

Listen to Learn

Children's experiences of learning in North Belfast



**YOUNG
at ART**



**Save the
Children**

About Save the Children

In Northern Ireland, Save the Children has been working alongside children, families, and communities for over 70 years. Our mission is to work in partnership to build communities who care about children, listen to what's important to them and work together to make things better. Save the Children has worked in North Belfast for over 10 years, delivering parental engagement programmes in primary schools and supporting families experiencing hardship through our Early Years Grants programme.

About Young at Art

Established in 1998, Young at Art, Northern Ireland's leading arts provider for children and young people, is home to the flagship international Belfast Children's Festival in March each year. We also engage with children and adults year-round through our Education & Engagement and Professional Development programmes and much more.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, Save the Children (SCUK) and Young at Art (YAA) would like to thank the children who participated in the workshops. We would also like to thank the schools who collaborated in this research and facilitated the involvement of children: Cliftonville Integrated Primary School, Ligoniel Primary School, St. Columban's Primary School, Carr's Glen Primary School, St. Vincent De Paul Primary School, and Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagáin. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the leadership of the North Belfast Primary Principals Group who have a vision for children's voices to be heard and enabled this research to happen.

Contents

1	Introduction.....	3
1.1	Educational Disadvantage in North Belfast	4
1.2	Community Context in North Belfast.....	4
1.3	Policy context across Northern Ireland	4
1.3.1	A Fair Start Report and Action Plan	4
1.3.2	Children & Young People’s Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework.....	6
1.3.3	Conclusions.....	7
2	Methodology.....	8
2.1	Approach to data collection	8
2.2	Methods.....	9
2.2.1	Creative outputs	10
2.2.2	Creative conversations with children.....	10
2.2.3	Artist observation.....	10
2.2.4	Evaluation Wheels.....	11
2.2.5	Teacher Observation	11
2.3	Conclusions.....	12
3	Findings.....	13
3.1	What are children’s experiences of learning in North Belfast?.....	13
3.2	What do children think helps them to learn?	15
3.3	What do children think hinders their learning?.....	19
4	Conclusions.....	23
4.1	Creative activities and classroom engagement.....	23
4.2	The role of families and challenges at home.....	23
4.3	The role of the wider community and external influences	23
4.4	The factors that help and hinder children’s learning	24
	Appendix A – Evaluation wheel analysis	25
	Appendix B – Figure list.....	39
	Appendix C – References.....	40

1 INTRODUCTION

North Belfast has high levels of deprivation, containing almost half of the 20 most deprived neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland¹. Children in North Belfast are also at greater risk of poverty, with the area having the second highest level of child poverty in Northern Ireland (almost one in three children)².

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) defines poverty as “when a person’s resources (mainly their material resources) are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs (including social participation)”³ and there is a wide body of research that evidences the impact of poverty on children’s learning and later life outcomes (Engle & Black, 2008; Dickerson & Popli, 2018). Given this, SCUK in partnership with the North Belfast Primary Principals Group (NBPPG) felt strongly that children’s voice should be at the centre of the educational decisions that affect them and help shape the learning conditions that will support them to achieve their potential. As a result, Save the Children have funded a participatory research project exploring children’s experiences of learning in North Belfast.

This report outlines the findings from this project. The research was undertaken by Young at Art and delivered across six participating primary schools - Cliftonville Integrated Primary School, Ligoniel Primary School, St. Columban’s Primary School, Carr’s Glen Primary School, St. Vincent De Paul Primary School, and Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagáin. 77 children from the six schools participated in the research between October and December 2024. Through a series of creative and participatory workshops, they explored three key research questions:

- What are children’s experiences of learning in North Belfast:
 - In School?
 - At home?
 - In the wider community?
- What do children think helps them learn?
- What do children think hinders their learning?

The report begins by outlining some background to North Belfast, both in terms of the socio-economic context and the local collaboration taking place between primary schools and other partners. The remainder of the introduction then touches on the wider policy context within Northern Ireland around educational disadvantage. Chapter two then outlines the methodology used by Young at Art (YAA), who designed and delivered the workshops with children across North Belfast. Chapter three summarises the key findings from the workshops and chapter four draws together the key conclusions.

It is hoped that the findings from the research will help to support all those involved in creating positive learning environments for children in North Belfast.

¹ Northern Ireland Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2021 – neighbourhoods are ‘super output areas’

² End Child Poverty coalition statistics for children living in households in relative poverty (after housing costs) 2022/23 -

³ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/what-is-poverty>

1.1 EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE IN NORTH BELFAST

Educational attainment for children in North Belfast is among the lowest in Northern Ireland, with over three in ten children leaving school without achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A* to C⁴. This is not helped by recent cuts to targeted education programmes across Northern Ireland, including North Belfast, with one report concluding that these cuts will increase poverty [and] widen existing educational achievement gaps (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023).

Recent analysis undertaken by the Department of Education (DE) identified geographical areas where children and young people may require targeted investment to tackle educational underachievement. This analysis identified North Belfast as one of the areas highlighted for future strategic investment in the new RAISE programme to implement collaborative place-based investment in tackling educational under-achievement. This was based on seven indicators: Children living in low-income households, levels of Special Educational Need (SEN), number of children in receipt of free school meal entitlement (FSME), GCSE attainment at grades A*-C, rate of school attendance, percentage of poor population health and disability, and areas where there are higher levels of anti-social behaviour and crime.

1.2 COMMUNITY CONTEXT IN NORTH BELFAST

North Belfast is the only area of Belfast without a strategic partnership board following the closure of the North Belfast Partnership Board in 2018. In response to the Department for Communities review of the People and Place Strategy⁵ the four Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships (Ballysillan, Crumlin/Ardoyne, Inner North and Ligoniel) came together to convene a series of community conferences with a vision to create a cohesive voice for North Belfast. This led to the formation of the North Belfast Community Partnership and the emergence of 4 strategic priorities and 11 overarching thematic areas in focus, one of which is education. The partnership is facilitating a series of thematic led workshops with the ambition of co-designing a place-based, community led area plan for the North of the City.

1.3 POLICY CONTEXT ACROSS NORTHERN IRELAND

As well as the local context, it is also useful to briefly outline the policy context in relation to educational disadvantage in Northern Ireland. There are three key recent policies and programmes around educational disadvantage in Northern Ireland that are relevant to this project, each of which are outlined below.

1.3.1 A Fair Start Report and Action Plan

In 2020, the Minister of Education appointed an Expert Panel to examine the links between educational underachievement and socio-economic background in Northern Ireland. The Expert Panel spoke to a range of stakeholders across Northern Ireland, including children and young people. They

⁴ Department of Education statistics for school leavers - <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-leavers>

⁵ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/people-and-place-review>

produced their report in June 2021, which identified eight key areas for consideration in tackling educational disadvantage:

1. Redirecting the focus to Early Years.
2. Championing Emotional Health and Wellbeing.
3. Ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment.
4. Promoting a whole community approach to education.
5. Maximising boys' potential.
6. Driving forward Teachers' Professional Learning (TPL).
7. Supporting the professional learning and wellbeing of school leadership.
8. Ensuring Interdepartmental collaboration and delivery.

Taken together, these eight areas highlight the broad influences on children's education and learning, spanning their entire childhood and involving a range of actors from families to teachers, to the wider community.

Areas 2, 3 and 4 are of particular relevance to this project. Area 2 (Championing Emotional Health and Wellbeing) focuses on children's emotional health and wellbeing, recognising the relationship between these factors and children's ability to engage in education. The challenging context of poverty and deprivation faced by many children in North Belfast is likely to heighten the need for support around emotional health and wellbeing due to the links between poverty and adverse childhood experiences. Children's emotional health and wellbeing has also been considered in a separate policy report and framework by the DE and Department of Health (DH), which is outlined in section 1.3.2.

Area 3 (Ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of Curriculum and Assessment) focuses on the relevance of the curriculum to children's lives. The report highlights schools' responsibility to provide a broad and balanced curriculum for all children, noting the flexibility given to teachers and schools to "*adapt and combine requirements within the curriculum to prepare young people for a rapidly changing world*" (p.20) and "*give every child the opportunity to experience success in learning*" (p.20). Speaking to children directly about their experiences of learning should help educators in North Belfast to utilise this flexibility to adapt their teaching and learning support in a way that is informed by children themselves.

Area 4 emphasises the importance of a 'whole community approach to education' involving more integrated working at a local level. Place based partnerships are a key part community and education development, and such an approach is envisaged by A Fair Start and is part of the new RAISE programme.

The RAISE programme is a whole community and place-based approach in localities across Northern Ireland to support the DE's vision that "*every child is happy, learning and succeeding*". It is based upon the mission set out in 'A Fair Start' and seeks to ensure that all children and young people are given the best start in life, regardless of background.

