribute to a

deeper understanding of how creative practices support wellbeing and participation within diverse communities.

Within this broader context, initiatives such as Arts Practices for Inclusion represent an important area for continued research and documentation, particularly in relation to community-based approaches that integrate artistic engagement with inclusive social practice.

Chapter 6:

Learning from Practice: Thematic Insights from ABT Action Research (2011–2018)

Between 2011 and 2018, a series of action research projects conducted within the framework of Arts Based Therapy (ABT) sought to examine how artistic engagement could support participation, development, and wellbeing among individuals with diverse abilities. These studies were carried out across different participant groups and contexts, generating a substantial body of practice-based observations and reflections. Through systematic documentation and analysis, several recurring themes began to emerge regarding the role of the arts in therapeutic and educational environments. The insights presented in this chapter synthesise these findings, highlighting key patterns observed across the research projects and examining how they contributed to the evolving understanding of arts-based practice. Collectively, these themes illuminate the ways in which ABT began to reshape approaches to learning, participation, and inclusion, laying important conceptual and practical foundations for the later development of Arts Practices for Inclusion (API).

Innovation

Across the action research projects conducted between 2011 and 2018, the theme of innovation emerged as a central feature of the evolving practice of Arts Based Therapy (ABT). Within these studies, innovation was not understood as novelty for its own sake but as a practical response to the limitations of rigid institutional structures that often struggled to accommodate children with diverse developmental profiles. The introduction of arts-based practices represented an attempt to bridge the gap between structured therapeutic or educational systems and the fluid developmental needs of participants.

Within this context, ABT began to introduce new ways of working with children that moved away from corrective models focused on fixing perceived deficits. Instead, the framework gradually emphasized participation, engagement, and connection through artistic processes. This shift represented a movement from tightly controlled environments defined by rules and behavioural prescriptions toward more organic learning environments shaped by play, rhythm, and creative exploration.

As Pallavi Chander (2012) notes, the structural design of ABT sessions incorporated rituals such as opening and closure, providing a flexible framework within which children and facilitators could engage creatively. These structures allowed space for spontaneity and experimentation while still maintaining a coherent session flow. Within such environments, facilitators were able to introduce artistic activities that encouraged participants to explore expression through music, movement, and visual arts.

This shift also reflected a broader transformation in the understanding of therapeutic engagement. Rather than positioning therapy solely as a process of skill acquisition—for example, teaching speech, writing, or behavioural regulation—ABT introduced the possibility of shared creative engagement. Achuta Nadapana (2014) describes this orientation as a move toward a deeper form of participation in which children are supported in developing a sense of self, confidence, and accomplishment through collective artistic experiences.

The integration of multiple artistic forms further challenged conventional divisions between developmental domains. Traditional therapeutic approaches often treat motor development, cognitive functioning, and social skills as separate areas of intervention. In contrast, the ABT framework recognised the interconnected nature of these processes.

Research conducted by Salomi Jacob and Sasha Braganza (2014) demonstrated that movement-based activities and play could influence vocalization and speech development. Jacob's study reported an average growth of 18.85% in coordination among participants, suggesting that engagement in artistic movement processes may contribute to improvements across multiple developmental areas simultaneously. Vani Joshi (2018) similarly observed that non-verbal artistic forms such as mime and dance could encourage participants to share personal narratives and explore forms of self-awareness.

These findings highlight the role of artistic environments in supporting multidimensional development. The physical environment itself also played a significant role in shaping these experiences. Observations by Salomi Jacob indicated that closed indoor environments often limited engagement among children with developmental delays, whereas open spaces near natural surroundings appeared to encourage greater freedom of movement and participation.

Facilitators also noted the importance of collaborative coordination among team members. Bunty Shreshta (2017) emphasised that ABT sessions function most effectively when activities flow seamlessly rather than appearing as disconnected tasks. Clear communication among facilitators and support staff ensured that sessions unfolded as cohesive experiences in which participants could engage without disruption.

Across these action research projects, the cumulative outcome of ABT interventions included improvements in social adjustment, participation, and confidence among participants. Rohini Chidambaran (2018) and Vani Joshi (2018) both observed that artistic environments provided opportunities for individuals to connect with others through shared creative interests. These interactions contributed to changes in self-image and social-emotional adjustment across diverse participant groups, including children with autism spectrum disorder and adults with developmental disabilities.

Taken together, these findings suggest that ABT introduced a significant shift in how therapeutic environments could be structured. By integrating artistic engagement into the environment itself, the framework began to move beyond individual therapy toward a broader model of inclusive participation.

Heterogeneity as a Pathway toward Inclusion

Another important theme emerging from the action research projects was the role of heterogeneous grouping in fostering inclusive learning environments. Within ABT sessions, groups often included participants with diverse developmental profiles alongside neurotypical peers. This diversity created opportunities for peer interaction and collaborative learning that differed significantly from traditional therapeutic settings.

Gitanjali Sarangan (2011) observed that in such environments neurotypical participants often functioned as natural language and behavioural models for children with developmental challenges. Through shared activities, participants were able to observe and imitate social behaviours, communication patterns, and forms of interaction in organic ways that did not rely solely on direct instruction.

However, the research also acknowledged that inclusive environments must remain responsive to individual needs. Sarangan noted that challenges could arise when certain behaviours were imitated

without context, or when parents expressed concerns about group dynamics. In some situations, participants continued to benefit from one-on-one interventions that supported the development of foundational social skills before engaging fully within larger groups.

Within heterogeneous groups, facilitators also observed the emergence of informal peer-support systems. Pallavi Chander (2012) described how participants often formed buddy relationships based on complementary strengths. Children with developmental delays sometimes provided social scaffolding for peers on the autism spectrum, while those with strong movement skills occasionally took leadership roles during dance or rhythm activities.

Such interactions allowed facilitators to adopt a less directive role. Chander noted that when groups were balanced effectively, peer learning often occurred with minimal intervention from facilitators. Similarly, Anagha K. A. observed that participants frequently learned language through exposure to peers during group activities.

