



**Arts Practices for Inclusion (API)
Practitioner Facilitation Research Report
Batch 2025–26**

Executive Summary

This research report presents an analysis of facilitation practice undertaken by practitioners in the Arts Practices for Inclusion (API) training programme during the 2025–26 cohort. The report examines how practitioners implemented arts-based facilitation across diverse social contexts and how participants engaged with the arts as a medium for inclusion.

The analysis draws upon **34 facilitation reports submitted by 17 practitioners**, covering two terms of field practice. These practitioners facilitated sessions across a variety of settings including alternative schools, organisations supporting persons with disabilities, residential care environments, and community-based learning spaces.

Across these contexts, practitioners collectively engaged **approximately 269 participants**, including neurodivergent children, adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, elderly residents in care homes, and participants from socio-economically vulnerable backgrounds.

The findings indicate that the arts functioned as a powerful language for fostering participation, expression, and relational engagement across diverse groups. Participants engaged with visual expression, movement, rhythm, storytelling, theatre, and play in ways that enabled communication beyond conventional verbal frameworks.

Thematic analysis of facilitation reports revealed several key insights:

- practitioners experienced significant transformation in their approach to facilitation, moving from instruction-based methods toward responsive and relational practice
- the arts created multiple entry points for participation, allowing individuals with varied communication styles and abilities to engage meaningfully
- collaborative artistic processes fostered empathy, peer support, and collective belonging
- sensory and embodied engagement enabled participants to access emotional expression and self-regulation

The research suggests that arts-based facilitation, when grounded in principles of inclusion and relational engagement, can cultivate environments where participants encounter one another beyond social labels or perceived limitations.

The findings contribute to the growing discourse on arts-based methodologies in inclusive education, community practice, and therapeutic environments.



1. Introduction

Arts Practices for Inclusion (API) positions the arts as a relational language through which individuals and communities can explore identity, connection, and shared experience. Within this framework, the arts are not treated as disciplines restricted to aesthetic production or performance. Rather, they function as experiential processes that allow participants to encounter themselves and others through imagination, sensory exploration, and collaborative creation.

The API framework emphasises that inclusive practice cannot be achieved solely through structural access or policy directives. Inclusion emerges through relational processes where individuals feel recognised, heard, and able to participate authentically. The arts provide such relational spaces because they allow multiple forms of expression and interpretation.

The API textbook articulates that artistic processes enable participants to access forms of knowledge that are experiential, embodied, and relational rather than purely cognitive. Artistic engagement therefore allows individuals to encounter difference not as deficit but as diversity within a shared creative field.

The practitioner training programme prepares facilitators to hold such spaces across diverse social contexts.

This report analyses the facilitation experiences of the API Batch 2025–26 cohort in order to understand how these principles manifest in practice.

2. Research Objectives

The research aims to:

1. analyse how practitioners implemented arts practices within different community contexts
2. examine participant engagement with arts-based activities
3. identify patterns in facilitator learning and development
4. explore how arts practices contribute to inclusion and relational engagement

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study uses **qualitative thematic analysis** to examine practitioner facilitation reports.

Facilitation reports function as reflective narratives documenting:

- participant contexts
- session objectives



- facilitation strategies
- participant responses
- practitioner reflections

These reports provide rich qualitative data on the lived processes of arts-based facilitation.

Data Sources

Source	Quantity
Practitioners	17
Facilitation reports	34
Terms analysed	2
Approx participants	269

Data Analysis Process

The analysis involved three stages:

Stage 1: Familiarisation

All facilitation reports were read multiple times to understand the range of contexts and practices.

Stage 2: Coding

Key patterns relating to facilitation approaches, participant engagement, and group dynamics were identified.

Stage 3: Thematic Development

Codes were grouped into broader themes representing recurring patterns across practitioners.