The programme is comprised of five key elements, each of which have relevance to North Belfast:

- **Local Strategic Plans** - Developed through a codesign process and public engagement and creative approaches to involve and give voice to more people and organisations across localities.

- **Community informed projects** - Investment in local projects which have been codesigned in localities to address priorities identified in the Strategic Plan for each place.
- **Cross cutting projects** – Regional initiatives that complement community informed projects and address the specific needs or challenges facing children and young people most vulnerable to marginalisation
- **Local reference groups** – Consultative forums established in each local area to enhance connections between different stakeholders
- **Local coordinators** – Enhancing partnerships and building working relationships between local communities and the DE

As highlighted in these elements, meaningful community involvement and participation are central to the approach to tackling educational disadvantage. In turn, the programme recognises that children and young people must be at the centre of place-based and whole community approaches to education. Involving children and young people meaningfully can maximise the impact of each of these elements. Children and young people can and should play a role in helping to inform local strategic plans, co-designing community informed projects, ensuring cross cutting projects meet the specific needs of children and young people, and feeding into local reference groups. In recognition of this DE has commissioned Stranmillis University College to engage with young people across the 18 RAISE localities to gain their insights and lived experiences of learning, and Parenting Focus to engage with parents to inform the development of locally co-designed plans. This project is one example where learning may help inform the design of further opportunities for children and young people to be involved in localised plans.

1.3.2 Children & Young People’s Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework

The importance of emotional health and wellbeing was identified as a key area in tackling educational disadvantage in the ‘A Fair Start’ report. Alongside this, in 2021, the DE and DH produced a framework to enable collective responsibility in supporting the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people, as well as those working with them. The framework was borne out of concern around the wellbeing of our children and young people, expressed by those working with them in educational settings as well as their parents and carers and the children and young people themselves.

The overriding aims of this framework are:

- To ensure that children and young people are empowered and assisted to understand and manage their emotional health and wellbeing.
- That their needs are identified early and addressed effectively when required.
- To establish an integrated model that supports an early help, support and intervention focus on children’s emotional health and wellbeing needs.
- That fewer numbers of children and young people will require specialist intervention from Mental Health Services.

As with ‘A Fair Start’, the framework emphasises the importance of a holistic approach that considers the child, school, and local community (including voluntary and community organisations). In turn, the report references the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the

Children and Young People's Strategy (2020 – 2030), each of which emphasise children's right to be heard on matters that affect them. Understanding children's broad experiences of learning in North Belfast (at home, in school, and in the community) through participatory workshops can help to better understand the impact of these wider influences on their learning and wellbeing.

1.3.3 Conclusions

This section has briefly reviewed key policies around educational disadvantage in Northern Ireland as well as the local context in North Belfast. Localised planning and place-based initiatives that involve the whole community are key to tackling this disadvantage and engagement with children, families and communities is a vital foundation to success. It is clear that the ambition to listen to children and families is evident in both policy and local collaborative efforts for change. It is hoped that this project will further emphasise the important and active role for children and young people in influencing local and national plans.

2 METHODOLOGY

The project explored three key research questions:

- What are children's experiences of learning in North Belfast; In School? At home? In the wider community?
- What do children think helps them learn?
- What do children think hinders their learning?

To explore these research questions, Save the Children (SCUK) commissioned Young at Art (YAA) to deliver a total of 24 visual arts-based participatory workshops for up to 77 children (p4– p7) from six North Belfast primary schools between October and December 2024. These workshops supported the children to creatively respond to the three key research questions exploring their experiences of learning.

Each child took part in a series of four workshops led by professional artist and facilitator, Duncan Ross, with support artists Catherine Turley and Ronan Smyth⁶. The children were introduced to a variety of visual arts mediums, including sketching, sculpture and portraiture, while being encouraged to discover and explore their own 'creative voices'. Each workshop built upon the previous one, diving deeper into the theme and expanding upon the creative skills learned. The workshops were child-led, and process based, allowing for meaningful creative conversations and reflections to take place, and placing the children's opinions and insights at the centre of the project. The workshop artists created a warm, welcoming environment, which promoted focus on the activity and theme, and reduced distraction. This approach also eases anxiety, a safe and secure environment was created making participants more willing to try new things and offer ideas.

The children's ideas and insights were listened to throughout the project, increasing their confidence and willingness to express their ideas. Through this workshop approach the children came to see that their voices and ideas are heard and can make a difference. At its core, the workshop sessions followed the Lundy Model for Child Participation which provides a model for organisations, working with and for children and young people, to comply with Article 12 of the UNCRC and ensures (i) that children have the **space** to express their views (ii) their **voice** is enabled (iii) they have an **audience** for their views and (iv) their views will have **influence** (Lundy, 2007).

2.1 APPROACH TO DATA COLLECTION

The project included a series of four participatory workshops, each workshop was opened with 'circle time' which introduced each session, checked in with how the children were feeling that day and invited them to take part.

- **Session 1 (October/November 2024):** The first workshop introduced children to YAA, the project, and began to introduce the project theme of learning. The children created giant drawings in groups, exploring different aspects of learning by adding words and images

⁶ At some workshops members of staff from SCUK and YAA were also in attendance to help document the process

within a giant figure that related to learning. They were encouraged to use their imagination and work collaboratively. The session also left time for discussion to foster critical thinking about their artistic choices and provides opportunities for children to reflect on their learning experiences both individually and within groups. They were asked to think about or bring in an object that helps them learn for the next session.

- **Session 2 (November 2024):** The second workshop, the children created a portrait of their special learning object they brought in or thought of, using a variety of drawing materials to express their connection to it. They were given professional drawing boards, and sketching materials they wouldn't normally have access to. The session also held time for a group discussion where children shared their artwork, reflected on their learning process and how their object helps them learn. They were also prepped for session 3, artists asked them to think of eight things that help them learn (this could be objects, people, places, etc.).
- **Session 3 (November 2024):** In the third workshop, children were given a variety of open materials to build sculptures that would be their ideal learning spaces. They were encouraged to use their imagination, and to try to incorporate the objects, people, and places they thought were important for learning. Some children worked in groups, while others individually, to create their sculptures. They were given time to explain their sculptures and imaginary spaces and how this would promote their learning.
- **Session 4 (November/December 2024):** In the final session, children created magical learning objects by painting and decorating pre-painted sculptures, created from open materials, to represent things that help them learn. Each child worked independently and were given the opportunity to share about their object at the end of the session, presenting it to the rest of the group. The session concluded with a reflective group discussion on the learning journey of the project and thanked the children for taking part.

These sessions were supplemented with bi-weekly online check-ins with two key groups:

- A steering group with representation of the North Belfast Primary Principals Group that provided strategic oversight and;
- A project implementation group with representation from participating schools

There were also regular check-ins between YAA's Creative Producer and lead artist, Duncan Ross.

2.2 METHODS

The *Listen to Learn* project employed a multi-method qualitative approach to evaluate and understand the learning experiences of children across the 6 involved schools. The project utilised a combination of observational techniques, creative activities, and reflective tools to gather rich, holistic data on the children's engagement, expression, and learning outcomes. The methodological approach centred around five key components: artist observation, creative outputs by children, evaluation wheels, teacher observation, and creative conversations with children. Each of these methods contributed to a well-rounded understanding of how children engage with learning in different contexts, in relation to research questions.

2.2.1 Creative outputs

Creative outputs by children were central to the *Listen to Learn* project methodology, as they provided tangible artifacts that reflected the children's thoughts, ideas, and learning processes. These outputs included a wide range of creative expressions such as group drawings, individual portraits, large sculptures, and individual sculptures. The creative work was linked to specific themes explored during the workshops, relating back to the research questions – exploring experience of learning at school, home, and in the wider community.

The value of creative outputs was twofold:

- **Self-expression:** Art allowed children to externalize their thoughts, feelings, and ideas in ways that may not have been possible through traditional verbal communication.
- **Reflection and Insight:** The artworks provided a window into the children's reflective processes, offering insights into their understanding of the workshop themes and the learning experiences they engaged with.

2.2.2 Creative conversations with children

Creative conversations with children were structured yet flexible discussions that took place during and after creative activities. These conversations allowed the artist facilitators to delve deeper into the children's thoughts, feelings, and reflections about the tasks and themes. The goal of these conversations was to:

- **Encourage reflection:** Children were prompted to think about their learning and express how they felt about the activities, their progress, and the themes explored.
- **Foster verbal expression:** While art provided a powerful outlet for non-verbal expression, creative conversations enabled children to articulate their thoughts in words, deepening their self-awareness and understanding of the learning process.
- **Gain insights:** Facilitators could gain valuable insights into how children viewed their own learning journey and how they interpreted the themes being explored in the workshops.