The ABT framework also incorporated structured assessment tools designed to capture developmental progress across multiple domains. Instruments such as the WCCL Rating Scale, the Narrative Capability Development Scale, and EPR-based observational formats were used to monitor changes in physical, intellectual, and emotional capacities.

Bunty Shreshta's (2017) work with heterogeneous groups of adolescents further demonstrated measurable improvements in impulse control and vocalisation. In this study, approximately 85.71% of participants showed progress in social interaction and vocalisation, while 71.43% demonstrated improved impulse regulation. These findings suggest that shared artistic environments can function as equalising spaces in which age and diagnostic categories become less central than participation in the creative process.

At the same time, researchers acknowledged that designing sessions for highly diverse groups remained complex. Vani Joshi (2018) observed that the wide range of abilities within some groups made it difficult to ensure that every activity remained equally meaningful for all participants. This challenge highlighted the need for flexibility in session design and ongoing innovation in inclusive facilitation practices.

Rhythm as a Structural Element of ABT

Rhythm emerged as another significant theme within the action research projects. Music and rhythmic engagement were found to play an important role in shaping both individual and group participation during sessions.

Gitanjali Sarangan (2011) highlighted the relationship between rhythm and the body's natural physiological patterns, describing musical rhythm as closely connected to the body's "kinetic melody." Because language and music engage overlapping neural systems, musical activities can support the development of communication processes in children with limited verbal ability.

The auditory cortex distributes musical information across multiple regions of the brain simultaneously. As a result, rhythmic activities may stimulate broader neural networks involved in movement, memory,

and speech production. For participants who were non-verbal, musical patterns often functioned as cues that helped them associate sounds with actions or movements.

This connection between rhythm and communication was further explored in Sasha Braganza's (2014) research. In one instance, children who had struggled for nearly a year to learn the names of peers through conventional teaching methods were able to learn them within three months once the names were incorporated into daily musical routines.

Music also served as an organising structure for group participation. Pallavi Chander (2012) noted that musical activities often helped shift groups from states of chaos toward coordinated participation. Through rhythmic patterns, children practiced imitation, turn-taking, and collective timing.

Salomi Jacob's observations suggested that improvements in physical coordination were often accompanied by increased vocalisation. As children became more aware of their bodily movements through rhythmic engagement, their willingness and ability to produce vocal sounds increased.

Researchers also distinguished between different elements of musical engagement. Vani Joshi (2018) observed that melody tended to encourage spontaneity and emotional expression, while rhythm played a more prominent role in supporting group synchronisation and impulse control.

Drumming exercises described by Rohini Chidambaran (2018) provided an example of how rhythmic activities could channel physical energy into structured expression. Participants learned to wait, listen, and coordinate with others, transforming a simple physical action into an expressive group experience.

Practitioner Learning and the Role of Phronesis

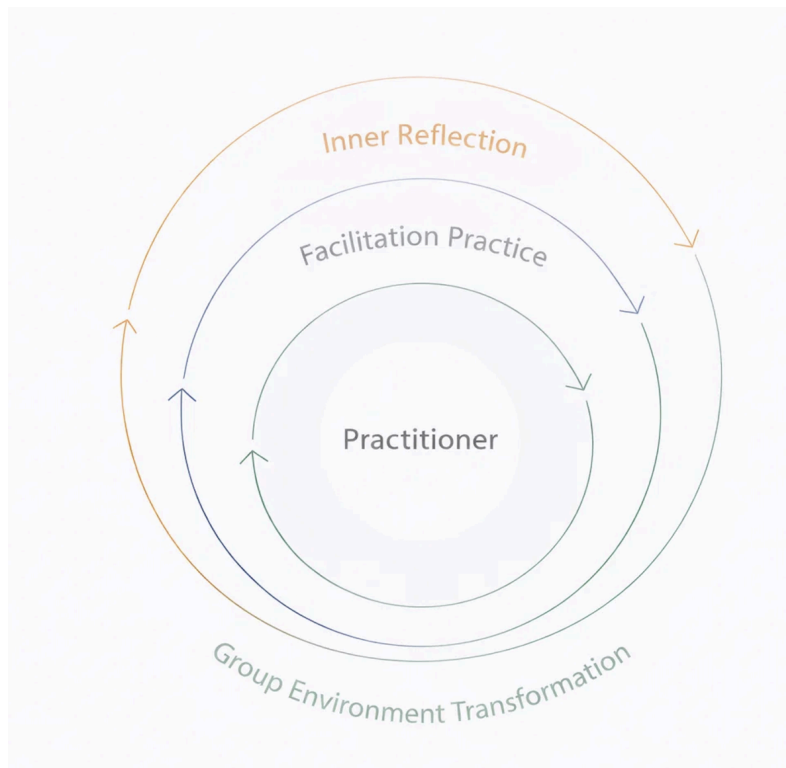
The development of ABT also led to important insights regarding the role of the practitioner. Several researchers described a gradual shift in facilitation practice that involved moving away from rigid clinical frameworks toward more responsive forms of engagement.

Pallavi Chander (2012) reflected that working with non-verbal children often required facilitators to rely on observation, intuition, and sensitivity to subtle behavioural cues. In such contexts, conventional therapeutic frameworks sometimes proved insufficient for understanding the full complexity of children's responses.

This shift aligns with the philosophical concept of phronesis, or practical wisdom. Within the ABT context, phronesis refers to the facilitator's capacity to interpret emerging situations and respond thoughtfully in the moment.

Anagha K. A. noted that many of the most meaningful moments during sessions were difficult to describe through conventional language. Participants sometimes demonstrated shifts in engagement, awareness, or interaction that felt significant yet resisted straightforward measurement.

Facilitators increasingly came to recognise that their own presence, patience, and openness played an important role in shaping the environment of the session. Rather than directing every activity, practitioners often learned to step back and observe how participants navigated the creative space.