4. Practitioner and Participant Overview

Practitioner Distribution

Category	Number
Practitioners	17
Reports analysed	34
Terms covered	2

Participant Context Distribution

Context	Practitioners	Approx Participants
Neurodivergent children	6	90
Adults with intellectual & developmental disabilities	5	75
Inclusive schools	2	30
Senior citizens	1	14
Mixed disability residential groups	2	40
Children with trauma contexts	1	20

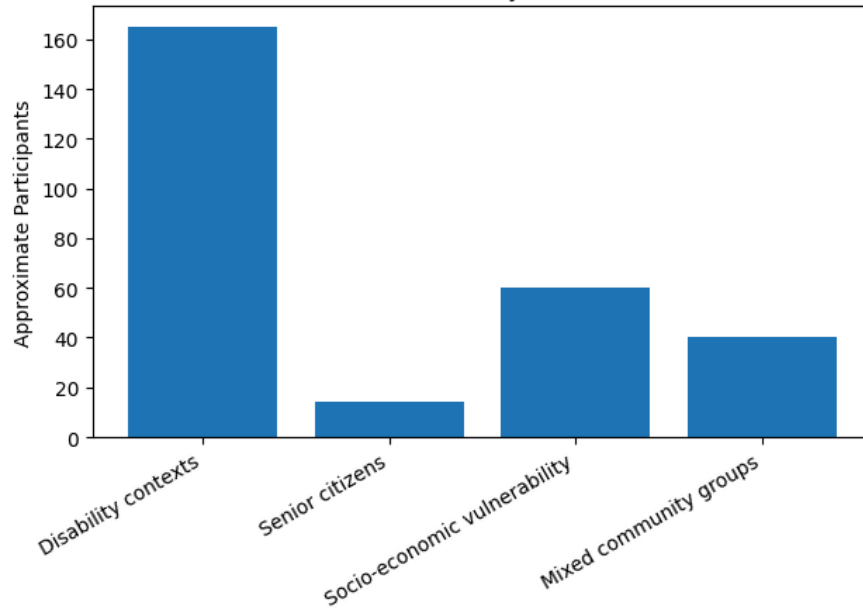


Participant Demographics

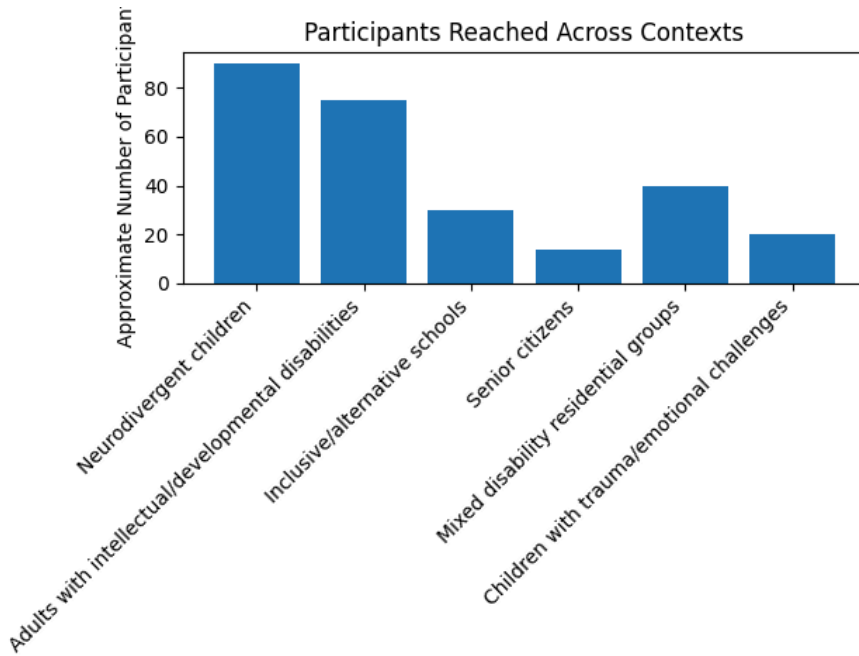
Category	Approx Participants
Disability contexts	165
Socio-economic vulnerability	60
Mixed community groups	40
Senior citizens	14