Through these conversations, the project team could uncover themes and ideas that might not have been immediately evident through artwork alone, providing a fuller picture of each children's learning experience.

2.2.3 Artist observation

Artist observation played a central role in the *Listen to Learn* project, enabling facilitators to track and document the ways in which children engaged with workshop activities and project themes. The artists worked closely with the children during the four workshop sessions, observing their understanding of the project theme, their interaction with the workshop activities, willingness and confidence to try new things, confidence in creating artwork, and interaction with their peers. This observational data was collected through an observation sheet at each workshop session, with a focus on the children's non-verbal communication through art, explanation of artistic choices through discussion, emotional responses, and creative choices. These observations helped to assess how children interpreted the themes presented during the workshops and how art provided a means for them to reflect on and articulate their learning experiences.

Key features of the **artist observation** included:

- **Expression of key research questions:** The research questions were woven into the workshop activities, and artists observed how children incorporated these into their creative outputs
- **Non-verbal Expression:** Understanding how children communicated their thoughts and feelings through their artistic choices, body language, and engagement with the task.
- **Emotional and Cognitive Engagement:** Observing moments of deep engagement or emotional expression as children worked on their creative projects.
- **Confidence:** Tracking how children interacted with each other, the workshop activity, art materials (e.g., drawings, sculptures, models) and the extent to which they were willing to try new things, offer suggestions, explain their artistic choices.

2.2.4 Evaluation Wheels

The evaluation wheels were a key tool used to track and assess the children's engagement, confidence, and perceptions of different aspects of their learning experience. At each school, four children were selected at random by the artistic team and their progress was tracked at each session on the evaluation wheel. The wheels (attached in Appendix A) tracked the following on a scale of 10 (1 being poor engagement/understanding and 10 being high engagement/understanding):

- Experience of Learning at Home
- Interaction with Peers
- Experience of Learning in the Wider Community
- Expressed Opinions on Theme Through Art
- Experience of Learning in School
- Confidence and Engagement with Activity

The evaluation wheels provided a structured method for the artistic team to track the responses, engagement and understanding of children at each involved school. This approach allowed for:

- **Tracking changes over time:** By comparing the ratings across different sessions, the project team could track shifts in engagement, confidence, and overall experience.
- **Identification of key barriers and enablers:** By looking at the areas with low or high ratings, the project team could pinpoint aspects of the learning process that were either facilitating or hindering the children's engagement.

An overview of the findings from the evaluation wheels for each school can be found in Appendix A.

2.2.5 Teacher Observation

Teacher observations were another important data-gathering method in the *Listen to Learn* project. Teachers played an active role in providing feedback on their children's participation and progress throughout the workshops and were asked to provide any insights or context from outside the workshop sessions.

Teachers were asked to focus on:

- **Behavioural Engagement:** How children participated in the activities, whether they were attentive, focused, and engaged.
- **Social Interaction:** How children interacted with peers, worked in groups, and responded to collaborative tasks.
- **Personal Development:** Any observable changes in children's confidence, social skills, or emotional expression during the course of the workshops.
- **Experiences of Learning:** Reflecting on the children's experience of learning, providing insight into how home life may affect these, and how they interact in a regular classroom setting.

2.3 CONCLUSIONS

The methodological approach used in the *Listen to Learn* project was multifaceted, combining both qualitative and reflective techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the children's experience of learning. Through artist observation, creative outputs, evaluation wheels, teacher observation, and creative conversations, the project was able to capture a broad spectrum of data that reflected the children's cognitive, emotional, and social learning experiences.

This approach allowed the project to not only evaluate the effectiveness of the workshops and activities but also to understand how different children engage with learning in various contexts. By combining these methods, the *Listen to Learn* project provided insights into the creative and learning processes of the children, highlighting the importance of creativity, reflection, nurture spaces, and social interaction in educational environments

3 FINDINGS

This section outlines the key findings from across the project. These findings are organised by the three research questions at the core of the project. For each, key themes are outlined and explained. Examples of children’s artistic outputs are also contained throughout to illustrate these themes.

3.1 WHAT ARE CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING IN NORTH BELFAST?

The first research question explores children’s experiences of learning in North Belfast, focusing attention on the key spaces in which they learn; at home, at school, and in the wider community. Three key themes emerged from our engagement with children:

1. Creative activities and classroom engagement

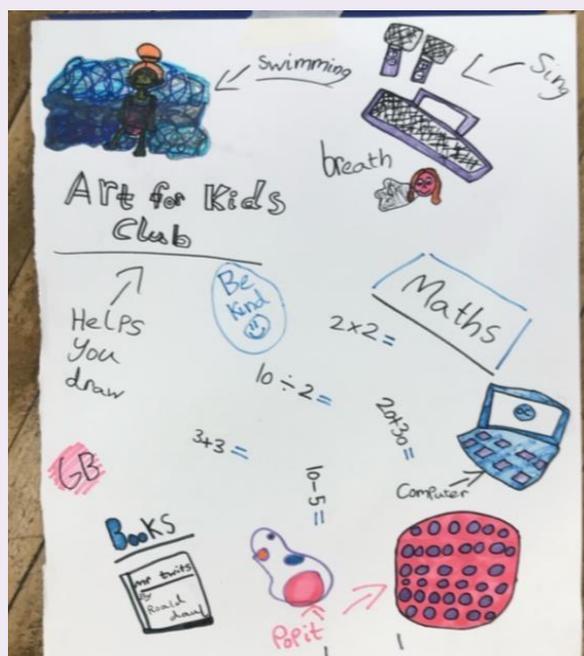
The first theme relates to the importance of creative activities in supporting and maintaining engagement in learning, particularly at school. Several key points emerged here:

- In several schools, children displayed high levels of interest and participation in creative activities such as storytelling, art, and group-based projects.
- Feedback from teachers across the six schools highlighted children’s enthusiasm for hands-on tasks and collaborative work, which fostered deeper learning and reflection.
- Children displayed and discussed positive attitudes toward various school subjects, combined with opportunities for self-expression, contributing to increased engagement and confidence.

Figure 1: A volcano model built by children to symbolise brain activity during learning



Figure 2: An output created collectively by children that focuses on important things that help with learning



2. The importance of family and home

The second theme focuses on the importance of families in supporting learning; either directly or by providing a calm and supportive home environment. The key points that emerged were:

- Families played a significant role in supporting learning in all the schools we engaged with, though many children faced socio-economic barriers, such as financial struggles and unstable housing.
- Home environments varied significantly, with some children benefitting from a calm, supportive atmosphere, while others struggled with distractions and resource limitations.
- Parents and siblings were frequently mentioned as key contributors to learning, offering emotional and practical support.
- Many children drew their family pet, as depicted in figure 3 (below) when thinking about what de-stresses them and makes them feel calm and ready to learn or do homework.

Figure 3: A drawing of family pets to show what helps them feel ready to learn.



Figure 4: A drawing of a child's family to show what helps them learn at home



3. Learning in the community

The third theme focuses on learning in the wider community, highlighting the range of external influences on children's learning. Key points include:

- Participation in extracurricular activities, such as sports clubs, summer programs, and cultural events, was referenced frequently as beneficial for social development and confidence building.
- Community resources like local parks and family hubs were valued but often underutilised due to external barriers, including safety concerns and socio-economic issues.
- Despite facing obstacles, several children expressed appreciation for opportunities to engage with the wider community, which provided additional learning experiences outside the classroom.

Figure 5: A child's drawing of their interactions with community spaces, such as parks



Figure 6: A child's drawing including a range of activities such as drama and dancing



3.2 WHAT DO CHILDREN THINK HELPS THEM TO LEARN?

The second research question focused on what children think helps them to learn. Three key themes emerged across the workshops.

1. Support from teachers and families

The first theme focuses on the important roles played by teachers and families in supporting learning. Key points include:

- Children frequently cited teachers and families as key enablers of their learning, with teachers providing personalised guidance and families offering emotional and academic support
- Several children cited interactive and engaging lessons as significant contributors to better understanding and enjoyment of learning, as opposed to less interactive lessons.
- The presence of supportive adults, both in school and at home, who actively encouraged learning helped boost children's confidence

Figure 7: Drawings showing teachers guiding and helping students in interactive lessons



Figure 8: Children's drawings of family involvement in everyday learning



Figure 10: A sculpture of an ideal learning environment created by a group of students, with spaces to read, play, and hang out.