Two-Way Learning

The concept of two-way learning also emerged as a recurring theme in the action research projects. Traditional therapeutic models often position practitioners as experts delivering interventions to passive recipients. However, many ABT practitioners reported experiences in which the learning process unfolded in both directions.

Sasha Braganza (2014) described how interactions with children encouraged facilitators to reconsider their own assumptions about presence, attention, and joy. Participants frequently demonstrated the ability to remain fully engaged in the moment, finding enjoyment in simple activities and responding creatively to unexpected situations.

Achuta Nadapana (2014) similarly reflected on the personal transformation that occurred through sustained engagement with the arts. Facilitators often reported increased patience, openness, and emotional awareness as they adapted to the rhythms of the group.

The Subtle Energy Guide (SEG), an element incorporated into the ABT framework, supported this process by encouraging introspection and mindfulness among practitioners. Rohini Chidambaran (2018)

observed that these reflective practices helped facilitators remain calm during challenging situations and develop greater sensitivity to subtle changes in participants' behaviour.

Through this process, practitioners reported increased confidence in navigating unfamiliar situations while maintaining a balance between structured preparation and openness to emerging possibilities.

Creativity, Expression, and Sublimation

Several action research projects also highlighted the idea that every child possesses an inherent capacity for creative expression. Achuta Nadapana (2014) described ABT as an experiential process in which children begin with their existing abilities and gradually expand their expressive range through artistic engagement.

Rohini Chidambaran (2018) observed that even very young children respond naturally to rhythm, melody, and visual stimuli. Long before developing formal language skills, children use gestures, facial expressions, and movement to communicate their needs and emotions.

Through artistic activities such as painting, singing, or drumming, participants were able to externalise experiences that might otherwise remain internalised. Pallavi Chander (2012) noted that improvements in speech were often accompanied by richer forms of expression in visual arts.

These creative processes also supported the psychological mechanism of sublimation, in which emotional tension or excess energy is transformed into constructive expression. Gitanjali Sarangan (2011) observed that rhythmic and visual activities provided alternative channels through which children could release frustration, anxiety, or excitement.

Rhythmic engagement often produced calming effects, allowing participants to regulate their energy levels and focus more effectively on group activities. This process contributed to improvements in attention, memory, and motor coordination.

Time, Continuity, and Participation

A final theme emerging from the research concerned the importance of sustained engagement over time. Many studies within the action research projects were conducted over approximately three months, typically involving around thirty-five sessions.

While these studies demonstrated promising outcomes, several practitioners expressed the view that such durations represented only the beginning of a much longer developmental process. Gitanjali Sarangan (2011), Pallavi Chander (2012), and Vani Joshi (2018) all noted that artistic learning processes unfold gradually and require sustained engagement.

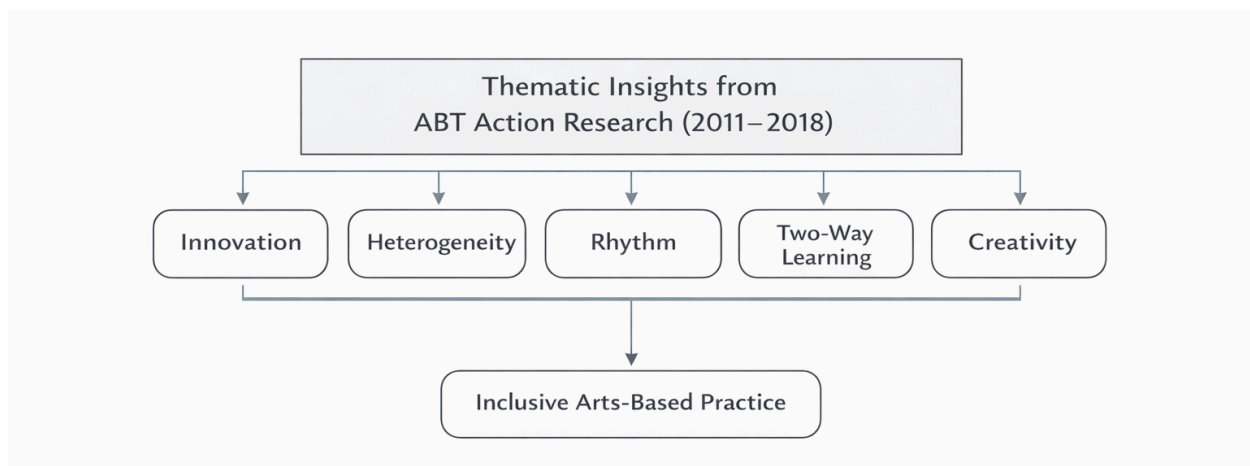
Practitioners also observed that irregular attendance could disrupt the continuity of group dynamics. Sasha Braganza (2014) and Achuta Nadapana (2014) noted that the absence of participants sometimes altered the rhythm of the group, requiring facilitators to adjust the structure of sessions.

Nevertheless, the flexibility of the ABT framework allowed participants to re-enter sessions after periods of absence without losing their sense of belonging within the group.

Conclusion

The thematic analysis of ABT action research projects conducted between 2011 and 2018 reveals a number of interconnected insights regarding the role of artistic engagement in therapeutic and educational environments. Across these studies, ABT emerged not merely as a collection of creative activities but as a broader shift in how environments of care and learning can be structured.

Through heterogeneous grouping, rhythmic engagement, practitioner reflection, and the recognition of each participant's creative potential, ABT introduced new possibilities for inclusive participation. These findings contributed to the gradual evolution of practices that would later inform the development of Arts Practices for Inclusion (API) as a broader framework for inclusive engagement across educational, therapeutic, and community contexts.



Chapter 7:

Evidence from the Field: Longitudinal Research on Arts Practices for Inclusion

(API Batches 1–9)

The research conducted across multiple cohorts of the Arts Practices for Inclusion (API) training programme provides an extensive body of evidence examining the impact of arts-based facilitation on psychosocial wellbeing, group participation, and inclusive environments. These studies collectively span API Batches 1 through 9 and represent a sustained research effort examining both participant outcomes and practitioner learning within arts-based inclusion settings.