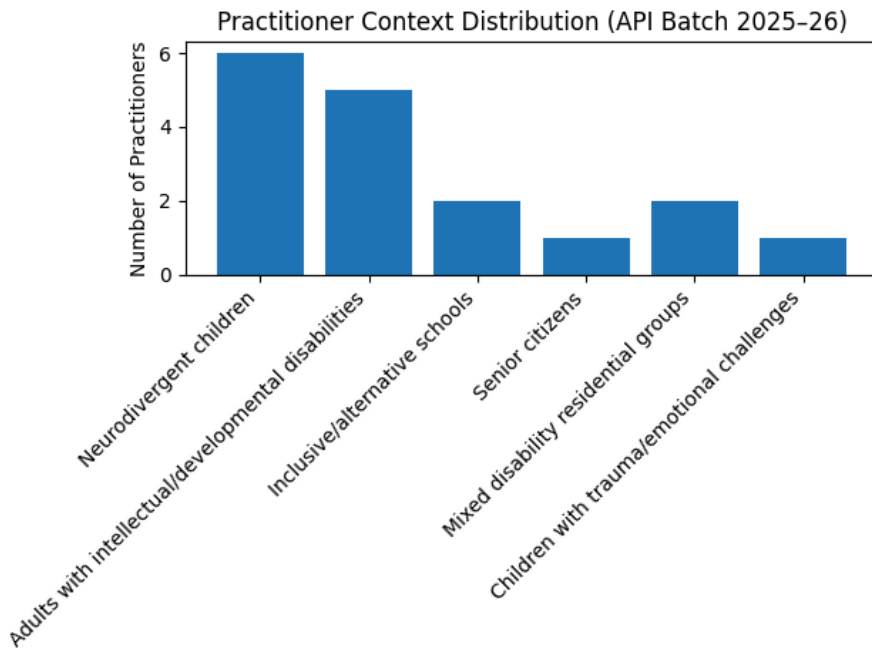


Overall Beneficiary Distribution



Participants Reached Across Contexts





5. Theoretical Framing

The conceptual foundation for this analysis is grounded in the Arts Practices for Inclusion framework.

The API philosophy recognises the arts as processes through which individuals can explore identity, emotion, and relational presence. The framework emphasises experiential learning where participants engage through sensory, imaginative, and embodied modes of knowing.

Within API, artistic processes are structured through a facilitation arc consisting of:

- circling
- warming
- creating
- closure

This arc mirrors relational processes of gathering, attuning, expressing, and integrating.

The arts enable multiple entry points for engagement because they operate across sensory modalities and symbolic expression. Participants therefore engage through movement, sound, colour, gesture, and narrative.



This multiplicity allows individuals with varied abilities and communication styles to participate meaningfully.

6. Thematic Analysis

The facilitation reports were examined through thematic analysis in order to identify recurring patterns across practitioner experiences and participant engagement. Thematic analysis enables the systematic identification of patterns in qualitative data and helps illuminate underlying processes within complex social and educational environments.

In this study, facilitation reports were read iteratively to identify themes relating to practitioner learning, participant engagement, group dynamics, and the role of the arts in fostering inclusive environments. Each report contained rich narrative descriptions of sessions, reflections on participant responses, and observations about the facilitation process. By analysing these narratives collectively, it became possible to identify shared patterns across practitioners working in very different contexts.

The themes presented below do not represent isolated observations but rather interconnected processes that emerged repeatedly across reports. Together, they reveal how arts practices create spaces for relational engagement, creative exploration, and inclusive participation.

Theme 1

Facilitator Transformation

One of the most prominent patterns across the facilitation reports is the transformation experienced by practitioners themselves. Many practitioners began the facilitation process with assumptions shaped by traditional educational or training environments, where the facilitator's role is often understood as directing activities, explaining instructions clearly, and ensuring that participants follow a predetermined structure.

However, as sessions unfolded, practitioners gradually discovered that arts-based facilitation within the API framework requires a different orientation. Rather than controlling the direction of sessions, facilitators learned to cultivate attentiveness to the group's energy, responses, and emerging dynamics. This shift often occurred through moments when activities did not proceed as expected.

For example, one practitioner described planning a carefully structured visual exploration activity using natural materials. The intention was for participants to experiment with colours extracted from flower petals and observe the transformation of pigments. Instead, several children began rhythmically pounding the petals against the table surface, producing sound and laughter. The facilitator initially attempted to redirect the group toward the planned outcome but soon recognised that the spontaneous rhythm created a



collective moment of engagement. What began as a visual arts exercise evolved into a playful rhythmic experience shared across the group.

Moments such as these prompted practitioners to reconsider their role within the session. Rather than directing participants toward specific outcomes, facilitators began to recognise the importance of holding space for exploration. The facilitator's role gradually shifted from that of instructor to that of observer, listener, and participant within the creative process.

Several practitioners reflected that this transformation required them to become comfortable with uncertainty. The arts-based facilitation process often involves unpredictable moments, where participants reinterpret activities in ways that were not anticipated in the original plan. Learning to trust these moments and allow them to unfold became an important part of practitioner growth.

Through repeated facilitation experiences, practitioners began to recognise that meaningful engagement often emerges not from carefully controlled activities but from moments when participants are able to respond authentically to the creative environment.