3. Community involvement in learning

The third theme focuses on the involvement of the wider community in children's learning. Key points include:

- Extracurricular activities such as sports teams, youth groups, summer camps, and cultural events played an important role in children's holistic development. In particular, the coaches and group leaders were highlighted as positive contributors to children's learning.
- Safe and inspiring community spaces helped foster social interaction and learning outside the classroom and home
- Involvement in local events and clubs helped boost children's confidence and offered them diverse learning experiences

Figure 11: Children's drawings showing the various community groups and clubs they participate in



3.3 WHAT DO CHILDREN THINK HINDERS THEIR LEARNING?

The third and final research question focuses on what children think hinders their learning. Three key themes have been drawn out of the workshops with children, each of which are outlined below.

1. Challenges in home and school environments

The first theme that emerged related to challenges in children's home and school environments, often related to stress or socio-economic factors. The key points that emerged were:

- Socio-economic challenges, such as financial difficulties and housing instability, were frequently highlighted as barriers to children's ability to focus on learning.
- Boring or stressful environments at home and school were widely identified as key barriers.
- Some children reported a lack of nutritious food at home or highlighted a lack of quiet spaces, each of which hindered their ability to engage in learning.

Figure 12: A child's drawing of their busy home environment, with lots of siblings and activity, making it harder to concentrate



Figure 13: A child's 'magical learning object', which gave them quiet time at home so they could focus on homework



2. Peers and group dynamics

The second theme focuses on the role of peers and the dynamics created by groups of children. The key points that emerged were:

- Group work presented challenges for many children, particularly in terms of collaboration and receiving feedback. Many children opted to work on their own rather than participate in group activities.
- There were language barriers faced by some children who had English as an Additional Language (EAL), which limited their participation in group activities. For example, one child who participated in the project said that she often learns from her friends outside of school who speak the same language as she does and struggles to engage with her classmates.
- Peer interactions were rated moderately low by those facilitating the workshops, with some children seeming to struggle to engage socially.

Figure 14: This child wanted to work on their own when making a sculpture of their magical learning space and make a space that was just for them as depicted by the “keep out” “stay out” signs.



3. Limited access to community resources

The third and final theme was a perceived or observed lack of access to resources and opportunities within the wider community. The key points that emerged were:

- External social issues, such as substance abuse and unsafe environments, limited children's access to community learning opportunities.
- Many children reported minimal engagement with community resources due to socio-economic barriers. For example, some children noted that they weren't able to travel to access places in the city, such as museums.
- Despite these limitations, children who participated in safe community activities expressed positive outcomes.

Figure 15: An imaginative drawing by a child based on a discussion about being nervous in some areas of their community, particularly parks



4 CONCLUSIONS

This research explored children's learning experiences in North Belfast across three key contexts: in school, at home, and within the wider community. The study revealed several important themes, each highlighting different aspects of learning support, engagement, and challenges faced by children. More information on the detail of the analysis is provided in Appendix A, which presents the findings from the evaluation wheels undertaken for each school⁷. These evaluation wheels help to demonstrate the value of combining observations and children's expressed opinions through their artistic outputs and discussions. Themed conclusions are outlined below.

4.1 CREATIVE ACTIVITIES AND CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT

Children showed strong engagement in hands-on and creative learning activities, such as storytelling, art, and group projects. Positive feedback from teachers emphasised the importance of providing interactive and expressive opportunities in the classroom. In turn, creative outputs, including conceptual art and collaborative projects, illustrated how these approaches encouraged deeper learning and confidence. This project shows the potential of these approaches for involving children in meaningful and engaging ways. The methodology outlined in chapter 2 provides replicable approaches for exploring children's views and experiences on other issues, or in other local areas.

4.2 THE ROLE OF FAMILIES AND CHALLENGES AT HOME

Families played a pivotal role in children's learning, offering both emotional and academic support. However, socio-economic challenges such as financial difficulties and unstable living conditions affected many children's ability to focus on learning at home. Despite these challenges, children's creative depictions of family members as learning companions demonstrated the critical role of familial encouragement. The relationship between poverty, deprivation and poor educational engagement and outcomes are highlighted across the policy literature on educational disadvantage (see section 1.1 and 1.3). In turn, the same literature emphasises the vital role that families can play in developing local solutions and supporting children's learning. The findings from this project re-affirm both of these points.

4.3 THE ROLE OF THE WIDER COMMUNITY AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Participation in extracurricular activities and community programs significantly contributed to social development and learning. However, limited access to safe community spaces and socio-economic barriers hindered children's engagement with local resources. Despite these obstacles, children expressed appreciation for positive community interactions, which were reflected in their creative outputs. 'Whole community' approaches are central to policy responses to educational and wider disadvantage in Northern Ireland. It is encouraging to see localised planning and community informed projects core aspects of the RAISE programme and other education and community development responses to disadvantage and poverty. The findings from this project reiterate the important role that

⁷ See section 2.2.4 for an overview of the 'evaluation wheel' method

wider community actors can play in supporting children's learning. However, they also highlight that access to learning spaces can be restricted by socio-economic factors and enabling access to wider opportunities within and beyond a child's local community is an important part of supporting their learning.

4.4 THE FACTORS THAT HELP AND HINDER CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Children identified teacher and family support, engaging activities, and community involvement as essential enablers of their learning. Personalised guidance from teachers, interactive lessons, and family encouragement played a crucial role in boosting children's confidence and interest in learning. The artistic outputs highlighted children's imaginative processes and teamwork in collaborative learning environments.

The study also highlighted various factors that hindered learning, including socio-economic challenges, stressful environments, peer interaction difficulties, and language barriers. Limited access to community resources and unsafe environments further compounded these challenges. Children's artwork vividly depicted the negative impact of financial stress, crowded spaces, and social barriers on their learning experiences.

These findings reaffirm the importance of developing flexible localised approaches to children's learning and curriculum delivery, highlighted within the 'A Fair Start' (see section 1.3.1). They also support aspects of the 'Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework' (see section 1.3.2), which highlight the importance of supporting the emotional wellbeing of children, teachers, families and the wider community.

APPENDIX A – EVALUATION WHEEL ANALYSIS

The evaluation wheels served as a tool for tracking and assessing the children's engagement, confidence, and perceptions of various elements of their learning experiences. Each session at the participating schools included a random selection of four children by the project team, who then had their progress recorded on the evaluation wheels. This approach ensured that children's feedback was continuously monitored and provided valuable insight into their evolving experiences throughout the project.

The evaluation wheels tracked four randomly selected participants' responses in six key areas, each measured on a scale from 1 to 10. In this scale, 1 represents poor engagement or understanding, while 10 signifies high engagement or understanding.

The tracked aspects included:

1. **Experience of Learning at Home**
2. **Interaction with Peers**
3. **Experience of Learning in the Wider Community**
4. **Expressed Opinions on Theme Through Art**
5. **Experience of Learning in School**
6. **Confidence and Engagement with Activity**

This system allowed the project team to maintain a structured and consistent method for monitoring children's responses, engagement levels, and understanding across the course of the project. It also helped the team gain a clearer picture of the children's perceptions of different aspects of their learning experience.

The evaluation wheels provided several key benefits:

- **Tracking changes over time:** By comparing the ratings across different sessions, the project team was able to monitor shifts in child engagement, confidence, and overall learning experience. This longitudinal tracking proved invaluable for understanding how children's experiences evolved throughout the project.
- **Identification of key barriers and enablers:** The data collected from the wheels helped identify both positive and negative aspects of the learning process. Areas with consistently high or low ratings highlighted where children felt particularly engaged or disengaged, allowing the team to address barriers and capitalise on enablers that fostered positive experiences.