Across these cohorts, practitioners trained through the API programme facilitated structured arts-based sessions within a wide range of social contexts. These included alternative schools, organisations supporting persons with disabilities, residential care environments, community learning spaces, and institutional care settings. Beneficiaries included neurodivergent children, adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, elderly residents in care homes, and individuals from socio-economically vulnerable backgrounds.

The research examined how participants engaged with artistic processes such as movement, rhythm, visual arts, storytelling, theatre, and play, and how these engagements influenced psychosocial wellbeing and group participation. In addition to quantitative outcome measures, practitioner facilitation reports provided qualitative insights into the dynamics of arts-based environments and the processes through which inclusion and engagement unfolded.

Across these cohorts, outcomes were assessed across three primary domains:

- emotional wellbeing
- social wellbeing
- inclusion wellbeing

Data were collected using structured assessment tools developed within the API research framework, including the Psychosocial Index Tool, Inclusion Index Tool, Socio-Emotional Domain Tool, and the API Socio-Emotional and Inclusion Tool. Statistical analyses primarily employed paired sample *t*-tests and, in certain contexts, Wilcoxon Signed-Rank tests to evaluate differences between pre-intervention and post-intervention scores.

Across the studies conducted within API Batches 1 through 9, the results demonstrate consistent positive trends across all three domains. These findings provide strong empirical support for the role of arts-based facilitation in enhancing psychosocial wellbeing and strengthening inclusive group environments across diverse beneficiary populations.

Emotional Wellbeing

One of the most consistent findings across the API research cohorts is the improvement observed in emotional and psychological wellbeing among participants following engagement in arts-based sessions.

Within the API research framework, emotional wellbeing was assessed through indicators such as emotional awareness, emotional expressiveness, emotional regulation, and emotional sensitivity.

Participation in arts-based activities appeared to provide participants with opportunities to explore emotional experiences in ways that extended beyond conventional verbal communication.

Across the research cohorts, emotional wellbeing scores increased across most beneficiary groups. Percentage improvements ranged widely across contexts, with increases recorded from approximately 10% to over 90% in certain groups. Statistical analyses across cohorts consistently demonstrated highly significant differences between pre- and post-intervention scores, with several cohorts reporting p values of $p < 0.001$.

These improvements suggest that arts-based sessions created environments where participants were able to explore and express emotions through creative processes such as storytelling, improvisation, visual art, rhythm, and movement. Such activities enabled participants to externalize emotional experiences that might otherwise remain internal or difficult to articulate.

Qualitative observations from practitioner facilitation reports reinforce these findings. Practitioners frequently described moments in which participants communicated emotional experiences through symbolic or artistic expression. In one instance, a participant used puppet storytelling to describe a character who felt lonely after losing someone important. As the story unfolded, it became evident that the narrative reflected the participant's own experience of loss. The artistic medium allowed the participant to share a deeply personal experience indirectly, creating space for empathy and acknowledgement within the group.

Movement and rhythm activities also played an important role in emotional regulation. Several practitioners reported structuring sessions to alternate between high-energy movement exercises and quieter reflective activities. For participants who experienced difficulty regulating emotional states or sustaining attention, this rhythm allowed them to release energy before transitioning into calmer activities.

From a psychological perspective, these outcomes align with theories of emotional development that emphasize the importance of expressive environments in fostering emotional awareness and regulation. The arts provide symbolic and sensory channels through which emotional experiences can be explored without requiring direct verbal articulation. Within such environments, participants can gradually develop greater awareness of their emotional states while also becoming more responsive to the emotional experiences of others.

Social Wellbeing

Improvements in social wellbeing represent another significant outcome across the API research cohorts. Social wellbeing within the API framework refers to indicators such as interpersonal communication, group participation, trust among group members, and collaborative engagement.

Across the research cohorts, statistical analyses consistently demonstrated improvements in social wellbeing scores following participation in arts-based sessions. Group-level percentage improvements ranged widely across contexts, with several groups demonstrating increases exceeding 50%, and in some cases exceeding 100%. These improvements were supported by statistically significant findings across multiple cohorts, with p values frequently below 0.001.

The collaborative nature of artistic engagement appears to play a central role in these outcomes. Many arts-based activities require participants to coordinate actions, negotiate shared creative decisions, and respond to the contributions of others. Activities such as group rhythm circles, collaborative visual artworks, collective storytelling, and ensemble movement exercises create environments in which communication and cooperation emerge organically.

Practitioner facilitation reports frequently described moments in which participants began responding to one another through artistic interaction. In one rhythm session, participants initially experimented with percussion instruments independently. Gradually, however, the group began synchronising their beats without instruction from the facilitator. Participants began watching each other's movements and adjusting their rhythms to match the emerging collective pattern. What began as individual sound-making evolved into a coordinated group rhythm that connected participants through shared attention.

Such experiences illustrate how arts-based group activities can foster social attunement and collaborative awareness. Participants who may experience barriers to conventional verbal interaction—due to disability, trauma, or social marginalisation—are able to engage through non-verbal and symbolic forms of communication.

These findings can also be understood through theories of group dynamics. As participants engage in repeated collaborative activities, groups often progress through stages of development characterised by increasing trust, shared norms, and cooperative behaviour. Arts-based processes appear to accelerate this progression by providing shared creative goals that encourage participants to interact with one another in supportive ways.

Inclusion and Collective Participation

The third domain examined across the API research cohorts was inclusion wellbeing. This domain refers to participants' sense of belonging, recognition, and participation within group environments.

Across the research cohorts, inclusion scores demonstrated consistent improvements following participation in arts-based sessions. Average increases across groups ranged from modest gains to substantial improvements exceeding 70% in certain contexts. Although the magnitude of improvement varied between groups, the overall trend indicated increased participation and greater recognition of peers within group settings.

Qualitative findings from practitioner facilitation reports provide additional insight into how inclusion developed within arts-based environments. Collaborative artistic processes often allowed participants to contribute to shared creations without the pressure of individual performance or evaluation.

