20 Babies Research Report

by Jessie Kelly

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Research Team

Jessie Kelly – Researcher

Jessie Kelly is a Geography PhD student at Newcastle University. Her research explores the geographies of loneliness in the millennial generation in County Durham. Her doctoral research politicises the subject of loneliness and highlights the ways that governmental decisions and economic and political legacies in County Durham can all play a role in exacerbating feelings of loneliness and isolation. She is a qualitative researcher and places value on hearing about the rich, varied, and complex lives of other people. She is passionate about understanding the inequalities that face the North East region that can affect the wellbeing and everyday experiences of those who live there.

Jessie also had a daughter, Ivy, just before the Covid-19 lockdown. Like so many, she found raising a young baby in the pandemic to not only be difficult and isolating, but also punctured with many moments of joy. She was therefore honoured to take part in the *20 Babies* project, as it meaningfully brought together both her academic and personal interests.

Florence Darling – Producer and Co-Researcher

Florence Darling is Producer (Children and Young People) and leads on the development and delivery of Baltic's children and young people's programme. Florence researches, initiates, implements and evaluates a programme that creates space for children and young people aged 0-24 from all backgrounds to engage with contemporary art.

Florence is also a PhD researcher in Sociology at Newcastle University. Her ESRC-funded PhD explores the social and cultural value of participatory arts for young people and examines how young people feel about taking part in arts-based projects and how valuable these opportunities are for them to express themselves, comprehend and reflect on their experiences and identities and communicate to others.

Florence had a son, Kit, born in March 2020 and her experiences of caring for her baby through the first Covid-19 lockdown inspired the *20 Babies* project.

Dr Jen Bagelman – Academic Supervisor

Dr Jen Bagelman is a Reader in Geography and Deputy Director at Newcastle University's Institute for Social Science. She is passionate about decolonial migrant and environmental justice and interested in using creative methods to address these themes. Most recently her work explores the intersections between reproductive health and migrant justice. She is grateful to have had the opportunity to learn with and from Jessie and Florence on the *20 Babies* project which exposes the intimacies of reproduction during pandemic times.

Background and Context

Towards the end of March 2020 the UK was placed into 'lockdown' in a bid to temper the threat of Covid-19: directing people to stay at home, keep their physical distance from others, and not mix with other households. 'Non-essential' shops and leisure spaces were all closed, and huge changes were made to the way socio-spatial relations were navigated and encountered. While people began to learn new ways of relating to one another from a distance and through screens, and workplaces adopted new ways of working, there were some 'events' that could not be put on hold: having a baby. While the physical process of giving birth remained largely the same, the social, emotional and cultural experience of having a baby was altered and put under restriction. Mothers now had to attend hospital appointments alone, have reduced physical contact with midwives and healthcare professionals, and had to labour alone until the 'final stages', when a birthing partner was finally allowed to join them.

The early stages of having a baby were also drastically different, with babies born during this period barely meeting anyone outside of the household for the first year of their lives. An Ofsted report published in Spring 2022 raised concern that these so called 'lockdown babies' had also been negatively impacted by the restrictions in terms of their personal, social and emotional development.

As a response to this context and concerns, the *20 Babies* project was formed. *20 Babies* has been designed and facilitated by Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art and funded by Mayborn Group, and this report has emerged from the research project that ran alongside it. Starting in September 2021, the project worked with 20 families from Newcastle and Gateshead who had a baby during the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020 (March – July 2020). The families attended weekly creative workshops that gave the caregivers a chance to explore their experience of the pandemic. Florence Darling, Producer for Children and Young People at Baltic, created this extraordinary project following her own experience of having a baby in the pandemic. Inspired by concerns around how first-time parents or families with limited support systems were managing, Florence conceived of this project that aimed to:

- Enable families to express their experiences and to develop new and creative ways of being, connecting and playing together.

- Explore the potential of contemporary art to bridge and build the lack of social interaction experienced by parents and babies, which had spent the majority of their life up to that point in lockdown.

This research project therefore utilised this unique opportunity to gain insight into the project, as well as the experiences of the *20 Babies* families who had a baby at such an unprecedented and unusual point in history. These voices have largely remained invisible until now. The research asks:

1. How can arts practice facilitate self-expression, communication and social connection, and what are the socio-cultural conditions that make this possible?

2. How did the families taking part in the *20 Babies* project experience and navigate having a baby during the Covid-19 pandemic?

