

# **How creativity can contribute to improving outcomes for children with disabilities**

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## **Background**

Sunningdale School is a specialist provider of education for children aged from 2 to 11 who have severe, profound, multiple and complex learning needs. The school sees creative attributes such as curiosity, imagination and risk-taking as critical to the independence of the children, and to their sense of purpose and long-term emotional wellbeing. The school endeavours to offer as many opportunities for the children to participate in creative activities as possible. However, the nature of the children's disabilities and their very high levels of dependency can make this particularly challenging. Whilst the school staff are adept at meeting the challenges that they confront, and are skilled at drawing upon their creative resources to identify diverse solutions as issues arise, they are always keen to look for new and exciting ways of engaging the children in creative activity.

## **Statement of Focus**

Consequently, in 2020 the school decided to develop an action research project in conjunction with a variety of creative practitioners to discover how the collective experience of the practitioners and the teachers might animate new thinking about how creativity can contribute to improving outcomes for these children. The school also decided to explore how arts projects might support the development of continuous professional development for staff.

This initiative represents an ambitious project for the school which set aside a budget of £10,000 to commission creative work. The school had hoped that by the end of the current academic year a range of activities would have been trialed, impacts on the children's development and some best practices identified, and a dissemination strategy would be underway. The emergence of the Covid 19 virus has impacted on planned activity but progress made to date is described below.

## **Project design and implementation**

Given its size and scale, the school felt that it was very important that a member of its staff was made responsible for driving the initiative forward to ensure that existing opportunities within school were not lost, appropriate external relationships were established, and the learning was captured and available to school staff and wider stakeholders. The school created a middle leadership post to which responsibility for the project was assigned. Sam Johnson was appointed to the post. Sam is an arts graduate who is passionate about performance arts and has considerable experience of teaching singing both within schools and in the wider community. To support Sam position herself for the role, I was appointed to share my knowledge of the sector, help Sam to shape the initiative, and introduce her to appropriate networks and creative practitioners who might contribute to the project. Sam and I registered to undertake Culture Bridges' Cultural Leadership Programme as we felt it would offer insights about how we might undertake the project and create an academic framework through which we could reflect on the lessons learnt.

From the outset, Sam and I were clear that we didn't want to be prescriptive about what creative activities might take place as we were keen to facilitate an open exploration of how a variety of arts activities might impact on the children's development. To this end we invited a group of artists and creative practitioners with experience of working in SEND environment to join us in co-creating the project.

However, we felt that in order to maximise the opportunities for learning that the project might create we would need to split the participating children into clearly identifiable groups based on assessments of individual developmental needs. We also felt that the creative activities commissioned would need to be designed in ways that would take these varying needs into account if potential barriers to the children engagement and growth were to be overcome.

This preliminary exploration resulted in the commission of creative activities designed to meet the needs of four distinct groups of pupils which comprised of children exhibiting:

- Profound multiple learning disabilities (PMLD)
- Sensory processing disorders
- Autism
- Higher levels of abilities

Activity started in January with the delivery of multi-sensory performances designed to engage children with PMLD by Bamboozle Theatre Company. The performances were deemed to be a great success by school staff who reported delight at the high levels of engagement shown by children. The performance demonstrated techniques to the staff that they might adopt in delivering drama-based learning and acted as a quick win for the programme in that participating staff become enthusiastic advocates for the project within school.

In February, Green Croft Arts worked in school with children with sensory processing disorders and autism. They built a light and sound installation which the children entered to participate in movement activities which enabled them to directly influence the appearance of projected images. This activity was deemed to be particularly appropriate for children with sensory processing disorders as the movement supported them in regulating themselves, and was equally of benefit to those with autism because of its highly structured nature and clear visual cues.

Again, this activity considered by school staff to be very successful. The staff joined Green Croft Arts in a subsequent CPD session to consider how the school's existing resources could be exploited to create further opportunities.

From March the Covid 19 virus temporarily curtailed activity. The school has remained committed to the initiative and the senior leadership team has ring-fenced resources to enable the commission of further activity as and when circumstances allow for a resumption. It is expected that future commissions will include:

- Bare Toed Dance Company and Baltic Stars visual artist Natalie Frost will separately work with children with autism.

- Tin Arts, an inclusive dance company, will work with the group of more able children as their activities offer a progression route into more advanced dance training and creates opportunities for children to perform work that meets the school's aspiration for these pupils to develop their own ideas.
- Baltic Stars Visual Artist Megan Randel has been approached to run a project in school for the more able children which will culminate in an exhibition showcasing their work.

### **Impact and reflections**

Although the shape of the project is still developing, some early reflections can be noted:

- The clarity of the objectives from the outset have enabled us to communicate them readily to wider stakeholders
- Time invested in considering barriers to engagement before starting activities has meant that resources have been effectively employed and risks mitigated
- Quick wins in terms of staff buy-in have been important for advocacy of the programme going forward
- Critical factors in operationalising the plan have been:
  - The appointment and clear role of a project champion
  - The firm backing of the project by the senior leadership team
  - The recognition of the potential value of the initiative being written into the school improvement plan
- Establishing relationships with creative practitioners and cultural organisations operating outside of the educational sector has enabled the school to extend its understanding of how the arts might add value to the children's educational development.
- The co-creation of the project by the artists and the teachers has allowed for a fertile exchange of ideas and expertise.
- The introduction of new sorts of activities within school have created opportunities for informal CPD to take place