One facilitation report described a collaborative drawing activity in which participants were invited to create a single large artwork together. Initially, participants hesitated, unsure where to begin. Gradually, individuals began responding to one another's drawings by extending lines, adding colours, and connecting shapes. The artwork evolved organically as participants interacted with one another's contributions.

In another instance, during a rhythm activity, one participant appeared hesitant to play their instrument. Two other participants noticed the hesitation and encouraged the group to pause and clap before the participant joined the activity. This brief moment reflected a growing awareness among participants of each other's presence and participation.

These observations suggest that arts-based group processes can create environments where individuals encounter one another through shared creative engagement rather than through predefined social identities or labels. In such contexts, participants begin to recognise themselves as part of a collective process, contributing to a sense of belonging within the group.

Practitioner Learning and Facilitation Practice

In addition to participant outcomes, the research conducted across API cohorts also revealed significant patterns in practitioner learning and facilitation practice.

Many practitioners entered the facilitation process with assumptions shaped by traditional educational or instructional models, in which the facilitator directs activities and participants follow predetermined instructions. However, repeated facilitation experiences often prompted practitioners to reconsider this role.

Practitioners reported that meaningful engagement frequently emerged when participants reinterpreted activities in unexpected ways. In one session, a facilitator had planned a visual arts activity involving natural pigments extracted from flower petals. Instead of focusing solely on colour exploration, participants began rhythmically pounding the petals against the table, producing sound and laughter. What began as a visual exercise evolved spontaneously into a rhythmic exploration shared by the entire group.

Experiences such as these encouraged practitioners to shift from directive instruction toward responsive facilitation. Facilitators learned to observe group dynamics carefully, allowing creative processes to unfold organically rather than attempting to control every aspect of the activity.

This shift required practitioners to become comfortable with uncertainty and to develop greater attentiveness to subtle changes in group energy, participation, and engagement. Over time, many practitioners reported increased confidence in allowing creative processes to emerge through participant interaction.

Sensory Engagement and Embodied Learning

Another recurring pattern across the research cohorts was the importance of sensory engagement in supporting participation and attention.

Many participants responded strongly to tactile materials, sound, movement, and colour. Arts-based environments allow sensory exploration to function as a legitimate mode of learning rather than as a distraction from structured activities.

Practitioners described sessions in which participants became deeply absorbed in tactile exploration of materials such as clay, pigments, or natural objects. In one activity involving flower petals, children experimented with crushing petals to observe the colours transferred onto paper. The sensory process of pressing and rubbing petals created a focused and immersive experience that sustained attention for extended periods.

Movement-based activities also supported embodied awareness. Exercises involving mirroring and spatial exploration encouraged participants to notice how their bodies moved in relation to others. In one session, participants were invited to observe their reflections in mirrors while experimenting with simple poses. The activity prompted curiosity, laughter, and moments of self-recognition.

These observations highlight how embodied learning through the arts can stimulate curiosity, attention, and presence among participants who may struggle with conventional classroom-based learning environments.

Reliability and Methodological Strengths

The research conducted across API cohorts also incorporated methodological measures to strengthen reliability and validity. One study included an analysis of inter-rater reliability to examine the consistency of scoring across observers.

Using Pearson's correlation coefficient, the agreement between the primary observer and co-observer produced a strong positive correlation of $r = 0.93$ ($p < 0.001$) across 2,876 observations. This high level of agreement indicates that the assessment framework used within the API research process was interpreted consistently by multiple evaluators.

The research also incorporated effect size measures such as Cohen's d , allowing researchers to examine the practical significance of observed changes in addition to statistical significance.

Over successive cohorts, the assessment framework itself was refined through clearer definitions of indicators, improved scoring criteria, and structured data collection methods. These refinements contributed to increasing reliability and robustness in evaluating arts-based interventions.

Implications for Arts Practices for Inclusion

Taken together, the findings from API Batches 1 through 9 highlight the potential of multi-arts practices as effective strategies for supporting psychosocial wellbeing and inclusive participation.

Arts-based practices provide multiple entry points for engagement because they operate across sensory, symbolic, and embodied modes of expression. Participants can engage through movement, rhythm, colour, gesture, and narrative, allowing individuals with diverse communication styles and abilities to participate meaningfully.

The collaborative nature of many artistic activities also fosters social interaction and shared experience. Through collective creation, participants develop awareness of one another's presence and contributions, strengthening group cohesion and social connection.

Finally, the research suggests that the facilitation process itself plays an important role in shaping these environments. Practitioners who adopt responsive and attentive facilitation approaches are able to create spaces in which participants feel safe to explore, experiment, and express themselves.



Conclusion

The cumulative findings from research conducted across API Batches 1 through 9 provide strong evidence that Arts Practices for Inclusion can significantly enhance emotional wellbeing, social participation, and inclusive group environments among diverse beneficiary populations.

Across multiple cohorts and contexts—including disability organisations, community groups, educational institutions, and care environments—participants demonstrated improvements in emotional awareness, interpersonal interaction, and participation within group settings.

Equally significant are the insights gained regarding facilitation practice and the role of the arts as a medium of communication and collective engagement. Artistic processes enable participants to encounter one another through shared creative exploration, creating environments where expression, participation, and belonging can emerge.

These findings reinforce a central premise of Arts Practices for Inclusion: that the arts are not merely creative activities but powerful processes through which individuals and communities can explore expression, participation, and collective human experience.

Chapter 8:

Facilitation as Practice: Practitioner Learning and Transformation in API

Introduction

Over the past decade, the Arts-Based Therapy (ABT) and Arts Practices for Inclusion (API) training programmes have supported practitioners working across education, therapy, community development, and social inclusion contexts. These programmes aim to equip practitioners with arts-based facilitation approaches that centre participation, relationality, and inclusive practice.