This report will answer the above research questions and discuss the key research findings that have emerged from the project. As well as being the researcher on this project, I am a Human Geography PhD student at Newcastle University. This report therefore engages with geographical and social science academic literatures, which help frame and make sense of the findings that have arisen from the data collection and analysis. The report will close with some points to consider going forward, and recommendations for future early years projects that Baltic may facilitate.

The Artist-led Workshops

Each Wednesday the 20 families met and engaged with a creative, artist-led workshop, followed by some informal socialising with refreshments in Front Room, Baltic. The workshops all focused, in some way, on the Covid-19 pandemic, helping the families to reflect and explore their experiences of parenting in a pandemic. The artists who have led the workshops and shaped the project are:

During one of the artist-led workshops.

Megan Randall, Baltic artist– Megan ran the workshops for the first eight weeks. Her background and artistic interests combine contemporary ceramics, installations and civic engagement. Megan's workshops engaged with ideas around 'good days and bad days' in the pandemic; communicating during lockdown; and acts of kindness and care. In Megan's workshops the families produced: a 'stormy sky' to represent the mood of lockdown, which was created by the toddlers using their hands, feet, leaves, fly swatters and other materials to paint and create a textured weather-scape; a computer/TV screen helmet that the families could decorate and wear, representing the connection we had to screens during lockdown, when relationships could only be maintained virtually; and face masks that were painted with a word/act of kindness in soy milk, and then dipped in flavoured teas, drawing on the idea of cups of tea and kindness that were so important during lockdown.

Alex Hughes, Baltic artist – Alex ran the workshops between weeks nine and 19. Her work draws on an amalgamation of materials, images and recordings to create mixed media objects, installations and performances. Alex's workshops continued the theme of tea and kindness, and she used a range of ways to help encourage the families to express their experiences of the pandemic. Some of the creative outputs from Alex's workshops included: clay teacups and saucers, that were formed and painted by the families; painting and decorating cardboard pieces of toast and paper plates, with the families encouraged to write kind acts that they encountered in lockdown; and the creation of collages using a range of materials, images, and colours to summarise their pandemic experience.

Michaela Wate and **Ceitidh Mac**, Company of Others – Michaela is a contemporary dancer and Ceitidh a musician, who led the sessions between weeks 20 and 25. Their sessions invited the families to dance, move and sing. In an early workshop they asked the families to come up with a series of words that summed up their experience of the pandemic (including lonely, family, health, distance). The families then came up with contemporary dance moves to represent each of these words, with the final workshop consisting of a group dance that captured their collective experience of lockdown.

Helen Pailing, Baltic artist – Helen ran the workshops between weeks 26 and 31. Helen has a background in contemporary embroidery and uses everyday materials to form sculptural objects, architectural interventions and installations. Helen's workshops were designed to look ahead from the pandemic and to embrace the positives. Helen's workshops therefore featured discussions around meaningful moments and traditions that were connected to having a baby. In the sessions we spoke of keepsakes, and collaboratively used a variety of materials to weave a 'baby blanket'. Helen's sessions often had a range of creative and sensory activities, which followed a child friendly theme (such as twinkle, twinkle little star; under the sea; and a teddy bear's picnic), encouraging the children to play and craft with saltdough, make shell necklaces, and create teddy-bear faces.

Megan Randall will lead the workshops for the final weeks of the project, which will take place after the completion of this report. The *20 Babies* project ends in August 2022.

Methods

This study explores how the *20 Babies* families have engaged with creative practice to make sense of their experiences of parenting in a pandemic. In order to capture the ways that the project itself has been encountered, as well as the broader experiences of lockdown, this study required the use of qualitative research methods to produce rich, in-depth data that gives voice to the families (Denscombe, 1998; Hakim, 2000; Winchester and Rofe, 2010). The methodology of this research project is underpinned by a feminist theoretical perspective, acknowledging power relations, positionality, subjectivity and situated knowledge (England, 1994; 2006; Haraway, 1988; Katz, 1994; McDowell, 1992; Oakley, 1981; Rose, 1993; 1997), thus elevating the previously unheard voices of the families and valuing their lived experiences.

This project is also based on the principles of participatory action research (Bagelman and Gitome, 2020; Cahill, 2007; Mannay, 2010; Pain, 2004), and is a collaborative project. This shifts the power towards the participants, giving a sense of ownership of the *20 Babies* project generally, and the research project specifically. This has shaped the overall direction of the project, as well as guided the ways in which research was carried out and negotiated.