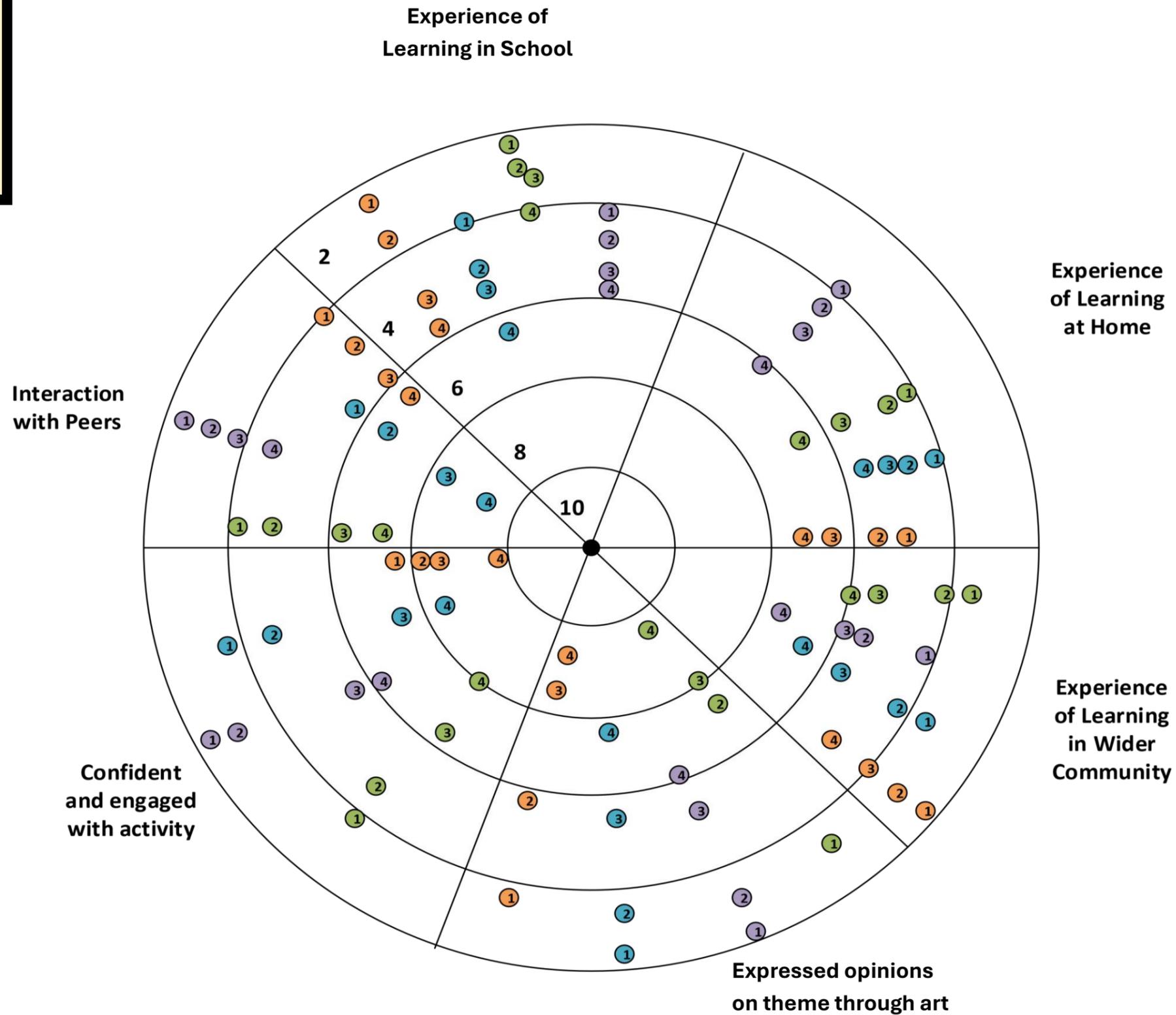
In summary, the evaluation wheels offered a dynamic and efficient tool for understanding the children's engagement and perceptions of the learning process. By systematically tracking their experiences, the artistic team was able to provide tailored support and interventions, ensuring a richer and more responsive learning environment.

In the following evaluation wheels, each child is represented by a coloured circle on the wheel, the number inside each circle indicates the workshop session number.

School 1

- Child 1 - ●
- Child 2 - ●
- Child 3 - ●
- Child 4 - ●

Number in circle indicates workshop session number



Evaluation Wheel Analysis

School 1 Trends:

- **Experience of Learning at Home:** Generally low, with most children rating their experience with learning at home poorly (mostly 1 or 2). This suggests significant challenges related to family support or home environments.
- **Interaction with Peers:** The peer interaction ratings are relatively low to moderate (2 to 3), indicating that some children struggle with social engagement or group work.
- **Experience of Learning in the Wider Community:** Most children rated their experience with community-based learning at a 2, indicating minimal involvement or engagement in external resources or activities.
- **Expressed Opinions on Theme Through Art:** Art as an expression tool received moderate ratings (2 to 4). It seems that while children have some ability to express themselves, it may not be the most effective medium for all.
- **Experience of Learning in School:** The ratings for school-based learning are generally moderate to positive (3 to 4), indicating that children are more engaged in school activities compared to other aspects.
- **Confidence and Engagement with Activity:** Confidence and engagement are stronger during school activities, with ratings mostly at 4, showing that children are more engaged and confident in school-based tasks.

Summary: Children in school 1 show a strong engagement with school-based learning, reflected in higher ratings for school experience and confidence in activities. However, there are notable struggles with home learning environments, social interactions, and engagement with the wider community, as indicated by lower ratings in these areas.

School 2

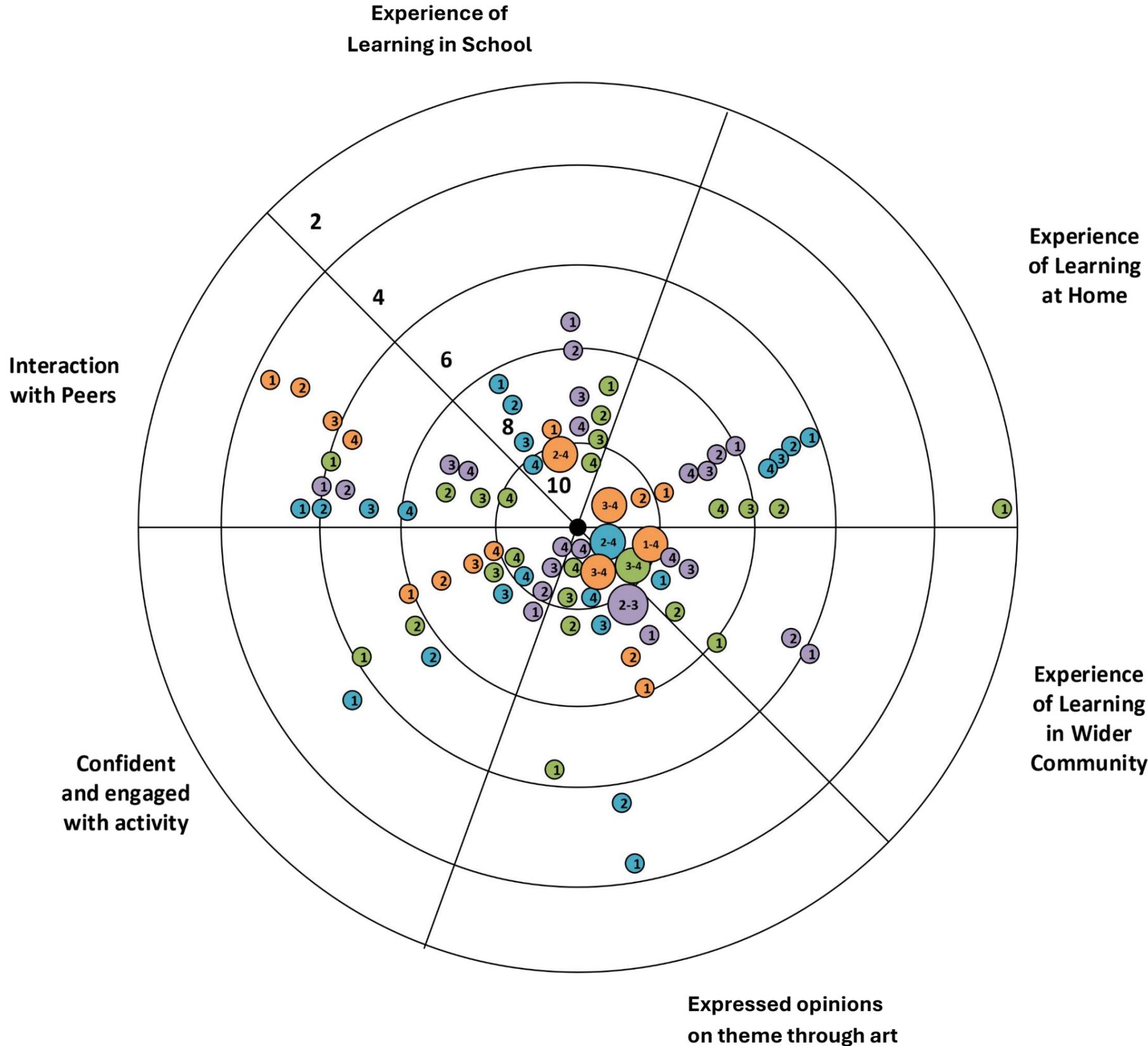
Child 1 - 

Child 2 - 

Child 3 - 

Child 4 - 

Number in circle indicates workshop session number



Evaluation Wheel Analysis

School 2 - Trends:

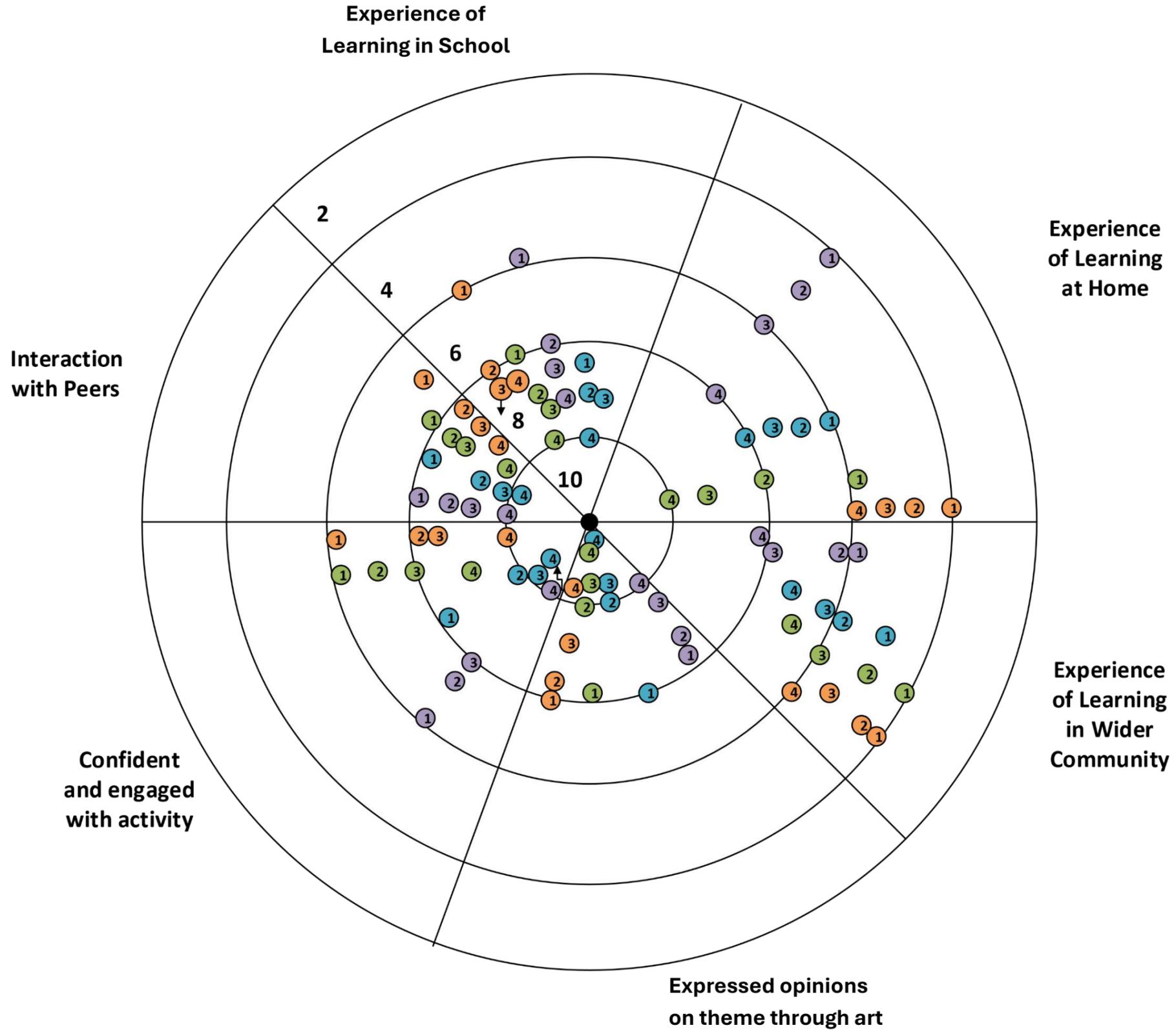
- **Experience of Learning at Home:** Ratings are predominantly low (1), suggesting that most children face difficulties or lack support for home-based learning.
- **Interaction with Peers:** The ratings for peer interaction are moderate to low (2 to 3), indicating some challenges in social engagement or working collaboratively.
- **Experience of Learning in the Wider Community:** The experience in the wider community is slightly better but still rated around 3, showing limited yet some engagement with external learning resources.
- **Expressed Opinions on Theme Through Art:** Art as a medium for expression received moderate ratings (2 to 3), indicating that some children can express themselves, though it may not be a primary form of engagement for many.
- **Experience of Learning in School:** School-based learning has moderate to high ratings (3 to 4), reflecting relatively positive experiences and engagement in school activities.
- **Confidence and Engagement with Activity:** Children show moderate confidence and engagement (3 to 4) in school-based activities, indicating some level of comfort with the learning process but also room for improvement in overall engagement.

Summary: Children in school 2 show a mixed level of engagement. They report low levels of engagement with home learning, minimal peer interaction, and limited involvement in community-based activities. However, school-based learning and confidence in activities show moderate to high ratings, suggesting that when children are in school, they are generally more engaged.

School 3

- Child 1 - ●
- Child 2 - ●
- Child 3 - ●
- Child 4 - ●

Number in circle indicates workshop session number



Evaluation wheel analysis

Schools 3 - Trends:

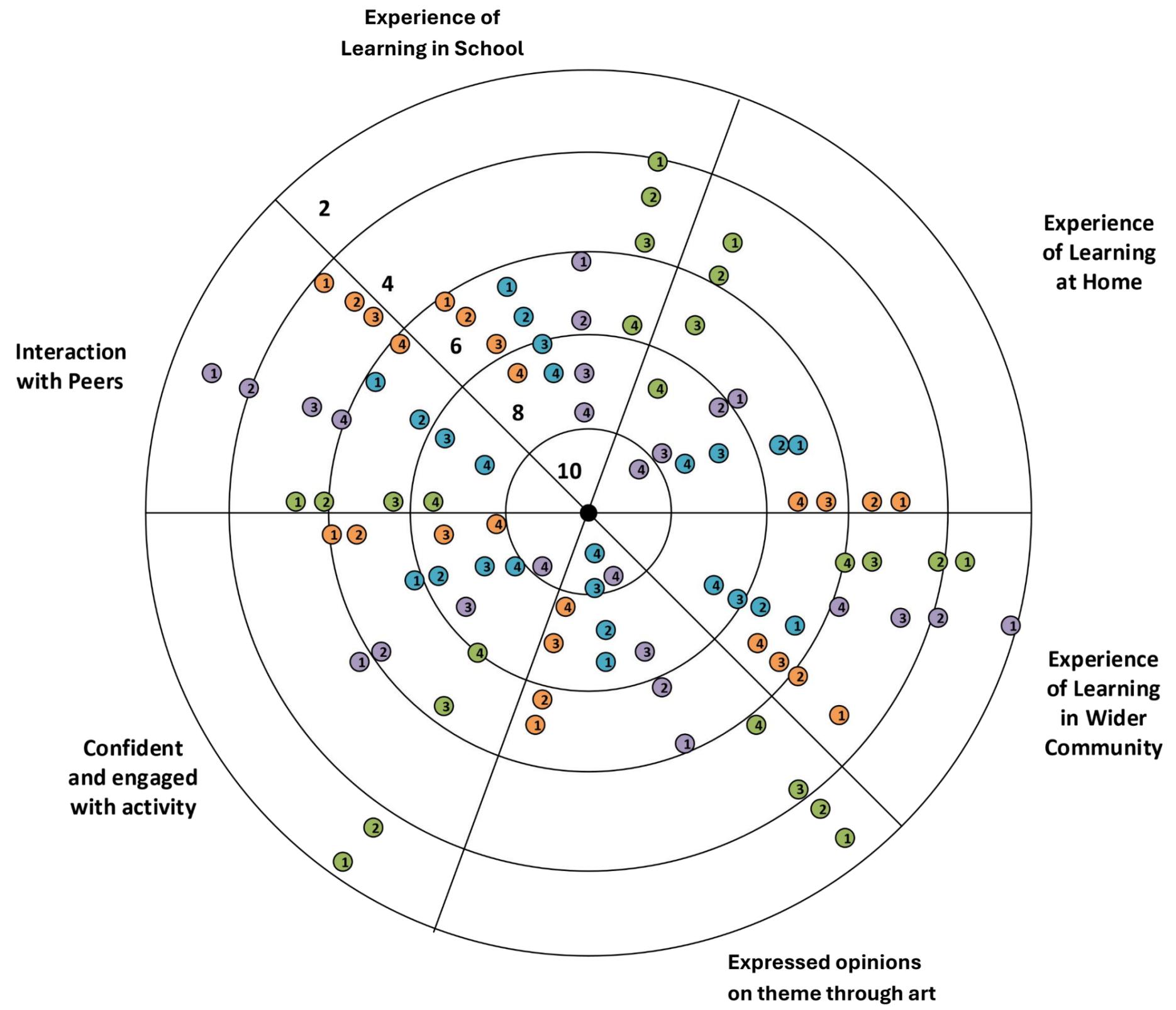
- **Experience of Learning at Home:** Ratings are generally low (1), suggesting challenges or lack of support for home learning. This is consistent with the trends seen in other schools.
- **Interaction with Peers:** Peer interaction ratings are moderate to low (2 to 3), reflecting some struggles in engaging socially or collaborating effectively with others.
- **Experience of Learning in the Wider Community:** Community-based learning is rated low (2), indicating limited access or participation in community resources.
- **Expressed Opinions on Theme Through Art:** Art was moderately effective for most children, with ratings between 2 and 4, suggesting it's used as a tool for self-expression but may not be a primary method for all children.
- **Experience of Learning in School:** Ratings for school-based activities are relatively positive (3 to 4), suggesting that children generally engage well with in-school learning.
- **Confidence and Engagement with Activity:** The children show good engagement and confidence in school-based activities, with most ratings at 3 or 4, indicating that while there may be struggles in other areas, school activities foster confidence and engagement.