Theme 2

The Arts as a Language Beyond Words

Another powerful theme emerging across the facilitation reports is the role of the arts as a language beyond verbal communication. Many participant groups included individuals who experienced difficulty with conventional forms of verbal expression due to cognitive, sensory, or emotional factors. In such contexts, the arts created alternative pathways through which participants could communicate their thoughts, feelings, and relational awareness.

Participants engaged with visual expression, movement, rhythm, storytelling, and gesture in ways that allowed them to express themselves without relying solely on speech. These forms of expression often revealed emotional and social awareness that might not otherwise have been visible within traditional communication frameworks.

In one facilitation setting involving adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, a practitioner described a clay exploration activity in which participants were invited to shape simple forms and pass them around the group. One participant, who rarely spoke during sessions, quietly collected the clay moulds and began distributing them to others in the circle. After ensuring that each participant had received one, he kept the final mould for himself and smiled briefly at the facilitator. The gesture was subtle but meaningful; it demonstrated awareness of the group and an intention to ensure that others were included before attending to his own participation.

In another session involving rhythm instruments, participants began experimenting with shakers and drums without any formal coordination. Gradually, the group began responding to one another's sounds,



synchronising beats and pauses. What initially appeared to be a collection of individual sounds evolved into a shared rhythm that connected the group. Participants who had not previously interacted began looking toward one another and adjusting their tempo to match the emerging pattern.

Such experiences illustrate how the arts enable communication through embodied and sensory processes. Participants who may struggle to express themselves verbally can still communicate intention, attention, and relational awareness through artistic interaction.

Theme 3

Collective Creation and the Emergence of Belonging

Across many facilitation contexts, the arts created opportunities for participants to experience belonging through collective creation. Unlike many structured learning environments that emphasise individual performance or evaluation, arts-based sessions often invite participants to create together.

Collaborative activities such as group rhythm circles, shared drawings, and collective storytelling allowed participants to contribute to a shared process rather than producing individual outputs. This shift from individual performance to collective creation helped reduce the pressure associated with “getting things right” and encouraged participants to focus on the experience of being present with others.

One practitioner described a session in which participants were invited to create a large collaborative artwork on a single sheet of paper. Initially, participants hesitated, unsure about where or how to begin. Some individuals worked quietly in small sections of the page, while others observed from a distance. Gradually, participants began responding to one another’s drawings by extending shapes, connecting colours, or adding patterns that complemented existing elements. The artwork evolved organically as a collective expression rather than a set of separate contributions.

Another facilitation report described a rhythm activity in which participants were invited to pass a beat around the circle. At one point during the activity, a participant appeared withdrawn and hesitant to play their instrument. Two other participants noticed the hesitation and encouraged the group to pause and clap for the participant before continuing. The moment was brief but significant. It demonstrated that participants had begun to notice one another and respond with empathy.

Such experiences suggest that collaborative arts processes can foster social awareness and mutual recognition within groups. The shared act of creating together allows participants to encounter one another not through labels or roles but through the experience of participation.

Theme 4

Emotional Expression and Regulation Through the Arts



Many practitioners observed that the arts created opportunities for participants to explore emotional experiences in ways that felt safe and non-threatening. Emotional expression often emerged through symbolic or imaginative processes rather than direct verbal discussion.

In one session, participants were invited to draw or paint what they described as their “happy place.” The activity prompted participants to reflect on environments or memories associated with comfort and safety. Some participants drew landscapes such as beaches or gardens, while others used abstract colours and shapes to represent feelings rather than places. During the sharing circle that followed, participants spoke about what their drawings meant to them, revealing personal memories and emotional associations.

Movement and rhythm activities also played an important role in emotional regulation. Several practitioners described alternating between high-energy activities and quieter reflective moments within sessions. For participants who experienced difficulty with attention or emotional regulation, this rhythm allowed them to release energy through movement before transitioning into calmer activities.

In one group of elderly residents, storytelling sessions often prompted recollections of past experiences. Participants shared memories associated with music, festivals, or family gatherings. These moments not only stimulated cognitive engagement but also created emotional connections among residents who discovered shared experiences.

The arts therefore provided a space where emotional experiences could surface gradually through creative exploration rather than through direct questioning.

Theme 5

Sensory Engagement and Embodied Learning

Sensory engagement emerged as a significant dimension of arts-based facilitation. Many participants responded strongly to tactile materials, sound, movement, and colour. The arts create environments where sensory exploration becomes a legitimate form of learning rather than a distraction from it.