To collect the data, I attended all of the workshops and informal social sessions between 15 September 2021 and 25 May 2022. I fully immersed myself in the sessions by participating in activities, having informal chats, and sharing my own experiences as a mother of a toddler who I, too, had parented in the pandemic. I also spent the rest of my day working at Baltic, engaging with the discussions and reflections on the sessions with the Learning team. The data was collected in the following ways:

- Ethnography: More than merely observing the families and taking notes, it felt important to feel what the participants felt, and experience what the participants experienced. I therefore took on an insider/ outsider role, negotiating the line between 'researcher' and 'mother of a toddler', and acknowledged my own (inter)connections within the group and the various socio-spatial relations at play (Cloke et al., 2004; Crang and Cook, 2007). There is thus an autoethnographic element to this research project, as I acknowledge how my own positionality and shared experiences with the participants have shaped my understandings and interactions as a researcher (Butz and Besio, 2009; Chang, 2008; Shaw, 2013). This data was recorded in the form of a research diary, where I documented my observations, thoughts, interactions and emotions after each session.

- Semi-structured interviews: I also conducted eight interviews to capture the experiences of the participants. While I had regular informal conversations with the families, these interviews allowed some of the findings from the ethnography to be 'formalised'.

- Engagement with creative outputs from the sessions: The creative outputs elicited discussion and reflections from the families, which also played an important part in the data collection.

The project has received approval from Newcastle University's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee to ensure that the project is approached sensitively and is ethically robust. I held the comfort of the *20 Babies* families at the heart of my concerns, never pushing for further information and being guided by what they wished to discuss. Participants were given thorough and regular reminders about my position as a researcher, and they were always asked for informed consent. Taking a feminist methodological approach which valued care was taken seriously in this project.

The data collected has since been analysed using the principles of the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which centres the data and allows the data to speak for itself.

8 formal interviews	**30 weeks of observations, discussion, reflection, academic reading and desk research**	**60 hours of attending creative workshops, ethnographic immersion and participant engagement**

Summary of Key Findings

1. The social connection and sense of belonging that has been built amongst the *20 Babies* families is the heart of this project. This community facilitates families to be expressive, reflective and creative in a safe space. These relationships are also a profound response to the absence and inability to build social bonds during the pandemic and its associated restrictions.

2. Baltic and the culture and atmosphere of its space is meaningful. The staff at Baltic are crucial in making this a space that is both extraordinary and ordinary, which fosters a sense of belonging, comfort, and connection.

3. This community of families and the safe space that has been created has produced a set of sociocultural conditions that allows self-expression and creativity to flourish.

4. Covid-19 and the associated restrictions during lockdown(s) has brought existing inequalities to the surface. The *20 Babies* families have had a diversity of experiences during the pandemic, finding both positives and negatives of having a baby during lockdown.

Social Connection and Belonging

The community and social connection built among the *20 Babies* families is one of the more poignant things to emerge from this project. It is truly the heart of this project, and has helped the families express themselves creatively, and reflect on their experiences in the pandemic. These bonds are also a touching antidote to the isolation and loneliness that was felt by so many during the pandemic.

> *"I've definitely got some friends here that I will know for a very long time"* SL

When the *20 Babies* project started, no one knew each other, and there was a real mix of families from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, as well as those who were confident and extroverted, or more reserved and shy. This project has brought together people who may have never found themselves in the same room as one another. While there were participants who were inevitably closer to some more than others, the *20 Babies* community is not exclusionary or 'cliquey'. Everyone was always greeted with genuine warmth and friendliness, and when participants shared their experiences they were always met with respect, support, care and kindness.