Summary: Children from school 3 exhibit strong engagement with school-based learning and show good confidence during these activities. However, there are consistent challenges with home learning, peer interaction, and community-based experiences, indicating that external factors may be hindering broader engagement and support.

School 4

- Child 1 - ●
- Child 2 - ●
- Child 3 - ●
- Child 4 - ●

number in circle indicates workshop session number



Evaluation wheel analysis

School 4 - Trends:

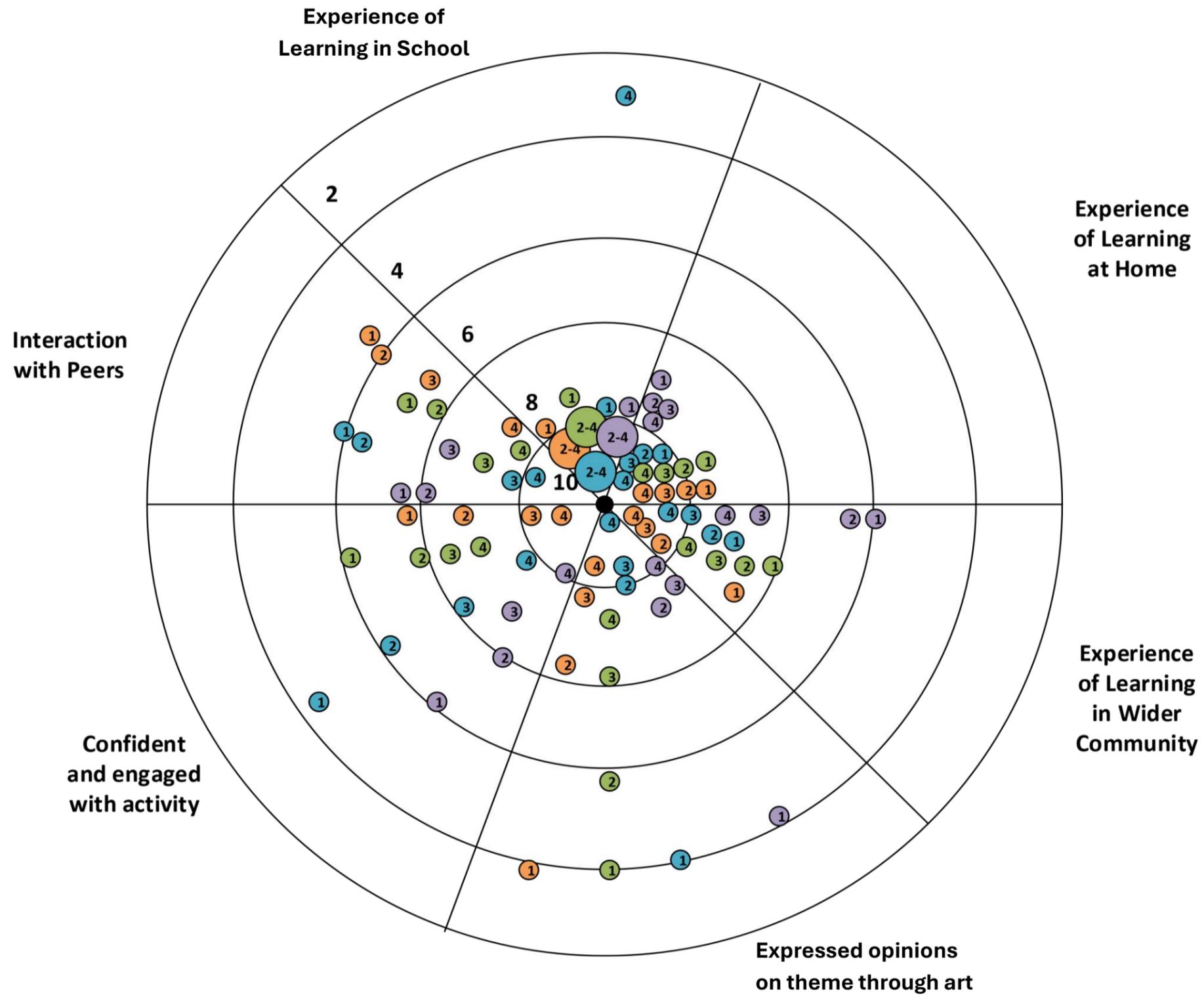
- **Experience of Learning at Home:** The ratings for home-based learning are generally low (1 to 2), showing that home learning experiences are challenging for most children.
- **Interaction with Peers:** Ratings for peer interaction are moderate (2 to 3), with some children showing positive peer engagement but still facing challenges in collaboration.
- **Experience of Learning in the Wider Community:** Community engagement is rated at moderate levels (3), indicating some participation in external learning opportunities but not widespread engagement.
- **Expressed Opinions on Theme Through Art:** Art was moderately effective for self-expression (2 to 3), with children showing some ability to express themselves creatively, but it was not universally impactful.
- **Experience of Learning in School:** School-based learning is rated relatively high (3 to 4), suggesting that when children are at school, they are more likely to engage and participate.
- **Confidence and Engagement with Activity:** Children show moderate to high confidence in school activities, with most ratings at 3 or 4, indicating good engagement in school-based activities.

Summary: Children from school 4 face challenges with home learning and peer interactions, with lower ratings for these areas. However, their experience in school-based activities is much more positive, and they demonstrate moderate to high levels of confidence and engagement with these activities.

School 5

- Child 1 - ●
- Child 2 - ●
- Child 3 - ●
- Child 4 - ●

number in circle indicates workshop session number



Evaluation wheel analysis

School 5 – trends:

- **Experience of Learning at Home:** Ratings are generally low (1 to 2), indicating that many children face significant challenges with home learning, such as lack of support or resources at home.
- **Interaction with Peers:** Interaction with peers is moderately rated, with scores mostly at 2 to 3, reflecting that children engage with peers but may not fully thrive in collaborative settings.
- **Experience of Learning in the Wider Community:** Community engagement is also moderate (2 to 4), suggesting that while some children are involved in community activities, the engagement is not widespread or highly impactful.
- **Expressed Opinions on Theme Through Art:** Art was moderately elective for most children (2 to 4), showing that while it serves as an outlet for self-expression, it may not be as prominent for all children. Experience of Learning in School: Ratings are generally higher (3 to 4), reflecting that children engage better when in school settings, benefiting from structured learning environments.
- **Confidence and Engagement with Activity:** Confidence and engagement are consistently rated between 3 and 4, suggesting that school-based activities help build confidence, although there may be room for improvement in overall engagement.

Summary: Children from school 5 have relatively positive experiences in school-based activities, with good confidence and engagement in these settings. However, they face challenges in home learning, peer interactions, and community-based engagement, where they report lower levels of participation. This indicates that external factors (home and community environments) may limit overall engagement and learning experiences.