While much of the work of these practitioners is documented through programme reports, case studies, and participant outcomes, it is equally important to understand how practitioners themselves experience the long-term impact of their training. Practitioner reflection provides insight into how facilitation approaches evolve over time, how practitioners internalize principles of inclusion, and how these frameworks shape professional identity and practice.

To examine this trajectory, a Practitioner Reflection Questionnaire was administered to individuals who completed ABT or API training programmes between 2011 and 2025. The aim of this reflection exercise was not to evaluate the training programme itself, but rather to understand how practitioners perceive the role of the arts in their work today, how their understanding of inclusion has evolved, and what shifts they observe in their facilitation spaces.

A total of 59 practitioners responded to the questionnaire. Respondents represent diverse practice contexts including therapeutic settings, community-based programmes, educational environments, and interdisciplinary inclusion work.

The reflections offer a valuable longitudinal perspective on how arts-based facilitation practices mature and embed themselves in practitioners' professional and personal frameworks over time.

Methodology

Study Design

The study used a mixed-method reflective questionnaire, combining quantitative rating-scale responses with short qualitative reflective prompts.

The questionnaire was designed to capture three broad dimensions of practitioner development:

1. Conceptual understanding of inclusion
2. Facilitation practice and group dynamics
3. Professional and personal transformation

The instrument consisted of:

- Likert-scale questions (1–5 scale) assessing perceived shifts in understanding, practice, and group outcomes.
- Structured categorical questions about how practitioners currently use arts practices.
- Open-ended reflection prompts capturing practitioner voice and experiential insight.

The questionnaire was distributed digitally and responses were collected through an online form.

Participants

The study includes 59 practitioners who completed either the ABT or API training programme between 2011 and 2025.

Participants reported varying levels of practice experience following training, and they work across a range of settings, including:

- therapeutic and psychosocial support spaces
- community programmes
- educational environments
- inclusive arts initiatives
- interdisciplinary social sector work

This diversity provides a broad view of how arts-based facilitation is applied across different contexts.

Questionnaire Structure

The questionnaire consisted of three key sections.

1. Role of the Arts in Practice

Practitioners were asked to identify how the arts function in their current practice across four conceptual frames:

- Therapeutic support
(emotional expression, regulation, development)
- Social connector
(building relationships and group participation)
- Inclusion tool
(bridging differences and reducing stigma)
- Social justice lens
(questioning power, voice, and access)

These categories allowed practitioners to situate their work within multiple overlapping functions of arts-based facilitation.

2. Perceived Shifts in Practice and Understanding

Participants rated the extent of change they experienced in areas such as:

- understanding of inclusion
- personal reflection required by the work
- awareness of power dynamics in facilitation
- professional identity development

Responses were recorded on a five-point scale, ranging from minimal change to transformational change.

3. Perceived Group-Level Outcomes

Practitioners also reflected on outcomes they observed in the groups they work with, including:

- social participation
- emotional wellbeing
- relational belonging
- overall group culture and inclusivity
- awareness of power and access
- reduction of barriers within groups

4. Open Reflection Questions

Two short prompts captured practitioner narratives:

- “The arts in my practice now feel like _____.”
- “Inclusion in my space today looks like _____.”

These qualitative reflections provide insight into the lived meaning practitioners attach to their work.

Results

Overview of Practitioner Responses

The practitioner reflection questionnaire generated 59 valid responses from practitioners trained in ABT or API across multiple cohorts between 2011 and 2025. The responses provide a longitudinal view of how arts-based facilitation practices evolve after training and how practitioners perceive their impact on group spaces.

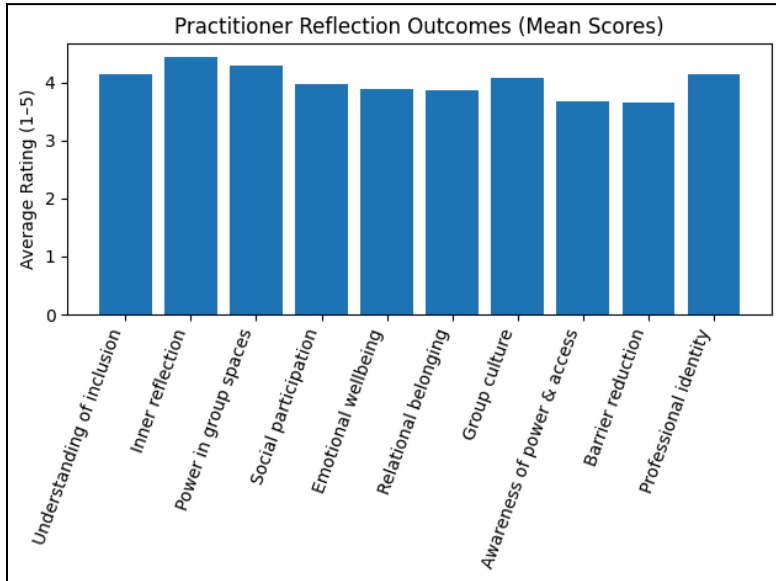
The quantitative items used a five-point Likert scale where higher scores represent deeper transformation or greater perceived impact.

Across nearly all domains, the responses cluster between 3.6 and 4.4, indicating that practitioners largely perceive moderate to significant shifts in their understanding, practice, and facilitation environments.

The highest-rated domains relate to inner practitioner transformation, while slightly lower scores appear in domains relating to structural change in group participation and barrier reduction.

Overall Mean Scores Across Domains

This figure summarises the mean ratings across ten practitioner reflection domains.



Key findings from the dataset include:

Domain	Mean
Inner reflection	4.44
Power in group spaces	4.29
Understanding of inclusion	4.14
Professional identity	4.14
Group culture	4.08
Social participation	3.97
Emotional wellbeing	3.88

Relational belonging	3.86
Awareness of power & access	3.68
Barrier reduction	3.64

Two major patterns emerge from this data:

1. Practitioner-level transformation scores highest
2. Group-level shifts appear moderate but consistent

This suggests that arts-based facilitation begins with a transformation in practitioner consciousness, which subsequently influences group environments.