Through my ethnographic observations I have watched some close friendships form. I have overheard WhatsApp groups being set up, phone numbers swapped, plans being made outside of the sessions. One family regularly got a taxi back to another family's home. One Dad handed his little girl to another woman in the group saying "go to Auntie". The little ones also formed connections, played happily with one another, or confidently approached other adults in the group to play, make crafts and chat. The extended families of the participants were also regularly welcomed into the space and *20 Babies* community. Dads, Grandmas (including one from Australia!), and Aunties have all attended sessions. These other caregivers often brought the little ones along without their mothers (who usually attended *20 Babies*), and while they were unknown to the other adults in the group, they were greeted with familiarity and warmth. This was because they felt known to the group already as they had been mentioned in previous conversations. This highlights some of the ways that the *20 Babies* families have become embedded in each other's lives, and while these may appear to be small, mundane moments, they are also powerful in the context of the challenges some of these families have faced, which have only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

In my conversations and observations of the group, it became clear that the longevity of the project helped these relationships form:

> *"Everyone is really nice. And it's seeing the same people every week which is nice. Because the other groups never tend to be a year, it's usually just six weeks isn't it? And then people move on and do different groups and things. So it's nice that this is all the same people and see them all grow up"* NE

As the project was over an extended amount of time, it meant that relationships were built organically and at a natural, steady pace. This has also been to the benefit of those participants that are more introverted and find it harder to make these connections. The longevity also encouraged people to attend, as they not only felt more attached to the project, but if they missed one or two sessions they felt confident to return, knowing that there were plenty more workshops, and that they knew the other families.

Perhaps the most powerful thing that has bound these families together is that they all have a shared experience of having a baby and parenting in a pandemic.

"It already feels a bit of a badge of honour to say that you've had a baby in lockdown…it's always nice to talk to people – whatever it is – who've been through a shared experience the same as you have…whether it's lockdown, or the pandemic, or whatever…People who've had the same experiences, the same difficulties." ME

"You're all in the same boat aren't you? So nobody is judging nobody. I feel confident to talk, whereas normally I'm a bit reserved. Like you know when it's a new group you don't really want to? Whereas in this group, everyone has been in the same situation so it's a lot easier to talk" KI

Despite the mix of backgrounds and circumstances, this common thread has woven through the entirety of the project, and connected the families beyond the fact they all have similarly aged children. This connects with Valentine's (2008) assertion that physical proximity to those different to ourselves is not enough to promote inclusion or build relationships, and that there needs to be something more. Hall and Bates (2018) noted that repeated encounters in everyday spaces (such as an art gallery in the local area) can help contribute to a sense of belonging. Further, Botterill (2018) found that successful community building emerged from there being something that tied everyone together, and that engaging in some form of action could help these connections to develop, rather than through just merely occupying the same space. The *20 Babies* project has therefore been successfully set up to foster these developing relationships, with its focus on shared experience, its facilitation of regular meetings, and its provision of creative acts that helps people bond to one another.

Further, in bringing families together from a range of backgrounds, this project has the potential to create a transformative politics of encounter, altering how the participants see and feel about others (Askins, 2015). A feeling of belonging can be hard to capture, especially for those unfamiliar with cultural spaces such as Baltic, or who do not feel at ease in a group where some are more privileged than others. To belong is to feel a part of a larger whole, to feel part of something bigger (Probyn, 1996) and it is thus important to consider the politics of belonging, in understanding who belongs where, and what spaces are engineered to facilitate belonging more than others (Mee, 2009; Mee and Wright, 2009). It is therefore crucial for a space to be welcoming and inclusionary to those from all backgrounds, and for a space to be meaningful.

A Meaningful Space

While the community built is testament to the wonderful families who participated in the *20 Babies* project, there is also something to be said for the tone set by Baltic and its staff. Florence Darling and Annie Bedford (Producer for Communities at Baltic), who facilitate the sessions, the artists, and the Visitor Experience crew, who welcome the families and serve refreshments in the Front Room, all demonstrate genuine warmth, support, care, and kindness towards the families.

> *"I feel really comfortable. Really relaxed. It's a really relaxed place and all the staff are lovely and everyone's easy to talk to."* RB

This is particularly important for the families who do not have much of a support system at home or in their wider personal community. Through ethnographic observations and informal chats with the families, it was noted that families from arrived communities or single-parent households appeared to gain the most from not only the project, but Baltic as a space as well. GK is an asylum seeker from Namibia, and prior to the project she had never been to Baltic, or ever seen the River Tyne before. She is classed as clinically extremely vulnerable, and therefore found lockdown, her pregnancy, and son's early months exceptionally challenging. She reflected that it had been a very different experience compared to when she had her eldest daughter in her home country, surrounded by friends and family. GK was therefore very isolated and struggled with her mental health during lockdown. It is clear from my chats with GK and my observations within the group, that the *20 Babies* project has been a meaningful experience for her, and that Baltic is a meaningful space, giving her and her family access to a colourful, educational environment.