School 6

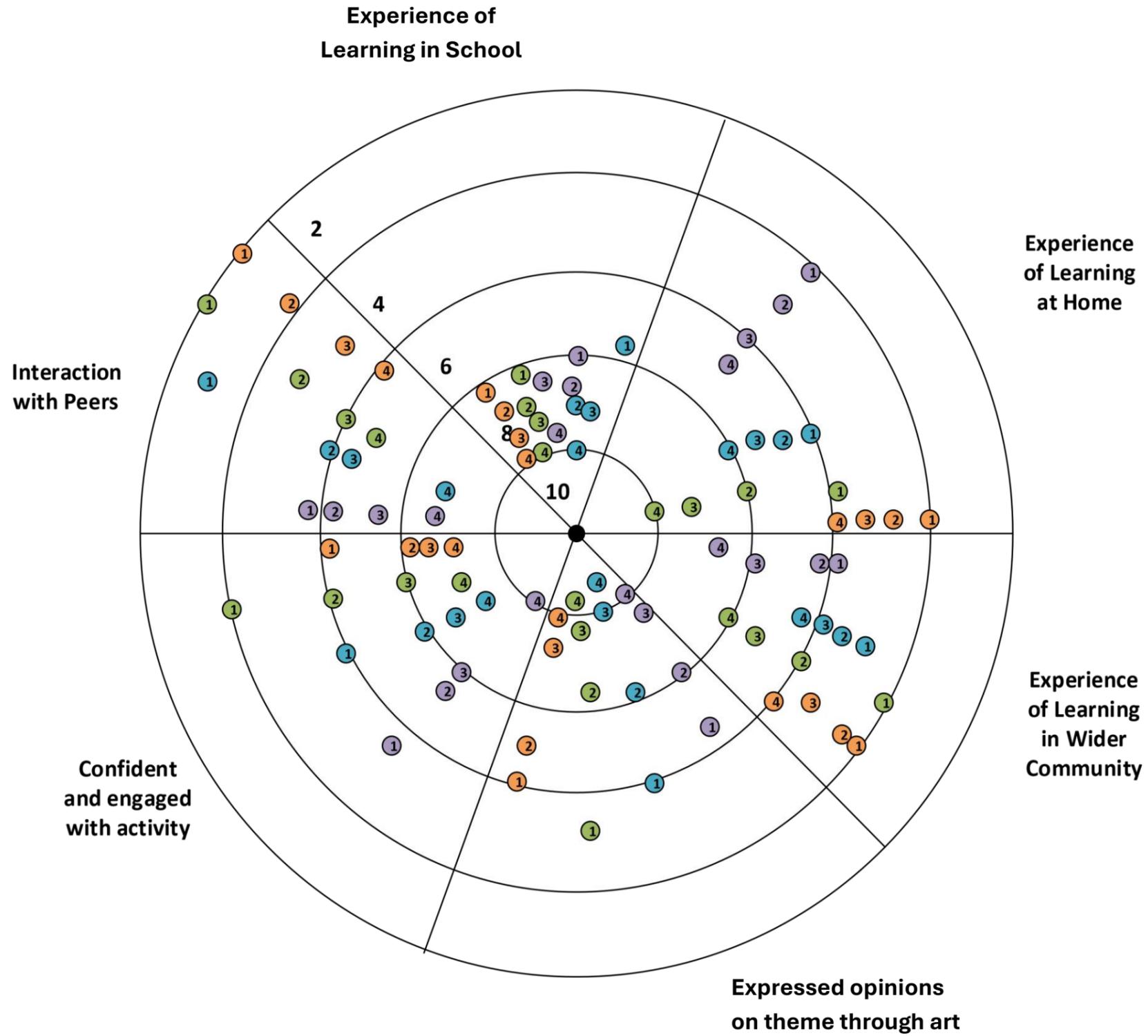
Child 1 - 

Child 2 - 

Child 3 - 

Child 4 - 

number in circle indicates workshop session number



Evaluation wheel analysis

School 6 – trends:

- **Experience of Learning at Home:** Ratings are generally low (1 to 2), suggesting that home learning is a significant challenge for most children, possibly due to lack of resources or support at home.
- **Interaction with Peers:** Peer interaction ratings are low to moderate (2 to 3), reflecting some struggles in engaging with peers and collaborating electively in group settings.
- **Experience of Learning in the Wider Community:** The ratings for community engagement are moderate (2 to 4), showing limited but somewhat positive involvement in community resources and activities.
- **Expressed Opinions on Theme Through Art:** Art is moderately elective (2 to 4) for self-expression, with some children benefiting from it as a medium, though not all use it extensively.
- **Experience of Learning in School:** School-based activities are rated positively (3 to 4), indicating that children are more engaged when participating in school-based learning experiences.
- **Confidence and Engagement with Activity:** Confidence and engagement are moderate to high (3 to 4), reflecting good participation during school activities but also showing potential for further improvement.

Summary: Children from school 6 show moderate to high engagement and confidence in school-based activities, where they perform better than in other areas. However, they face significant challenges with home learning, peer interactions, and community engagement, as indicated by lower ratings in these categories. These trends suggest that external support, both at home and within the community, may be limiting the children's overall learning experiences.

Overall Trends Across All Schools

- **Home Learning:** Across all schools, children generally report low ratings for their experience of learning at home. This trend indicates that many children struggle with home-based learning, potentially due to lack of resources, family support, or unstable home environments.
- **Interaction with Peers:** Peer interaction is consistently rated as moderate, with most children showing some level of engagement but also indicating challenges in socializing or collaborating electively. Peer engagement seems to be an area where children face difficulties, suggesting the need for more social or collaborative opportunities.
- **Experience in the Wider Community:** Community involvement is generally rated low to moderate, with some children showing limited engagement with external resources like family hubs or parks. This indicates that access to community-based learning opportunities may be a barrier, possibly due to socio-economic factors.
- **Art as Expression:** Art is moderately elective in allowing children to express their opinions and engage with learning. However, it is not the predominant method of engagement for all

children, with ratings ranging from 2 to 4, reflecting that while some children find it a useful tool, others may not engage as fully.

- **School Experience:** Across all schools, children generally report positive experiences with school-based learning, with ratings mostly between 3 and 4. This shows that when children are in the school environment, they tend to engage more positively with activities and learning experiences.
- **Confidence and Engagement:** Confidence and engagement are generally higher during school activities, with ratings mostly at 3 or 4, suggesting that school environments are conducive to child participation and confidence. However, external factors like home support and peer engagement seem to influence overall engagement levels.

Overall, the evaluation wheels reveal that school-based activities provide the most positive experiences for children across all schools. However, challenges persist in areas like home learning, peer interactions, and community involvement, where many children reported difficulties or low engagement. These trends highlight the need for increased support at home, stronger peer interaction opportunities, and greater access to community resources to foster more well-rounded learning experiences.

APPENDIX B – FIGURE LIST

- Figure 1: A volcano model built by children to symbolise brain activity during learning
- Figure 2: An output created collectively by children that focuses on important things that help with learning
- Figure 3: A drawing of family pets to show what helps them feel ready to learn.
- Figure 4: A drawing of a child's family to show what helps them learn at home
- Figure 5: A child's drawing of their interactions with community spaces, such as parks
- Figure 6: A child's drawing including a range of activities such as drama and dancing
- Figure 7: Drawings showing teachers guiding and helping children in interactive lessons
- Figure 8: Children's drawings of family involvement in everyday learning
- Figure 9: 'Magical' learning objects created by children through individual and group work to show how they like to learn and play
- Figure 10: A sculpture of an ideal learning environment created by a group of children, with spaces to read, play, and hang out.
- Figure 11: Children's drawings showing the various community groups and clubs they participate in
- Figure 12: A child's drawing of their busy home environment, with lots of siblings and activity, making it harder to concentrate
- Figure 13: A child's 'magical learning object', which gave them quiet time at home so they could focus on homework
- Figure 14: This child wanted to work on their own when making a sculpture of their magical learning space and make a space that was just for them as depicted by the "keep out" "stay out" signs.
- Figure 15: An imaginative drawing by a child based on a discussion about being nervous in some areas of their community, particularly parks

APPENDIX C – REFERENCES

- Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland (2021) Interim Report. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/expert-panel-education-underachievement-interim-report> (accessed 19 February 2025)
- Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland (2021) A Fair Start - Final Report and Action Plan. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/fair-start-final-report-action-plan> (accessed 19 February 2025)
- Department of Education (2021) Children and Young People's Strategy 2020 – 2030. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/children-and-young-peoples-strategy-2020-2030> (accessed 19 February 2025)
- Department of Education (2024) RAISE programme: summary document. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/raise-programme> (accessed 19 February 2025)
- Department of Education & Department of Health (2021) Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/children-young-peoples-emotional-health-and-wellbeing-education-framework-final-version> (accessed 19 February 2025)
- Dickerson, A. and Popli, G.K. (2018) The many dimensions of child poverty: evidence from the UK millennium cohort study. *Fiscal Studies*, 39 (2). pp. 265-298.
- Engle, P. L., & Black, M. M. (2008). The effect of poverty on child development and educational outcomes. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1136(1), 243-256.
- Fitzpatrick, C., Loader, R., McCartney, S., McConnell, B., McMullen, J., Murray, .C., Orr, K., Purdy, N., Simms, V. (2023) The Consequences of the Cuts to Education for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland. Ulster University/ Stranmillis University College. Available at: [The-Consequences-of-the-Cuts-to-Education-for-Children-and-Young-People-in-Northern-Ireland-Final.pdf](#) (accessed 3 March 2025)
- Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British educational research journal*, 33(6), 927-942.
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (UNCRC)