Practitioner-Level Transformation

Deep Personal Reflection

The strongest reported outcome relates to inner reflection, with a mean score of 4.44.

This indicates that practitioners overwhelmingly perceive arts-based facilitation as requiring continuous self-examination and awareness. Unlike many structured training models that emphasize skill acquisition alone, practitioners in this study describe their work as involving an ongoing reflective process.

Several practitioners note that arts-based facilitation demands attention to:

- personal biases
- emotional responses
- relational dynamics
- positionality within group spaces.

This pattern suggests that the ABT-API training experience functions not only as professional development but also as a process of practitioner transformation.

Shifts in Understanding of Inclusion

The mean score for change in understanding of inclusion is 4.14, indicating a substantial shift in how practitioners conceptualize inclusion.

Prior to training, many practitioners reported associating inclusion primarily with access or accommodation. Over time, however, their reflections suggest a shift toward understanding inclusion as:

- relational practice
- participatory process
- ongoing negotiation within group spaces.

Practitioners frequently describe inclusion not as a fixed state but as something that must be continuously held and cultivated within facilitation environments.

Changes in Facilitation and Power Dynamics

Practitioners reported significant changes in how they approach authority and leadership in group contexts.

The mean rating for influence on holding power in group spaces is 4.29.

This reflects a transition from hierarchical facilitation models toward more shared and participatory approaches.

Practitioners described several facilitation shifts, including:

- moving from instruction toward facilitation
- allowing participant-led exploration
- creating spaces where multiple voices can shape group direction.

These findings suggest that arts-based facilitation can reshape the structure of leadership within group environments, encouraging more collaborative forms of engagement.

Professional Identity Development

The influence of the ABT–API journey on professional identity also scored highly, with a mean rating of 4.14.

For many practitioners, engagement with arts-based facilitation appears to extend beyond specific programmes and becomes integrated into their broader professional orientation.

Practitioners reported that the training influenced:

- career pathways
- facilitation philosophy
- interdisciplinary collaborations
- long-term practice frameworks.

For some respondents, the training redefined their professional trajectory, prompting them to integrate arts-based methodologies across multiple domains of work.

Group-Level Outcomes

While practitioner transformation appears strongest, respondents also reported observable shifts in the groups with whom they work.

Social Participation

The mean score for social participation is 3.97, indicating moderate to significant improvement in participant engagement.

Practitioners frequently reported increases in:

- participant voice
- collaborative engagement
- willingness to contribute.

Arts-based facilitation appears particularly effective in creating multiple entry points for participation, allowing individuals to engage in ways that suit their comfort and communication styles.

Emotional Wellbeing

The domain of emotional wellbeing received a mean score of 3.88.

Practitioners observed improvements in participants' ability to:

- express emotions
- regulate feelings
- develop confidence in group settings.

Arts-based processes such as movement, storytelling, and visual expression appear to create safe avenues for emotional exploration, particularly in groups where verbal communication alone may be limiting.

Relational Belonging

Relational belonging scored 3.86, reflecting improvements in interpersonal connection within groups.

Practitioners noted increased:

- peer connection
- shared ownership of group space
- reduction in stigma between participants.

This suggests that arts-based facilitation contributes to building relational cohesion, particularly in diverse or mixed-ability groups.

Overall Group Culture

The domain of overall group culture received a mean score of 4.08, indicating that practitioners perceive notable shifts in the inclusivity of group environments over time.

Rather than focusing solely on individual outcomes, practitioners describe arts-based facilitation as influencing the collective atmosphere of the space.

Group spaces were described as becoming:

- more participatory
- more open to diverse forms of expression
- less hierarchical.

Awareness of Power, Privilege, and Access

The mean score for this domain was 3.68, reflecting moderate growth in awareness of structural and interpersonal power dynamics within groups.

Practitioners reported that arts-based processes can make power relations more visible and therefore more discussable within group contexts.

However, the slightly lower score suggests that structural awareness develops gradually, often through extended facilitation experience.

Reduction of Barriers

The lowest mean score in the dataset relates to reduction of visible and invisible barriers, at 3.64.

This result is important. It indicates that while arts-based facilitation can create more inclusive spaces, practitioners recognize that structural barriers cannot always be removed through facilitation alone.

These barriers may include:

- institutional constraints
- resource limitations
- societal stigma.

Nevertheless, practitioners report that arts-based facilitation can help mitigate the impact of these barriers within group environments.

Qualitative Themes

Analysis of the open-ended responses reveals several recurring conceptual themes.

The Arts as a Shared Language

Many practitioners describe the arts as functioning as a non-verbal language of connection.

The arts provide avenues for communication that extend beyond traditional verbal or cognitive frameworks, allowing participants with different abilities, backgrounds, and experiences to engage meaningfully with one another.

Inclusion as a Process

Practitioners consistently describe inclusion as something that is actively practiced rather than achieved.

Inclusion is understood as:

- holding space for multiple voices
- adapting facilitation to participant needs
- allowing different modes of participation.

Facilitation as Relational Practice

Another recurring theme is the shift toward understanding facilitation as a relational practice.

Practitioners describe their role less as directing outcomes and more as:

- holding space
- guiding collective exploration
- supporting shared meaning-making.

Discussion

The findings of this practitioner reflection study highlight the multi-layered nature of arts-based facilitation as both a professional practice and a relational methodology.

One of the most striking insights from the dataset is the strong emphasis on practitioner transformation. The highest mean scores occur in domains related to personal reflection, power dynamics, and professional identity. This suggests that arts-based facilitation requires practitioners to engage in an ongoing process of self-awareness and reflexivity.

This aligns with theoretical perspectives in participatory and relational pedagogy, which argue that inclusive facilitation cannot be reduced to techniques or programme structures. Instead, it depends on the practitioner's capacity to remain attentive to relational dynamics, power structures, and participant experience.