> *"I suffered mental health issues with my situation in the pandemic and the way it was in my pregnancy... I think coming here has improved a lot. Coming here, seeing children, seeing children's smiles, just hearing them laugh a lot is very comforting... My view has changed, and I appreciate things a lot more, and basically I appreciate life more, because you never know what's next."* GK

GK's feelings towards the project and the space, which was also shared by others in the group, is a result of the extraordinary efforts and acts of kindness and care that is offered by the staff at Baltic. Organising a photoshoot for a little boy's birthday; learning individual drink orders; remembering facts and the likes and dislikes of the little ones; ordering taxis outside of the sessions to facilitate access; offering support and care; simply saying "you're doing a great job". All of these seemingly small acts made a profound impact on how the families experienced Baltic as a space.

These acts by Baltic's staff are representative of radical hospitality. Radical hospitality, which has religious, Benedictine origins, is the practice of actively seeking people who may need support, and finding ways to make those who are often marginalised and forgotten to feel welcome, comfortable and supported (Pratt, 2011). It is clear from Baltic's aim to 'poverty proof' the gallery, and the provision of free drinks and refreshments – as well as a place to just be – that Baltic is embracing this idea of radical hospitality. The *20 Babies* project is also testament to this, and its careful and thoughtful application of these values has resulted in a meaningful space that provides comfort, familiarity and belonging: all key ingredients for building social connections and encouraging self-expression, self-reflection and creativity.

Being a meaningful space is also critically important in the context of rising living costs, rising poverty, over a decade of Austerity, and the continued negotiation and recovery of adjusting to life since the Covid-19 outbreak. These issues are also particularly pertinent to the Newcastle and Gateshead areas, with the North East region facing some of the deepest austerity cuts, higher levels of inequality, and fewer opportunities than other areas in the UK (IPPR North, 2020). While a meaningful space such as Baltic cannot be a substitute for structural change, it could be understood as a "meantime space" that offers a source of hope in "mean times" (Cloke et al., 2020). By embracing the "here and now" at Baltic, there is potential for this hopeful, meaningful space to have the capacity to open up possibilities for alternative political ethics. This space can therefore act as a quieter resistance and form of radical politics (Askins, 2015; Horton and Kraftl, 2009; Jupp, 2017; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar, 2018), which provides real hope to those who occupy it.

Further, in providing a meaningful space to be, the *20 Babies* project also became a significant feature in the families' weekly routine, adding much needed structure that was so absent during the pandemic.

"He loves it. It means that familiarity, that routine – which he really didn't get a lot of in the first year – he's got now. It means every week he knows what we are doing. That we come here [Level 2] first thing, then we go downstairs [Front Room] and get a snack… he really has gained a lot from it…already I'm thinking I don't want it to end!" SL

Attendance for toddler groups or similar projects is likely to be variable and have some 'drop-off', however the *20 Babies* project had a 'core' group of families (usually around 14) who attended the majority of sessions. These families also made some phenomenal efforts to ensure they attended each week. *20 Babies* was the first place a new family of four ventured together after the birth of their second daughter. It was also the first place a mother of a toddler and newborn visited solo. One family attended as usual on their daughter's second birthday, with a day full of plans and a party later the same day, and having had no sleep the night before in preparation. Many, if not all, of the families have come in after a sleepless night. *20 Babies* therefore formed an important part of their weekly routines. It is a meaningful space and project, which was clearly deserving of the efforts made by the *20 Babies* families.

It is striking that while Baltic is an extraordinary space and *20 Babies* is an extraordinary project to be part of, the project also opened up opportunities to be ordinary. Though the creative workshops were designed and facilitated by the artists, the project's focus on the values of participatory action also meant that the workshops were a space for the families to direct their own discussions, which were meaningful and helpful to them. Conversations about potty training, sleepless nights, developmental milestones, 'fussy' eaters, birthday present ideas, tantrums. The caregivers often directed conversations towards topics they saw as important, and were the types of interactions and conversations that were difficult for new parents, or parents with limited support, to have during the isolation of lockdown. Baltic and the *20 Babies* project are therefore both extraordinary and ordinary, in that it has helped facilitate these everyday interactions which are meaningful.