Several practitioners described sessions in which participants became deeply absorbed in tactile exploration of materials. In one activity involving flower pigments, children experimented with crushing petals to observe how colour transferred onto paper. The tactile process of pressing and rubbing the petals created an immersive sensory experience. Participants who often struggled with sustained attention in classroom environments remained engaged for extended periods as they watched colours emerge gradually.

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



Such experiences demonstrate how embodied learning through the arts can support attention, curiosity, and presence.

7. Anecdotes Section

The facilitation reports contained numerous narrative moments illustrating shifts in participant engagement. While many of these moments were brief, together they reveal how the arts can create conditions for transformation.

Narrative Moment 1

During an early session with a group of children, one participant remained seated near the doorway and refused to join the circle. The facilitator respected the participant's choice and continued the session without insisting on participation. Over the following weeks, the participant gradually moved closer to the group during activities. Eventually, during a movement exercise involving animal gestures, the participant stood up and joined the circle spontaneously. The moment was met with gentle encouragement from peers, marking the participant's first active participation in the group.

Narrative Moment 2

In a name-and-movement activity designed to introduce participants to one another, a shy participant quietly said her name and added a small hop as her movement. The group responded with enthusiastic clapping. Encouraged by this response, she repeated the movement with greater confidence. Over subsequent sessions, the same participant began volunteering first during activities and encouraging others to participate.

Narrative Moment 3

During a puppet storytelling activity, participants were invited to create characters and imagine short narratives. One participant used a puppet to describe a character who felt angry and lonely after losing someone important. As the story unfolded, it became clear that the participant was speaking indirectly about the loss of a relative. The activity opened a space for the group to listen and respond with empathy.

Narrative Moment 4

In a geriatric care facility, an elderly participant with limited speech spent an entire session colouring quietly. Although the participant did not participate verbally, they periodically lifted the drawing and showed it to nearby participants. Each time, they smiled broadly when someone acknowledged the drawing.

Narrative Moment 5



In a rhythm circle, participants were experimenting with different percussion instruments. Gradually the group began synchronising beats without any instruction from the facilitator. Participants began watching each other's hands and adjusting their rhythms. The resulting sound created a moment of collective focus that lasted several minutes.

8. Research Discussion

The findings of this research highlight several important insights for the field of arts-based inclusion.

First, the arts create environments where participation is not dependent on a single form of competence. In many conventional learning settings, communication and engagement rely heavily on verbal expression and cognitive processing. Individuals who struggle within these frameworks may therefore be perceived as disengaged or incapable. The arts challenge this assumption by enabling multiple forms of participation through sensory, symbolic, and embodied expression.

Second, facilitation within arts-based inclusion requires practitioners to adopt a relational approach rather than an instructional one. The facilitator's role is not to deliver knowledge but to create conditions where participants feel safe enough to explore, experiment, and respond to one another. This relational orientation allows participants to engage with authenticity rather than compliance.

Third, collaborative artistic processes appear to play a significant role in fostering belonging. Shared creation allows participants to encounter one another through action rather than through predefined social identities. The act of creating together invites attention, empathy, and responsiveness.

Finally, the arts create spaces where emotional experiences can emerge gradually through metaphor, symbol, and movement. Such processes allow participants to explore emotions without the pressure of articulating them directly.

9. Conclusion

The facilitation journeys of the API Batch 2025–26 practitioners illustrate the transformative potential of arts practices within inclusive environments. Across diverse contexts — including neurodivergent children, adults with intellectual disabilities, elderly residents, and participants from socio-economically vulnerable backgrounds — the arts created spaces for exploration, expression, and relational engagement.

Participants encountered one another through shared processes of drawing, movement, rhythm, storytelling, and play. These processes enabled communication beyond language and encouraged participants to recognise one another's presence within the group.

Equally significant was the transformation experienced by practitioners. Through repeated facilitation experiences, practitioners began to shift from directive approaches toward responsive and relational



practice. They learned to trust the creative process, to observe subtle changes in group dynamics, and to recognise the value of moments that might otherwise go unnoticed.

The findings suggest that arts-based facilitation has the potential to contribute meaningfully to inclusive education, community engagement, and therapeutic environments. By creating spaces where multiple forms of participation are welcomed, the arts enable individuals to encounter one another through imagination, empathy, and shared experience.

Ultimately, the research reaffirms a central principle of Arts Practices for Inclusion: that the arts are not merely creative activities but relational practices through which individuals and communities can explore belonging, difference, and connection.

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