

Arts & Autism Action research

EXPLORING WAYS OF RE-ENGAGING PUPILS AT RISK OF EXCLUSION FROM MAINSTREAM EDUCATION

Creative Partnerships Manchester Salford Action Researchers are made up of teachers and creative practitioners, each person is monitoring an aspect of the creative programme with a specific question in mind...

Journalist **Matt Baker** talks to **Margaret Meredith**, Head of Art at Chatsworth High School in Salford. Margaret is an Advanced Skills Teacher and as part of the Creative Partnerships Programme is working with partner - **Dynamic New Animation**.

Margaret's question? To investigate how the creative curriculum might support autistic young people to reach a better understanding of themselves...

There is a collective silence, a widening of young eyes and then an inquisitive dart to the other side of the shadow screen. Many of the young people remain seated, transfixed by the figures that dance before them, but for some of the children at Chatsworth High School, the mysterious movements of the shadow puppeteer behind the screen are almost too intriguing. Unable to contain their curiosity, they slowly edge forward, curiously searching for the force behind the animated figures that leap towards them.

It's a scene that could pass as a typical drama lesson in any classroom. But for the children in this Salford classroom, eagerly watching a shadow puppetry demonstration, the lesson represents a titanic struggle to overcome severe autism.

"Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are very isolated in their own world and struggle to relate to others in a meaningful way," explains the teacher pulling the strings - Margaret Meredith, Chatsworth High School's Head of Art. *"But by using shadow puppetry imagery we're finding that they're able to explore the world outside of them and start to try and understand cause and effect."*

As the shadow puppets act out an elaborate and, at times, humorous, story line, following a tradition not dissimilar to the historic Punch and Judy, the children's enthusiasm is tangibly obvious. Keeping a close watch on the eager huddle of children before her, Margaret notes how the pupils are beginning to psychologically project feelings towards the puppets and show signs of building emotional bridges to understanding other people.

"As we're using live video feedback, we're letting the children have a go at operating the puppet shapes themselves, so they're able to see that they are creating the story," she adds. *"Autism so affects their sense of self that they struggle to understand other people and to recognise that they too have needs. Young people with ASD can find it very difficult and sometimes even frightening to make or develop relationships. With this project we are trying to offer them opportunities to start building on their understanding of themselves and other people through the interactions of puppet images."*

With more than half a million people suffering from autism in Britain and a 2002 poll by the National Autistic Society showing that three quarters of British teachers are dissatisfied with the extent of teacher training in autism, it's initiatives such as these that are sorely needed to give teachers the tools to support young autistic people.

The brainchild of a Creative Partnerships Action Research Project, which brings teachers and creative practitioners together to develop a more creative curriculum, this initiative has enabled Margaret to join forces with puppetry practitioner Dynamic New Animation. As a result, she is able to use sensory theatre to gently challenge the pupils' autism in a risk-assessed way.

"If we molly coddle the young people and wrap them in cotton wool they are likely to stay withdrawn and can end up in a very lonely space," she emphasises. "But if we challenge them and perhaps unsettle them a little they're able to learn about relationships with people and this assists them to come out of themselves. These children are very human, friendly and affectionate, but in many cases, don't know how to show it."

Even though her research methods are showing early indications of progress, Margaret is quick to underline how huge the barriers are that these children have to overcome. *"The first couple of sessions were difficult," she notes. "Some of the children can be very aloof. It often feels like they're from different planets that are orbiting around each other but have no connection."*

"When you look at two-year-olds in nursery, for example, you'll notice how they naturally start to play with each other. Right there and then someone with ASD couldn't do that because they don't necessarily know how to be with other people."

Providing a supportive and creative environment is one way, though, that Margaret believes teachers can help people with ASD learn to cope and live with their issues and gain a meaningful grasp of identity.

In keeping with her belief that the children's barriers can be challenged to help them as individuals come to terms with, and cope with their personal situation, she is busy introducing a series of creative initiatives into the classroom to do just that.

We also collaborated with Touchdown Dance, a dance company which has a particular expertise in working with people with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD) and Sensory Needs, to help the children physically express themselves," she explains. "And we're looking at other initiatives that involve singing and visual arts work to open up as many outlets of personal expression as possible."

As one of eight teachers selected by Creative Partnerships Manchester Salford to be involved in the Action Research Project last November 2004, Margaret is fast developing into what one of the programme facilitators calls "a pillar of good practice".

"The Action Research Projects are not like traditional research projects," explains Chris Finn, Creative Programmer for Creative Partnerships Manchester Salford. "This programme aims to promote a liberating and pro-active piece of research that's all about developing high quality teachers and asking them to delve into their creativity. It has a strong academic element, is grounded in evidence-based outcomes and is intended for publication in peer review journals, but it's more about encouraging and supporting the individual practitioner as far as they can go."

As Margaret turns to address her class, who by now are engaged in exploratory 'play', creating their own shadow adventures, she points out various individuals who have developed in significant ways since the programme started. Readily acknowledging Creative Partnerships for helping her to develop such a progressive environment, she's hopeful that her findings will help other teachers build more supportive environments for children with ASD.

"There's a massive need to help strengthen these children's sense of self and creative initiatives like these will contribute a great deal," she says. "You can't imagine how frightened some of these children are of dealing with other people but we're now seeing smiles on faces that never smile. And that, I think, represents a significant breakthrough."

Matt Baker