The Value of Art: Self-Expression and Self-Reflection

Most of the *20 Babies* families did not consider themselves to be creative, or to be particularly interested in art, until they participated in the project. The workshops introduced new sights, sounds, smells and textures to the toddlers, having experienced creative workshops that included painting; moulding with clay; dancing; listening to and playing musical instruments; experimenting with flavoured teas to dye materials; and other creative, sensory activities. For most of the toddlers, this was the first time they had encountered these 9 activities, and their parents told me that this had inspired them to do them at home. The workshops not only gave them ideas, it gave them the confidence to facilitate these activities at home too.

> *"You see I'm not very creative at all, so it's definitely brought my creative side out since coming. It's definitely given us ideas for things to do at home"* RB

> *"We do finger painting and spaghetti painting at home. Whereas I wouldn't normally get them out at home because I don't like mess, but now I've seen [son] really enjoys it here, I do do it at home now, because now I know how much he enjoys it here, it does push us to do it at home"* KI

This new confidence not only has the potential to inspire a new generation of creatives, it is also representative of the success of this project. It has 'jump-started' a desire to be creative, as the caregivers see the benefits for both their little ones, and themselves. One of these benefits lies in the ability to use art to express their feelings and experiences. I have observed that the act of doing something with their hands, and having an activity to concentrate on, allowed the families to open up and share their stories with more ease. This supports existing literature that connects creative practice with wellbeing. Art can help with mental health (Atkinson, 2021); ward off feelings of loneliness and isolation (Perkins et al., 2018); and art therapy has long been used in cases of trauma, to help people understand their experiences and work through them therapeutically. It is thus reassuring to have seen this be the case in the *20 Babies* project, and it provides evidence and support for how future projects could enhance wellbeing.

> *"It does because you always, like, go back to different times in the pandemic and then you talk about it in the group and I think sometimes it just gives you, like, what's the word? Like you feel proud of yourself. Getting through having a baby in the pandemic...and you think 'I done that. I got through that' so I think it makes you feel that little bit better knowing you've gone through it and it helps talking about it with other mams."* KI

The ability to be self-expressive and share experiences in the creative workshops is also testament to the sense of community and comfort felt in the group. For those who had never engaged in creative practice before, some of the workshops pushed them out of their comfort zone. In particular, the contemporary dance and singing workshops held by Michaela and Ceitdh, encouraged us all to sing, hold hands, move and dance around the room. As social bonds had already developed by this point in the project, and everyone was familiar with each other, these workshops were met with laughter and high spirits, with everyone joining in. It is possible that these workshops may not have worked as well if they had been held at the start of the project, as the participants may not have felt as comfortable with each other. The sense of community and the meaningful space of Baltic has therefore created a set of socio-cultural conditions that has allowed creative expression to flourish, enabling the families to try new things and express themselves in different ways.

Art can also connect people beyond providing spaces of encounter and wellbeing, with Perkins et al. (2018) finding that feelings of connection and belonging could also be experienced by just knowing others had enjoyed and encountered the same art venues as they had. This has been found in the case of the *20 Babies* project as well, with the families forming attachments beyond the group and beyond the project – both with each other and Baltic itself. Relationships have thus formed with Baltic as a space, acting as a supportive and welcoming resource. In the formal interviews I conducted, all of the participants spoke of what a great space Baltic is, and that they had recommended it to other people they knew, particularly in terms of it being welcoming to families. One participant organised a charity walk from her church to Baltic, with the congregation enjoying the Front Room's refreshments as a half way, resting point. This connection to Baltic gives the families a sense of ownership over the space, a sense of belonging, and that it is theirs in terms of how they occupy and use it. Small-scale projects such as *20 Babies* can therefore help 'spread the word', as the families share their positive experiences with their wider personal communities. This means that Baltic can therefore be encountered as a meaningful space that enhances wellbeing by a wider a community of people – particularly those who would not normally access such cultural spaces.

Participant's own photo and artwork.

The Diversity of Experiences: Challenges and Privileges

Participant artwork.

The *20 Babies* project was not only innovative in terms of its format and approach, it also provided unique insight into the largely untold stories of families who had a baby in the pandemic. There have been reports in the media about difficult and lonely birthing experiences (CliffordKent and Lloyd-Fox, 2021; Raingold, 2021) as well as emerging academic research that is mainly concentrated in the health and medical field (Friesen et al., 2021; Janevic et al., 2021; Lalor et al., 2021). While there have been some studies in the social sciences (DeYoung and Mangum, 2021), rich, qualitative research that explores the various experiences of pandemic parents and their lockdown babies is still limited. This research project therefore provides fertile ground for not only social science inquiry, but also gives insight into who may benefit from projects such as this in the future.