Another important finding relates to the relationship between practitioner transformation and group outcomes. While practitioner-level shifts appear very strong, group-level outcomes show slightly more moderate scores. This pattern suggests that changes in group culture and participation may develop gradually over time as practitioners deepen their facilitation practice. While arts-based practices can create more inclusive micro-environments within groups, larger institutional and societal structures continue to influence participation and access.

Nevertheless, practitioners consistently describe arts-based facilitation as creating conditions in which new forms of participation become possible, even within constrained environments.

Overall, the findings reinforce the idea that arts-based facilitation functions not simply as a tool for engagement but as a framework for relational inclusion.

Conclusion

This practitioner reflection study offers valuable insight into the long-term influence of the ABT-API training journey on facilitation practice and inclusive group environments.

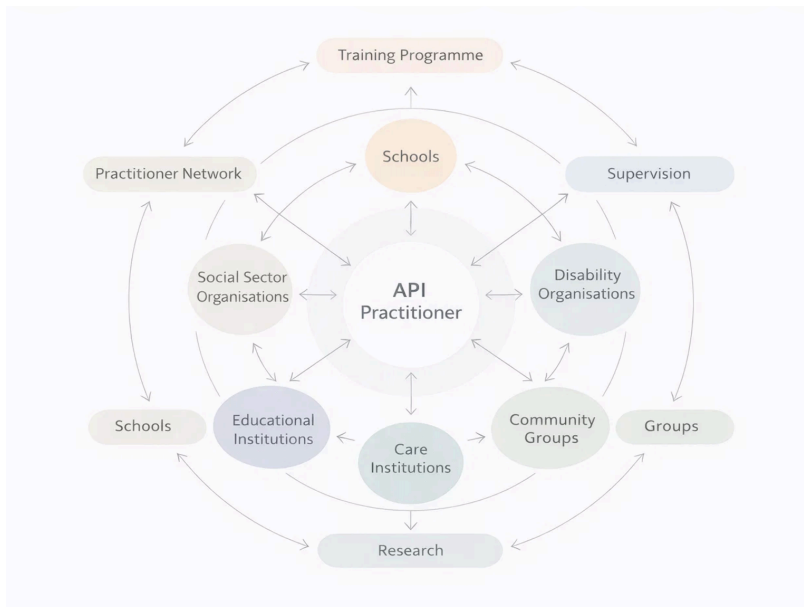
Across a sample of 59 practitioners working in diverse contexts, the findings reveal strong evidence of both personal and professional transformation. Practitioners report deep shifts in their understanding of inclusion, their facilitation approach, and their professional identity.

At the practitioner level, the work appears to cultivate ongoing reflection, greater awareness of power dynamics, and a move toward participatory facilitation models. These changes appear to influence the structure and atmosphere of the group spaces practitioners hold.

At the group level, practitioners report improvements in participation, emotional expression, relational belonging, and overall group culture. Although structural barriers to inclusion remain present in many contexts, arts-based facilitation appears to create environments in which participants experience greater voice, connection, and shared ownership of space.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the ABT-API facilitation journey functions not merely as a training programme but as a long-term developmental process for practitioners.

Through sustained engagement with the arts, practitioners cultivate the capacity to hold spaces that are responsive, participatory, and inclusive. In this way, arts-based facilitation becomes both a practice of inclusion and a way of understanding relationships within communities.



Chapter 9:

Toward a National Framework for Arts Practices for Inclusion

The research, practice insights, and institutional experiences documented throughout this compendium collectively illustrate the transformative potential of arts-based engagement within inclusive social systems. Over more than a decade of sustained work across diverse contexts, the development of Arts Practices for Inclusion (API) has demonstrated that artistic processes can function as powerful mediums for participation, expression, and shared human experience.

The findings across the research cohorts indicate that arts-based facilitation contributes significantly to improvements in emotional wellbeing, social interaction, and inclusive participation among diverse beneficiary groups. Participants engaged in creative processes not merely as recipients of intervention but as active contributors to shared artistic environments. Through movement, rhythm, storytelling, visual arts, and play, individuals discovered new ways of communicating, collaborating, and expressing personal experiences.

Importantly, the impact of these practices extends beyond individual psychosocial outcomes. The arts create environments where people encounter one another beyond conventional social labels, diagnostic categories, or institutional roles. Within such environments, differences in ability, background, and life experience become part of a shared creative field rather than barriers to participation.

Equally significant are the insights regarding practitioner development. The research reveals that arts-based facilitation requires a shift in the role of the practitioner—from directing outcomes to cultivating spaces where creative exploration can emerge organically. Practitioners learn to observe subtle group dynamics, respond to unexpected moments, and support participants in ways that emphasise presence, attentiveness, and openness.

These insights suggest that arts-based inclusion should not be understood merely as a programme or intervention but as a broader approach to designing inclusive social environments. When embedded within educational institutions, community organisations, and care systems, arts practices can create structures that support participation for individuals who may otherwise remain excluded from conventional frameworks.

The cumulative evidence presented in this compendium therefore points toward the possibility of a broader national framework for arts-based inclusion. Such a framework would recognise the arts as essential components of human development, psychosocial wellbeing, and community participation. Rather than treating artistic engagement as an optional enrichment activity, institutions could begin to integrate arts practices into the foundational structures of education, community care, and social development.

In the Indian context—where diversity of language, culture, and ability forms a defining feature of society—arts-based approaches hold particular promise. Artistic processes transcend linguistic and cognitive barriers, allowing individuals to participate through movement, rhythm, gesture, and imagination. These processes offer pathways for participation that are accessible across diverse populations.

The journey documented in this compendium represents only the beginning of a broader movement toward arts-based inclusion. As practitioners, researchers, educators, and communities continue to explore the possibilities of artistic engagement, the field of Arts Practices for Inclusion has the potential to contribute meaningfully to more compassionate, creative, and inclusive societies.

Ultimately, the arts remind us that inclusion is not merely a policy objective but a lived experience. When individuals gather to create, imagine, and express together, they encounter one another through shared humanity. In such spaces, participation becomes possible for all.

Chapter 10:

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