There was a real diversity of experiences drawn upon by the *20 Babies* participants. With some finding the positives and seeing it as an opportunity to slow down, spend time with loved ones, and realise 'what matters' to them; while others faced loss, uncertainty, deteriorating mental health, and loneliness. For this reason, it was important to take an intersectional, feminist approach (Crenshaw, 1989) to the project, in order to sensitively acknowledge the various privileges and challenges faced by the diverse *20 Babies* group.

Drawing on the maternal geographies literature has been useful to make sense of these varying experiences in the context of parenting in the pandemic. While the physical act of pregnancy and birth is largely the same for everyone, birth and parenting is layered with social, cultural and political meaning (Longhurst, 2011). It is also unevenly experienced, and the pandemic has brought these inequalities and vulnerabilities to the surface. Bagelman and Gitome (2020) provide the helpful concept of 'contracting care' to capture the multiplicities and multidimensional experience of birth, which centres the position of the woman. This is where *20 Babies* has been particularly successful, as it has effectively made space for the multiple experiences of the project's families, holding together diverse stories, emotions and circumstances. It has facilitated opportunities to shed light on the positives of lockdown and the shared experiences of having a baby in lockdown, whilst also sensitively and carefully giving room to the more difficult experiences in a safe, supportive environment.

I have observed that those who have had a more challenging experience of the pandemic are those who have perhaps gained the most from this project. This is likely due to the fact these families already had existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, and the project has had the ability to provide support, care, kindness, hope and opportunity. As stated earlier in this report, these families tended to be those from arrived communities or from single-parent households.

Prior to this project GK did not know many people locally. She told me that for her, as a Black woman, she found it hard to make connections with others. To have watched her develop a strong friendship with another Black woman in the group was powerful to observe. From *20 Babies* she has gained deep connections, and found a local community to gain advice and support beyond formal services and charities.

SS had very limited support and help with her son. She faced a number of difficulties during lockdown and continued to throughout my time on the project. However, in attending *20 Babies*, she has made wider connections and friendships. Florence Darling, who has shown incredible care and support towards SS (again embracing radical hospitality) has also been able to signpost SS towards helpful services and opportunities. Through engaging with the project, SS had the weekly opportunity to not only watch her son flourish in a safe, creative and educational environment, she was able to breathe a little more, knowing her son was having fun and was surrounded by a community of families who helped entertain him and showed him care and kindness.

KI is a single parent and had limited support with her youngest son. It was clear from the start how much she enjoyed and gained from the *20 Babies* project. She attended almost every week, and has said that since coming to *20 Babies* that she can see how welcoming and family-friendly Baltic is. KI often went to Baltic outside of sessions, bringing along her extended family and friends. As a result of her participation, she has also been given the opportunity to join a working group at Baltic, engaging with discussions and decision making that will shape future projects.

This project has therefore had far-reaching and a long-lasting impact on the families who have participated. The meaningful space, the radical hospitality, the care, and the kindness, have all helped develop a warm and supportive community of creative families. By uncovering the families' everyday experiences of the pandemic, it has been a useful lens to gain understanding of who benefits from projects like this, and what kind of legacy seemingly small projects can leave. A project that has heart like *20 Babies* is extraordinary, with much to be gained by its participants and wider community, touching the lives of all who are involved.

Points to Consider

- Creating a sense of community is vital to fostering an environment where self-expression, self-creativity and self-reflection can flourish.

- Facilitating a project that is long-term allows connections to be built organically, and creates a strong community built on respect, support, compassion and care.

- Having a shared experience can help bind a group together. This extends to those who facilitate and participate in sessions (Producers, Artists and Researcher), helping the whole group understand each other, relate, and work collaboratively.

- Maintaining a welcoming, safe space that is meaningful to the families can help encourage participation, attendance, discussion and reflection.

- A strong community helps to push people out of their comfort zone, enabling them to try new things and express themselves in new, creative ways. This confidence in creative expression also extends to the home and family, with the potential to inspire younger generations.

- Projects like this can act as a vital source of care and support, creating a hopeful space for more vulnerable members in the community.

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